

YOM KIPPUR AND THE SPIRITUAL CASE FOR CLIMATE ACTION

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I'm not sure about God, but I do believe there is godliness in nature. It is a sacred gift that is awesome – as the word is used in scriptures of all creeds. As a decades-long climate change activist, I am convinced that we will only save our planet if we insert our souls into the story.

Whether you view nature as God's ultimate creation, as humankind's dominion, or like me, as the astonishing wonder of the spiritual and physical realm, nature is under dire threat. The extraordinarily complex web of life is dying around us, and as fixing it will disrupt our physical and spiritual equanimity, we largely ignore this suffering.

In the spirit of Yom Kippur, let us make it right. We can and we must.

Solomon constructed the First Temple which stood for 400 years. Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians destroyed it in 587 BCE.

Within 70 years, the returning Jews rebuilt the Second Temple, destroyed by Titus and the Romans almost 600 years later.

Two millennia on, our Earthly temple is being destroyed. This most glorious temple, the natural world, has stood for billions of years, hosting humans for 200,000 of them. Today, we are the destroyers.

In the spirit of Yom Kippur, let us make it right. We can. And we must.

Climate change is now at the precipice of becoming an irreversible catastrophe. It is almost unbearable to read about what has already been lost. But we must grieve and atone by joining with others to protect and repair the natural world.

We can save lives, protect habitats and species, and regenerate ecosystems. We can become the compassionate ones by bequeathing a habitable home to future generations. This is our spiritual choice.

In the Bible, Noah spent 120 years roaming the world warning of the flood and no one would listen. Scientists have spent 60 years warning of the greenhouse effect to no avail. These warnings are now manifest in the daily weather and news reports – everywhere.

Our redemption will come through action. But first we must hold the excruciating truth. Just as we care for ailing loved ones, we can change our priorities because of love in our hearts...love for our Earthly temple and for our children and grandchildren.

I don't know what propels a specific individual to action, but I do know that a serious medical diagnosis jumpstarts families, friends and colleagues into active kindness. When someone we love is gravely ill, we sacrifice our time, energy, pleasure in order to tend to our loved one. We cook food, rub feet, even deal with insurance. And those that love us rush to help out. When my friend Diane was dying of lung cancer at age 39, her mom's colleagues donated their precious vacation time so she could take time off to be with Diane. This caring instinct is missing from our relationship to our Earthly home, even as it has guided significant environmental progress, from the revolutionary Clean Air Act to the Endangered Species Act.

The destruction of the Temples in Jewish tradition represents exile and subsequent persecution. Climate change could force a billion refugees in the next decade. In order to protect these climate refugees, we have to love them as we love our ailing loved ones. They are in exile.

In 1986, Greenpeace's flagship, the Rainbow Warrior, helped relocate the Rongelap people who were suffering from radiation sickness caused by United States nuclear testing. I recently saw photographs of Greenpeaceers carrying deformed children to safe havens. The fundamental goodness of this act struck me in my heart. A mere two weeks later, our government refused entry to Bahamian climate refugees from islands devastated by Hurricane Dorian. Very few of us spoke up to welcome these destitute refugees. We can incorporate fundamental goodness into our actions on behalf of the climate refugees of today and tomorrow.

Climate change presents spiritual choices in our quotidian, political and financial lives. One example - our money can fuel progress or destruction.

Over 20 trillion dollars of fossil fuel assets are on the books of oil companies. If we burn this oil, catastrophic climate change is guaranteed. Leaving it in the ground will be political hell. We can protect our Earthly temple or protect these assets. We cannot do both. Divest or actively engage to change these fossil fuel companies. Invest instead in renewable energy, regenerative agriculture, and green bonds.

Stock indexes quadrupled in the past decade reflecting business models that encourage mass extinctions, melting icecaps, and climate change chaos. This is an indecent way to make money. We change the laws and accounting rules, and redefine profit, or nothing else changes.

Let's use power and money for good.

There are builders, young leaders, solar installers, farmers, artists, accountants, city planners, chefs, teachers, large and small businesses ...all of whom can help repair the damage. It will take all of us choosing extraordinary acts of courage to protect nature. This is no easy battle, and we already have huge casualties.

Yes, nature is resilient and so is humankind. We must save every living thing we can – flora, fauna, land and sea.

We can work together with the vigor, ingenuity and commitment that great social and economic transformation requires while rejoicing in the human spirit and its delight, diversity and kindness.

We can choose to make a better world.

We can and we must.

Tikkun olam.

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