Sermon on Flood

The most significant event of my life was my mother dying when I was nine and my brother was 15. Going forward, my life was forever shaped by that event.

My father was someone who went out of his way to help his friends, and he was basically tolerant and friendly. He loved little kids, but after my mother died, he was making a new life for himself as my brother and I were getting older. We were mostly left to navigate for ourselves. In many ways this helped me to be resilient and responsible from an early age.

My brother was 6 years older than me and my life-long mentor. He was unusually smart and got a Ford Foundation scholarship to the University of Chicago when he was 16. Since our house was 1 block away from Chicago, he was always only a few miles away from the time I was 10 to seventeen. He eventually became an experimental psychologist.

Growing up, he was the one who listened to my problems and counseled and advised me although he was a teenager and we saw each other sporadically. He talked to me about history and about civil rights, and women's equality before they were major issues in the popular culture because of his expansive idea of acceptance. He always saw the glass as "half full" (his words), never half empty in everyone he cared about. He died from complications of Parkinson's Disease at age 62.

Today is his birthday.

After he died, I brought home from his house, one of the last books he was reading, before Parkinson's robbed him of the ability to fully concentrate.

The book, written in 1995 was titled How Many People Can The Earth Support. I'll return to this book in a minute

This week's Torah portion deals with Noah's flood. I want to talk about what might be a modern equivalent of that flood and how we must step up to try to save much of creation and ourselves.

In the Torah, God was convinced that humankind had become corrupt and God set out to "put an end to all flesh," except for those creatures brought onto Noah's ark. Today, climate change, or climate weirding, threatens much of life as we know it.

The book, How Many People Can The Earth Support looked at, among other things, whether there was enough useable water to accommodate present and future population growth. Only a small percentage of the huge amount of water in the world is fresh water. Humans need fresh water to survive.

Today, the world's supply of fresh water is endangered by many things. Moreover, the earth's seas and the creatures in them are endangered as well.

To quote from The Sacred Balance by David Suzuki, "Water is integral to supporting and maintaining life on this planet as it moderates the climate, creates growth and shapes the living substance of all of Earth's creatures. It is the tide of life itself, the sacred source."

The new U.N. climate report says that climate change is already having staggering effects on oceans and ice-filled regions that encompass 80 percent of the Earth and future damage from rising seas and melting glaciers is now all but certain. We are seeing that record losses of sea ice and melting glaciers could harm water supplies, and warming oceans could wreck marine fisheries. The ocean is losing oxygen, growing more acidic, taking up an increasing

amount of heat, and becoming more stratified, with warm water at the surface preventing cooler, nutrient rich waters from rising. All of these changes have profound consequences for marine ecosystems. One of the most shocking findings involves "marine heat waves," which have been blamed for mass deaths of corals, kelp forests and other key ocean organisms.

All of this makes it clear that climate change is drastically affecting the waters of the Earth. It is, but sadly, there is more. There is also all that we humans have been adding to the waters that have been accumulating in it.

It is estimated that eight million tons of plastic leave shorelines globally each year. There has been much media coverage of plastics floating on the surface of the ocean. But now, some environmentalists who have been investigating plastics in the ocean depths see less on the surface. Much evidence shows that macroplastics are fragmenting into microplastics less than 5mm in diameter. These microplastics are sinking down into the seas. Water organisms (fish, whales, etc.) throughout the world are being found with these microplastics inside of them. Many of these microplastics are found in fish and other water creatures eaten by people. Scientists are finding many of these organisms starving to death from eating plastic and/or no longer being able to find their former live nutrition. Almost every piece of plastic ever produced still exists.

Since the 1980s fertilizers and pesticides are used more intensively than ever before and as more land is continually given over to agriculture, the use of them has increased dramatically in this century. Eventually any excess of these used on land (and there is much) ends up in all the waters of the world. These excesses lead to excessive algae bloom, depletion of oxygen in the water and the inability of organisms to survive. Urban environments contribute to this as

homeowners dump fertilizers and pesticides on their lawns to insure environments free of weeds and insects. The chemicals migrate throughout the water systems to ground water, water pipes, streams, rivers and oceans.

Moreover, the practice of selling water in plastic bottles has spread throughout the world; it is contributing to crucial ground water depletion.

The following Chasidic Tale gives us a way to think about our relationship to the Earth.

Two men were fighting over a piece of land. Each claimed ownership and bolstered his claim with proof. To resolve their differences, they agreed to put the case before the rabbi. The rabbi listened, but could not come to a decision because both seemed to be right. Finally, he said. “Since I cannot decide to whom this land belongs, let us ask the land.”. He put his ear to the ground, and after a moment straightened up. “Gentlemen, the land says that it belongs to neither of you—but rather that you belong to it.”

In a similar sense, we also belong to lakes and seas. Put differently, we are all parts of the same inter-dependent creation.

On July 29, 2019, a scientist, Gus Speth, wrote the following on Facebook: I thought that with 30 years of good science we could address those problems. But I was wrong.

The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy……and to deal with those we need a spiritual and cultural transformation and we scientists don’t know how to do that.

If my brother were here today, he would most likely still find the cup half full for his friends and loved ones, but, since he was a scientist, he would, almost certainly, find it almost empty for the future of the Earth.

However, as Jews, we have been taught that our actions have consequences and that we are responsible for those consequences. We are also taught that, while it is our duty to engage in Tikkun Olam and try to heal the world, we are not required to succeed or finish doing what needs to be done. But we must engage and give it our best effort.

We are now looking to the children of the world to solve these problems, but the children are not enough. It will take all of us changing how we consume, what we consume, and how we understand the consequences of what we do.