

Rabbi Melanie Aron

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### **Lo Alecha – Time Management**

Back in 1954, well before Steven Covey and his *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, in a talk to the Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches, quoted the then-president of Northwestern University, Dr. J Roscoe Miller, saying:

*"I have two kinds of problems:  
the urgent and the important.*

*The urgent are not important, and the important are never urgent."*

Anyone who has ever taken a seminar on time management has encountered this "Eisenhower Principle" and the four quadrants of important and urgent, important and not urgent, urgent and not important, and not urgent and not important. We have been guided to stay out of quadrants 1 and 4 and to focus on quadrant 2, that is, not to allow important things to become urgent, so that one doesn't spend all one's time fighting fires, and instead to focus on what's important, without allowing others' urgency to distract you.

It is much easier said than done.

For most of us the attraction of the urgent is like the flame to a moth; we just can't help ourselves from focusing in that direction.

As Earth Day approaches this year on Sunday, April 22, I was thinking about that tension between the urgent and the important in our political life. So much has been going on, every week, every day, even hour to hour, that it is hard even to

sort out which are the important things and which the distractions. Last weekend my daughter and I pondered, Was the bombing in Syria the distraction from the scandals, the pardon, the resignations, or was it the other way around?

Overall, though, I am concerned that there is one issue, foundational to all the others, that is getting lost in the shuffle.

When we give tzedakah and there are multiple needs, we are urged to first address issues of life and death. In the complex reality in which we live—with constitutional crises, issues of war and peace, the curtailment of civil rights, gun violence, scandals of every sort, and young black men getting shot at for asking directions—it is hard to sort out what is the work that we should be doing. And yet the reality is that if we do not respond to the increasing changes in our physical environment, then our home, this planet earth, is in danger of becoming unlivable.

For me this hit home when I was at the national meeting of Reform rabbis last month and a rabbi from Florida, Rabbi Jeff Salkin, author of *Putting God on the Guest List*, who is not progressive in his politics, talked about how he is selling his house, because with the rising oceans, his neighborhood is so frequently flooded.

I am now what is politely called middle aged. My odds of making it to 2050 are only 34% and would be only 22% if I were a man. But my children have a good chance of living into the second half of this century, when the impact of global climate change will be that much greater. My youngest in particular is quite concerned that by the time she is my age, some 35 years from now, things that we take for granted in terms of our enjoyment of the earth, including Alaska's

glaciers, snorkeling at the Great Barrier Reef, and even outdoor hikes, will be fading memories.

Unfortunately for most of us, the overwhelming nature of this particular threat, and the lack of clarity about next steps to take, sends our attention back to all of the other urgent issues before us.

Recycling, taking shorter showers, even Meatless Mondays and composting will not really be enough to turn things around for our planet. Even “if we were to take every car off the road and close every factory,” according to a recent United Nations report, “we still could not reverse the effects of carbon dioxide and other pollutants on global warming.”

Perhaps that’s why the song for this generation is not the “We Shall Overcome” my generation sang at rallies, but the much more pessimistic “Waiting on the World to Change,” by John Mayer, with its chorus, “So we keep waiting, waiting on the world to change.”

But waiting won’t do it. As Yogi Berra, the quotable Yankees catcher, supposedly once said, “If we don't change direction, we're liable to end up where we're going.” And we can’t wait for politics to catch up with the physical realities happening all around us.

I find guidance on this issue in the ancient words of *Pirke Avot*, which we read at this time of year: *Lo Alecha Hamlacha Ligmor*. Though we may not be able to complete the work, that doesn’t excuse our failure to undertake it.

Margie Freedman, chair of our Sustainability Committee, is here tonight in honor of Earth Day to talk to you about issues that affect the environment, especially

housing and transportation, particularly SB100 and other efforts of Reform California. Though SB 827, the state housing bill related to housing development near transit hubs, failed yesterday, it will be revived in new and improved forms and hopefully will join last year's package to fast-track housing near public transportation., which was signed into law.

Recently the Sierra Club magazine had an article by Eric Holthaus about how he personally experiences what he termed "climate change depression," an environmental dread that interferes with his sleep. Many of us are also aware of the shocking suicide of David S. Buckel, a nationally known gay rights attorney and environmental activist, who wanted to call attention to the degradation of our environment. We pray that less extreme measures will be successful in calling attention to this life-and-death issue and to prompting action and response to current threats.