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 Rosh Hashanah Morning 5768/2007  
 Congregation Bnai Brith, Santa Barbara CA

The other night I dreamt that I was drinking Manishevitz wine, but that it had turned sour. That's all I remember. You might say that it doesn't really mean anything, but I am certain that this night-time vision bubbled up out of my sub-conscious with an urgent message for me from my own soul. A dream left uninterpreted, says the Talmud, is like a letter left unopened. I invite your interpretations on the beach this afternoon.

The Jewish people dreamt a dream many centuries ago, which we call the Torah, and we have been toiling ever since to understand the message which that dream is attempting to communicate to us. Like most of our dreams, the dream of the Torah comes to us in fragments, often disconnected and sometimes containing disturbing, frightening, or bizarre images. And yet like our most vivid personal dreams, the stories of the Torah leave us convinced that an important truth is seeking expression, is seeking to rise up out of our depths into the sunlight of consciousness.

Two primeval Hebrew myths, the stories of the Garden of eden and the Tower of Babel, speak to us out of our collective subconscious. And not just the Jewish people, but the entire Western world has sensed in these stories some truths, hidden yet profoundly significant, about our human condition.

In the Torah's first dream story, we human beings find ourselves in a garden, children really, playing in a world of peace and beauty, in harmony with the animals, the trees, the wind, the earth and the waters. And then we remember seeing a tree, and a snake, and temptation, and suddenly we find ourselves banished from the garden, in exile from the tranquil and blessed harmony of nature.

In a second dream story, the Tower of Babel, we human beings are in motion, a single nomadic tribe, journeying on the earth. Then we make a discovery, a technological advance...we discover the secret of baking bricks, which allows us to build mighty structures, walls and towers far taller and stronger than any previous stone hut or fence. In that dream, the new technology...the baking of bricks...leads to a civilization which at first appears powerful, secure and stable, but turns out to be unstable at its core... The technological building project, the tower of Babel, in the end results in the collapse and disintegration of the first human community.

These two Torah dreams of our exile from nature, and of the instability of technologically advanced civilization, have haunted western civilization for thousands of years...and today perhaps more than ever. I would like to speak with you this morning about just this: our exile from nature and our anxieties about the instability of our civilization...and to share with you what the Torah has to offer in response to these powerful and disturbing dreams.

First of all, while the Garden of Eden sounds great, the Torah never seeks to guide us back there. The way to the Garden is blocked, in that dream narrative, by a flaming, spinning sword. Instead, the Torah urges us toward Sinai, where we receive guidelines for living in an imperfect and difficult world. Our Jewish ideal is **not** a world of childlike wonder and innocence, but a world of morality and responsibility. And our religion seeks to raise up children who understand that a stable civilization requires adults who are both

able and willing to **restrain themselves**. Not to deny, but to bring under control... our powerful and natural human desires, and our cravings for instant personal gratification.

The shofar that we just listened to seeks to take us back in time to the morning in the desert, three thousand years ago, when we stood as a people at the foot of Mount Sinai, and the sound of a shofar was blaring louder and louder...and there at the beginning of our history as a people, we accepted the responsibility of living in the world as adults.

In each and every generation, each year at Rosh Hashanah, we ask ourselves, what does it mean to live as a responsible adult in this world? What are the mitzvot...the limitations and the obligations...which the adults of the society must take upon themselves if their world is going to endure.?

And that question begs a prior question, that posed by the story of the Tower of Babel: What threatens our civilization? The people of Babel feared external enemies, but in the end they brought about their own collapse. Is there some technological advance...analogous to baking bricks... upon which we have built our civilization, but which could potentially lead to the destabilization and collapse of our world?

I am no scientist, and I am not a prophet. I have no clearer insight into the challenges facing us than anyone in this room. But I try to stay informed and I try to pay attention to what thoughtful people are saying. Also, I try hard not to get drawn into a “crisis of the week” mentality. But slowly and steadily I think that we are realizing that there is a technology that we thought was making us strong but which is actually destabilizing our civilization. I am speaking of our oil and coal based energy infrastructure. Our Tower of Babel is a vast grid of coal fired power plants, and our supremely private and exquisitely convenient means of personal transport, the petroleum-driven automobile.

How is it destabilizing? In two fundamental ways. First, our addiction to gasoline is directly financing the two most extreme and dangerous forms of Islam in the world today—the fundamentalist Shiite Islam of Iran and the extremist Sunni Islam of Saudi Arabia. The adherents of those two Islamic movements represent a small percentage of the Muslim world, but their influence is strong...and growing stronger...because we support them every time we fill up at the gas station. Our gas money is funding the fundamentalist Islamic schools, the madrasas, and our gas money is funding Iran’s nuclear weapons program.

Secondly, the emissions from our automobiles and our power plants are dramatically raising the levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. These emissions are producing a global warming whose effects are completely unknown and potentially catastrophic. I understand that there are still skeptics on this question, but I think Governor Schwarzenegger put it pretty well, when he recently told journalist Thomas Friedman: “if 98 doctors say my son is ill and needs medication and two say “no, he doesn’t, he is fine,” I will go with the 98. It’s common sense—the same with global warming. We go with the majority, the large majority.” That is our Republican Governor speaking.

Friedman argues in a major article in the New York Times magazine last April, that a green ideology is needed now that will mobilize liberals and conservatives, evangelicals and atheists, big business and environmentalists. We now have a scientific consensus that the risk of things going haywire—weather patterns getting violently

unstable, glaciers melting, prolonged droughts—grows rapidly as CO2 levels approach a doubling of the concentration that was in the atmosphere before the industrial revolution. And we will pass the doubling level around mid-century, if we do basically nothing.

I read Tom Friedman, and I think he is smart, and convincing, and also Jared Diamond, author of “Collapse: how societies choose to fail or survive,” and I felt the same about Al Gore’s movie An Inconvenient Truth. These are among our best thinkers, and they are attempting to summon us to action...as Diamond puts it, summoning us to choose to survive. Each one of them seeks to inform us, to inspire us, and to scare us just a bit, but not to terrify us...knowing full well that fear may get our attention, but it cannot mobilize us to change our lives.

And this is where I believe that Judaism has something profound to contribute to this moment in history. The entire Torah is built upon the story of Sinai...a mythic narrative in which we stood together at the foot of the mountain, poised between slavery and freedom, and made a decision to live on the earth as adults. We are standing in that very place now.

Some religions focus primarily on questions of faith, the afterlife, and salvation. But Sinai...the Jewish story... has always been about the basic questions of life: what should we eat? How shall we draw food out of the earth, and what must we do in return? How should we deal with poverty? What is our obligation to the stranger, to the animals, to the land and the trees? Today, the fundamental questions facing us are the same: how will we obtain heat and light? Where will our food come from? How will we travel from home to work and back and how can we ensure the health, safety and well-being of our children and our grandchildren?

These are the most important, the ultimate religious questions that a Jew can ask...and in our gathering here today, the shofar demands that we open our hearts to the possibility of making some changes...together.

Let’s talk for a moment, on this High Holy Day, about a mundane, commonplace, unspiritual piece of our lives...our car. It’s a tool...which we use without thinking, until it breaks down and then we become very religious and start using God’s name in the most inspired and creative ways...In that vehicle, one gallon of gasoline may take you from here to Carpinteria...or maybe Ventura if you have a fuel efficient hybrid. How many pounds of carbon dioxide would you guess that gallon of gas produces when you burn it in your engine? The answer is 20 pounds. You can check that at [www.fueleconomy.gov](http://www.fueleconomy.gov). Avoid burning one gallon of gas, and you avoid sending twenty pounds of CO2 into the atmosphere.

Since everyone agrees that we need to reduce the amount of CO2 in the atmosphere, not increase it, if we want to live as responsible adults and not pass an unstable civilization to our children and grandchildren...this bears further thought.

I noticed not long ago that there is a bus that runs along Cathedral Oaks Road, and stops at the corner of Turnpike, just outside of Tuckers’ Grove Park. Upon checking the route, incredibly, I found that that bus line actually ends not too far from our house out in Ellwood. Furthermore, I discovered this summer, after working here for three years, that there is a road that goes right down into Tuckers’ Grove...and so that bus which could take me from home to work and back is actually only about a ten minute walk from my office.

However, the last bus of the day leaves Turnpike at 5:06PM...which is too early for me, much earlier than my work day ends. There is another bus, but it only goes as far as Fairview. Why is that? And why are there no buses in the evening? And there are other problems. I'm a rabbi! What do I do if I needed to get over to Cottage hospital, or to a meeting at the federation, or the university...?

These are new questions, the practical difficulties of responsible living for a Santa Barbara Jew in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but they are exactly the same kind of questions that Jews have been debating ever since we stood together at Sinai. The entire Talmud is a vast record of Jewish debates about nit-picky little situations, about how to make the Torah's guidelines work in a world of obstacles and complications.

The discussions become productive when I am no longer asking these questions alone, but together with my community. OK, I need to get over to the hospital several times each week. But can I set aside one day of my work week when I will plan to stay at the Temple all day? I can! And even though the last bus leaves at 5:06, can I bring my bicycle on the bus and ride home at 5:30 or 6:00? As a matter of fact, I can! Marian may not want me to do that in the winter when it gets dark early, but for six months of the year...at least...yes, I could ride home. Now let's do the math. Since each round trip to work takes about a third of a gallon of gas, if I can avoid just one round trip between home and work between now and Yom Kippur, I would be avoiding pumping 7 pounds of CO2 into the air. True, Tom Friedman says we need to avoid releasing 175 billion tons of CO2 in the next 50 years, so my seven pounds saved feels...a little pathetic.

But look around. There are 1,000 people here this morning. If all of us chose to avoid one 15 mile car ride between today and Yom Kippur ...either by carpooling, or by taking a bus, or by combining an errand with another errand...then in one week we as a community—just those of us in the room right now-- will have avoided sending 7,000 pounds of CO2 into the atmosphere...3 and a half tons, in just one week. Now, as long as I am fantasizing, if all of us could manage to avoid one 15 mile car trip per week for the next year, then as a community, we would have avoided releasing 364,000 pounds of CO2...or 182 tons between today and next Rosh Hashanah. Not pathetic at all.

And here are some other things that would probably occur: we would all be in better shape, because of the walk from our home or office to the bus stop. And we would arrive home more relaxed, and in a better frame of mind, having had time to day dream on the bus, or on the short walk home from the bus stop.

Also, because our friends would see us standing at the bus stop, or riding our bike, they would think to themselves, "huh. I wonder where that bus goes to?" or "huh, I want to ride MY bike!" And so the one thousand individuals times 7 pounds of CO2 times 52 weeks might be doubled as an indirect consequences of our collective decision...or even tripled.. without ANY of us avoiding more than one 15 mile car ride per week.

But in all likelihood, it would not stop there, because we would find that we really ENJOYED riding the bus, or riding our bike, and so by this time next year we might decide that avoiding one car ride per week is not enough, and that we want to increase to two car rides per week. And, by the way, as all 1,000 of us and our neighbors and friends and co-workers start riding the buses more, the Metropolitan Transit District would start adding bus lines and frequencies and it would start to actually become feasible to live in this town and get around by bus most of the time.

Then somebody in our congregation would probably want to write this up, and the word would spread to other synagogues around the country and churches would probably want to get in on the act. It makes one wonder, doesn't it, how many thousands, or even millions of tons of CO2 we might actually avoid releasing....and how many millions of our dollars would not go to Iran and Saudi Arabia, all beginning with those of us in this room deciding to avoid one car journey, between today and next Yom Kippur.

How likely is all this to happen? I don't know! How likely is even the first step...that all of us, or even most of us, will decide and actually avoid one 15-mile car journey between now and Yom Kippur? I don't know!

There is only one reason that I can imagine that some significant portion of us might take this first step...and that is that we are here together in this room this morning. The rabbis of the Talmud said: "the gathering of the wicked is bad for them and bad for the world. But the gathering of the righteous is good for them, and good for the world."

This is a big gathering, undertaken at considerable expenditure of time, effort and money. Many of you have taken off from work to be here this morning, and many of you walked a long way from your car to reach your seat. Will this gathering, with all of its excitement, all of its headaches, all of its drama and all of its impact on our neighbors, will this gathering be good for us and good for the world?

The answer lies in the hearts and minds of each person in this room. We are standing together this morning at Sinai. The shofar has spoken to us of our choice, between life and earth, blessing and curse. The choice we make during the coming week is the first of many. And this how we travel together: one step at a time. See you on the bus. Shanah tova.