

Shana Tova. G'mar Tov.

There is a well-known midrash¹ that speaks of the time before Abraham's call to start a new nation. It says that when Abraham (Abram) was journeying from place to place, he came upon a palace which was burning.

He stopped and asked, "Is it possible that this palace has no master?"

Whereupon God said, "I am the master of this palace."

From that place, because of that interaction, according to the midrash, God calls Abraham and says "lech l'cha: go forth."

The midrash teaches something very powerful and provocative: that Abraham's faith --and God's trust in him-- originates from *witnessing the brokenness*. We assume there must have been others who passed by or looked away. But Abraham dares to stop, take note, and recognize that something is terribly wrong. Abraham, according to the midrash, is chosen for the task because of this and because he has the courage to ask: "Who is responsible here?"

The midrash is subversive in its understanding of the roles of God and people. God does acknowledge responsibility for the totality-- ownership of the world palace -- God does NOT then put out the flames. The palace still burns. **Instead**, in the next moment, God calls Abraham to the task. Go forth. Go build a people that can, like you, pay attention; that, like you, ask the big and necessary questions; and like you, can and will do the work of addressing and healing a palace, a world that is on fire.

Abraham is the father of the Jewish people, our oldest ancestor. We follow in his footsteps. This isn't just a midrash. It's a mission statement for the Jewish people & for humankind.

Here we are in 2019, many, many years from Abraham and when this midrash would have taken place. And quite literally, **the palace is on fire**. The amazon is burning. Cities are flooding. Icecaps are melting. Oceans are warming. Species are dying.

A few thousand years after Abraham, a 16 year old Swedish climate activist/climate prophet, Greta Thunberg spoke these words to the World

¹ Bereishit Rabbah 39:1

Economic Forum (January 24, 2019) that echo our rabbinic ancestors'. She said: **"I want you to act as if the house is on fire, because it is."**²

This is the season of *teshuvah*, turning. For the 40 days starting with Elul and especially over the last 10, we engage in *heshbon hanefesh*, an accounting of our souls. On Yom Kippur, something shifts. We go from the "I" to the "we." Ashamnu, Bagadnu. We seek to take responsibility not simply for individual wrongdoings but for the collective.

In my mind, there can be no more important topic to raise up on this time of **collective turning and responsibility** than the climate emergency, which is, as many argue, the greatest challenge of our time (and one of the greatest challenges humanity has ever faced). The response to this crisis has direct impact on the lives, health and prosperity of our children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren; nieces/great nieces/nephews/great nephews; friends' children and their children. It is already affecting many of us, and more intensely those in vulnerable areas of our country and in the Global South.

As challenging as it is for us to face the threats of the climate crisis, I want to invite us this evening to summon **the hutzpah of Abraham**, our oldest Jewish ancestor, and the *courage* of a young activist to notice, to cry out; to ask "Who is responsible for this palace?" and "What do we do? How do we put out the flames?"

Noticing/Crying out

Before I go any further, I want to stop and ask everyone to pause for a second and take a breath and notice what might have arisen since I began my talk. (30 second pause) Fear? Anxiety and worry? Anger? Frustration? Even grief? Desire to find an escape route and take a 20 to 25 minute bathroom break? All valid!

This is a really hard topic to talk about for a lot of reasons. To name a few: because it feels out of our grasp. Because it feels so overwhelming. Because it is scary. I struggle with all these feelings. In preparing this talk, I have done some self reflection, and I have noticed that I tend to read virtually every major article in the Times and the a good number that come through my social media feed-- **except** (until recently!) the articles on the climate emergency, especially ones with frightening statistics. I typically save those for later-- and never come back to them.

²<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/01/our-house-is-on-fire-16-year-old-greta-thunberg-speaks-truth-to-power/>

And when the climate comes up in conversation, even in a casual “wow it is hot, let’s blame global warming” way, I am quick to change the topic. My fight or flight reactors are strong - and like Jonah upon hearing the call to preach to Ninaveh, most of the time, I flee.

I also looked back in my notes and re-read a sermon I gave to my former congregation on environmental teshuvah eleven years ago- and I was surprised by how much things have changed in little more than a decade. Back then, we saw global scorching as a problem- yet it still felt abstract. I pushed to bring this issue to our attention, but there was yet a feeling of emergency.

Eleven years ago, I said we were in a turning point moment. Kol Vahomer- all the more so, now, in 2019.

This past July was the hottest month on record on the planet, in a 140 year record, with the planet a 1.71 degrees higher than the 20th century average³. The record warmth also shrank Arctic and Antarctic sea ice to historic lows. September 2019 (a few days ago) was the hottest September on record.⁴

The world’s leading climate scientists believe that we must hold the planet’s warming to 1.5 degrees celsius (.5 degrees less than the Paris accords) and do so **by 2030 to avert or mitigate the worst impacts of climate change**. Given the current trajectory, if we do nothing, scientists project a four degree temperature increase in that time.⁵ Vulnerable populations at home and in the Global South are at a greater risk for experiencing catastrophic impacts. The World Health Organization estimates climate -related deaths will reach 250,000 per year between 2030 and 2050. And a 2018 World Bank report estimated that by 2050, there would be 143 million climate change-driven migrants from the regions of Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and southeast Asia alone.

Many, for good reason, say that climate change is a complicated issue. Solving it would involve intergovernmental cooperation that is not precedent, compromises from industries and businesses who are driven by profits; creation of technologies not yet invented; and let’s be honest: a radical restructuring of our economies and even way of life.

³ (<https://www.noaa.gov/news/july-2019-was-hottest-month-on-record-for-planet>)

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(<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/10/04/global-warming-september-2019-hottest-record/3865898002/>)

⁵ Intergovernmental panel on climate change. <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>

While the issue and potential solutions may be complicated, **our response need not be.**

We should take the lead of Abraham. When we see a palace on fire, we should not concern ourselves over how hard it will be to put out the flames; how many firemen or women we need to do the job. We should not look at the beloved palace and say “It’s impossible to save - it’s just too big of a fire- let’s just keep going, business as usual.”

Rather, we should stop, notice and cry out: Our beloved Palace Earth in on fire!
There is no Planet B.

“Is it possible that the palace has no master?”

Seeing the palace on fire, Abraham asks: “Is it possible that the palace has no master?” In other words: Who is in charge here?

To answer that for ourselves in this moment of climate crisis, let’s go back to the beginning, to the Garden of Eden. *Adam*, the first human being, whose name comes from the word “*adamah*” -earth because out of the earth he was formed, is placed in the garden of Eden. He is given a task: “*l’avda ul’sham-rah*”⁶; the traditional translation “To till and to tend it” does a disservice to the power and meaning of the text.

“*L’avdah*” - can mean “to work” but the word also comes from the Hebrew word “*eved*” - servant and “*avodah*” - service. In the words of Rabbi Michael Cohen, The connection with ‘*eved*’ “is to say we are not the masters of the environment, we are its servant.”⁷

Ul’shamrah- comes from the word that means to guard or protect, in the way that we God protects us in the torah, we protect the earth. The way that we protect children, we are to protect and guard the earth.

The rabbis continue this theme of stewardship in a midrash⁸ that demonstrates awareness of the human desire to exploit natural resources, foreshadowing our current dilemmas. The midrash says that when *Adam* was placed in the Garden of Eden, God Godself took the first creature around to all the various trees in the

⁶ Genesis 2:15

⁷ Hold for this citation.

⁸ Kohelet Rabbah 7:13

Garden, saying: “See how beautiful and praiseworthy my Creations are! Take care, therefore, that you do not destroy my world, for if you do, there will be no one left to mend what you have destroyed.”

It’s amazing to me that a text written around 200-400 CE understood the danger of exploitation of natural resources well before the industrial era when carbon emissions began to change our weather. Rabbi Ethan Witkovsky teaches on this midrash, “God’s warning, built into the origins of us and of the world, is an explicit reminder that nature is not invincible, we must care about it not only for ourselves but for the future.”⁹

While the torah does not always line up with our contemporary values, in this case, there is so much torah and interpretive support for sustainability. From the shemittah- the radical idea that the LAND itself needs rest every seven years; to the concept of land ownership-land belongs to God and we are only renters; to the prohibition of hopping down fruit trees in war time- an instruction that gives birth to the value of “ba’al tashkit” - honoring the earth and our resources by not wasting-- the torah tells us in so many ways that we are stewards on this earth. **We are responsible for all of Creation.**

I want to name that while this sounds beautiful- it may also feel like a burden when it comes to the climate crisis. After all, we are not the ones who polluted the earth. We inherited the debts of unregulated industrialization and globalization. How can we, who have such a small part in the creation of the problem, be “responsible for all of Creation.”

To this I quote Abraham Joshua Heschel who said, “In a civilized society, some are guilty but all are responsible.”

What do we do now? How will we put out the flames?

Our eyes are open. We have seen the palace on fire. We have asked who owns that palace and who is responsible and the finger is pointed right back at us. Now: **What do we do about it?**

Hazon, the largest Jewish environmental organization in North America, has an answer: Make this year, 5780, a year of environmental teshuvah (repentance, turning). Environmental teshuvah is defined as **“the outward manifestation of our commitment to doing better for the planet.”**

⁹ Get link

Each and every day, we make decisions- mostly small but sometimes big decisions - that impact the environment. The food we eat, the *amount* of food we buy, the clothes we wear, the stocks and portfolios our finances are invested in, the ways we travel are just a few examples.

I was recently speaking to an SAJ member about Greta Thunberg's trip to North America for the U.N. Climate Summit and International Climate March. In keeping with her principle to live with little to no impact on the environment, Greta traveled from Britain to New York on a 15 day voyage on a zero-carbon emissions sailing boat and thanks to social media, many of us followed her journey.

I recently had a conversation with an SAJ member about the ways Greta has influenced her teenage son and their friends. She told me: "I think the boat trip itself is THE (greatest) contribution that Greta has made. Beyond anything else she is saying or doing. It is the action that speaks a million words. And the issue for us now is: how much are each of us willing to let go of?"

In 5780, the year of environmental teshuvah, I ask us: what decisions or changes can we make to reflect our commitment to doing better for the planet? Just like with any commitment or practice, we should not set ourselves up for failure -- if we say, we will change our ways all at once and in every area of our life - we will likely not be able to sustain the effort. To set ourselves up for success, let's focus on one or two only and make them both challenging and do-able. Some examples: commit to abstaining from single use plastic bottles and bags; eat one less meat meal per week; travel by airplane less frequently and when you travel by plane, commit to buying carbon offsets; buy the food you need rather than think you need to avoid food waste and compost food scraps.

In our community, we value mitzvot as spiritual practices not only for their own sake but because they help **us** awaken to gratitude and affirm our values. Let's view our individual environmental practices in this light. Even if our decision to unplug our electronics when we aren't using them is not going to make a significant dent in the colossal problem of climate change, it can remind us that **we care** about the earth and that **we are committed** to doing something about it. The more we engage in these small acts, the more we remember. That memory inspires not only our daily activism but can fuel a larger commitment to speaking up and acting for the sake of our planet.

We move from individual to community. I commit to bringing more green awareness to SAJ and to fostering an environment that supports each other in our individual commitments and considers what we changes we can make to lower our congregation's carbon footprint. And I hope you will join me.

Even as we consider our individual and congregational commitments, it is important for us to remember that individual actions are not the primary cause - nor primary remedy- of the climate crisis. We must speak loudly and clearly, bringing our Jewish values of stewardship and justice into the public square and demand that our country does teshuvah.

Jewish climate activists from the New York Jewish Climate Network did this-- and joined with activists around New York state this past year to help ensure the passage of an ambitious, comprehensive climate law, committing that New York State reach carbon-free electricity by 2040 and a net-zero carbon economy by 2050. New York follows seven other states who have passed similar legislation in the past year alone.

And perhaps especially because it is more needed there, we can bring those Jewish values of “l'avda v'shamra” - to serve and protect- towards national attention. A mass movement is building. In August 2018, Greta Thunberg decided that she would no longer go to school rather strike in front of the Swedish parliament. She sat alone.

My colleague Rabbi Elissa Sachs-Cohen brilliantly compared Greta to the Talmudic character Honi, a rainmaker who, when the community faced a drought, drew a circle on the ground and stood in the middle, demanding not to move until God brought the rain. Through her principled stance and unwillingness to back down, she has brought the rain.

Greta's picture soon went viral and inspired other kids to start striking and most importantly speaking out for change. On September 20, 2019, just thirteen months after protesting alone, **millions of people**, mostly children and teens marched in the largest climate mobilization of all time. Over the week of action (9/20-9/27), 7.6 million people are reported to have attended strikes in 6135 actions in 185 countries¹⁰ from major cities to tiny towns and to rural villages in the Global South.

I had the privilege of marching in NYC with my older child Avi and a few SAJ students and families. I also relished seeing SAJ teens who were marching with their schoolmates, whom I bumped into along the way.

[Along the route, I was talking to Avi about various political candidates and their stances on addressing the crisis. Avi said: “Mom, climate is my issue. The elections are your issue. It's not really my thing.” I gave a little prayer of thanks for those unique parent-teaching moments and I explained how fighting for

¹⁰ <https://globalclimatestrike.net/>

issues we care about and elections were interconnected; about how important it is to raise our voices so the politicians know what we care about and what to fight for.]

Earlier, I spoke about the fear, overwhelm, grief I feel regarding this issue-- how sometimes I want to be like Jonah and run away. Something shifted for me at the march on September 20. The march was youth led, youth driven. I looked around and absorbed. If these young people can face an uncertain future and say: "I am not going to just let this happen, I am going to do something about it," then how can I not follow their lead?

Hazon called on us to engage in environmental teshuvah. I want to offer one more thought on this concept (connected to the climate march). The Talmud talks about two kinds of (motivations for) teshuvah¹¹: *teshuvah me-yirah*- from fear (of punishment) and *teshuvah me-ahava*, from love (of the Divine). They are both acceptable forms of teshuvah but the talmud indicates teshuvah from love is more powerful.

In terms of the global climate crisis, we certainly feel the need to change due to fear of consequences for our planet -*teshuvah me-yirah*. Seeing the house/palace on fire can motivate us. Seeing the emergency is important for our prioritization.

And it is also important - and perhaps most impactful for our long-term engagement- to be motivated to change out of love.

My oldest child is four years younger than Greta. My son is 8 years younger. Just as I make sure they have housing, food and water, I need to do whatever I can to make sure they have a habitable planet and city (especially for when I am no longer around). Not because I have to. Rather because I love them more than life itself. Because I want them to have a future of promise. I want them to live in a world that is good and gracious and kind.

For those of you who were here on Rosh HaShanah, I spoke about facing a new and uncertain year. We talked about facing that year with love. "Olam Chesed Yibaneh: I will build this world from love. You must build this world from love."

¹¹ Yoma 86b

We look around. We notice: Our palace is on fire! We cannot keep walking by.

We hear the call. We are responsible.

Olam Chesed Yibaneh. Out of love for the earth and all of creation, out of love for our families and the families of our community, let us commit to this teshuvah.