

Olam Tov—A Good World

If God were going to give us a performance review, an annual evaluation, how would we get the results?

If it came via email, a text, or a phone call, we'd probably delete or ignore it as spam.

If it were snail mail, we'd recycle it without opening it.

On an individual basis, God writes in the book of life who this year shall live, and who shall die, who by fire, who by water, suggests our liturgy. Which is to say, we find out when we find out.

But how would God display God's pleasure or displeasure with the people Israel as a group? If you know the paragraphs of the Shema, this will sound familiar:

וְהָיָה אִם־שָׁמַעַתְּ שְׁמִיעוּ אֶל־מִצְוֹתַי אֲשֶׁר אֶנִּי מְצִוֶּה אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם
וְנָתַתִּי מִטֶּר־אֲרָצְכֶם בְּעֵתוֹ יוֹרֶה וּמִלְקוֹשׁ

"If you obey the commandments that I command upon you this day... I will grant the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the late" (Dt. 11:13-14).

But if you turn to other gods,

וְחָרָה אַפִּי־ה' הָיָה בְּכֶם וְעָצַר אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְלֹא־יִהְיֶה מִטֶּר וְהִאֲדָמָה לֹא תִתֵּן אֶת־יְבוּלָהּ וְאֲבִדְתֶּם מְהֵרָה מֵעַל־הָאָרֶץ
הַטֹּבָה אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה נָתַן לָכֶם:

"God's anger will flare up against you, shutting up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce; and you will soon perish from the good land that God is assigning to you" (Dt. 11:17).

These words, from the second paragraph of the Shema, which we recite twice daily, make it very clear how the Torah understands the way God gives us feedback collectively: the weather.

Weather that facilitates good harvests is a blessing. Weather that is either too dry or too wet, and that does not produce good harvests, is an indication of God's displeasure with us. The Torah says, God will speak through the weather.

And we all know that this past year, and for many years, the weather has been speaking.

It's getting hotter.

Sea levels are rising.

And weather is become more extreme.

Eleven inches of rain in ten hours here in St. Louis in July. More tornadoes, and hurricanes. More droughts, and forest fires.

Is it God's voice we hear in the wind of the hurricane, in the rush of the flash flood, in the quiet of the drought?

Maybe it's God. Maybe it's our Earth. Maybe it's Nature. Maybe God and Earth and Nature are different dimensions, different names, for our Source of Life.

Whoever's message it is, the message is clear: our climate is changing.

The worst kind of feedback is, “I’m really unhappy with you but I won’t tell you why or what to do to make it better.” It’s the worst because you are left guessing both about what you’ve done wrong, and about what you can do to make things better.

That’s not what’s happening here.

We know, more or less, what’s causing climate change.

We know, more or less, what we need to do.

There’s too much carbon in our atmosphere, and we need to switch from adding carbon to our atmosphere to removing it.

There won’t be just one way to do this. There will be many strategies, including reducing fossil fuel emissions through changing behavior and technology, new and renewable and greener energy sources, carbon sequestration, and maybe even someday, geoengineering, the deliberate large-scale manipulation of an environmental process.

We know that so much depends on decisions made by government and corporations. Organizing, voting, donating, and advocacy can have an important impact, which is why I’m making climate change an important part of my annual philanthropy, and I hope you will too.

Supply responds to demand though, and there is a crucial role for individuals, practically speaking.

Morally, we are all complicit. And morally, we are all responsible.

And Jewishy?

Our tradition demands that we choose life,¹ that we tend to the earth,² that we not desist from the work, even though we will not finish it.³ We cannot give up on ourselves, on our planet, or on the work.

So how do we respond? What do we do?

Two thousand years ago, in the land of Israel, when Jews thought God was speaking through the weather, they knew how to respond. They knew what to do.

הָגִיעַ שְׁבַעָה עָשָׂר בְּמַרְחֶשְׁוֹן וְלֹא יָרְדוּ גֶשְׁמִים, הִתְחִילוּ הַיְּחִידִים מִתְעַנִּין שְׁלֹשׁ תַּעֲנִיּוֹת

If it had not rained by the seventeenth of Marcheshvan, about the middle of November, more than a month after the beginning of Sukkot, when the fall/winter rainy season should have begun, the Mishna prescribes a series of fasts.⁴

Individuals were to fast three times, on a Monday, a Thursday, and a Monday again, each a sunup to sundown fast. “Individuals” here refers to Torah scholars,⁵ which is to say, the moral leaders of the community.

The fasting of these pious ones was supposed to arouse God’s mercy and send the rains. And if the rains did not come, three similar fasts were decreed on the entire community. More and more fasts, on this pattern of Mondays and Thursdays, are decreed until the rains finally arrive.

This is all to say, the classical rabbinic response to weather incompatible with sustainable life is to fast, to cry out from our kishkes, from our guts, our empty stomachs and

¹ Deuteronomy 30:19

² Genesis 2:15

³ Mishna Pirke Avot 2:16

⁴ Mishna Taanit 1:4

⁵ According to Rav Huna in Bavli Taanit 10a and Maimonides, Commentary to the Mishna, *ad loc.*

intestines, for now empty by choice, but without the arrival of rain in its time, those stomachs will be starving.

So what should we do? What would it look like to cry out and respond from our kishkes?

There's research⁶ that says that the individual choice we can make that will have the most impact on climate change is to change what we eat.

Eating fifty grams of beef costs about 17.7 kilograms of carbon dioxide.⁷

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.

A quarter pound burger, just the burger, about 113 grams of beef—is responsible for creating 40 kilos of carbon dioxide. I will never enjoy eating a hamburger as much again.

Some of you are already eating the way we all should be. Some of you are vegetarians, or even better, vegans. You have my admiration and appreciation for doing something I'm not ready to do myself.

For the rest of us, I want to suggest exploring some options that are more moderate.

Over these ten days of repentance, between now and Yom Kippur, I want to challenge you to experiment in changing your eating in some way that for you, and for our planet, is meaningful.

In his stunning book *We Are The Weather*, Jonathan Safran Foer suggests going vegan—no animal products, until dinner time.

You could try that.

I think my family is going to be much more careful to only eat meat on Shabbat and holidays, and not the rest of the week and not to make lots of leftovers so that we're eating meatballs on Friday night, and still on Monday and Tuesday and Wednesday.

You could try that.

I could imagine going vegan, or pareve (no meat or dairy), or just meatless, on Mondays and Thursdays, like the days on which the rabbis fasted.

You could try that.

If you're having lunch with people after services, discuss this with them, and especially if they are people you live and cook and eat with.

Over these two days of Rosh Hashanah, decide how you'd like to experiment between now and Yom Kippur.

If you're so motivated, you can start with a sunup to sundown fast on Wednesday, which is actually Tzom Gedaliah, a real fast on the Jewish calendar. And then start helping our planet at breakfast the next day.

⁶ See *We Are The Weather: Saving the Planet Begins at Breakfast*, by Jonathan Safran Foer (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019).

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/dining/climate-change-food-eating-habits.html> for all of these statistics.

At Kol Nidre, I'll be speaking about the interior moral and spiritual work we will need to do as climate change continues. And I'll check in with you about how these ten days of repentance and experimentation in eating in a more climate-friendly way have been.

We as individuals, as households, can make significant changes in a year, or even in weeks. As Moses said in last week's parasha, "this mitzvah that I command you this day is not too hard for you, nor is it beyond reach... it's very close to you, *in your mouth*, and in your heart, to do it."⁸

As a synagogue, responses to climate change, to be done sustainably and with good process and outcomes, take longer.

This new year, 5783, is the first year of the seven-year Shemita cycle. Last year was a shemitah, or sabbatical year, when Israel's farmland was supposed to lay fallow.

Would it be possible for our Kol Rinah to be net carbon neutral within seven years, by the end of this new Shemita cycle?⁹ I have no idea. But if you're interested in slowly and thoughtfully considering that with me and others here at Kol Rinah, let me know. And after the holidays, we can start thinking about what thinking about this even looks like.

As a nation, as a congregation, as individuals, we have and always will have shorter-horizon challenges than climate change, needs that are more urgent right now.

But as a species, for our planet, nothing is more important.

Climate change will be a challenge, a growing challenge, for the duration of the life of the youngest child here.

Rosh Hashanah, the birthday of the world, is about the world, and not really about Jews or Judaism, particularly. It's the most universal of our holy days.

Our ancient ancestors understood drought in Israel as God speaking to them, and it being their responsibility, alone.

Climate change is speaking to all of us, every human, every animal, every plant, everywhere.

I do wish us all a shana tovah—a good year.

But if we can only look one year ahead, we won't have many more shanim tovot—good years, ahead of us.

Rather, I wish you, I wish us, an Olam Tov—a good world.

Olam Tov.

⁸ Deuteronomy 30:11, 14.

⁹ Thank you to Nigel Savage for the shemita connection and this question.