

In Knowing, and In Not Knowing

For the last decade or more, my family's pre-Yom Kippur meal has been hamburgers. All you can eat, lots of protein and fat before the fast.

This year, we didn't have hamburgers. And I will say, my stomach feels a little less unpleasantly heavy than it has on previous Kol Nidres.

I did grill chicken for the second day of Rosh Hashana. But my family's working on this less-meat thing.

As many of you heard or read, I spoke on Rosh Hashana about climate change. The short version: the Torah understands the weather as God's feedback mechanism for us. When there was a drought, in rabbinic times, people would fast on Mondays and Thursdays to arouse God's mercy and bring rain. When it comes to reducing our carbon footprint, the most potent individual decision we can make is to eat less beef, and lamb. I invited people to experiment with eating less meat during the time between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, perhaps by abstaining from meat on Mondays and Thursdays, like the rabbis, or in other ways.¹

Did anyone here have any successes or reflections they'd like to share?

This is all great. I'm proud of all of us who have worked on this. Needless to say, keep it up.

But what has taken us, what has taken me, so darn long? We didn't just find out about climate change in the last two weeks. What will prevent me from going all in, from really living in a way that is reflective of what I know the world needs from me, of what I know will make me proud, tomorrow, and decades from now? How do I, how do we, go just a little further than we've ever gone before in aligning our values with our actions, our heads and hearts with our hands?

Let's start with an Al Chet:

על חטא שחטאנו לפניך בידעים ובלא יודעים.

For the sin that we have sinned before you knowingly and unknowingly.

Did you ever notice that line? How could a sin be both knowing and unknowing? I think there may be an answer in the story that Jonathan Safran Foer tells in his book, *We Are the Weather*.²

In 1942, a twenty-eight-year old Catholic in the Polish underground, Jan Karski, embarked on a mission to travel from Nazi-occupied Poland to London, and ultimately to America, to inform world leaders of what the Germans were perpetrating. In anticipation of his journey, he met with several resistance groups, accumulating information and testimonies to bring to the West....

After surviving as perilous a journey as could be imagined, Karski arrived in Washington D.C. in June 1943. There, he met with Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, one of the great legal minds in American history, and himself a Jew. After hearing Karski's account of the clearing of the Warsaw Ghetto and of exterminations in the concentration camps... Frankfurter paced

¹ Available here: <https://images.shulcloud.com/7787/uploads/2021-Rabbi-Sermons/RNARHSermon20225783final.pdf>

² *We Are The Weather: Saving the Planet Begins at Breakfast*, by Jonathan Safran Foer (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019), pp. 16-18.

the room in silence, then took his seat, and said, “Mr. Karski, a man like me talking to a man like you must be totally frank. So I must say I am unable to believe what you told me.” When Karski’s colleagues pleaded with Frankfurter to accept Karski’s account, Frankfurter responded, “I didn’t say that this young man is lying. I said I am unable to believe him. My mind, my heart, they are made in such a way that I cannot accept it.”³

There’s a difference between knowing something and believing it, Frankfurter suggested. Knowing something means intellectually knowing it to be true.

Believing it means allowing that knowledge to affect your actions, to change your behavior.

Perhaps this is what it means to commit a sin בידעים ובלא יודעים, knowingly and unknowingly—knowing something, but not knowing it sufficiently deeply in order to act on it, to behave as if we know it.

For every one of us, there are things we know to be true, yet we don’t act as if we know them to be true.

And climate change is a parade example.

We’ve all seen statistics, read articles, experienced more heat and more extreme storms. We know.

בידעים.

But we also don’t know.

ובלא יודעים.

Because if we really knew, if we believed, we’d do a lot more about climate change.

We’d eat less meat, we’d fly on airplanes less, we’d drive using gasoline less, we’d donate more to organizations that worked on these issues, we’d vote these issues, we’d make sure our homes and businesses were as carbon-neutral as possible.

Our own mortality is the hardest, and yet the most pertinent example of knowing, yet not knowing. Yom Kippur is a day on which we rehearse our own deaths—we wear white, mimicking burial shrouds; we don’t eat or drink or wash, or engage in intimate relations. Part of the vidui, the confessional that we say on our deathbed (or that we say on a person’s behalf if they can’t say it) is to pray that our death serves as atonement for all the times we could have done better.

But it’s really hard for me to believe that one day, I won’t be here. I mean, I’ve always been alive, as long as I’ve ever... been alive. Intellectually I’m aware of my own mortality. But do I believe it? Can I believe it? Like Frankfurter, not really.

And until I believe that I will die, I won’t go all in on the things that I can do to increase the likelihood of living a long, healthy life. Because why do I need to if I don’t believe my life will ever end? Right?

Some of you here tonight have had experiences, illnesses, accidents, losses, that have allowed, or compelled you to believe, or nearly experience, your own mortality more than others of us.

I was talking with someone recently who suddenly lost someone close to them. The week after shiva, all the family members were making sure their loved ones knew where all their passwords and important paperwork were, realizing that we never know when it may be too late to share that information with those who will need it.

³ There’s a new play Off Broadway on the life of Jan Karski, entitled, *Remember This: The Lesson of Jan Karski*, starring David Straitharn. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/15/theater/remember-this-the-lessons-of-jan-karski-review.html>

This going from knowing and not knowing, to just knowing and doing—this is the pivot point of teshuva—of recognizing that we have not been doing what we should, and that we need to act, more, or differently.

Sometimes, we're so jarred by an experience that it can change us. But absent that, moving from knowing to believing is so hard, so hard.

Just noticing, being aware of the moments and the areas of my life where I know, but I don't act—and noticing the barriers to my fully embracing the knowledge I already have—that noticing and awareness can slowly nudge us towards movement, to change, to act.

Try this with the way you take care of our planet.

Try this with the way you take care of yourself.

And you can try this with relationships, and the way you take care of people.

Is there a relationship in your life, with someone you're close to, or someone you're not as close to anymore, where you know what you need to do—how you need to show up in that relationship, but you haven't yet?

Maimonides, arguably the greatest Jewish thinker of all time, and many after him⁴ explain how to repent for sins between people, as well as sins between us and God. But how do we do teshuvah for, much less change, the ways our everyday lives do harm to the earth and to people we can't even identify?⁵

Writes one scholar, our nation “is replete with profoundly caring human beings motivated not only by self-interest but also by infinite wellsprings of compassion and by desire for justice and goodness. And yet everyday life, a ‘good life’ in the United States, entails consumption, production and acquisition patterns that threaten Earth’s capacity to sustain life as we know it, and exploit vast numbers of people worldwide, some, even unto death.”⁶

As I said on Rosh Hashana (and I need to remind myself of this, so you're hearing it again): Our tradition demands that we choose life,⁷ that we tend to the earth,⁸ that we not desist from the work, even though we will not finish it.⁹ We cannot give up on ourselves, on our planet, or on the work.

על חטא שחטאנו לפניך בידועים ובלא יודעים.

For the sin that we have sinned before you in knowing and in not knowing.

This Yom Kippur—עד ערב, מערב, from evening, from morning, towards evening again, ask yourself what you know, but don't know, don't believe.

⁴ See Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Forgiveness* (https://www.sefaria.org/Mishneh_Torah%2C_Repentance.1?lang=bi) and Rabbenu Yona, *Gates of Repentance* (https://www.sefaria.org/Shaarei_Teshuvah.1.1?lang=bi) among many others. For an outstanding modern example, see Dr. Louis E. Newman, *Repentance: The Meaning & Practice of Teshuvah* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2010).

⁵ Lisa Exler and Ruth Messinger suggest that the confessionals in the machzor all being in the plural (we have sinned before you...) “dictates a radical view of our responsibility for each other. By implicating ourselves in this long list of sins inflicted by our fellow humans... we remind ourselves that we play a role in the injustices taking place around the world that likely don't make our list of individual sins.” See their “We Have Sinned: T'Shuvah in a Globalized World” in *We Have Sinned: Sin and Confession in Judaism*, ed. Lawrence Hoffman (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2012), p. 161.

⁶ Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), p. 3, quoted in Julia Watts Belser, “Privilege and Disaster: Toward a Jewish Feminist Ethics of Climate Silence and Environmental Unknowing,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, Volume 34, Number 1, Spring/Summer 2014, pp. 83-101. This quotation is on p. 85.

⁷ Deuteronomy 30:19

⁸ Genesis 2:15

⁹ Mishna Pirke Avot 2:16

These hours in shul, and at home, and in shul, ask yourself what's keeping you from knowing deeply enough to act?

And if by the time the fast ends, and the shofar sounds, there is something you know and believe deeply enough to do something about it, this will have been a useful Yom Kippur for you, and for the world.

May we be inscribed and sealed in the book of life.

Ketiva v'chatima tova.