

# The Peoplehood Papers 28

December 2020 | MarCheshvan 5780

**The Climate Crisis & The Jewish People:  
From “Why” to “What and How....”**



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# **The Climate Crisis & The Jewish People: From “Why” to “What and How....”**

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# From the Editor

This issue of the [Peoplehood Papers](#), jointly produced by the Center for Jewish Peoplehood Education and Hazon, *The Jewish Lab for Sustainability*, is dedicated to the topic of **addressing the global climate crisis. What is the role of the Jewish people? What can, could, or should we do?**

Global warming is a modern-day development that challenges us as Jews to respond. We need to interpret our personal and collective responses to this crisis as Jews, in the spirit of our heritage, our texts and our ethos. Are we bystanders or should we be activists as Jewish tradition compels us to assume responsibility and act upon it? And what does that mean, in practice?

Global warming is a challenge to all of humanity, but we wanted to explore how we can interweave responses to the climate crisis with normative understandings of Jewishness, gathered and built upon over centuries? How can we utilize the collective wisdom and energies of the Jewish people to accelerate the velocity of best practice around our response to climate change? Can we reach the point that just as Jews are required to be responsible for each other (*kol Israel arievim ze laze*) they will also feel obligated to the wellbeing of our world (*kol Israel arievim la'olam*)?

In addition to the above questions we challenged our article contributors to address the following:

- What do you think has been most impactful in this work so far?
- What do you think the greatest challenges are?
- What are key things that you think Jewish institutions or Jewish people could or should do?
- How can we mobilize more resources and synergize our efforts across our Jewish communities?
- What is required politically and educationally to bring about this change?
- What would be required to shift our actions?
- What would it mean for Jewish communal, national and global organizations to respond? What will it mean for the Jewish people if we do not respond?
- Where and how should Israel fit into the process of response?

- Do we, in the Jewish world, have an obligation to act independently of Israel? What does such an organized response look like, and how does it reflect on our dialogue with Israel?
- What new interactions between Jewish communities, faith, and climate have been revealed because of Covid-19?
- How has the Covid-19 pandemic changed the way we think about communal responses, and how might that change how we interact with climate change?
- Does our commitment to Tikkun Olam also cover fixing the damages humans brought upon our world?

I want to thank our article contributors for sharing their thoughts, insights and passion for this topic. We hope that their articles and the questions framed here will inspire further conversations. Special thanks to Hannah Henza from Hazon who was our partner in this production from the first day to its completion; to Sarah Wolk for the word-proofing of the text, and to Eliezer Weinbach who carried the bulk of the editing work. This collection of essays could not have happened without them.

Shlomi Ravid

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# Introduction

**Eliezer Weinbach**

The picture of a basin of cracked earth devoid of water is seared into my memory, so I turn off the faucet while I brush my teeth. The video of a turtle with a straw stuck in its nose is seared into my memory, so I don't use plastic straws anymore. Yet I have, along with the rest of the world, failed to protect our planet. And make no mistake — we have failed. We are playing catch up. Whatever the precipitating factors, anthropogenic Climate Change is already killing and destroying, and will continue to do so.

On a day-to-day basis, I did not feel the impacts of Climate Change, and therefore I never felt compelled to investigate it more deeply. About three years ago I started working for Hazon, and began to learn that there was a much bigger picture that I hadn't seen. I thought that by recycling I was being the change I wanted to see in the world, but I wasn't changing anything. It turns out that there are lots of things individuals can do to combat Climate Change, and I was barely doing one. Composting, transitioning to a plant-based diet, buying less, supporting CSAs, calling my representatives. Why hadn't I heard of these things when I was growing up? Shouldn't my day school have taught me these actions are inspired by Jewish values? I found out recently that my great grandfathers grew their own vegetables in Poland and on Staten Island. Why wasn't that passed to me as a tradition? A rabbi of mine said, "Anyone with a brain in their head *knows* that the Torah values environmentalism." Yet the sad truth is that there are powerful forces that keep us from having the information that we need in order to *care*. I didn't know there was a problem, and my childhood teachers probably didn't either.

Now there are new questions on the table — how do we connect with those who don't know? How do we leverage relationships and shared experiences to educate, support, and activate others? How do we inspire people to take big steps instead of small ones? How do we overcome the forces of inertia that would keep us from learning? How do we cultivate within ourselves the strength to act in the face of pain and challenge? We all have brains in our heads — how do we best put them to use? *We are in a global climate crisis, and Jewish tradition compels us to respond.*

This publication seeks to answer some of these questions. In these pages will be found the prophecies and censures of teens and elders; the texts and musings of the Orthodox and the Reform; the hopes and fears of a diverse group of people who need us all to listen together and then act together. Jewish peoplehood has always been motivated by resilience, experience, and wisdom. The writers of the following essays bring the full power of these forces to bear on this most critical of problems. Please join me in considering their words, rising up to the challenges they set before us, and accepting the weight of responsibility for the future of our people and the entire world.

I know we are equal to the task.

**Eliezer Weinbach** is a National Programs Coordinator for Hazon. He was raised with a deep love of G-d and creation, and discovered fully integrated Jewish environmentalism at the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center. A graduate of Yeshiva University and the JOFEE (Jewish Outdoor, Food, Farming, and Environmental Education) Fellowship, he holds onto seemingly divergent concepts as tightly as he can.



# The Bible's Ecological Language

Ellen Bernstein

By way of introduction let me say a little about myself and my work. I was in one of the first environmental studies programs in the country at UC Berkeley and I founded the first national Jewish environmental organization — Shomrei Adamah, Keepers of the Earth — in 1988. I started Shomrei Adamah because I believed that ecological ideas coincided perfectly with Jewish ones, and I believed that religious organizations must assume the mantle of environmental leadership. Shomrei Adamah's work was largely educational. We reflected upon and discussed the texts, traditions, and practices of Judaism from an ecological perspective, and we developed books and educational materials to help engage the Jewish community on issues of environmental concerns. We laid the philosophical groundwork for Judaism's ecology.

Over the years I came to see that the way we communicate the environmental message (both in the religious world and the wider world)—the language we use, the stories we tell, and the way we frame the message— is as important as the message itself. We need compelling, robust, and nuanced language to inspire and connect us more organically with the natural world. Too often I have felt that environmentalists were speaking to a narrow audience of like-minded allies. Contemporary environmental language can be too flat and sometimes too political. It can sound more transactional than poetic. **People today are suffering from green fatigue and can't bear to hear about one more climate disaster, one more deadly heat wave, deadly forest fire, or deadly hurricane. They tune out and eventually turn off altogether. Our language and our communication efforts are hobbling our ability to reach wide audiences. We must be able to address people with widely different perspectives. After all, the environment is not just for environmentalists. This is the great challenge of our time.**

I have always sought a more embodied and less scientific language, a more evocative language that could convey the richness and meaning of the natural world and help us build a relationship with her. "We will only conserve what we love," wrote the Senegalese environmentalist, Baba Dioum. I have been moved by the beauty of the world and all its riotous biodiversity, and I was moved by the Bible's ability to capture

the depth of this beauty in its evocative, multi-layered language. Biblical language has endured for millennia, speaking afresh to each generation, and its ecological ideas are deeply embedded in its stories.

In the last decades, I've been taking the Hebrew Bible's ecological language more seriously. Language after all is the beginning of culture and the beginning of identity. I've been interested in developing the Bible's language as the basis for a kind of cultural ecology. Biblical language has of course been a source of inspiration to writers and thinkers, throughout history. I believe it can help us today if we can tap into that literary vein.

Allow me to offer a couple of examples from Genesis 1, which is easily the most accessible text in the whole canon. We can begin with the 2nd line of the Bible's creation story, which states that "In the beginning... *Ruach Elohim*, the wind of God, hovered over the surface of the waters." *Ruach* is a beautifully multilayered word in Torah. *Ruach* is the wind. *Ruach* is the breath, the place where the breath from inside our lungs meets the outside atmosphere. *Ruach* is the spirit, so it is the place where God, breath, and wind coincide. *Ruach* is used over and over in Torah intertwining these three meanings: wind, breath, and the divine. Since God, the breath, and the wind are all bound up together, when we contaminate our air, we are contaminating God. Restorative activities like gardening, farming, and tree planting all rebuild the soil and absorb carbon from our air, which in turn becomes plant matter. These actions intentionally exchange carbon for oxygen as we build a temple for God, a temple that God can inhabit, a temple where God, too, can breathe.

The second word that I will mention today is the root *r-d-h* (רדה), or the English "to have dominion over," in Genesis 1:28. Created last, God gives the human creature mastery over the earth and dominion over the other creatures. Sadly, even tragically, the English word dominion has given the Bible and Judaism a bad name in environmental circles. Thousands of articles and entire books have been written about this verse, ever since the historian Lynn White wrote an article in *Science* magazine in 1967 implicating this biblical allowance for dominion as the source of our environmental crisis. White argued that God's giving humanity dominion was a mandate for humanity to dominate and exploit nature. This reading is entirely out of context and shows no appreciation for the sense of goodness and ultimate value that permeates the whole creation. Reading the full text, it follows that the human's job is to be a benevolent, loving caretaker of creation. Why would God want people to exploit a world of beauty and goodness that God had just created? This idea of dominion as domination is what I was taught over forty years ago when I was a college student at Berkeley, and this is the reading that continues to be taught in environmental studies and geography courses, invariably turning young

people away from Judaism. Much of my own work is dedicated to this audience, since there is such a dearth of writing on constructive biblical approaches to ecology that make it into academia.

I'd like to conclude with a plea. For the last two decades I have been one of a handful of Jews doing scholarly and creative work on the intersection of Judaism and ecology. There is so much that needs to be done, and academia offers many possibilities to engage young people in interdisciplinary ecological work. It's been disappointing that no seminaries and few universities are picking up on this. Environment touches everything we do every day. In every realm of life and in every academic field we can make deep ecological connections.

It has always been my contention that there is nothing more important and more Jewish for us as Jews than to attend to the needs of our earth, our life support system. There will be no Judaism if our earthly home becomes uninhabitable, and I fear that this is the direction we are headed, unless we begin to act for the sake of the whole earth and our future.

**Rabbi Ellen Bernstein** founded the first national Jewish environmental organization, Shomrei Adamah, Keepers of the Earth in 1988, and has been writing, teaching and organizing around Judaism, Bible, and ecology ever since. She is the author of *The Promise of the Land: A Passover Haggadah* and *The Splendor of Creation, A Biblical Ecology* among many other works, and is a sought-after speaker and teacher on the intersection of religion and ecology. She is an advisory board member of the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology. To learn more, visit [www.ellenbernstein.org](http://www.ellenbernstein.org).



# Witnessing and With-nessing the Climate Crisis

**Rachel Binstock**

I thought I would be ready for something like this.

I had been training. I had cultivated a spirituality that could carry me through tough times, studying ritual and self-care practices that rooted me back in my center. I had been learning and teaching about growing my own food, making my own medicines, and other survival skills I might need if and when societal collapse happened. I had been preparing through my lifestyle, living in a mobile tiny home on a piece of wild land, off grid with my own sources of water and power.

But I wasn't ready. Ready isn't the right word.

I moved to Southern Oregon in March right as the pandemic spread across the US and shelter-in-place began. I had been living in the Bay Area, working for Urban Adamah, my last stop in a 7-year journey of Jewish earth-based education and revival. I believed, and still do, that remembering and reimagining our ancestrally-given earth-based practices are integral to being a whole human being, an earth-dweller, and a team member to the more-than-human world. But I also saw that our movement was struggling to mobilize the hundreds of young energized adults, who were called to our programs, around the climate crisis. And I too struggled as a practitioner to integrate and metabolize the reality of the climate emergency for myself, to offer that space for others, and to get involved, even as I had worked on climate as a student and then a professional organizer early in my 20s. I knew climate scientists and activists had been warning of a warming climate and its impacts for the last 50+ years; and I knew that corporate interests were seeding doubt, through funding research that obscured the public's understanding; and those very truths compelled me to work as a farmer and educator. But I saw how I, along with so many righteous earth-loving humans around me, struggled to see Climate Change as a compelling truth; the rational knowing wasn't connected to the somatic experience of a present seemingly untouched by the whispers of pending destruction. I chose, like so many do, to take on individual "sustainable" practices like not eating meat, biking instead of driving, traveling less, and later moving into a tiny house off-grid. But I did

not locate myself in the systemic struggle for policies that curbed emissions and shut down the fossil fuel industry. Those fights I left for someone else. That is until I took a job working for Dayenu: A Jewish Call to Climate Action developing a space for Jewish communities to metabolize their anxiety, fear, and stuckness around the climate crisis so they can move towards meaningful, bold, systemic action. We are calling the work I am developing Spiritual Adaptation, a counterbalance to climate mitigation that often looks like action and advocacy. This is a space for the existential reckoning and evolution of consciousness needed to accept the reality of the climate emergency upon us. And even as this project was working me, calling me into my own work of processing the deep stores of grief, overwhelm and stuckness inside, I still wasn't ready.

And then the West Coast was set ablaze this September. While there have been big fires here before, never had we seen fires consuming such large swathes of the coast from Tijuana all the way to BC. And I was caught in the middle, and I wasn't ready.

The morning of Tuesday, September 8th, I left our off-grid homestead for town. There had been high winds, 20-40 mph, and I had spent the evening before battening down the hatches to secure our outdoor kitchen and bathroom, tool shed and tiny home. As I entered town, I saw a plume of smoke on the horizon. People were sounding the alarm that there was a fire on the north end of Ashland. I watched in disbelief as the smoke billowed and filled the sky only a few miles away. It became quickly clear that this wasn't a small brush fire but a blazing, dangerous force. I started getting alerts from the county to be ready to evacuate, I started hearing from friends that the fire was spreading northbound fueled by the high winds. I stopped trying to get work done and started asking "Should I pack my bags? Hook the tiny house up to the truck? How would I do that by myself? Should I stay put, or run?" I frantically texted my partner who was 10 miles north in Medford on the other side of the valley to let him know to be on guard. The fire was between us and both thoroughfares were burning. His only option was to stay put and see how the fire spread. After leveling the better part of Talent and then Phoenix, the towns north of Ashland, a friend texted that the fire reached south Medford where my partner was. I was terrified, unsure what to do. "Where can I find real time information?" I thought. I began tuning in to livestreams on Facebook where people were tracking police scanners for houses and farms reported to be on fire. I drove home and saw the town of Ashland filled with the overflow of the freeway as the fire consumed the properties straddling I-5 and the towns just north of here. I sat and watched from a nearby ridge as helicopters and planes flew overhead spewing toxic fire retardant all over this gorgeous land to save human lives and homes. Stunned, my mind fogged in confusion and my heart cracked and bruised, but it did not shatter. It couldn't afford to — we weren't in the clear yet. Over the next 36 hours I waited for my partner

to arrive home safely and received a steady flow of updates from friends reporting themselves as safe. Learning whose homes burned, learning about the destruction. As rescue operations counted the deaths, missing people, and homes destroyed, I counted a mountain of blessings. I couldn't believe the winds had blown the fire away from our home and not towards it. I couldn't believe that some didn't even get an evacuation notice, no time to grab anything. I couldn't believe that of the 2000 homes destroyed, a large portion belonged to working class Latinx folks whose labor supported Ashland's arts, culture, and dining industries.

**The destruction here is heart-breaking. Its friends' lives turned upside down, whole neighborhoods turned to ash, family photos gone. Its climate refugees, jobs lost, and years of rebuilding. However, the scariest part is that I am not sure if the world is awake or taking this in.** This is a warning, it is a tell-tale, a foreshadowing of all the pain and suffering on our collective horizon. This isn't a tragedy isolated to the West Coast, this is an inescapable fate for those on the East Coast, in the Midwest, or in the South. We are no longer waiting for the day that the earth warms and we feel the impact. That day has arrived. This is happening to all of us and will happen to you too. The climate emergency is upon us, and we don't have that much time to act.

I wasn't ready because I hadn't admitted that it was here. Every time I heard about the very real impacts of the climate crisis on other people in other places I hadn't really been bearing witness to the devastation. I hadn't allowed myself to be with it, to be a witness to it, because it was always so horrible that my coping strategy was not to let it in. If I shut it out, I could still function, I could make it through my days fraught with un-sustainable hypocrisy. Even though the nascent knowing of the climate emergency was within, I hadn't yet been knocked down, forced to acknowledge its presence, release control, and have faith that either I'd make it out or I wouldn't. I was still trying to plan and control my surroundings.

And while we need to get ready and make evacuation plans with our loved ones; while it would behoove us to build resilient land-based communities growing our own food, building with earth-based non-toxic and fire-proof materials, pushing for zoning that allows for alternative ways of living; while we need to be showing up to fight corporate greed, bringing an end to fossil fuels and supporting regenerative agriculture that sequesters carbon into prairie and pasture; what we need to do first is to look this reality squarely in the eyes and take it in. We must become a witness to it, holding it in our hands, being with it. The concept of witnessing, in Hebrew being an *ed*, is a potent one in the Jewish tradition. It isn't until a witness signs the marriage document or declares the new month that the portal into marriage or the new month can be crossed. The word *ed* is enlarged in the Torah when the passage from the seminal prayer Shema is scribed.

The Shema is the Jewish declaration that we are all One and so the fact that the word *ed* is enlarged suggests that witnessing is the key to knowing the true nature of the interconnected one-ness of all phenomena. A witness's power is to acknowledge what is. **Witnessing the reality of the climate crisis, with-nessing it — being with it — and letting it land in our bones and heart, allows us to walk through the portal into a future where mitigation is possible, where humans re-invest in the regenerative capacity of the earth and join it.** The climate crisis is here, we must with-ness it, it must be acknowledged. Only then can we radically and swiftly change our relationship to energy, food, comfort, and the planet's more than human beings... or else the earth will do that for us.

**Rachel Binstock** is a farmer-artist, educator-activist, and spiritual leader who works at the intersections of earth-based Judaism, Jewish trauma, Climate Change, and inspired Jewish ritual. She got her start working at Eden Village Camp as Assistant Farm Director and later at Urban Adamah where she ran the young adult fellowship. She is currently working on a project with Dayenu: A Jewish Call to Climate Action, developing spiritual space and methods for the Jewish community to reckon with the existential reality of the climate emergency. She has also been involved with other Jewish organizations including Wilderness Torah, Hazon, Alef, and Romemu.



# Climate Crisis: A Jewish Response

**Michael M. Cohen**

For many, April 22, 1970, the first Earth Day, marks the beginning of the environmental movement. Similarly, understanding the first sentence of Genesis as, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” conveys the world was created ex nihilo. Another reading of that sentence, “When God began to create heaven and earth,” means matter already existed and God used it to form the heavens and the earth. That approach compels us to acknowledge that the first Earth Day did not appear ex nihilo but was part of an unfolding process including Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), Paul Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb* (1968), and the first picture of the earth taken from lunar orbit by Apollo 8’s crew (1968). That picture allowed humanity to see, more fully comprehend, how small and fragile our planet is against the vastness of the universe. The following year, 1969, was the Santa Barbara oil spill, and a year later, the first Earth Day.

That earthrise photo, published in the New York Times on December 30 became an iconic image around the world. Called by nature photographer Galen Rowell, “the most influential environmental photograph ever taken,” Archibald MacLeish wrote, “To see the Earth as it truly is, small and blue and beautiful in that eternal silence where it floats is to see ourselves as riders on the Earth together, brothers on that bright loveliness in the eternal cold.” Simply put, we are protected by that eternal cold by our atmosphere, made up of a perfect blend of mainly water vapor, carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide. Sunlight enters the atmosphere as short wavelengths of light. That light is reflected back as long wavelengths of light and in that changed wavelength all of it is unable to escape our atmosphere because of the combination of gases. By keeping some of the light in, think heat, our planet maintains its life affirming temperature. This is the same dynamic causing a car to heat up when it’s windows are closed. The sun’s short wavelength of light enters through the window, but once converted to long wavelengths of light, the heat gets trapped by the windows.

The diversity of life on our planet only exists in the narrow temperature range enabled by that formula of atmospheric gases. Diversity is not a liberal political value; it is the way of the world. The environment is healthier with greater diversity, coral reefs and rainforests are prime examples. This is also true for the human family. We are better off

because of different religions, nations, cultures, and languages. The Irish Potato Famine was caused by planting only one variety of potato. Without a diverse crop, the disease spread on a large and deadly scale.

Diversity is a leitmotif in the early chapters of the Book of Genesis. All creation is called “good,” reminding us of the worth of the multiplicity of the world. By describing everything created prior to humans as “good,” the text teaches all things have intrinsic value beyond any price we may place on them. Once we are created, “very good” is used. An anthropocentric reading says this is because the world was created solely for our needs, while a biocentric reading says “very good” means creation was complete and we humans were the last piece of the biological puzzle.

Diversity is emphasized a few chapters later when Noah brings pairs of species onto the ark ensuring after the flood they can replenish the earth. After the flood, God places a rainbow, with its diverse colors, in the sky as a reminder to never again destroy the world.

Immediately following we read about the Tower of Babel. For Yeshayahu Leibowitz, Babel represents a totalitarian state where the aims of the nation are valued more than the individual. In such a society, where everyone, “had the same language, and the same words,” diverse thought and expression is crushed.

In the genealogies that link Noah and Babel we read, “Nations were divided by their lands, each one with its own language, according to their clans, by their nations.” Leibowitz sees the babel of languages not as a punishment but a corrective return to how things had been and are supposed to be.

**The opening of the Bible understands diversity not as a noun but as a verb. Its importance is underscored by these accounts, highlighting diversity as a foundation of the world. Such an orientation is essential for our survival.**

At the end of the Noah story God says privately to Godself they will, “never again strike down all living things.” We find comfort in that thought. However, a few paragraphs later when God places the rainbow in the sky as a public “covenant between Me and earth,” God qualifies what God originally said by stating, “then I will remember My covenant, between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh, and the waters will no more become a Flood to destroy all flesh.” God will never destroy the world via a Flood, but unsettling, seems to leave the door open to destroy the world by other means. In that same troubling vein we should remind ourselves of the Midrash telling us how God created and destroyed worlds until God created this one:

Rabbi Abahu said: "This proves that the Holy One, blessed be God, went on creating worlds and destroying them until God created this one, and declared, 'This one pleases Me; those did not please Me.'" (*Midrash Rabbah* — Genesis III:7)

**The distressing question this Midrash raises is as God looks at the world today does God still say it pleases God? When it comes to a more serious response to the Climate Emergency, not to mention other human social and political defects, we can conclude God would be very displeased. We can remain smug and think this world will last forever. Perhaps one of the early iterations of the world, as the Midrash suggests there were, had developed just like ours today, only to be destroyed, if you will, by not following God's Environmental Plan.**

We can find relief when the text first states God will not again destroy the world. We can choose to do that, but that dulls any sense of urgency when it comes to how we need to act vis-à-vis Climate Breakdown. Recently Rabbi Bradley Artson quoted the American journalist Finley Peter Dunne who said the business of religion is to "comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable." We are all too comfortable when it comes to Ecological Collapse. Heschel taught, "Few are guilty, but all are responsible." When it comes to our shared environment we are all guilty as we all impact the environment. Our challenge is to be more responsible towards it and each other. The clock is ticking.

**Rabbi Michael M. Cohen** teaches at the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies and Bennington College. He is also rabbi emeritus of the Israel Congregation, Manchester Center, Vermont.



## Returning to the Earth

**Nate DeGroot**

When would you guess that the Hebrew word “*teva*,” meaning “nature,” first shows up in Jewish sources? Maybe the creation story, when God creates light and dark, land and sea? Or when the first humans are created in a garden, surrounded by trees? Nope. Not there. Maybe during the flood, with rainbows and doves and a whole lot of water? Not there either. Maybe in Psalms, filled as they are with lush allusions to natural objects? Still no.

Surprisingly, the first time “*teva*” seems to appear in Jewish writing meaning “nature,” isn’t until the 12th century CE. How could that be, for a religion that is so fundamentally rooted in the natural world?? How could it be that a religion that tells time by the celestial bodies, whose holidays make sense only in relationship to the seasonal harvests, whose sacred text was given on a mountain in the wilderness, and whose Promised Land flows with milk and honey could exist for millennia without a word for “nature”?

For our ancient ancestors, everything, including and perhaps especially nature, was seen as part of the Divine. “*Ein od milvado*,” our Chasidim teach us. There is nothing other than God Godself. So there was no need to distinguish between God and the natural world. Because the natural world is very simply and profoundly a manifestation of the Source of All Life, an aspect of Divine mystery made corporeal through the unbounded diversity and beauty of God’s creation, a *lavush* or garb in which God is dressed, nature cannot be separated or distinguished from God. And without a clear division between the two, there was no need or even possibility for a specific word to try to contain the bountiful and majestic proliferation of the wondrous Eternal. Rather, all is one.

Taken seriously, this means that how we treat nature is also a direct reflection of how we treat God. Thus, every toxic fume that gets puffed into the air is filling God’s lungs with smoke. Every waste plant pumping harmful refuse into flowing streams overflows God’s cup. Every leaky oil line, buried deep within our planet’s water and soil, poisons the veins that course through the body of the Infinite One. In the 21st century, is this not what it means to take God’s name in vain?

In the Garden of Eden, the first human (*adam*), we're told, is created from the earth (*adamah*). Us and the earth, we share a common root — mythically, scientifically, linguistically, spiritually. So how are we going to treat it? How are we going to treat ourselves? Our kin? Our ancestors? The Divine? And those yet to be born?

It is past time for those of us in the Jewish community to take our foundational legacy of environmentalism seriously.

As individuals we must change our own habits. Like adrienne maree brown teaches about fractals: "How we are at the small scale is how we are at the large scale." Our personal choices refract into larger reality. Plus, by acting from a place of personal transformation and empowerment, we are readying ourselves to welcome and fight for the large scale changes around climate that we need and that are coming, priming ourselves for the systems level changes that are on their way.

At the same time, we need to apply similar theories to our organizations. What adaptations are we making to our buildings? What changes are we making to our education? What kind of choices are we making regarding the food we serve, the plates we serve it on, and the ways we use our sprawling campuses? How are we living out Jewish earth-based values on every level of our organizations?

And finally, we need to mobilize ourselves, as a North American and global Jewish community, to join the incredible movements for climate justice that already exist. We need to show up in solidarity with frontline communities and those most impacted by the devastations of Climate Change, both within and outside of the Jewish community. We need to practice solidarity with other groups, offering the wisdom of our tradition and the fierceness of our resolve, while asking how best we can support. We need to work to pass policy and vote into office climate activists and advocates from the local to the national. And, recognizing that climate justice is inextricably linked with all forms of justice, we need to show up across a diversity of movements that are all seeking to build a more whole world together.

Before leaving the Garden of Eden, we're told that our relationship with the earth will be cursed. That we'll suffer from toil and sweat, and thorns and thistles will grow from the ground all the days of our lives until we return to the earth.

Traditionally, this is read as "the curse will be in effect until we die." But what if we read it differently? What if we read it as: "We will be cursed for as long as we treat the earth with contempt and disregard, for as long as we remain distant and see it as "other," for the earth will be sick because of us and we will suffer because of it. But if we "return to the earth," if we make *t'shuvah* with the earth, and repent and renew our sacred

connection with the very substance from which we are formed, then the curse will be lifted. Not because God said so, or because our punishment will be rescinded, per se. But because we will be treating the earth better and helping to ensure a healthier and more sustainable earth for all. We will be lifting the curse we had placed upon ourselves.

**In the months and years to come, it is my blessing and my hope that as individuals, organizations, and the broader Jewish community, we make a conscious and concerted effort to return to the earth, rekindling our relationship and honoring our roots and in so doing, transform the curse of our own undoing, into the blessing of our future.**

**Rabbi Nate DeGroot** is the Associate Director, Spiritual & Program Director at Hazon Detroit. Ordained from Hebrew College in 2016, he has previously served as the inaugural Jewish Emergent Network Rabbinic Fellow at IKAR in Los Angeles and founded Mikdash, a grassroots cooperative Jewish community in Portland, OR.



## Synagogues Aflame: Our Omissions in Transmitting *L'Dor V'Dor*

**Anna Dubey, Raphaela Gold, Sophie Raskin, and Michael Pincus**

All of our worlds are connected. Every single human's actions impact one another. Our mutual reliance can be enlightening and powerful, but when it comes to the environment, our actions can create irrevocable detriment to global life as we know it. And this is the reality we face now. If we, the Jewish people, do not respond, we will not suffer the consequences of our passivity alone: we are responsible for the rest of the world as well. We no longer need to wonder if we should take action, but rather when — and the “when” is now. Our Jewish values compel us to inspire and enact the change we so desperately need to preserve life on Earth.

The idea of *l'dor v'dor*, from generation to generation, is deeply ingrained in Judaism. As it states in *Pirkei Avot, Perek 1 Mishnah 1*, “Moshe received Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua; Joshua to the elders; the elders to the prophets; and the prophets handed it down to the men of the great assembly.” In this tradition, the fundamental teachings of Judaism were passed down carefully from generation to generation. So where did we go wrong? As Jews assimilated into industrial diasporic society, we adapted to the ways of the world, prioritizing social survival over cultural preservation. We neglected to pass down the environmental values inherent to the teachings Moshe received. From Torah to Talmud to our historic communities, Judaism has always been an agricultural tradition, featuring decrees about *shmitah*, the recurring year when we let the land rest and recover from farming, and *bal tashchit*, a principle that emphasizes the importance of sustainability. But Jewish youth now learn too little of their religion’s emphasis of preserving the natural world, and their lack of climate education endangers Jewish practice and community as we know it. JCCs aflame during uncontrollable wildfires, Jewish neighborhoods uprooted and scattered in the wake of hurricanes, wet ink smearing the pages of Torah scrolls waterlogged during floods: we can already witness these tragic scenes playing out on the global stage today. And what’s next? Sukkot spent within the colorless walls of a barren Sukkah, praying for fresh produce and the end of a drought that seems permanent? Passover gathered around a Seder plate of leafy greens wilted in a suffocating heat wave while we recite

the plagues of old? Tisha B'Av observed in mourning of all the synagogues assailed by the commonplace disasters characteristic of the worsening climate condition?

These are the images of the dying world. Our community will suffer future catastrophes in unending multitudes. Our holidays will lack their seasonal significance. Our traditions will morph into the unrecognizable. **This is the great existential threat of our era. Jews have weathered many an oppressive storm before, and we are adept survivalists. We must reinvigorate our environmental tradition and demonstrate the weight of *l'dor v'dor* by rising up collectively against the climate crisis. Those who come after us deserve the richness of a culture Jews have maintained and cherished for millennia.**

By joining the fight against Climate Change, Jews have the opportunity to strengthen our own nation. Today, the Jewish people are divided along denominational, geographical, generational, and cultural lines that can feel impossible to cross. Working together to mitigate the effects of Climate Change will allow us to dismantle the barriers that separate us and unify around a common goal that sustains us collectively, no matter how our individual Jewish identities may differ.

But this is not just about us. Inherent in Torah-based environmentalism is the idea that we must preserve the world for the benefit of humanity, not just for our own people. *Bal tashchit* teaches us not to destroy natural resources, even if they belong to our enemies. How, then, can we justify damaging the resources of everyone on the planet? As a nation so often subjugated, we cannot turn a blind eye to a crisis that jeopardizes the livelihood of others. Jewish history of survival amid crisis prepares us to uplift other frontline communities. Supporting those with the most to lose to Climate Change amplifies our values of *tzedek* (justice) and *chesed* (loving-kindness), paving the way for a more socially just, unified, and inclusive Jewish community. Judaism demands that Jewish institutions take climate action for the sake of other nations, ourselves, and the youth who are our future.

We've mentioned the Jewish values of sustainability and *l'dor v'dor*; the time has come to act on them. By exemplifying these values rather than merely preaching them, we will demonstrate that they remain vital to who we are as a people and a religion. Many Jewish youth feel disconnected from the tradition because it appears outdated or irrelevant. Demonstrating that the Jewish community cares about future generations will build a less apathetic generation of Jewish youth, eager to take on leadership roles in a Jewish community that enshrines the fight for climate justice within the core of its modern identity. Through this course of action, institutions will make responding to Climate Change a Jewish imperative.

So where do Jewish institutions start this existential work? We begin by dismantling the myth prevalent within our institutions that reducing each of our individual carbon footprints is enough to save the environment. You likely grew up being taught to recycle or to turn off the faucet while brushing your teeth. While this type of action is important and should not be overlooked, preaching individual responsibility above all else diverts attention from the powers truly capable of enacting systemic change: big corporations and governments. Jewish institutions should focus on honest climate education emphasizing our communal responsibility to hold the people in power accountable for action that matches the scale of the crisis. Jewish day schools and synagogue Hebrew schools should construct environmental curriculums that are transparent about the true causes of and solutions to Climate Change. Lessons can also introduce the nuances of climate injustice and its intersections with race, gender, and socioeconomic class.

Beyond strengthening the way Jewish institutions inform members about the climate, we need to start putting our money where our mouths are—literally. Many Jewish institutions are privileged to be well-funded and well-resourced. These institutions have the collective financial power to influence real systemic change in ways that individuals are not able to. Some Jewish groups are already paving the way, such as United Synagogue Youth (USY), which recently launched the Hannah Weiss Hasviva Shelanu Sustainability Fund to grant money to local regions and chapters implementing sustainability initiatives in their communities. If other Jewish institutions create grants for climate action initiatives and habitually donate to environmental organizations, meaningful change will result. This is our project as teen leaders with Hazon's Jewish Youth Climate Movement (JYCM). Jewish institutions can engage in this shared vision by seeking out Hazon's guidance and joining our Seal of Sustainability, a program in which individual Jewish synagogues, schools, and organizations commit to creating and implementing a seven year climate action plan. And we invite these institutions to harness the ingenuity and bold passion of their young members as they embark on this journey. Establishing local *kvutzot* (chapters) of JYCM is a meaningful cultivation of the voice of Generation Z, the youth whose international activism has reshaped the global climate conversation and agitated those in power to pursue transformational change. The success of our Jewish climate response is contingent on their leadership.

We have the power in this critical time to alter the imminent future and to leave the earth better than we found it. Jewish tradition compels us to transmit environmentalism from generation to generation. Like our ancestors, today we are called to carry out the mission of instilling Jewish youth with environmental values and working toward a sustainable world for all people.

The **Jewish Youth Climate Movement** was founded by Hazon in 2020. We are dedicated to mitigating Climate Change by empowering teens, mobilizing our communities and taking action. JYCM believes in using Jewish values as a motivation to create a more equitable and sustainable world for all.

The writers of this article are all high school seniors and activists/leaders in JYCM. **Anna Dubey** and **Raphaella Gold** are from New York, **Sophie Raskin** is from Tulsa, OK, and **Michael Pincus** is from West Palm Beach, FL.

To learn more and see what the movement is up to, visit [jewishyouthclimatemovement.org](https://www.jewishyouthclimatemovement.org) or follow us on social media: [Instagram](#) | [Facebook](#)



# It's Worse than You Think: A Call to Action

**Daniel Heinrich**

It is worse, much worse, than you think.

So begins David Wallace-Wells' 2019 book *The Uninhabitable Earth* — a complete description of the terrifying inevitabilities that await us, our children, and our grandchildren, as the earth warms such that the world will most likely experience its first anthropogenic mass extinction. Reading his words, I am overwhelmed by constant and impending dread. And I know that I'm not alone.

As a student at Brandeis University's Hornstein Program for Jewish Professional Leadership, I am encouraged to consider what it means to be a Jewish leader. For me and many of my peers, positions in leadership may still be far off, so contemplating the future of the Jewish community is more of an intellectual exercise based on hypotheticals of what may come. Within these exercises it is easier to believe that the same rules of operations that have governed our communal landscape over the last 20 years will continue their current course. It is conceptually much harder to consider the myriad possibilities of how Climate Change will disrupt everything we are and everything we do.

If you, like me, are fearful of the future, you might be asking what we in the Jewish Community are doing now to adapt our business models to mitigate future suffering and disruption stemming from Climate Change. The answer is not enough.

Wallace-Wells argues that the painful impacts of anthropogenic (human-caused) Climate Change are already here. Seven million people die annually from air pollution-related disease alone, not to mention those deaths that are associated with drought, heat, flooding, storms, wildfires, resource shortages, and more.

Most of those currently experiencing the impacts of Climate Change are living in developing nations on the other side of the planet from us. Many others live much closer to home; environmental racism is revealed in studies that show a statistically significant link between air pollution in low-income communities of color, rates of asthma and environment-borne diseases, and mortality rates from Covid-19 in every corner of the US.

It is already happening all around us. For the most part, we don't see it, and generally speaking, we are not counted among the suffering millions. But this suffering is very real,

and requires action if not for our own sake, then for the sake of others. As a community of Jewish people, of concerned citizens largely in the US and Israel, we are not doing enough to fight it.

Yet our inaction at the individual or institutional level is understandable; it's impossible to understand, let alone combat, the depth of human suffering associated with an "annual Holocaust," as Wallace-Wells puts it.

Perhaps it is inaccurate, or at least indelicate, to compare Climate Change to the Holocaust. But I don't think it's wise to mince words about it. Talking about this requires us to be candid. And I, at 28 years old, like many, can say candidly that I am scared.

I'm scared because I want to have a long and healthy life (*ad mea v'esrim* — to 120) in safety and prosperity. With my education, I aim to fill that life with a career in the Jewish community, and call the other authors in this volume my peers. But when I think of my future, it is impossible to plan for more than a few years, because it is increasingly unlikely that my plans will remain untouched by the looming threat of Climate Change.

If you're thinking "Why are you so worried, Daniel? You're educated and from an upper middle class background; the Jewish community will always have a need for professionals in the field, so you'll be able to find work, move, and afford air conditioning. Given all that, you are relatively unlikely to die young in a flood, or from heat stroke, or from resource shortages." To these points, you would largely be correct.

But this is exactly the point I want to speak to.

I might have time to do the things I want to do. I might have a few decades in relative safety and prosperity. I might have a substantial career as a Jewish nonprofit professional. But then again, I might not. And even if I do get that time, what about those that don't have my privilege?

Which is why I often think of the following poem by the German pastor Martin Niemoller, whose words you may remember in some form from your Hebrew school days and are cut into stone at the Holocaust memorial in Boston:

First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a socialist.

Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

In the case of Climate Change, though, there is no “they” coming for the socialists or the trade unionists or the Jews.

Many (but not all) of the Jewish people<sup>1</sup> are relatively insulated from the immediate ravages of Climate Change. However, there is no denying that the Jewish people will be impacted by Climate Change—all people will be. History shows that the Jewish people have been targeted specifically for their ethno-religious identity during times of crisis, but Climate Change knows no such antisemitism. There is no ticker on the ADL website demonstrating the growing threat of Climate Change to the Jewish people; this time the Jewish people might not be “the canary in the coalmine” of history.

The circumstances of history and geography where most Jewish people are located, and our relative wealth within our biblical or diasporic homelands, will ensure some delay before the effects of the impending environmental catastrophe reach the bulk of our community. The majority of forced climate migrants will come from the earth’s low latitudinal band around the equator, where extreme weather events and resource scarcity are increasingly common.<sup>2</sup>

When I first began my research for this article over the summer, 25% of Bangladesh was underwater. The average American (including my eco-loving, near-vegan self) pollutes 33 times more than the average Bangladeshi. Unhomed and without support, many of those people have joined the growing ranks of climate migrants. By some estimates there may be as many as one billion climate migrants in the next 30 years<sup>3</sup>; due to the economic prosperity of the US and Israel, those same migrants will come (and are coming) to our shores and borders in search of refuge in the wealth of our home nations and the technological adaptations we’ve already made.

All this adds up to mean that 95%<sup>4</sup> of Jews in the world may well remain undisplaced and comfortable for some time longer than other people in the world, even as we continue to pollute and emit at higher levels than those that are bearing the brunt of Climate Change. While the timeline of events is not set in stone, and the exact nature of the impending destruction uncertain, virtually all of the available research points to this eventuality.

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1 *An important disclaimer: the Jewish people are not a monolith. The following assertions are not completely inclusive of the community of communities that make up the Jewish experience.*

2 <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-climate-crisis-migration-and-refugees/>

3 <https://www.iom.int/migration-and-climate-change>

4 [https://www.jewishdatabank.org/content/upload/bjdb/2018-World\\_Jewish\\_Population\\_\(AJYB,\\_DellaPergola\)\\_DB\\_Final.pdf](https://www.jewishdatabank.org/content/upload/bjdb/2018-World_Jewish_Population_(AJYB,_DellaPergola)_DB_Final.pdf)

Speaking for myself, the Climate Change-related suffering that I will inevitably endure in my lifetime still feels intangible and distant. I have not yet been forced to make any radical changes to my lifestyle to conserve resources, or shield my loved ones from harm. I live in suburban Boston, where sea level rise will not threaten my apartment, nor do I want for fresh water, nor have the offerings of my grocery store altered in any way. I'm willing to bet that my experience is representative of many in the Jewish community.

This year the Hornstein program hit its 50th anniversary, and there is a part of my brain that still hopes for a 50-year career in Jewish nonprofits like previous generations of Hornstein alumni are enjoying in an era of relative peace and prosperity that is rarely known in Jewish history. As of yet I have not given up hope that the Jewish organizational community will continue to exist in 2050, as it has for the first 27 years of my life pre-Covid. But that hope is fading. Or, if I'm honest and shed my optimism, that hope is already gone.

Because the situation is worse, much worse, than we think it is.

According to Wallace-Wells and climate scientists, it is already too late to act. The same fear that paralyzes me now, the same fear that paralyzed Pastor Niemoller from speaking out against Nazi genocide, has already paralyzed us past the point of preventing the "annual Holocausts" of Climate Change.

Like few other peoples, we know what it means to lose loved ones at an unfathomable scale due only to the simple happenstances of our births. We know the consequences of inaction. We know the impact of fear. We must not wait until Climate Change comes for us. We must do more.

This fear is what drives me now. Going forward in my career, whether I am lucky to have a full 50-year career or not, I hope to have a loud and forceful voice for climate action in the Jewish community. Incorporating an agenda of Climate Change action into the daily lives and operations of the Jewish community is terrifyingly difficult and will require hard conversations and a lot — A LOT — of learning.

**There is no doubt in my mind that we are up to this task. As long as we do it together. I implore everyone to find a resource they trust — whether those resources can be found in this volume, or if they can be found in the Torah, or if they are a scientific study, or a journalistic text, or a podcast, or a friend, or a rabbi — and learn from them.**

**Learn and take action.**

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# The Purpose of Creation

**Aaron Koller**

Why does the orca exist? The ostrich? The crocodile? Are these even reasonable questions? For some religious thinkers, the questions are reasonable and the answers are clear: Genesis 1 informs us that the rest of Creation exists to be exploited by humankind. After all, after the separation of light from darkness, water from water, and land from sea, and after the creation of the heavenly bodies, the fish and the birds, and finally humanity, God tells them: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, to rule over the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and every living thing that moves on the earth.” This is the purpose of humanity, its manifest destiny and divine command. And those creatures exist in order to be dominated, to provide the raw materials for human conquest, the setting in which humanity is to subdue the world.

Maimonides thought this was poor reading and nonsensical philosophy. He pulls no punches as he opens this discussion (Guide 3.13): “Intelligent people are very perplexed when they inquire into the purpose of the Creation. I will now show how absurd this question is.”<sup>1</sup>

It turns out that it takes some thinking to see the absurdity, but it is there no matter what philosophical route one travels. First, Maimonides reminds us that according to Aristotle, the cosmos was never created, but has existed in a steady state eternally (Maimonides rejects this view on philosophical grounds, and we now know it is false on scientific grounds, but recall that it was a respectable view until the cosmic microwave background was detected in 1964). If something has always existed, and not been created, it makes no sense to ask about its purpose, as a purpose presupposes that there was an act of creation.

But many others — Maimonides included — reject the idea that the universe has always existed, and assert instead that it was created. What, then, is its purpose? Maimonides says that some “assume that the Universe was only created for the sake of humanity’s existence, that they might serve God.”

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1 For the chapter, see Michael Swartz, *מורה נבוכים לרבנו משה בן מימון* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2002), 2.460-466, with the notes, and especially the references in nn. \* and 41.

This is a two-step claim: (1) everything else exists in order to support humankind, and (2) humankind needs to exist in order to serve God.

Neither of these, argues Maimonides, are philosophically coherent. First, could God have created humanity without first creating the rest of the cosmos — stars in the distant galaxies, the tube worms in the hydrothermal vents? If so (and obviously so!), the rest of creation does not exist to support humankind. Second, is it sufficient to say that humanity exists “in order to serve God”? Does God need this? No, it would only be for the sake of the humans themselves. But then we are back to the question: why do the humans and the rest of creation exist?

**Says Maimonides: “Therefore, the correct view in my eyes, in agreement with the beliefs of the Torah and in accordance with philosophical thought, is not to believe that all that exists is for the sake of humankind, but rather that all other things that exist are intended for their own sake.”**

There is, then, no functional answer to be given as to why the octopus inhabits the oceans, or why the squirrel runs around my yard. The question is a nonsensical one, or — to put it differently — it is the same as asking why the world exists at all. A religious answer to this can only be, “because it is the will of God.” This is why there is life, and this is why there is a cosmos.

**Most crucially, the lesson here is that no living being — even humans — exist on a higher plane of purpose than any others.** True, in Genesis we read that God created the sun, moon, and stars “to illuminate the land.” But as Maimonides explains, this describes one effect of the heavenly bodies, but does not mean to say that this is their entire purpose. There are also, of course, food chains, and Maimonides argues that this is what Genesis 1:28, referred to above, describes: the reality that humans dominate the earth. But food chains do not describe ontological hierarchies, only pragmatic hierarchies. The tiger shark that eats the sea turtle is not therefore ethically more significant than the turtle. And humanity’s dominance over the world means nothing other than power. It does not mean that humans are more important than the rest of the natural world.

This does not mean that human exploitation of the natural world is off limits. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, reflecting on Genesis 1, captured this “food chain” element of the human gaze on the world: “the cosmos provokes Adam the first to quest for power and control.”<sup>2</sup> For Soloveitchik, “Adam the first” (his term for humanity as depicted in Genesis

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2 Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “The Lonely Man of Faith,” *Tradition* 7.2 (1965), 5-67, at 55.

1) looks at the rest of the cosmos as raw material. How does it work? How can I make it work better? How can I use it for my own purposes, to better my life? More broadly:

Adam the first is interested in just a single aspect of reality and asks one question only — "How does the cosmos function?" He is not fascinated by the question, "Why does the cosmos function at all?" nor is he interested in the question, "What is its essence?" He is only curious to know how it works. ... The conative movement of attraction which Adam the first experiences toward the world is not of an exploratory-cognitive nature. It is rather nurtured by the selfish desire on the part of Adam to better his own position in relation to his environment. Adam the first is overwhelmed by one quest, namely, to harness and dominate the elemental natural forces and to put them at his disposal. ... He is completely utilitarian as far as motivation, teleology, design and methodology are concerned.<sup>3</sup>

And unfortunately, Soloveitchik's description of Adam the first is accurate for humankind much of the time. We look at the world and ask how it can help us, rather than standing in awe of it. And as Soloveitchik describes, there is nobility and dignity in the mindset that drives us to do so, to constantly improve our fate, to prevent more human suffering, to conquer the world.

The problem emerges not from the actions but the mindset. Humans are apex predators, settlers, colonizers, explorers, and conquerors. But we are not therefore any more significant in God's eyes than anything else in the created world.

Much the same message may be the point of the famous but often-misunderstood climactic speech in the book of Job.<sup>4</sup> When God appears to Job, who has been complaining that his suffering is unjust, much of the divine speech (chapters 38-41) revolves around a consideration of the natural world. Why? God drives home the point that Job's complaints are egotistical and anthropocentric. The world is a big, complicated place. Does Job think that everything is engineered just to attend to his moral standing? Why, then, does it rain out in the wilderness where there are no people (38:25-27)? The fact is, God is as concerned with the uninhabited wasteland as much as God is concerned with Job. God has freed the ass and the onager (39:5), created the untamable wild ox (39:10-12), and given the eagle the power to soar far above human civilization (39:27-30). The point is simply that the natural world exists independent of human presence.

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3 Soloveitchik, "The Lonely Man of Faith," 12.

4 The following follows the convincing interpretation proffered by Edward L. Greenstein in a number of studies; see especially, "The Problem of Evil in the Book of Job," in *Mishneh Todah: Studies in Deuteronomy and Its Cultural Environment in Honor of Jeffrey H. Tigay* (eds. Nili Sacher Fox, David A. Glatt-Gilad, and Michael J. Williams; Winona Lake, Ind: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 333-362, especially 356.

I think of this often when I am fortunate enough to get to the rocky coasts of Maine or northern Israel. I can watch the waves pounding the surf with immense power, wave after wave, some larger, some smaller, but unceasing. And I realize — each time, it takes me a moment — that the waves do not care about me. They are not putting on a show. They have been pummeling these rocks for millions of years, and will continue to do so when I turn around and walk away.

Humankind is as much a part of the world as anything else, but not a more significant part than anything else. This shift in perspective — from humans as the telos of creation to humans as part of creation — has the potential to shift the way we live in the world. No more significant than any other creature, we have the obligation to respect the rest of the cosmos.

Existence is a mystery. There can be no sensible answer to the question of why we walk this earth. All we can do is ask how to make our existence meaningful. “Meaning” and “function” are opposites. If we think that our lives serve no purpose other than accomplishing a list of tasks, we have therefore deprived ourselves of living a meaningful life. And the same is true for our attitudes towards other creatures; none can be reduced to merely serving a purpose in our lives, but need to be seen as inherently worthwhile, the product of the same divine will that gifted us our lives. By recognizing that our time here is no more significant than the time allotted to the orca, the ostrich, and the crocodile, we can strive for a life that is redemptive without being exploitative.

At the end of the chapter in the Guide, Maimonides makes one final point about the story of creation in Genesis. Each act of creation is evaluated, “God saw that it was good” (*va-yar’ elohim ki tov*). This, says Maimonides, is the exact opposite of the idea that some things were created for the benefit of others. On the contrary: it is endowed with inherent worth, with value that transcends the functional. This is the ultimate teaching of the story of creation in Genesis 1, as Maimonides reads it. “God saw all that God had made, and it was very good.”

**Aaron Koller** is professor of Near Eastern Studies at Yeshiva University, where he studies Semitic languages. He is the author of *Unbinding Isaac: The Significance of the Akedah for Modern Jewish Thought* (JPS/University of Nebraska Press, 2020) and *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), among other books, and the editor of five more. Aaron has served as a visiting professor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and held research fellowships at the Albright Institute for Archaeological Research and the Hartman Institute.



# Together we are Lighter: A Communal Response to Climate Change and COVID-19

**Aharon Ariel Lavi**

Somewhere in the early 90's, when I was in 5th grade, I remember watching a TV show describing what might be the consequences of what was then known as Global Warming and the Ozone Layer Hole. Don't test me on the details, it was a long time ago, but I do remember the sense of upcoming catastrophe that completely freaked me out and sent me to bed lying ill for three days. On the fourth day, I decided I had to do something about it, so I ran for my school's "pupil's council" and became chair, joined a youth movement, and ended up heavily engaged in developing the intentional communities movement in Israel, and later in the Jewish world.

What's the connection? Well, I ask myself the same question from time to time, wondering if communities are really what we need as the climate system is going off track. True, the dark forecasts of 25 years ago did not come to pass — at least not fully and not yet. We all know the details: last September was the hottest in recorded history, the Arctic ice is melting, and species are going extinct. The root cause of all of this is that we are about to reach 8 billion people who want to live an American lifestyle and when I look at my children I am not sure they will enjoy the same nature and climate I was privileged to enjoy.

## **Community IS Sustainability**

We need some urgent response, so who cares right now about living communally and strengthening Jewish identity? This can wait for the next generation.

Well, it cannot wait.

This is not because community is somehow more important than sustainability — such things can't be compared. It cannot wait because sustainable living is not a "thing" in and of itself. Sustainable living is the aggregate outcome of many individual actions carried out by human beings endowed with free choice. People's choices are rooted in their identities, dreams and aspirations — which are, in turn, rooted in their families and

communities. Healthy and vibrant communities can induce more sustainable actions and forms of living, if they only see such sustainability as central to their identity.

For instance, it is well known that the main factor determining the burden we put on our ecological system is not the number of people living but rather the ecological footprint per person (meaning, roughly, the amount of resources we each consume). When people live in an isolated manner and need to provide for almost everything themselves, within the family unit at best, they demand a much higher volume of resources from the environment. The simple examples of communities changing this include carpooling, sharing rarely used stuff (hence buying less), composting and recycling together, or supporting local farmers as a group of mindful consumers (CSAs). But wait, there's more.

### **Communities and COVID-19**

We can't get away with talking about Climate Change without referring to COVID-19. There are quite a few similarities: both are global crises threatening the social order as we know it, both require a combination of governmental and civilian actions, both have over-reacting alarmists and under-reacting skeptics (with the vast majority of normal people somewhere in the middle) and both present a complex system of social, environmental, and economic prices which we need to weigh against each other in every decision we make. For example, we know well that lockdowns bring infection levels down, but also have their economic, social, and emotional toll. Similarly, we know that carbon emissions can be reduced dramatically if governments ban all forms of non-renewable energy, for instance. But the economic, social, and political cost of such a move will be so severe that it might very likely be higher than the actual cost of Climate Change. It is hard to tell at what point the price of the cure outweighs the cost of the disease.

**In any case, there is one major overlap between Climate Change and COVID-19, which is often overlooked, and that is the role of communities in solving the crisis. According to Prof. Yaneer Bar-Yam, a physicist from MIT who has been studying epidemics for decades, the key ingredient in fighting an epidemic is communities. "In the Ebola crisis in Western Africa", he told the national leadership group of intentional communities in Israel, "we saw that communities figured out themselves how to quarantine people, took care of them and their families and eventually instead of millions of deaths, according to the forecasts, we had only 10,000 or so." The main reason for this is that communities are a synergetic creature, capable of bringing together numerous individuals into a concentrated and orchestrated collective action, which in total has a bigger impact than the sum of the individual actions comprising it.**

But it goes deeper than that.

### **Communities make us Lighter**

Human beings have an internal desire to be loved, to be recognized, to belong to a group in which they can feel safe and flourish. When they are isolated, those needs don't go away but rather transform into over-consumerism intended to compensate for the lack of social bonding. Strong friendships and deep ongoing relationships forged around shared intentions — such as intentional communities — create happier and fuller people, who need to consume less in order to feel filled-up. AKA lighter people.

It is worthwhile to mention, from my standpoint as an Israeli, that while Climate Change is not a major issue for most (of my fellow) Israelis, community building definitely is. Besides the Kibbutzim, Israel has sprouted a one-of-its-kind movement of over 250 intentional communities, spread all throughout the country. True, most of them don't deal with Climate Change directly, but by living communally they contribute their share indirectly.

Can we do more? Of course, we can. I believe that together with the more practical tools for sustainable living communities offer, described above, [Jewish Intentional Communities](#) can actually become a building block of [Jewish Sustainable Living](#), and of Jewish peoplehood. It's not an either-or question, we need to tackle both issues at the same time in order to secure our future, physically, socially, and spiritually.

**Rabbi Aharon Ariel Lavi** is one of the founders of MAKOM, the Israeli umbrella organization of intentional communities. In 2014 he also founded Hakhel: the Jewish Intentional Communities Incubator at Hazon, which he leads to this day.



# How to Imagine a Future

**Sophie Lieberman**

I don't know how to respond to the question: "When did you first start to care about the environment?" First there's a pause. Then I begin to disjointedly stitch together a story that starts with the day my parents sent me off to Jewish farm camp the summer before I entered 6th grade. I pivot to something about how I explored the country by bike throughout high school, leading my love and appreciation of the outdoors to grow into a part of my identity. Finally, I introduce the high school teachers who responded to my discomfort with waiting for one-size-fits-all solutions that were supposedly on the horizon, spurred on by capitalist pursuit and economic growth. It was at this stage that I was introduced to formal theories of environmental justice.

Each part of this story is true, and represents an important turning point in my own education and opinions, but the sequential narrative is one I have concocted over the years and refined to satisfy my questioner the next time I'm at a family event or applying for a job. A more genuine answer would go something like: I am unable to remember an age when I wasn't mourning the little time I had left with a planet I recognized or worried about a future that might look remarkably different than the world my parents had taught me to live in.

For people my age, years stretch ahead of us much longer than they do behind. At least, this is how we are taught to plan our lives. But how do we reconcile this with what we have grown up always knowing: the years ahead of us will take place in an ecosystem that looks vastly different than what exists in anyone's living memory? How do we make plans using the same linear timeline, the one that is presented to us on an allegedly blank page with equally-spaced tick marks for us to fill in? How can our parents be adequate teachers in preparing us for this future?

**In a religion that is based on covenants made to generations an unknown distance into the future, where we preserve customs that do not have a remembered start date and allow for ancient practices to retire, Judaism offers a template with which to more creatively envision the possibilities for change, to help us forecast our lives the same way science forecasts an irreparable future.**

Fifty years ago, early Jewish environmental figures such as Rabbi Everett Gendler pointed to our estrangement from nature as inseparable from the impending environmental crisis. Gendler advocated for a Jewish practice that centered “nature elements which lie dormant, neglected, sublimated, and suppressed within the tradition.” In the same decade, the world celebrated the first Earth Day, and oil companies stoked Climate Change denial as their own scientific research pointed to proof of anthropogenic Climate Change. People began looking for ways to reaffirm their personal stakes in environmental protection, and Gendler’s suggestion for recovering nature’s role in Jewish tradition was an important guide for this movement. Likewise, much of the recent conversation around Jewish environmentalism has attempted to explain why one’s Jewish identity should move them to care, and how we might shape Jewish practices and institutions to fit a future that is more sustainable in the long term.

While these questions paved the way for our current understanding of environmental responsibility, they are not so interesting anymore given all that we have learned and experienced since the start of the mainstream environmental movement in the United States. My generation is living out the hypothetical musings of impending crisis that have been happening over the past decades. We have an innate understanding of why all institutions and communities should be addressing these questions, whether or not there is an explicitly shared connection. Continued conversations about whether and why Jews should care about the climate crisis only holds up the potential for larger mobilization.

Instead, a powerful perspective that Judaism can offer is the unique structure of a Jewish experience, ranging from one as small as an individual service to as large as the cyclical Jewish year, which prepares us to meet the challenges we face when we begin to comprehend the climate crisis. Ten days after we begin a new annual cycle on Rosh Hashanah, we repent for the sins of the past year. We are not even given a chance to take a breath of the new year before we pause everything to evaluate our actions on a community and global level. I look at these ten days as a reminder of the urgency of the moment, one that doesn’t allow for continued conversations about whether and why Jews should care about the climate crisis to hold up larger mobilization.

The names we use to describe these sins in our prayers are the same names we used one year ago, and alongside this solemn recitation we are given the opportunity to ask for forgiveness. Here is an opportunity to instill in ourselves collective responsibility, reminding us that even if we have changed over the past year, individual actions are small in the face of crisis. Eco-awareness and environmental degradation were the launching pads for the Jewish environmental movement, and are easier to internalize as we continue to see the effects of our actions, just as it is easier to repent for the sins that we were aware of committing over the past year. It is much more difficult to

face the climate crisis, where a change in behavior is prompted by our ability to care about people who initially will experience devastation much sooner than ourselves. And yet, Jews are practiced in this way of thinking, as we are forced to acknowledge our communal infractions against the world again and again each year, even if we never have had any intention of implicating ourselves.

We should be taking advantage of the space that Judaism provides for reimagining our relationship to the climate crisis by embodying a new relational connection to a future, but possibly not our individual futures. Textual theology will continue to be discussed and disagreed upon per tradition, and we might never reach an agreement about explicit Jewish responsibility in the face of the climate crisis. But the structure of Jewish observance allows those observers to inject vital human agency into a conversation that often only has room for acceptance of approaching inevitability. We know as humans that we need to care. Jewish tradition can offer the world an answer to how we look forward.

**Sophie Lieberman** is a senior at Yale University majoring in environmental studies with a concentration in the environmental humanities. On campus, she has been a farm manager for the Yale Sustainable Food Program and president of Yale Hillel. She has previously worked at the Capital Area Food Bank and the Weizmann Institute of Science. She is currently helping to found Zumwalt Acres, a regenerative agriculture project in Illinois where she is overseeing the farm's agroforestry project and helping cultivate a farming community guided by Jewish values.



## Thirty-Two Years and Counting: Finally Hearing the Prophet's Call

**Hody Nemes**

June 23, 1988. A 98 degree day. Like a *navi* of old, NASA climate scientist James Hansen strode into the halls of Congress — with a warning. “It’s time to stop waffling so much and say that the evidence is pretty strong that the greenhouse effect is here,” he said, referencing Climate Change. The next day, his testimony graced the New York Times front page. National coverage of Climate Change began at last. Global warming even appeared as a campaign issue during the 1988 presidential election.

Hansen wasn’t the only Jeremiah talking that year. The Earth itself flashed warnings: massive drought gripped the country, and on the very day Hansen testified, lightning struck Yellowstone, triggering one of the worst fires in the park’s history.<sup>1</sup> By season’s end, [five million acres](#) had burned in the West.

As best I can tell, the Jewish community shrugged at Hansen’s news. This was not a particularly Jewish issue. Besides, wasn’t it likely the government would step in to fix the “greenhouse effect,” as it had fixed the ozone layer and other environmental disasters?

I was born in 1989. When I learned about the stakes of Climate Change as a child — hundreds of millions of lives on the line, among other miseries — I, too, trusted that governments would address it. I was wrong. I watched as the Kyoto Protocol earned zero votes in the Senate; as international climate summits failed; as President Bush waffled on climate science; as a well-funded fossil fuel campaign sought to discredit Hansen’s prophecy. As was said of Jeremiah, so was said of the climate prophets: “That man is not seeking the welfare of this people, but their harm!” (Jeremiah 38:4). The weather seemed stable enough, the Temple secure in its foundations; why listen to a hysterical prophecy of destruction?

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<sup>1</sup> Hal Rothman, “A Test of Adversity and Strength: Wildland fire in the national parks system,” n.d., 188, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/fire/upload/wildland-fire-history.pdf>

**We Jews — so sensitive, given our history, to impending catastrophe — why didn't we quiver at Hansen's Temple gate pronouncement? How might history be different if we had? Why, in 1988, as warnings from Hansen's fellow data prophets began to crescendo — did we not fund renewable energy, retrofit synagogues, change our diets, lobby politicians?**

Was Climate Change too Universalist? Were we too focused on more immediate threats — Arab terrorism, the Cold War, Jewish continuity, anti-Semitism? (The Soviet Jewry movement was in its heyday; the intifada raged in Israel, with shootings rising in June.)

I don't have the full answer. The history of Jewish climate activism awaits its chronicler. But I know there is yet time for the Jewish community to fully embrace Hansen's call to action. In my 15 years as a climate activist, I've seen several paths our community could travel in the quest to avoid oncoming *churban*. Below, I share five of these paths:

### **Sustainable Sanctuaries**

Most simply, Climate Change is a math problem. If we can [reduce](#) the amount of net carbon emissions 45% (from 2010 levels) by 2030, we will avoid major suffering. We can help this equation: the American Jewish community's carbon footprint is in the neighborhood of 86.9 million metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub>. If our community were a country, 119 countries would pollute less than we do.<sup>2</sup>

We should begin in our homes and institutions. In particular, the Hazon Seal of Sustainability provides a roadmap for synagogues, schools, and other Jewish groups who want to improve their relationship with the planet but need a framework.<sup>3</sup> Every Jewish institution should undergo an energy efficiency audit, purchase renewable energy, audit its food choices, and reduce waste. These steps save Jewish institutions money and help activate new volunteers and draw new members. It's a no-brainer.

Making our sanctuaries places that do no harm is a worthy goal for any generation. Yet these actions are ones that all people should be taking. What are specifically Jewish ways we can help?

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2 This is a necessarily imprecise approximation based on research by Rachel Aronson of Hazon in 2018, using the per capita carbon emissions of an average American and an estimate for total number of Jews living in America.

3 This was the brainchild of Nigel Savage. In 2016-17, I ran the new program while serving as Manager of Greening & Climate Initiatives for Hazon.

## Change Jewish Law: Halacha and Orthodoxy

As a reporter for the Forward, I covered the 2014 climate march, the largest climate protest in history. One in 10 co-sponsoring organizations were Jewish, including rabbinical associations, seminaries, and denominations — with the notable exception of Orthodoxy, the fastest growing denomination. The OU declined a request for comment; the RCA expressed concern about getting involved in a march that could be “politically hijacked.”

Despite some excellent exceptions, Climate Change consciousness is lower in Orthodox institutions. Perhaps that’s because halacha, the bedrock of Orthodox life, has little to say about Climate Change — a geoscience phenomenon that only gained prominence in 1988. If you read recent *teshuvot* published by major *poskim*, you’ll find almost nothing about Climate Change.

Yet if Orthodox communities are to change, our law must change. Does halacha have anything to say about which boiler a shul buys? About buying an electric or gas car? Yearly flights to Israel? Meat at kiddush? Reducing emissions associated with kashering ovens? If *poskim* cannot address Climate Change, halacha seems to lose some of its internal coherence. If fire was speeding towards my town, and halacha said, “Put on tefillin, go about life as usual,” would I not stand aghast? Halacha is not a suicide pact.

We need *teshuvot* to address these questions.<sup>4</sup> The work for laypeople is to ask questions! Ask rabbis *she’elot* about carbon emissions. Force them to grapple with these questions, to research them, to take climate into account in their *piskei halacha*.

## Harness the American-Israel Relationship

But there is another overlooked path into the hearts of the Orthodox, as well as many other Jews: Israel. Climate Change is [coming](#) for Israel. As temperatures rise and aquifers disappear, Israel faces immense challenges. Widespread fires, coastal flooding, horrific heat will all abound, even as the Negev desert marches 300-500 km northwards (under a mere 1.5 degree C [projection](#)).

But Climate Change will also destabilize Israel’s neighbors. By century’s end, spending a few hours outdoors may [prove deadly](#) in parts of the Middle East. Fresh water will be scarce. Expect conflict and refugee waves to surge among Israel’s neighbors. The horrific Syrian revolution was [likely influenced](#) by unprecedented drought, which pushed millions of farmers into overcrowded cities. Thus the climate crisis, just as much as a

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4 My teacher, Rabbi Haggai Resnikoff, is a rare voice writing a *teshuva* about Climate Change.

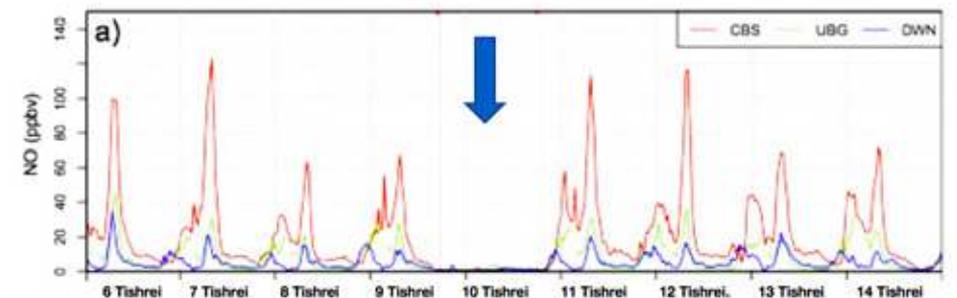
nuclear Iran or a resurgent Hezbollah, is an existential [threat](#) to the State of Israel (and to Palestine, too).

We must push pro-Israel groups to act accordingly. AIPAC is among the most powerful bipartisan lobbying groups in history. If it's serious about protecting Israel, climate legislation must be on its policy agenda. I've joined AIPAC to lobby for Iran sanctions. Imagine if we had also asked for sanctions against the world's worst carbon polluters, for carbon fees and renewable subsidies, all in service of a safer Middle East. This vision may sound like a pipe dream, but if enough people start asking *why Israel's climate security is not a priority*, AIPAC will be forced to respond.

### A Day of Total Shabbat

Jewish tradition cannot tell us about emissions scenarios and carbon intensity. But it can tell us how to live well in any age — particularly in the Jewish cycle of time. One day in seven, and one year in seven, we are instructed to rest. This instruction is worth sharing with the world.

Judaism has a longstanding policy against proselytization; yet to heal the world, we must become Sabbath evangelizers. Data collected on Yom Kippur in Tel Aviv show a massive reduction in auto emissions on 10 Tishrei.<sup>5</sup> A similar drop likely occurs each Shabbat in Jerusalem. Why can't this reduction take place once a week — in every country on the planet? Can we not bring forward that day that is \_\_\_\_\_, a day of all Sabbath?



Imagine: each Sunday, a growing movement of Americans (a) turn off digital devices; (b) refrain from driving; (c) gather for meals with loved ones.

<sup>5</sup> Ilan Levy, "A national day with near zero emissions," *Atmospheric Environment*, Vol. 77, 2013 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1352231013003488>

For 21st century humans — overloaded with social media, atomized, frightened, choking on air pollution — this could be a revelatory call. “To cease for a whole day from all business, from all work, in the frenzied hurry-scurry of our time!” wrote Rabbi S. R. Hirsch. “‘How would it be possible? The pulse of life would stop beating and the world perish!’ The world perish? On the contrary, it would be saved.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Bands of Prophets**

**The call that went forth from Congress in 1988 still echoes. It’s true the Jewish community largely missed that call; there is yet time to heed the echo.** Few of us are climatologists, true; but anyone can become an advocate, repeating the words of the prophets in the ears of our leaders.

In 2016, New York activists started a grassroots Jewish climate advocacy group, Jewish Climate Action Network NYC (JCAN). We gathered Jews outraged by the climate crisis, joined larger climate coalitions, added Jewish voices in favor of state climate legislation, and educated Jews about Climate Change. Our coalition succeeded beyond our wildest dreams, and we played a substantive role in its efforts: New York in 2019 passed one of the most aggressive climate laws in the country.

JCAN-NYC, Jewish Earth Alliance, Dayenu, Hazon — all are working at local levels. But why can’t this work expand further? Can we seed *thousands* of local JCANs across the country — bands of Jews advocating for climate legislation? Can we heed Hansen’s call now, becoming a religious community known for our climate advocacy?

We may not be prophets, but we are the children of prophets. It’s high time we acted like it.

**Hody Nemes** is a fourth-year rabbinical student at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah. A graduate of Yale University and Yeshivat Maale Gilboa in Israel, Hody serves on the steering committee of Jewish Climate Action Network NYC, a grassroots Climate Change advocacy group, which he co-founded in 2016. He served as Manager of Greening for Hazon, where he helped launch a “Seal of Sustainability” for Jewish groups across the country. Hody is a Climate Reality speaker, GreenFaith Fellow, and former Green Israel candidate for the World Zionist Congress. A St. Louis native, he now lives in New York City.

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6 R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Judaism Eternal* 2:30, [cited](#) by R. Fred Scherlinder Dobb



# Dayenu: We Have Had Enough!

**Jennie Rosenn**

The climate crisis is the existential crisis of our time. We feel the heat. We read the staggering predictions of sea level rise. We witness the floods, fires, and hurricanes wreaking havoc across the globe, and we know that without very significant changes, we are hurtling towards an unlivable and unsustainable future. Many people are already experiencing the painful impacts of Climate Change.

We have known our world was broken. Even before the pandemic hit, we knew that we couldn't continue as we had been and expect our children and grandchildren would have a safe planet to live on.

But the deep disruption caused by the coronavirus has put these truths into even sharper focus. We have experienced our profound interconnectedness. We have a new knowledge of what disruption feels like, what happens when governments fail to prepare and respond adequately, and what not listening to science leads to.

The pandemic has awakened even the most comfortable among us to the fragility of our food, health, education, energy, and transportation systems. We are understanding in our *kishkes*, in a new way, the threat of climate collapse. But this time of disruption and destruction has given us an unexpected opportunity to re-envision and rebuild the world. Not to bolster the same unjust economies and polluting infrastructure. But to dream big. To envision and bring to life something profoundly different.

This time is not only being shaped by pandemic. The uprisings for Black lives have put into sharper relief for many the systemic racism that pulses through our nation. It has heightened our awareness of the insidiousness of white supremacy and how Black, Brown, and Indigenous people bear the weight of injustice. The climate crisis is a force multiplier, exacerbating historical inequities even as it impacts everyone. Justice and equity are essential to confronting the climate crisis and like coronavirus, none of us, regardless of wealth or skin color, is safe from the impacts. The climate crisis does not affect us all equally, but no one will be exempt.

We are living in a devastating time. As Jews, we have faced existential crises, disruption, and destruction many times throughout history. Each time we have not only survived, but envisioned and rebuilt a different future. Each time we have had to create a very new kind of existence. The destruction of the Temple, for example, meant the end of the sacrificial system and the birth of rabbinic Judaism. It was a complete paradigmatic and societal transformation — a shift from sacrificial offerings on the Temple's altar to a practice of deeds and prayer, the Judaism we know today. What comes after the Temple is a story of rebuilding, not the same structures but ones that transformed Jewish civilization and brought about a new era.

We can think of many other times throughout history when there has been profound reinvention. Right now we are in such a time, one that calls for bold, not incremental, action. This moment in history demands responses and solutions at the scale that science and justice demand. None of us can sit this out.

We need a powerful Jewish climate movement that is spiritually rooted, multi-generational, bold, and centers justice.

Some may ask, why should we do this as Jews? There are many answers to this question.

First, numerous Jewish values call us to rise to the challenge of the climate crisis. There are the classic references to *שומרי אדמה*/protecting the earth and *אל תשחית*/do not destroy. But at its core, the climate crisis is also about social, economic, and racial justice. It is about whether we believe that every human being is created *בצלם אלוהים*/in the image of God and deserves to have their most basic human needs met — air, water, food, shelter. Will we protect the most vulnerable *ואלמנה* ויתום *גר יתום*? *שומר גר יתום*? Will we choose life/ *בחרת בחיים*? Most fundamentally, what is at stake is whether humanity will continue *לדור ודור*/generation to generation.

Second, there is a diverse movement of people fighting for climate justice, including faith groups, Black, Brown, Indigenous communities, young people. At this time when we need all hands on deck, every community must fully show up, including the Jewish community.

While we are only 2% of the American population, the Jewish community has a strong voice in American society and politics. Furthermore, religious voices play an important role in shaping our national narratives and solutions. We must ensure the centrality of human dignity, social justice, and the public good.

Furthermore, there is power in spiritually rooted activism. We bring Jewish history and experience, teachings and tradition, and faith and song to the movement.

Finally, people are grappling with this existential crisis, and we must support them Jewishly to live with greater integrity and wholeness, attending to the spiritual issues raised by the crisis.

Studies indicate that 80% of the American Jewish community is concerned or very concerned about the climate crisis. But most are not taking action. The two main reasons:

1. People are not sure what they can do to make a difference in the face of such an overwhelming crisis.
2. It is difficult to confront the truth of what is at stake and the fact that without massive change, we are hurtling towards a world in which much of the earth will become uninhabitable. It's too much to take in so we disassociate or distract ourselves. How can our souls bear such a painful possibility?

So we are building a spiritually rooted Jewish climate movement that supports us to face the truth, in community, to make space to grieve, to feel the anxiety, and to develop practices to support us to move through it. Part of how we live in the face of this painful truth, is by taking meaningful action, together with others. We are building a Jewish climate movement that gives people pathways to take meaningful action.

In order to mitigate the most devastating impacts of Climate Change, and to avert total climate collapse, we need to take action on a systemic level. While personal practices like reducing meat consumption and communal practices like greening institutions are important, if every single person and Jewish institution significantly lowered their carbon footprint, we would not avoid the most catastrophic impacts of Climate Change. In the middle of April, when more than half of the world was home-bound due to coronavirus, carbon dioxide emissions only fell around 17%. The other 83% of emissions are embedded deeply into our economy. To address that, we must make change on a systemic level.

This means ending our dependence on fossil fuels, creating millions of living wage clean energy jobs, transforming our infrastructure, manufacturing, transportation and agriculture sectors, and ensuring that those communities most impacted by the climate crisis are prioritized in this transition.

We can do this by:

- Advocating for comprehensive climate policies that center equity and justice.
- Moving money to leverage the power of institutional investors that are financing the fossil fuel industry.

- Changing the political landscape by voting with climate at the fore and calling on candidates and leaders to take bold action on climate.

The Jewish community has a significant role to play in bringing about these changes. We need to bring the full power and people of the Jewish community — to join together with other communities — to forge a new kind of world. One that is more just and sustainable.

Dayenu is a new Jewish organization mobilizing the American Jewish community to confront the climate crisis with spiritual audacity and bold political action. In partnership with a nationwide network of Jewish and interfaith grassroots environmental groups, we are together building a robust Jewish climate movement. American Jews of all generations are forming Dayenu Circles and engaging in powerful national campaigns, calling on leaders to take bold climate action that centers justice and equity, and joining together with other communities to work for a more just and sustainable world. This work could not be more urgent. Time is running out.

**Dayenu: We've had enough!**

**But Dayenu also means, we have enough. We have what we need to confront the climate crisis. We have the science. We have the resources. We have the people, and we have the power. We have what we need so that everyone can have enough.**

**Now is the time to join together in this urgent and sacred work. Nothing less than the future of humanity is at stake.**

**Rabbi Jennie Rosenn** is the Founder and CEO of [Dayenu: A Jewish Call to Climate Action](#).



# The Carob Tree of the Twenty-First Century

**Vered Tohar and Adi Wolfson**

In the Babylonian Talmud, we find the following well-known legend involving *Honi the Circle Maker*:

As Honi walked along one day, he saw a man planting a carob tree and asked him: How many years will it take for this tree to bear fruit? The man replied: It will take seventy years. Honi continued: How do you know that you will be alive seventy years from now, so that you may enjoy this fruit? The man responded: I found a world full of carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted them for me, I am planting this one for my descendants (Ta'anit 23a).

In the original, the legend appears in the context of a discussion about the Return to Zion and the seventy-year Babylonian exile; the question debated is whether seventy years is a short or long amount of time. In this essay, we wish to divert the discussion from its original historical and transcendental context to the connection between the Jewish world and the contemporary climate crisis, from the specific perspective of responsibility and intergenerational reciprocity. This legend, as we interpret it, first and foremost represents the principle of intergenerational reciprocity, which holds that all of us depend on nature but also upon one another. It affirms the importance of preserving the planet for our own sake and for that of future generations.

To get there, we wish to dwell on a marginal detail in the story: the botanical fact that the female carob tree gives fruit once every six years. It is inconceivable that the Sages, who lived in a society that had been agricultural since time immemorial, taught this story and placed it in writing without realizing that it contained misinformation. Still, we seize upon this detail, to illustrate the conceptual web that unites the cluster of agricultural legends in the Talmud, which ultimately concern themselves with the delicate fabric of humankind and its environment, and the commitment of the contemporary Jewish world to assume responsibility for the struggle to surmount the climate crisis.

Accordingly, in this piece we propose that the legend of Honi and the planter of the carob tree be read as a universal allegory that pertains to our current climate crisis and the intergenerational responsibility of Jewry to head the movement to address it. This reading interprets the story as a metaphor about assuming ecological, personal, and intergenerational responsibility.

In the late twentieth century and even more forcefully in the twenty-first century, Climate Change and global warming have been marked as the greatest environmental threat to the globe and to humankind and have been promoted to center-stage among environmental struggles. The steady increase in average temperatures around the globe in the past century has precipitated major Climate Changes worldwide—extreme changes in weather that are causing natural disasters such as aberrantly powerful rainstorms, mudslides, and droughts. Climate changes are also responsible for the melting of polar ice caps and rising ocean waters that may subject coastal cities to inundation. Rising average temperatures and declining average rainfalls are also exacerbating desertification around the world, causing deserts to expand and inducing aridity in soil that renders it unable to sustain agriculture. Global warming is also causing harm to species diversity, driving some species to extinction while allowing other species, invasive ones, to flourish. These phenomena collectively are leading to hunger, water shortages, and local and global tussles over resources that are forcing large population groups to migrate in search of sources of sustenance.

The UN report entitled “Our Common Future,” presented by the Brundtland Commission in 1987, urged us to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Another document, “Agenda 21,” presented at the global summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 in an attempt to establish a new agenda for the twenty-first century, is also based on the principle of intergenerational justice. These two constitutive documents, in addition to innumerable international discussions, climate summits, and global agreements, further underscore the need for immediate joint action to save the earth and humankind.

Intergenerational responsibility is also a key concept in the perception of sustainability. Sustainability is defined as the ability of nature to endure processes and the ability of processes to remain stable over time while considering their environmental, social, and economic aspects. What this means is that an equilibrium must exist between nature’s ability to continue sustaining natural systems (life cycles, food chains, and so on) and support life around the globe over time, and the development and needs of a certain population (human or other) that depends on these processes. Simply put, it denotes the way life should be lived today so that future generations will be able to live under conditions at least equal to ours.

**The Talmudic homily of Honi and the planter of the carob tree illuminates the interrelationship of human and nature at several levels. It illustrates the sensitivity of Jewish culture, as far back as the literature of the Sages, to the reciprocity of humankind and nature; it also, however, relates to each generation's active responsibility for posterity. It emphasizes that life on this planet is the outcome of responsibility shared by people wherever they are, a responsibility that began at the dawn of humankind and should last forever. The Sages understood the principle of sustainability, even though they did not call it by name. All these levels of understanding are ultimately captured in the planter's remark: "I found a world full of carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted [them] for me, I am planting for my descendants."**

As we face a reality replete with crises and seek effective and plausible ways of taking action, we may summon the profusion and wealth of pro-ecology Jewish sources to impart systematic teachings on the topic. From this standpoint, the treasures of Jewish culture can undoubtedly provide a broad foundation, in value and educational terms, for our efforts to tackle the climate crisis. These efforts may be structured coherently, as an outgrowth of the underlying values of Jewish culture that are established in its canon texts; accordingly, in effect, it is already built into the worldview of this culture. Due to the profound ancient nexus of the People of Israel and the Land of Israel, and the perception of miracle that typifies the sustainability of the nature of the Land of Israel in the Sages' writings, the values of Jewish culture can and should serve as spearheads for the war of consciousness against the climate crisis.

We conclude with another well-known legend that substantiates the great miracle of nature and humankind's participation in it—not only in the future, as in the legend of Honi, but in the present as well:

Rami bar Yehezkel happened to be visiting Bnei Brak. He observed some goats grazing under a fig tree and noticed that honey oozed from the figs and milk dripped from the goats, the two liquids mingling. He said: This is what the expression "flowing with milk and honey" means (Ketubot 111b)

Like Rami bar Yehezkel, let us teach our children to observe the minute details and learn to appreciate and protect them. As members of the Jewish people who once knew how to gather for the promotion of global humanistic agendas, we believe that now, too, we must not be bystanders. Today as before, the Jewish voice should be heard. It is within our ability to be an important and meaningful motivating force in the struggle with the climate crisis. Nurturing a carob tree is an ancient Jewish principle; let us now mobilize it for the greater global interest.

\*Translations from Babylonian Talmud were made by Sefaria: A Living Library of Jewish Texts, The William Davidson free digital edition of the Babylonian Talmud [https://www.sefaria.org.il/Taanit.23a?ven=William\\_Davidson\\_Edition\\_-\\_English&lang=he](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Taanit.23a?ven=William_Davidson_Edition_-_English&lang=he)

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# Liberating the Future: Passover and Beyond

**Arthur Ocean Waskow**

Fifty years after the original Freedom Seder, thousands of Jews all across the United States observed Tisha B'Av in a new way. Traditionally, it was the mid-summer fast day of mourning the destruction of two ancient Holy Temples in Jerusalem. In 2019, thousands observed the day by demonstrating against a major high-priority policy action of the then government of the United States — its oppressive and deadly treatment of refugees and immigrants. In some of these demonstrations, dozens of Jews were arrested as part of the protests.

There were two remarkable aspects of these events: that for the first time in American history, large numbers of Jews and many of their major institutions publicly, clearly, vigorously, and concertedly opposed a major policy priority of the US government; and that in doing so, they drew on the religious teachings and spiritual practices of a Jewish holy day in an effort to change public policy.

In many of these gatherings, the participants spoke of the Jews who had been driven from shattered Jerusalem into death marches toward exile in Babylon and toward enslavement in the Roman Empire, mentioned dozens of passages of Torah demanding love and decency toward refugees and immigrants, cited thousands of years when Jews were expelled from various countries and became refugees, remembered how the United States had rejected refugees from Nazi Germany and sent them back to concentration camps and then death camps, and recalled how their own grandparents and great-grandparents had immigrated in terror and poverty to America.

All these memories were about the specific life-experience of Jews and the Jewish people. Yet the protests were focused far more universally — toward an oppressive US government and the oppression of a non-Jewish ethnic group. “Never Again Means Anyone” and “Never Again Means Now” were watchwords of the protests.

This action was the lineal heir of the Freedom Seder in 1969, which also liberated a new way of thinking about all the Jewish festivals and fast days. The wall between “ritual”

and “politics,” between “spirituality” and “social justice,” first began to crumble, then came crashing down.

In 1969, nowhere that I have been able to find did any Jewish community think or act as if Tisha B’Av had to do with anything other than those ancient Temples. By 1972, the same group of people in Washington DC — about forty altogether — who had organized and led the Freedom Seder were gathering on the steps of the US Capitol to fast in sorrow for and opposition to the US War Against Vietnam. They drew an analogy between the Roman Empire’s salting the soil of what Rome called “Palestine” so that the Jewish farmers could not grow food, and the US Government’s pouring Agent Orange onto the forests of Vietnam, thinking that to kill the forests would kill the Vietnamese revolution.

Already, earlier in 1972, the same small band of Jews had sparked a somewhat broader celebration of Tu B’Shvat, the midwinter Jewish festival of the RebirthDay of Trees and of the Divine Tree of Life, by condemning the destruction of those trees in Vietnam. They pointed out that the Torah (Deut. 20:19-20) explicitly forbids the killing of “enemy” trees even or especially in time of war. So they organized “Trees and Life for Vietnam,” convinced the renowned Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel to become Honorary Chair of the Campaign, raised money to support reforestation in Vietnam, and sent delegates to Paris to give the money in equal shares to representatives of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the National Liberation Front, and a group of Vietnamese Buddhist monks led by Thich Nhat Hanh.

On Tu B’Shvat itself and its adjacent days, they brought the feminist and politically strongly progressive Congresswoman Bella Abzug and neo-Hassidic Rebbe Shlomo Carlebach to speak at different times on Judaism and the war. This time it was a reinterpretation of both a medieval mystical celebration of God as the Tree of Life and the modern Zionist redefinition of the day as a time to plant trees in the Land of Israel that moved in a universal direction.

By the summer of 2010, the universalization of Tisha B’Av had taken a small step forward, beyond 1972. Earlier in the summer, the BP Big Oil blowout of an oil well in the Gulf of Mexico had engulfed and killed eleven BP workers on the oil rig and tens of thousands of fish and birds in the Gulf region, leaving many businesses along the Gulf shores in financial downfall. The US government was doing little to help — especially little to protect the future of Earth’s oceans and marine workers and businesses from similar disasters.

So about 300 people, led by Jews using the symbols and practices of Tisha B'Av but including many adherents of other religious and spiritual traditions and many secular environmentalists, gathered on the steps of the Capitol. They spoke of the destruction being imposed on Temple Earth. They heard and joined in the wailing chant of a new "Lament for Earth" written by (now Rabbi) Tamara Cohen in the style and wailing melody of the ancient Book of Lamentations. The use of Rabbi Cohen's text for a more universal Tisha B'Av slowly made its way into the more experimental arenas of Jewish life.

In 1969, the original Freedom Seder was like a crystal dropped into a super-saturated solution. Many parts of the American Jewish community — especially but not only many of its young people — had soaked themselves deeply in the need to turn away from America's "original sin" — racism — and the need to end an illegitimate and obscene war. Although many Jewish institutions had to some extent supported the Black-led freedom movement in the South, very few were willing to condemn the US War Against Vietnam. Yet many outside the official leadership burned with passion to redress those wrongs, and were convinced that the values they espoused were rooted in Torah and in Jewish history.

So the Freedom Seder crystallized those urgent feelings, and the result was a sudden transformation in the ways in which many Jews thought and felt about "ritual" as a frame for social activism. The first result was a profusion of activist Haggadahs that were utterly clear about their Jewish roots and strongly committed to their Universalist flowering. The new understanding of "activist ritual" kept cooking in the community. And for many young Jews half a century after the original wave of Seders, the encounter at Standing Rock with Native/ Indigenous spirituality fused with resistance to corporate plans for earth-wounding oil pipelines once more soaked the community in the passion for activist ritual.

How might this fusion of festival ritual and social action work in the future?

Some world-spanning banks invest hundreds of billions of dollars in corporations that burn Earth, destroy communities, and kill people. On Sukkot, the earthy harvest festival, Jews celebrate by building temporary, vulnerable, open-to-Earth huts with leafy, leaky roofs; by waving in the seven directions of the universe the Four Species branches of palm, willow, and myrtle, and a lemony etrog (citron); and by chanting prayers called "Hosha Na — Please save" Earth .from locusts, droughts, invasive worms, and other plagues

What would happen if groups of Jews walked into offices and branches of those banks waving the branches, singing songs of sacred Earth, chanting prayers to save us from burning fossil fuels, demanding that the banks stop lending money to the Carbon Pharaohs and instead lend money to neighborhood solar co-ops, to companies building wind farms, to projects of reforestation?

In American society, every other year Sukkot comes a few weeks before a major national election. What if we were to commit ourselves to “Share Sukkot/ Green and Grow the Vote” as part of the Jewish observance of the holyday? What if the building of sukkot in all our communities were connected with the values inherent in the festival and with outreach to make sure that under voting communities — our own youth, the poor and those racially marginalized — were especially encouraged and aided to vote?

What are those values? Torah teaches that the band of runaway slaves that made up the refugees from the Tight and Narrow Place — Mitzrayyim, Egypt — lived in sukkot. What does that mean that Sukkot teaches about responding to refugees? Sukkot is about the harvest. What does that teach about feeding the hungry? The Hoshanor “Save us, Save Earth” prayers — what do they teach us about saving Earth from CO2 and methane, from “forever plastics” and carcinogenic chemicals?

Traditionally, the offering of 70 bulls during Sukkot was connected to prayer for the prosperity of all the “70 nations of the world.” And we pray, “*Ufros alenu sukkat shlomekha* — spread over all of us the sukkah of shalom.” What if we were to hear the truth that it is the very vulnerability of the sukkah, not the seeming impregnability of a fortress, that — when shared with others — makes for peace? Together, these two teachings make the foundation of a loving and respectful “foreign” policy.

On Yom Kippur, Jews read aloud a passage from the Prophet Isaiah (57: 14-58: 14): that cries out, “*Do you think that when God called you to fast on Yom Kippur, that meant drooping your head like a bulrush, wearing sackcloth and ashes? No! It meant feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, housing the homeless, breaking the handcuffs clamped on those imprisoned by the powerful.*”

What would happen if in many synagogues, at that point in the regular service, groups of people went out from their synagogues into the streets, chanting these passages from Isaiah, picketing a business that is stealing its workers’ wages, standing in tears at a prison notorious for its physical and psychological abuse of prisoners?

At the synagogue celebration of B’Mitzvah, what would happen if the young person’s growing into more responsibility, together with their families, integrated into their celebration an outcry from the last of the ancient Hebrew Prophets (Malachi 3: 23-24):

“I will send you the Prophet Elijah to turn the hearts of the parents to the children and the hearts of the children to the parents, lest the Breath of Life come as a Hurricane of Destruction and smite Earth with utter desolation.” What if the adults and youngsters present on that day said aloud they would take on the mission of Elijah, and named one act to save Earth that they would commit to doing?

Let us in fear, hope, and the trembling that infuses both of them reexamine our celebrations of Pesach. What does it mean for the American Jewish community to celebrate the Festival of Freedom in a society that is still caught in the history of slavery and racism? We began with memories of a Freedom Seder that took some partial account of this reality by weaving other struggles for freedom — especially the Black American struggle — with the ancient celebration of liberation from slavery to Pharaoh. But when the Freedom Seder was written, it seemed that struggle had already pointed the way to ending structural racism. Half a century later, it is clear that the tentacles of racism were stronger than we knew. Now what?

In America, the triumphant observance of freedom achieved is for Jews the crowning achievement of that ancient struggle. For Jews! — But for Blacks? For the Indigenous Peoples? For brown-skinned Spanish-speakers? For Muslims? For the workers whose unions have been squeezed out of existence and those for whom unionizing was never part of the law? For the rural “old Americans,” forgotten and left with dwindling life-spans to die of alcohol and drugs and despair? For Earth, racked by Plagues more dangerous than those of ancient Pharaoh, brought on by Carbon Pharaohs of today?

How does a celebration of freedom achieved turn itself into a point of struggle for freedom not yet achieved?

What would Pesach become if “*Lo dayenu* — NOT enough for us” — were as important as “*Dayenu*”? What would it mean for every Seder community to spend one day of Passover in action on the streets — embodying, not only remembering, the freedom journey? For as the traditional Haggadah says: In every generation, every human being must act as if we, not our forebears only, move from slavery to freedom!

**In short, what would it mean if large parts of the Jewish community, working with other communities to heal sufferings that afflict all peoples, were to reenergize the powerful rituals that were themselves originally crystals of life, and point them toward seeking justice, compassion, healing, and peace for Earth as well as Humankind**

I have asked “what would it mean?” up till now from the “outside” of spiritual experience — adopting spiritual practice to meet a “political” need. Suppose we ask

what would its *meaning* be, from the inside out? That is, what is the spiritual truth of a reconfiguring of these rituals into activist change?

Often I hear people contrasting spirituality and politics: spirituality as an individual's experience of awe toward something fuller than the self — beyond self and society — contrasted with politics as filled with fearful defenses against being overwhelmed by something in society bigger than one's self.

I think this is a misperception. I suggest we think of spirituality as both an individual and a social/ political possibility. As a single person, I can feel awe at the astonishing complexity and grandeur of my community and of the universe, of each of which I am a sacred and necessary part. (The "sacred and necessary" does not permit me to oppress or be oppressed.) If I can experience and affirm this role, the expression of it is my individual "spirituality".

As a society, the same: With our unique culture, if we affirm the unique cultures of other communities within the One and affirm for each its own reach toward the One — its own pursuit of its own spirituality — we can together strive toward a "communal spirituality". That striving is the society's "politics".

The goal of that striving is not a God Who is *Adonai* or *Melekh*, Lord or King. It is a theology of Ecology as a worldview, social and cultural as well as biological — not a worldview grounded in Hierarchy and Subjugation. We each in our own culture need to look inward as well as beyond ourselves to encourage the language and symbols and behaviors that call forth that response.

At our best, this is how "ritual" and "politics" fit together. Each is an expression of its own and of the other's spiritual life.

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