

D'var Neshama
By Dave Snyder
March 1, 2013

Shabbat shalom. Close your eyes for a moment, breathe in one breath of Shabbat air, and breathe out one slow breath of Shabbat peace. Breathe in, and think of the most precious young people in your life--your children, grandchildren, or a young person who is simply dear to you; imagine the water, and air, and soil, and food that has nourished you, and your ancestors before you, returning from its life giving mission in your lungs and veins and organs, into the lungs and veins and organs of those small, indescribably precious children who captivate you, to help them grow up. Shabbat shalom. On Shabbat, in particular, it's good to let the crazy chorus of the world recede, to relax our grip on the uncharted future. It's good to stop sanding the smooth stones of the past, our grief, our shame, our regret, our nostalgia. On Shabbat, we should let ourselves feel the fullness of life that gets lost in the blur of our days. AND, in this space of reflection, we should consider our planet's predicament-- this precious container, this God-given, living ground of life.

This week's Torah portion tells the story of the golden calf that the Israelites made, and worshipped, at the foot of Mount Sinai, before they received the 10 Commandments from Moses. The Golden Calf was our best guess in a moment of exhaustion and frustration and wandering; it was a signpost, an idol, an outpouring of our superficial, material essence. And even after we encountered the voice of God, that "best guess" lives on today. Think of its modern, industrial incarnation-- flat screens, smart phones, cars and trucks and frequent flights, coal-fired power plants, big buildings and lights on late, a billion clicks demanding "refresh" every minute-- the modern idols of convenience and consumption, our very own golden calf. And just as the golden calf got the Israelites into big trouble, it turns out to be not so good for us moderns, either.

For years, the world's political leaders have agreed that we must keep carbon emissions below the point where the planet's temperature will rise more than 2 degrees celsius; more and more accurate climate models have

established a “carbon budget” of 565 gigatons (565 billion tons) of carbon that we can expel into the atmosphere and still keep our warming impact at or below 2 degrees, the point where the series of already worsening climate crises, from Katrina and Irene and Sandy, to drought and rising oceans, becomes one long and species-threatening catastrophe. But...the Carbon Tracker Initiative, a team of financial analysts and climate scientists, recently took stock of the carbon reserves already claimed on the balance sheets of the world’s fossil fuel companies, around 80% of which is still below ground-- and this totals 2,795 gigatons.

It would be easier, just a bit easier, to think about those 2,795 gigatons as somebody else’s carbon. Just like it would be easier to think of the golden calf as the ancient Israelites’ golden calf. But they are one and the same, the carbon, and the calf, and they are ours, our legacy. The golden calf of carbon is worth trillions of dollars to the world’s oil companies; and by worshipping this golden calf, we have allowed the delicate raft of human existence to float into the rapids of climate change, to the very brink of the cliff of extinction. It’s time to melt down the calf. It’s time to stop investing our pension funds and campus endowments in reckless fossil fuel companies; it’s time to use the leverage of our city and state contracts with power companies to compel them to use more alternative energy; it’s time to challenge fracking, and frack sand mining, as it mutilates tribal and rural lands in our state and across the world. In doing so, we will be joining a vibrant, truly global movement, from the Idle No More movement of Native Americans in Canada and the US, to youth climate justice movements from Bangladesh to Afghanistan to Somalia. As frightening as it can be to stand up to such odds, I’d rather take on the carbon barons alongside millions of courageous people across the world, than stay isolated in the land of hyperconnectivity. So let’s take a deep breath of nourishing Shabbat air, and then let’s go forth into the world in the coming weeks and months, as parents to defend our children’s future, as children of the earth to defend the very life of our mother. With each breath, may we feel the love of God igniting the divine spark inside us, may we feel the whisper of the earth urging us onward to compassionate, firm action, like a river, like a redwood, like human beings.