

## Yom Kippur Study Session: Jewish Texts and Climate Change

*These texts and questions were put together by Har HaShem members Yonatan Malin and Becky O'Brien. Becky is Food & Climate Director for Hazon, the Jewish Lab for Sustainability. Yonatan is a volunteer with Citizens' Climate Lobby (CCL) and co-chair of CCL's national Jewish Action Team. Additional links and resources are provided at the end.*

### Text Study no. 1

An excerpt from a Yom Kippur sermon by Rabbi Lauren Grabelle Herrmann:

There is a well-known midrash<sup>1</sup> that speaks of the time before Abraham's call to start a new nation. It says that when Abraham (Abram) was journeying from place to place, he came upon a palace which was burning.

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

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

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

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

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

Abraham is the father of the Jewish people, our oldest ancestor. We follow in his footsteps. This isn't just a midrash. It's a mission statement for the Jewish people & for humankind.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bereishit Rabbah 39:1

<sup>2</sup> The sermon is available here: <https://hazon.org/rabbis-spiritual-leaders/resources/>.

## Questions:

1. How is this teaching relevant to climate disruption? Are we up to the challenge that Abraham was up to, when he first noticed the palace burning and then obeyed God's command, "lech-lecha," go forth?
2. How can we use the strengths of Jewish communities to address climate change, and how can we strengthen our communities through that work?
3. Are we asking the "big and necessary questions," as Rabbi Lauren puts it? What would it take to address climate disruption at scale? How can we work towards this goal without becoming overwhelmed?

Text Study no. 2

A story about Honi the Circle Maker, a Jewish scholar of the 1st-century BC:

One day, he [Honi the Circle Maker] was walking along the road when he saw a certain man planting a carob tree. Honi said to him, "This Tree, after how many years will it bear fruit?" The man said to him, "It will not produce fruit until seventy years have passed." Honi said to him, "Is it obvious to you that you will live seventy years, that you expect to benefit from this tree?" He said to him, "I found a world full of carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted for me, I too am planting for my descendants."<sup>3</sup>

## Discussion questions:

1. How can this story be interpreted today in light of climate change? What actions can we take now that will benefit our descendants in seventy years? Do these actions also have benefits now?
2. Can legislation be analogous to the planting of a carob tree in this story? What legislation passed 50-70 years ago that benefits us now? What legislation can we pass now that will benefit future generations like the carob tree in this story?
3. Yom Kippur encourages us to contemplate our own mortality. Does this awareness influence your priorities in the coming year? What is most important to you? How do these priorities impact future generations?

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from <https://www.sefaria.org/Taanit.23a.16?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>.

Text Study no. 3

From Nigel Savage, *Living Under Water: Venice, Climate Change & Jewish Tradition*:

“For two thousand years we have asked: is this food *fit* for me to eat...?

And the word for “fit” is, as we know, *kosher*.

How did we teach our kids, generation after generation, to restrain their food choices?

To eat certain things, but not others. To control their appetites and ours, literally, rather than have them control us.

Within Jewish communities and beyond we must now say: we are living proof that limiting our food choices doesn't diminish our happiness, it increases it.”

## Questions:

1. In addition to keeping kosher, Jews have observed Shabbat, and practiced *teshuvah*, among many other traditions that are about exploring and practicing limits, restraint, and self-control. Are there examples in your life, whether from Jewish practice or elsewhere, of limitations that have increased your happiness?
2. In what ways, if at all, are your food choices and other personal behavior connected to the atonement you are seeking this year?

Thank you for participating in this discussion with us!

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**Resources for further study and action:**

- Dayenu: A Jewish Call to Climate Action: <https://dayenu.org/>
  - Har HaShem Dayenu Climate Action Circle: contact [diana.ruth@sbcglobal.net](mailto:diana.ruth@sbcglobal.net).
- Citizens' Climate Lobby: <https://citizensclimatelobby.org/>
- Hazon: <https://hazon.org/seal/about/>, <https://hazon.org/commit-to-change/brithazon/>
- Jewish Youth Climate Movement: <https://www.jewishyouthclimatemovement.org/>
- Jewish Earth Alliance: <https://www.jewishearthalliance.org/>
- Jewish Climate Action Network (JCAN): <https://www.jewishearthalliance.org/>
- Greenfaith: <https://greenfaith.org/>
- Interfaith Power and Light: <https://www.interfaithpowerandlight.org/>