

2nd Day of Rosh HaShanah 2022/5783 Protecting Our Planet

Here's a question: If you got to choose which part of the Torah to read on Rosh HaShanah, what would you choose?

Our rabbis went with a story about birth—the birth of Isaac—to connect to the birth of the world. In more recent history, the Reform movement went with my favorite choice—the narrative of Creation, that gorgeous description of God transforming a swirling mass, unformed and void, into air, sea, and land; filling each habitat with compatible forms of life; and setting in motion the weekly reset and rest of Shabbat. That feels like the right selection for this sacred day—a celebration of another trip around the sun.

Over all the trees, the mountains, the cliffs and valleys, the oceans, birds and fish and wildlife... God granted human beings control. God granted us responsibility. To enjoy this world, and also לְעִבְדָהּ וּלְשַׁמְרָהּ, “to tend it, to protect it”.¹

I don't really have to tell you that the Torah reports a rocky start to human history. Adam and Eve violate the only directive given to them in the Garden of Eden—do not eat from the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil—and they are banished, along with the shrewd snake, each with a tailor-made consequence. The snake must now slither on its belly; Eve and all women will endure great pain in childbirth. And what of Adam? God says to him²:

Cursed be the ground because of you;
By hard labor shall you eat of it
All the days of your life:
Thorns and thistles shall it sprout for you.
But your food shall be the grasses of the field;
By the sweat of your brow
Shall you get bread to eat,

Life will never be as luxurious as it was in the Garden of Eden. Adam, who never had to work a day in his life, will need to change his entire way of being in order to put food on the table.

And all of this change, this need to work harder and maybe live with less... because Adam and Eve made a choice to embrace one thing: knowledge.

Adam and Eve aren't the only ones whose knowledge impacted their relationship with the earth they were charged with protecting. Every single human being alive right now—you, me, all 8 billion

¹ Genesis 2:15

² Gen. 3:17-19

of us, and every person who will come after us—we are *all* connected in the shared fate of our planet.

And at the moment, my friends, it doesn't look good. At all.

I trust that you are well aware of the crisis humanity and our earth are facing. It's not coming in some distant, unimaginable future. It's not limited to the most remote places on the planet, which we could conveniently ignore. Our enormous carbon emissions are pushing up global temperatures, and the weather is responding. 11 inches of rain in St. Louis in July—in 10 hours. Record-shattering heat waves in Europe, causing 11,000 deaths in France alone³ and the worst drought conditions across the continent in 500 years.⁴ California's extreme heat over the last 3 months—can you imagine an entire summer of 100+ degrees?! In Honduras and other countries in Central America, rates of death due to kidney disease have increased 177%⁵ over the last 30 years—disease likely caused by heat stress and dehydration.

This catastrophe is here, now, and it's affecting the already-most-vulnerable people on the planet. We'd be fooling ourselves to think it won't affect us, too. Our children. And their children.

On this sacred day, we celebrate *Hayom Harat Olam*, today is the birthday of this beautiful world. Rosh HaShanah is also the kickoff to *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah*, the 10 Days of Repentance that lead to Yom Kippur. Each of us has personal *teshuvah* to do—and I trust that you already know which relationships require attention. When it comes to our relationship with the climate crisis, our *teshuvah* must begin in a much more foundational way: with empathy. Challenging as the task may be, our world's future depends on us learning to actually care about what's happening.

On this point, there seems to be a pretty major generational divide. Our teens and college students—they get it. You're no doubt familiar with Greta Thunberg, the Swedish teen who inspired worldwide peer activism with her 2018 "School Strike for Climate" outside her country's Parliament. She was 15. When invited to address the United Nations the following year, she said to world leaders: "You all come to us young people for hope. How dare you? You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words."

With no intent to shame or embarrass any of us, I ask, genuinely: How would *we* rate *our* own engagement with this crisis? More pointedly, on a scale from

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https://www.lemonde.fr/en/france/article/2022/09/06/heat-wave-likely-to-have-caused-over-11-000-additional-deaths-in-france-this-summer_5996012_7.html

⁴ <https://news.sky.com/story/almost-half-of-eu-countries-still-suffering-from-drought-12667870>

⁵ <https://www.thinkglobalhealth.org/article/climate-change-kidney-killer>

“Why-are-you-wasting-a-high-holiday-sermon-on-this, Rabbi” to
“This-is-the-most-serious-threat-we-face-and-we-must-act-now”, where would you place yourself?

That ancient charge from the days of the Garden of Eden—tend to this world; protect this precious earth—has taken on an urgency and an intensity that the Torah could never have anticipated. Industrialized society has enabled us to live in a modern-day Garden of Eden. And along with all of our material possessions, we possess the same thing that got Adam and Eve kicked out of their first home: Knowledge.

We’ve known since the 1980s that burning fossil fuels was going to warm the planet with devastating consequences—and we kept doing it. We keep doing it. Here are some specific projected impacts: *If* we meet the goal of the Paris Accords of 2 degrees warming—a big *if*—major cities that already experience extreme heat will become almost uninhabitable. If we let the planet warm 4 degrees, we’re looking at a new summertime normal that will likely cost thousands of lives *each day*.⁶ If we were to slide to 11-12 degrees of warming, half the world’s population would die of direct heat exposure. It’s terrifying.

The question on this Rosh HaShanah is: what will we do with this knowledge?

All the big things need to happen—lobbying, voting, federally mandated changes, global cooperation. Wherever you see yourself making a difference in these ways, you should.

In his book *We Are The Weather*, Jonathan Safran Foer reports⁷ on one meaningful change each of us can, and must, make. A change that matters more than recycling, composting, driving electric cars, or putting solar panels on your house (which I just did, and now I feel a little less amazing about it). And it has to do with the way we eat. I’ll give you the numbers; you do the math:

Eating fifty grams of beef costs about 17.7 kilograms of carbon dioxide.⁸

Fifty grams of lamb is much better, only 9.9 kilos of CO₂.

Chicken and most fish is much less, only 3 kilos of CO₂ per 50 grams.

Cheese, like mozzarella, cheddar and parmesan, isn’t so great—about 5.4 kilos per 50 grams. (Cream cheese and cottage cheese are better.)

Eggs are 2.1 kilos of CO₂.

Tofu is only 1 kilo of CO₂ per 50 grams of protein.

And beans? 0.4.

⁶ <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/07/climate-change-earth-too-hot-for-humans.html>

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<https://www.eater.com/2019/9/18/20870920/jonathan-safran-foer-we-are-the-weather-interview-meat-vegan-climate-change>

⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/dining/climate-change-food-eating-habits.html>

A quarter pound burger, just the burger, about 113 grams of beef—is responsible for creating a whopping 40 kilos of carbon dioxide.

Altogether, food production contributes *at least* 15% of the world’s total emissions. That’s the most conservative estimate.

It’s obvious, isn’t it? The single-most practical change any of us—*all* of us—can make, is to significantly reduce our consumption of animal products: meat, dairy, and eggs.

That’s probably not what you wanted to hear. You might think it’s simply not doable. I’ve been wondering whether I, an already mostly-vegetarian, can manage to cut out dairy and eggs. What is required of us are substantive, major changes in our lives. God’s charge to Adam now calls to us across the historical divide: Tend to this earth. Protect this one planet I’m giving you.

We must make more responsible choices with the knowledge we possess.

Life will be less comfortable, less luxurious. But we hope there will be life. And having hope means acting as if you can see the outcome you desire.

Safran Foer suggests a “vegan-until-dinner” approach, but here’s no one way to do this. You could try Meatless Mondays. Or make your home a beef-free zone. Try a throwback to the old country and reserve your meat-ing for Shabbat and holidays. Whatever you think you might be able to do, be sure to open this conversation with the rest of your household, particularly those who shop and prepare meals.

And if you want to think with me about how we might make meaningful changes here at Congregation Beth El, I’d be glad to start that conversation after the holidays. Let me know.

My friend and colleague, Rabbi Noah Arnow, who is also speaking about the climate crisis today, suggests that we use these 10 Days of Repentance to try out some of these new approaches to sustenance, and that we check in with each other on Yom Kippur to see what we’ve learned. I’d encourage our community to do just that.

Imagine our world a year from now, 5 years from now, 20 or 50 or 100 years down the line... hold onto that image, and picture it when you need a push.

Adam and Eve didn’t get a choice—they were banished from their Garden. We have both the knowledge and the choice. Let’s make 5783 the year we do everything in our power to preserve our Garden. Shanah Tovah.