

ROSH HASHANAH HAYOM HARAT OLAM-
TESHUVAH FOR THE EARTH OCT 1 2019/5780
Rabbi Shawn Israel Zevit, Mishkan Shalom

Shanah Tovah dear friends and sojourners among us. This *Rosh Hashanah* we enter a new Jewish decade. [We welcome 5780 and the possibilities of a grand, transformative new beginning.](#) 5780 highlights the letter “*Pei*” (also number 80 in Hebrew). *Pei* is also a word that literally means mouth and focuses our attention on the power of words.

As Rabbi Yael wrote in her September Kol Shalom article, *“This is a time to be vigilant about the words we use, the stories we tell and the narratives we live by. This is an opportunity to wonder about the words we want to place upon our hearts and before our eyes to guide our efforts and actions.”*

Last year we celebrated moving into our fourth decade together as a community and today we celebrate our arrival into a new Jewish decade, as well as the secular calendar’s 2020 ahead. The question arises not only what our work of the High Holy Days is this year, we are also invited to look at this decade ahead. 2030 or 5790 is held up as a benchmark for the harmonizing or decaying of the health of our planet and civilizational systems we have developed and relied on to this point. Who are we as a community to be in light of this awareness? Is the strength of our mission and values that brought us to this point sufficient for the call of the present and future? Who are we to be now so that we live into 2020 vision and not blindly tumble into each year in avoidance of our impact in this precious world? What can we draw on Jewishly and from larger scientific and world wisdom to set our course?

There are so many issues we could focus on today- on **Earth-Birth-Day**. Personally, the themes of the preciousness and precariousness of life loom large in my own family these days with my parents’ health decline. I thank the many of you for your compassionate messages and healing prayers, and to Rabbi Yael, the staff and lay leaders for stepping in even more this past week.

Rosh Hashanah is also known by the sages as “Hayom Harat Olam”- the day the world is/was/will be born. This day urges us to expand our vision even as we work to repair and forgive, accept, change and challenge aspects of our lives and relationships. We have just chanted our people’s myth and understanding of existence, the formation of the cosmos and life as we know it- Bereysheet Barah Elohim, with beginning. “[Yom Harat Olam](#)”, the big bang birth of the Universe- Uni- not multiverse- the Life Force that gives rise to all interconnected life.

As I prayed for guidance and opened to what was asking to come through me- again and again, I was drawn back to a recent experience. It was the 60th birthday of a dear friend, and they gifted all of us with an audience to a wisdom teacher and we were invited to ask one question each. I asked, “what can I do with the life I have left for the sake of the planet?”

There was a pause- itself different than responses to other questions, then finally the response came “the question itself needs to be reframed. Since all of humanity and all species are of the earth, including you- simply speak the truth as it comes through you and you will be of service to the Earth. Do not fall into the illusion that you and the earth are separate.”

Hearing these words in this context has been like a spiritual chiropractic on the ecosystem of my soul. I recognize where I have been reluctant, sheepish at times, lazy or split within myself when it comes to feeling the deep distress I and so many carry in the wake of the suffering we have inflicted on ourselves/earth-beings on an ecological level. It is no surprise that our tradition from the very first lines of *Bereysheet* we chanted, names us [Havah](#)- the Creative and Generative Birther of Life and [Adam](#)- earth being from the word [adamah](#)- earth- as in humans from humus. Yet, what I am raising up for us today is not an environmental pitch or a rally for the recycling bin- as important as those are.

I am talking about a deep, long-standing Jewish, First Peoples, multi-religious and multicultural, cellular level, neuro-biological human knowing of the interconnectedness of all life, and the need to see our way of living as individuals, as a community and beyond as sacred expressions of the earth itself.

INVITATION TO EARTH/ADAM/ADAMAH VISUALIZATION

I really believe that if we as Jews must now talk and act on a “Gaian” level, on, as [Gro Harlem Brundtland stated in her 1988 UN Sustainability report](#)- environmental, political, social, economic, and I would add- spiritual dimensions. Rabbis Zalman Schachter-Shalomi z”l and R. Arthur Waskow gave a Jewish context for this [Gaian consciousness](#). This is the only way we can respond to **Global Climate Disruption**, as Rabbi David Seidenberg refers to it. If we don’t, “denominations” and “the Jewish people” will become irrelevant. I don’t say this pessimistically. I say that with great hope in the Jewish people and in humanity.

I think that is something as a Reconstructionist movement we also have to offer; that we can take [Mordecai Kaplan](#) the next step, when he articulated salvation as self and collective realization and manifestation- from individual salvation through the salvation of the Jewish people and humanity, and take salvation into the salvation of the planet itself. [As Rav Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of Palestine](#) until his death in 1935 once wrote:

“...there is a person who rises even higher until they unite with all existence, with all creatures, and with all worlds. And with all of them, they sing...The song of the soul, the song of the nation, the song of humanity, the song of the wo

My Friday night kiddush is now a reconstruction of the Reconstructionist version, *Asher Kidshanu, im kol bryotahah* (*who is in the sanctification of all creation*). I am searching to reboot and reclaim all religious and activist expressions from the foundation of Creation itself. Not about life, but Life’s expression through us. Because ultimately, without a planet that is sustainable, all these conversations are going to be make-work projects until our voices are not heard anymore.

My friend and colleague Rabbi Fred Dobb, standing this morning at Adat Shalom, Bethesda, MD is stating in his sermon on the “[Fierce Urgency of Now](#)”, *“For the Yamim Noraim, how can we NOT make a climate message central, on the Birthday of the World?! ...Prayer helps motivate actions and commitments – so all this holiday liturgy, at this moment in human and Jewish history: those prayers must focus us to avert catastrophe, and try to leave a decent future for those who come after us...Climate change must go from being AN issue,*

one among many; to, in some ways, THE issue—the overarching challenge which, if unaddressed, makes all else for naught.” R. Fred has penned [many inspirational sermons](#) that give context and specifics in this regard.

We are not alone in the Jewish world this day speaking on these matters- Rabbi Josh Lesser at the Recon congregation CBH in Atlanta, our own member rabbis Phyllis Berman and Arthur Waskow in Montreal this morning, where 500,000 people recently gathered for a climate justice rally. So here we are- this Earth Birth Day, as a recent Jewish Week Times article stated. *[“The bima is heating up this High Holiday season – with talk of climate change.”](#)*

[Nigel Pearce, Exec Dir of HAZON, the Largest Jewish Environmental Organization in the U.S. declared his organization had defined this year as one of environmental teshuvah.](#) In doing the work internally with his staff before launching this national campaign, he described their process, *“The simplest way I can put it to you is that we attempted – bravely, messily, seriously, and yet with much laughter and music and beautiful davening and jumping in a lake – we attempted to begin this year’s process of teshuva. Individually, organizationally, and collectively as a field. It was a deeply emotional experience – raw and inquiring and thinking about the nature of teshuva, of repentance and return, in important ways; not just in relationship to the world outside, but in relationship to race and gender and equity inside our organizations and in the Jewish community and in our own lives.”*

“And so we addressed grief, about how doing this work makes us feel, what it feels like to be alive right now. I’m persuaded this is an important thing to do. We are carrying, many of us, a growing sense of fear and desperation, anger, and grief. I do think it’s necessary to try to open this up a little – not as an endpoint, not to mire oneself in grief, but rather to acknowledge it in order then to move forwards.”

“And so, with inspired leadership from Yavilah McCoy and others, we also leaned into inequity in our world and our country, in our field, in our organizations, and in ourselves. And with a real focus on those who inside the Jewish Environmental world often have less power or authority or voice, and who outside in the wider world are often the people who bear the brunt of environmental damage, from asthma rates in poorer communities to the devastation in the Bahamas last week. As in other storms, and other parts of the world, it is the poorer people, with the most fragile homes, who have been most devastated.”

“This work necessarily involves what Joanna Macy calls “active hope” – having a vision of a better world, and acting to build it. Can we live more lightly if we don’t change our ways? Or: put a different way: we can’t just focus outside. We have to pay attention to what it feels like to be a queer person in one of our organizations, or not white, or younger, or not a cisgender male, or not Ashkenazi – and so on.”

“The reason that we have the cycle of the Jewish year, the reason we have to start the teshuva process all over again, every year, is because – hopefully – each year we are somehow better and kinder and act better to those we know and love, and better to those we do not know and love. And yet, each year, also, we have to strive to do better.”

So what happens to our own sense of meaning, hope, purpose, web of relationships and life activities if *Hayom Harat Olam*- Earth Birth Day asks us to both stop pretending and dissociating from the cries of the planet (as we once cried out from *Mitzrayim*- the narrow place of oppression ourselves to be heard)? Are we acting as [Pharaohs today](#)- oppressing, constricting and enslaving the earth we are of and now the planet’s cries for liberation have intensified and will not go underground or undersea any longer?

[Jonathan Franzen, a contributor to The New Yorker, wrote in his recently:](#)

“...the impending catastrophe heightens the urgency of almost any world-improving action. In times of increasing chaos, people seek protection in tribalism and armed force, rather than in the rule of law, and our best defense against this kind of dystopia is to maintain functioning democracies, functioning legal systems, functioning communities. In this respect, any movement toward a more just and civil society can now be considered a meaningful climate action. Securing fair elections is a climate action. Combating extreme wealth inequality is a climate action. Shutting down the hate machines on social media is a climate action. Instituting humane immigration policy, advocating for racial and gender equality, promoting respect for laws and their enforcement, supporting a free and independent press, ridding the country of assault weapons—these are all meaningful climate actions. To survive rising temperatures, every system, whether of the natural world or of the human world, will need to be as strong and healthy as we can make it”

“And then there’s the matter of hope. If your hope for the future depends on a wildly optimistic scenario, what will you do ten years from now, when the scenario becomes unworkable even in theory? Give up on the planet entirely? To borrow from the advice of financial planners, I might suggest a more balanced portfolio of hopes, some of them longer-term, most of them shorter. It’s fine to struggle against the constraints of human nature, hoping to mitigate the worst of what’s to come, but it’s just as important to fight smaller, more local battles that you have some realistic hope of winning. Keep doing the right thing for the planet, yes, but also keep trying to save what you love specifically—a community, an institution, a wild place, a species that’s in trouble—and take heart in your small successes. As long as you have something to love, you have something to hope for.”

Our own Mishkan Shalom- 230 households, hundreds of individuals of all ages and a collective Jewish community that has enormous and disproportionate impact for good in the larger Philadelphia, and even national and international scene. I think of our site stewards and building and aesthetic committee people, whose work year after year to care for our little patch of *adamah* and beautify and help us stay “grounded” is vital to the “*adamic consciousness*” we are called to.

Our own young and future leaders in this past year’s bnai mitzvah class, many of whom express anxiety, fear and dogged determination in response to our planet’s future, insisted on sending a portion of the bnai mitzvah families to our local [POWER Climate Justice initiative](#), to put resources where practical environmental justice impact, not only reactive mitigation, is supported.

Many of our members have devoted their professional and volunteer lives to the well-being of our planet. We received a Green Award from the city of Philadelphia when we first moved in a repurposed the building, and we met the basic criteria for the [HAZON Seal of Sustainability](#) seal two years ago. (See <https://mishkan.org/committee/sustainable-mishkan>.) Yet much remains undone within our own community to fully embrace a lived sustainability, obtain a solar roof, among the things our sustainability fund-raising campaign aims to help address.

As Franzen continues, “There may come a time, sooner than any of us likes to think, when the systems of industrial agriculture and global trade break down and homeless people outnumber people with homes. At that point, traditional local farming and strong communities will no longer just be liberal buzzwords. Kindness to neighbors and respect for the land—nurturing healthy soil, wisely managing

water, caring for pollinators—will be essential in a crisis and in whatever society survives it. Most of all, though, it gives me hope for today.”

What I am suggesting is all encompassing and not issue based. We want to take on white privilege, racism, immigration and refugee issues- look at the environmental and resource domination behind these attitudes and circumstances- environmental justice for those who live where gas and coal plants are placed and raw sewage is dumped, for those fleeing environmental degradation and the ensuing instability. My sister Pamela, a life-long environmentalist is the head of biodiversity for the city of Surrey, BC, where the city voted in a comprehensive sustainability plan a few years ago through which all facets of the city must run. What we are engaging in is not a siloed environmental project or policy- it is a way of reclaiming life as part of the living planet.

Even for those of us distressed by the ever-unresolved conflicts in the Middle East and Israel and Palestine in particular, I suggest we are missing the “ark” if we separate ecological-consciousness from achieving co-existence (not even holding out for peaceful here) for all concerned. This is where [Eco Peace/Friends of the Earth Middle East](#), or the [Interfaith Sustainability center in Jerusalem](#), or even [Medji Tours](#) whose Israeli Jewish and Palestinian co-founders combine social, political and environmental trips all are crucial allies and perspectives to integrate into the upcoming series of dialogues on Israel and Palestine we will be holding, thanks to Marcy Boroff’s initiative.

As Rabbi David Seidenberg wrote recently, *“Astonishingly, a much more detailed study of the impact of climate change on Israel was only published one year ago, in the [International Journal of Climatology](#). What is most dangerous is that the region of Israel and Palestine is already increasing in temperature by more than half a degree per decade. That’s five times the global average of about 1 degree per century. That’s based on data from 1960-2017 of what’s already happening, [published only 3 months ago](#), and it’s more than twice the already accelerated rate of change reported in June in Haaretz.*

On the broadest scale, two other studies have found that the Fertile Crescent, the arc that goes from Israel through Turkey to Iraq/Mesopotamia, where agriculture began, will disappear- climate change, which should be called global climate disruption, is an utter disaster for Israel and Palestine.

That's the message of the Noah story, and the Abrahamic covenant, and the Torah laws about Sabbath and Sabbatical year and Jubilee all endow Divinity with a deep dislike for Adam harming Adamah- and continually reminding us through the words of the Psalmist and others, the "Earth is the Source of Life and the blessed abundance of the diversity of life."

The more oppressive parts of the Israeli government's leadership are doing something that will help Jewish people in Israel survive the climate cataclysm – commandeering resources – but they are doing it at the expense of the Palestinian people. That may be a way for some...to survive, but it's the quickest way to make sure Judaism as a moral value system becomes extinct.

Every year, the Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah, the Torah exhorts us: "I have made the heavens and the earth witnesses against you: life and death I set before you... you must choose life, so that you will live" (Deut. 30:19). In 2019, we have a clearer picture of what it means to choose life, and we know that the time we have to choose it is running out. If we make radical changes in the next ten years, so that our carbon output starts decreasing by 5789 or 2030, it's still a scary picture, but our chances are better than 50%. "Better late than never" may work for some things. But for the planet, and for Israel and Palestine – much later equals never.

So where to now my friends? As Mike Weilbacher, Exec Dir of the Schuylkill Environmental Center wrote recently in the Philly Inquirer, "As an aging boomer, I am humbled by the power these kids are building and thrilled by the movement they are creating. In addition to Fridays for Future, the Sunrise Movement group has built and continues building impressive activist chops – they are not waiting for the old-guard greens to solve this issue for them".

Rabbi Fred Dobb shares: "To embody hope, our climate repentance must be wide-ranging. Nothing is disconnected from the climate crisis—so real teshuvah demands fast huge changes in how we eat, and live; learn, and work; how we get around; what we do; our leisure pursuits, and tzedakah; our spending and investing; our thoughts; our activism—everything about how we live is on the table." Rabbi Dobb also lays out the [Jewish value-based foundations](#) and [action-based thought essays](#) to inspire and inform our actions.

What might teshuvah for planet look like considering the current reality and cumulative effects we have had on our own habitat? Here I will go to wisdom from a local, home grown young leader, Haddasah or Dasi Weinmartin, daughter of Abby Weinberg and R. Nathan Martin, whose bat mitzvah was only this past August. Dasi shared the following.

T'shuvah is repentance, which is essentially the process of acknowledging mistakes and returning to our best selves. Maimonides breaks teshuva down into three steps: 1) confessing your wrongdoing, 2) regretting your actions, and 3) vowing not to repeat whatever it was you had done wrong.

T'shuvah is a process that people have been doing for centuries, whether they realized it or not. Midrash from the Talmud, Pesachim 54a, even says that "Repentance was created before the world was created." The prioritization of t'shuvah's creation shows that it is an important practice, maybe even essential. This midrash of the creation of teshuva is a hopeful thing. It implies that there is a possibility that anyone can change if they take the right steps. For me, the fact that the ancient rabbis envisioned this concept is almost as if those ancient rabbis envisioned that future generations would be capable of change.

We can see the end point of this period of repentance, and we can feel the urgency to improve ourselves before the deadline. This urgency is quite similar to something else that we are all facing. The climate crisis. Let's take a moment to use the lens of teshuva on this issue with a little guide I like to call: "Dasi's T'shuvah Assessment."

First, transgression. *We, the human people, have created significant damage in our past, building up an economy based on fossil fuels, which has seriously harmed the climate, and severely impacted many communities across America. It is time now to fix that before these gates close.*

Second. Acknowledge and apologize. *Each day we are developing a clearer understanding of climate change and acknowledging the impact of the problem. Climate scientists say that we only have up to the year 2030 to transition to a sustainable way of living before the damage that has been done to the earth is irreversible, or until our gates close. But when it comes to apologizing, how does*

one apologize to the earth? You can't simply go up to the nearest tree to apologize and say "Sorry tree, I'll try harder next time." You must act.

***This leads to the third element of teshuva - action or taking steps to repair.** That means it's time to do some personal, country-wide, and global t'shuvah. For my bat mitzvah project, I have begun to take my part in doing just that. I have joined the Sunrise movement - a youth-led organization whose goal is to stop climate change and create millions of jobs in the process. Sunrise recognizes that we must act before the gates of a livable planet close. Specifically, the movement is calling for a Green New Deal, a ten-year plan to transform our economy by guaranteeing almost 100% clean renewable energy by 2030, a living wage job to every American who needs one, and progress towards ending oppression of minority groups. I created a Sunrise Hub in Northwest Philadelphia to bring the Sunrise activism to our part of town and to fight climate change with my community... Everything counts in working towards a cleaner, greener, just world. The ancient Rabbis designed teshuva as an architecture for change. Help change our system today.*

I see the invitation and even the call that 5780 and this new decade in our larger cultural calendar provides as we reach 2020, is to see even beyond this time to the longer vision. Billy Linstead-Goldsmith, with the support of our Tikkun Olam board rep Seth Horwitz, will be organizing conversations for those of you who are interested to envision how we might move forward with greater adamic consciousness in the year ahead.

Let's be bold and claim this coming year with our eyes wide-open and the words of our mouths (*pei*), and actions of our hearts opening to justice for all (*Pitchu Li shaarei tzedek*). Let's not wait for hindsight vision and lament what we might have done for the sake of the planet, our nation and communities, the meaning and potential purpose of our own lives and those of our loved ones. Our goal is to actively, consciously and compassionately reach for clarity and insight so we can engage more fully with the expanse of life's choices, blessings and challenges in clear, true and sustainably accountable ways.

Our Jewish tradition and values and our own Mishkan Shalom statement of principles, invite us to rise above cynicism or apathy and get involved in life with discernment, commitment and compassion, not

despite our current circumstance, rather even more so because of them. Our city, state and nation are gearing up to organize this year for an election cycle that will affect our democratic, diverse and sense of justice for decades to come. This precious earth cries out for our immediate attention, as do those longing to join us in these United States of America.

As Rabbi Ira Eisenstein, son-in-law of Recon founder Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan stated, *“Belief in God, therefore, has to do... with human nature, with the way individual men and women act, with their attitudes, their ideas of what is good and what is bad, with their ideals... If we believe that life is worthwhile, that it is good, that, in spite of sickness and accidents, in spite of poverty and war, in spite of all the sad and difficult conditions in the world, that the world can still be made a better place, then we believe in God. When we believe in God, we cannot be discouraged because we believe that all the misery in the world is due, not to the fact that misery must be there, that it is a necessary part of life, but to the fact that we have not yet discovered how to do away with that misery.”*

Throughout the Days of Awe and the year ahead we will through the words of our mouths, the meditations of our hearts and the actions we take together focus on our vision and mission on how we can act for justice, compassion, peace and a sustainable planet as earth-beings, as the *adam of adamah*.

Shanah Tovah U'Mitukah--wishing all of us and our precious world rebirth and renewal in the year ahead.

SHAWN ISRAEL ZEVIT, (RRC/ALEPH) serves as rabbi at [Mishkan Shalom](#), in Philadelphia, PA. A member of the ALEPH VAAD, he is co-founder/director with Rabbi Marcia Prager of the [Davennen Leader's Training Institute](#); and with Rabbi Nadya Gross is the [Associate Director for the ALEPH Hashpa'ah \(Spiritual Direction\) program](#), He is a liturgical [recording and performing artist](#) founder of www.jewishmensretreat.org; co-editor of [“Brother Keepers: New Perspectives in Jewish Masculinity”](#); author of [“Offerings of the Heart: Money and Values in Faith Community”](#).