

Rabbi Chai Levy Kol Nidrei 2019 Congregation Netivot Shalom  
 Jewish Response-ability in the Climate Crisis:  
 Going Forth in Honest Teshuva and Active Hope

Always a glutton for punishment,  
 this year I decided to forgo the light summer reading, you know,  
 the fun novels and page turners that people usually enjoy while vacationing.  
 Yes, this summer, I dove into the climate change genre<sup>1</sup> and read books like:  
The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming  
 Needless to say, this wasn't exactly the kind of relaxing reading  
 that you do while dozing off on a lounge chair with a pina colada.  
 No, my reading would be accompanied by insomnia,  
 Worrying about the future of life on earth. Anyone else having those nights?

The author of The Uninhabitable Earth, David Wallace-Wells observes,  
 and it's an observation I've been sitting with daily (and losing sleep over):  
 "We have not developed much of a religion of meaning around climate change  
 that might comfort us, or give us purpose, in the face of possible annihilation."

We now know the climate crisis is already here, and we know we need to change  
 our entire global infrastructures (such as energy, agriculture) to survive.  
 But I want to speak tonight to the issue raised by David Wallace-Wells:  
 What wisdom and purpose does Judaism offer in the climate crisis?  
 Being a Jew is about taking responsibility,  
 for the mitzvot, for our sacred obligations to our community and to our world.  
 "Response-ability": How are we able to respond when the needs of the world are  
 so massive, so overwhelming, so hard to even fathom?

The story of Jewish response-ability begins with the first Jew, Avraham.  
 Avram responds to God's call to *Lech Lecha*, to go forth,  
 to go on a journey into the unknown.  
 This moment of hearing the Divine call is the beginning of the Jewish people.  
 The Zohar teaches that Lech Lecha is said to all people at all times;  
 It's just that Avram heard it.

And a midrash imagines what happened in the moments just before  
 Avram heard the Divine call to go forth.  
 Bereshit Rabbah 39:1 teaches:

Avram was like a man who sees a *bira doleket*,  
 Which means: a castle aglow/lit up,  
 And he wonders if there is an owner of the castle.  
 “Is it possible that this castle has no caretaker?!”  
 At that moment, the owner of the castle peeks out and reveals himself.  
 Similarly the midrash concludes: Avram said,  
 “Is it possible that this world has no one to look after it?  
 And then God peeks out and says: *Lech Lecha*, Go forth.

I want to unpack this somewhat cryptic midrash because  
 it teaches us about Avram’s first moment of God consciousness and  
 it teaches us about Jewish responsibility.

What is this glowing castle?

And why is it the setting for Avram to first hear God’s call?

Many of the commentators<sup>2</sup> understand the *bira doleket*

to mean “a castle in flames,” a burning castle, and

from the inferno, God looks out and says *Lech Lecha*,

“you, go forth and be a blessing,” there is much work for you to do here,  
 in the chaos and destruction of this world on fire.

It’s chillingly close to what Greta Thunberg and the other teenage climate activists  
 have been saying: “our house is on fire.”

Avram emerges as the founding father of the Jewish people because he hears the  
 Divine call from the flames, God saying,

“I’m the owner of the castle, and I’m trapped in the fire. Help. I need you to help.”

Other commentators, such as Rashi, read *bira doleket* differently:

He reads this glowing castle as “illuminated,” or “filled with light.”

In Rashi’s reading, Avram becomes the first Jew because he sees the wonder and  
 beauty in the world and thinks: this castle must have an owner.

In other words, there must be a Source of Life and hope in the world,  
 and Avram’s response is to be the messenger for this Light.

For us, in finding a way to respond as Jews in this climate crisis,  
 both readings are true.

The castle is on fire: Wildfires, drought, warming oceans, record heat waves.

And the castle is illuminated with the Source of Life:

with beauty, wonder and inspiration that compels us to respond.

Both are calling us to *Lech Lecha*, to go forth into an unknown future.

In both readings – the burning castle and the illuminated castle -

Avram heard Lech Lecha and was called to action to be a blessing.  
 This is the legacy that Avram bequeathed to us:  
 An abiding combination  
 of both: radical responsibility and discontent with the world as it is,  
 and: radical amazement and hope for what is possible.

How do we go forth on this Yom Kippur,  
 on this day of truth-telling and atonement,  
 and at this critical time in human civilization?  
 It's been said that  
 We are the first generation to feel the effects of climate change,  
 and we are the last generation who can do anything about it.

How do we respond to the call, like Avram did?  
 I want to lay out two basic principles for us  
 in holding these two simultaneous readings of the glowing castle,  
 two Jewish ways to respond, to Lech Lecha, to go forth, in the climate crisis:

Honest Teshuva and Active Hope.  
 First, let me address Honest Teshuva:  
 As Jews, we believe that we can change our ways.  
 That is what we are doing here on Yom Kippur.  
 And the first step of doing teshuva, of making change,  
 is feeling the pain of the mess we've made.  
 Maimonides lays out clearly the steps to teshuva in his Laws of Repentance.  
 Before we confess and clop our hearts and resolve to do it differently,  
 we feel the pain of regret.  
 It's very similar to the 12 steps of addiction recovery programs: the beginning of  
 change is being honest with ourselves and admitting we have a problem.

The grief about our climate catastrophe is hard to bear.  
 Reading the news, I brace myself as I open up another article.  
 What will be the latest devastating report?  
 Will it be about the dying of the oceans? Another hurricane? Climate refugees?  
 I know that my mind can pull me away from really feeling it because it's  
 overwhelming, but that is just another form of climate change denial.

We are like Jonah, who we'll read about tomorrow.  
 When tasked with warning the people of Nineveh about their immanent destruction, he runs away from God.  
 He falls asleep, even while the stormy waters are raging around him!  
 He dissociates, like we do, from the overwhelming feelings.  
 But not Avram. He sees the castle burning, and he hears God's call, and he *lech lecha's*, he goes forth.

Our Jewish tradition asks us to not avoid what's painful.  
 Facing it is the first step in teshuva,  
 just as Jonah eventually wakes up and fulfills his mission.  
 And Jewish tradition asks not to avoid grief,  
 but to go through it so that we can move forward.  
 This is the wisdom of shiva and our mourning practices.  
 This is precisely what mental health professionals are encouraging  
 to cope with the new phenomena that they call "eco-anxiety" and "climate grief."  
 We need to grieve the real losses we are facing AND  
 not be paralyzed by the grief but take action.<sup>3</sup>

We know that the castle is burning.  
 Last fall, we all went around with our N95 respirator masks  
 to avoid breathing in the smoke from the Camp wildfire.  
 It's ok to feel sad about what we've lost,  
 to feel afraid, to feel anxious about the future.  
 Denial will not help us,  
 but when we face what's real and painful with honesty, that the castle is on fire,  
 we can make the changes our world so desperately needs.  
 We can *lech lecha* and do teshuva and change the way we live on this earth.

Together with Honest Teshuva is Active Hope.  
 The God who tells Avram to Lech Lecha,  
 to go into the unknown with courage and to be a blessing  
 at the *burning castle*, is the same one who shows up at the *burning bush*  
 to tell Moshe to go forth to free the Israelite slaves.  
 There at the burning bush, God reveals God's name:  
 "Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh, 'I will be who I will be.'  
 God tells Moses: tell them 'Ehyeh (I will be) sent you.'"

God whose name YHVH is the past, present, and future of the verb “to be,” here shows up in the future tense, to express, in this moment of going forward with courage, that this God of the Torah is the power of POSSIBILITY, of transformation, of changing what IS into WHAT COULD BE.<sup>4</sup>

At the very foundation of Judaism, at this *lech lecha* moment of freeing us from slavery and continuing through every generation of our people’s history, is the hope that things can get better. HaTikvah. The hope. This is the other sense of the glowing castle: that it’s illuminated with the same light of the burning bush that says: Go forth, change is possible.

Our Jewish approach to hope and possibility is not, however, passive. It’s not just waiting for someone to save us. And it’s not a naïve optimism that everything will somehow be ok. It’s what the great (local) eco-philosopher Joanna Macy<sup>5</sup>, calls “Active Hope,” That is, being uncertain about the future, but moving forward in action anyway.

Remember when we stood at the shore of the Sea of Reeds? And it seemed we were stuck? – the Egyptian army behind us, the sea in front of us. We had no good options. Was this the end? A midrash (JT Taanit 10b) imagines the thoughts of the Israelites in that moment – “What do we do? Do we fight? Do we just jump into the sea and die by suicide?” The answer is in the biblical text: Moshe tells the people, “don’t fear, God will save you.” (Exodus 14:13) But then God speaks up and says to Moshe, *Ma Titzak Eili? Daber El B’nei Yisrael V’yisa’u!* “Why are you crying out to Me? Tell the Israelites to get moving!” (Exodus 14:15) And indeed, we moved forward, we *lech lecha’ed*, into the rising sea waters, And a future opened up that we hadn’t known was possible.

Active hope doesn’t require knowing how we will solve all of the problems we’re stuck in, but it is an orientation towards life in which we take hopeful steps forward – *V’yisa’u!* – like God said when we stood at the sea. It’s what the millions of climate strikers around the world,

led by our youth, did a few weeks ago.  
 And it's what we do, as we do environmental teshuva<sup>6</sup>,  
 through activism and agitating for global change, AND  
 through our own personal teshuva and change,  
 such as eating less meat and choosing a plant-based diet, driving less and flying  
 less, and inspiring others to reduce their carbon footprint as well.

You might remember Laurie Zoloth<sup>7</sup> who used to be part of the Berkeley Jewish  
 community. She is an Ethics professor, now in Chicago, and she's president of the  
 American Academy of Religion. She cancelled her organization's conference of  
 9,900 scholars to avoid the carbon emissions of 9,900 round-trip flights,  
 as an expression of observing the biblical Shmitta year,  
 of letting the land rest and restore.

Will it save life on the planet? Unknown.

But, as an ethicist acting from her Jewish sense of responsibility,  
 that goes all the way back to Avram at the glowing castle,  
 Dr. Zoloth understands that we have a moral obligation to reduce the effects of  
 climate change for future generations and that  
 one person's honest teshuva and active hope can have a ripple effect.  
 It's but one example of living in response to the *bira doleket*,  
 the castle that is both burning and illuminated,  
 and that compels us to respond  
 by being honest about what we're doing to the planet and doing teshuva  
 and by living with active hope that we can do it differently and  
 by taking steps to do it differently.

Deep Breath. It's a heavy topic. I know. But it's really the *only* topic.  
 Yom Kippur requires us to be real and to be honest about what is most difficult.  
 The Unetaneh Tokef prayer expresses the essence of these Yamim Noraim:  
 "Who will live and who will die? Who by fire and who by water?"  
 It's not just poetry; it's all too real in our changing climate.  
 But the prayer is not meant just to scare us.  
 It's meant to motivate us – to take stock of our lives and our world.  
 The prayer ends by saying that our actions *maavirin et roa hagezera*,  
 can avert the severity of the decree.  
 The prayer understands that we don't know if we can *change* the decree,  
 much like our climate scientists say.  
 Some are saying it's too late, and it's time to just move to higher ground.

But as Jews, as the descendants of Avram and Sarah,  
 We “move to higher ground”  
 By holding that we have the response-ability, the ability to respond,  
 with honest teshuva and active hope,  
 to avert the severity of the decree.  
 We look at our world, and we see a *bira doleket*, a glowing castle.  
 It’s both burning with destructive fires  
 and illuminated with the light and beauty of Possibility.  
 The Owner of the castle peeks out and invites us to *Lech Lecha*,  
 To go forward with courage not only for our own sake,  
 but for the sake of our children, for future generations,  
 and for the sake of all of life on Earth.

G’mar Chatima Tovah.

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<sup>1</sup> Other reading included: [We are the Weather: Saving the Planet Begins at Breakfast](#) by Jonathan Safran Foer, [Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization](#) by Roy Scranton, and [The Sixth Extinction](#) by Elizabeth Kolbert.

<sup>2</sup> see Rabbi David Luria, 18<sup>th</sup> Century Russia (the RaDaL), Rabbi Zev Wolf Einhorn, 19<sup>th</sup> century Vilna, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Rabbi Jonathan Sacks.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/how-climate-change-affects-mental-health-835807/>

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Rabbi Michael Lerner’s [Jewish Renewal](#) for this idea.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.activehope.info>

<sup>6</sup> <https://hazon.org>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/06/us/setting-aside-a-scholarly-get-together-for-the-planets-sake.html>