

YK AM

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Climate Justice Demands our Al Cheit Attention

When I grow up, I want to be Greta Thunberg. That girl is amazing. 16 year-old Greta, who hails from Sweden, has taken the world by storm, courageously and forcefully calling on world leaders to change course and prioritize the preservation of our planet over the pursuit of money.

Thunberg delivered an emotional speech at the United Nations' Climate Action Summit in September, appealing to world leaders "about the grave need to stop the effects of climate change."¹ She said, "You all come to us young people for hope. How dare you?"

"You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words, and yet, I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing."

Tearfully, Thunberg condemned the lack of action on part of world leaders to address climate change. "We are in the beginning of a mass extinction and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you?"

I thought of our ancient texts and generations of commentary that underscore the core Jewish idea that the earth belongs to God, who gave us the responsibility to care for it. Genesis 1:26 reads, "And God said, 'Let us make man in our image, [after our likeness], and they shall rule over the fish of

¹ "You Have Stolen My Dreams and My Childhood': Greta Thunberg Gives Powerful Speech at UN Climate Summit". Mahita Gajanan, Time Magazine, September 23, 2019

the sea and over the fowl of the heaven and over the animals and over all the earth and over all the creeping things that creep upon the earth.”

The revered Rav Avraham Kook, the early 20th century Chief Rabbi of Palestine commented on this verse:² “No intelligent, thinking person could suppose that when the Torah instructs humankind to dominate...it means the domination of a harsh ruler, who afflicts his people and servants merely to fulfill his personal whim and desire, according to the crookedness of his heart. It is unthinkable that the Torah would impose such a decree of servitude, sealed for all eternity, upon the world of God.”

Genesis 1:28 says, “God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and rule over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the sky and over all the beasts that tread upon the earth.’” Rabbi Norman Lamm from Yeshiva University commented, “Man is not only an *oved*, a worker and fabricator, he is also a *shomer*, a trustee who, according to the Halakha, is obligated to keep the world whole for its true Owner, and is responsible to return it in no worse condition than he found it.”³

But as a human community, we have been neglecting our *shomer* job. “Thunberg cited more than 30 years of scientific evidence showing the consequences of a perpetually warming globe.”⁴ She called out politicians who have known of the science but have not acted, saying, “You say you hear us and that you understand the urgency. But no matter how sad and angry I am, I do not want to believe that,” she said. “Because if you really

² Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook- "A Vision of Vegetarianism and Peace," chapter 2, edited by Rabbi David Cohen, in Lachai Ro'i, Jerusalem: Merkaz HaRav (1961), translation by Rabbi David Sears in The Vision of Eden p. 339

³ Rabbi Norman Lamm, “Ecology in Jewish Law and Theology.” In Torah of the Earth p. 126

⁴ “You Have Stolen My Dreams and My Childhood’: Greta Thunberg Gives Powerful Speech at UN Climate Summit”. Mahita Gajanan, Time Magazine, September 23, 2019

understood the situation and still kept on failing to act, then you would be evil, and that I refuse to believe.”⁵

Now is the time to understand the urgency.

At the Global Climate Strike the prior day, Thunberg told the crowd, “Our house is on fire. We will do everything in our power to stop this crisis from getting worse.”⁶

The Global Climate Strike was an international event, with young people taking to the streets in cities all over the world. “The old shall dream dreams and the youth shall see visions, the prophet Joel said.”⁷ Their passion comes from a deep fear that the world we know now, the world my generation and those before me for thousands of years enjoyed, is not well. As the climate changes, hundreds of species become extinct and severe weather becomes common, the youth fear a future world dramatically diminished.

Speaking to the world leaders at the climate summit, Thunberg critiqued even the prevailing suggestions for mitigating the climate crisis. She remarked that the current plan to cut emissions relies on her “generation sucking hundreds of billions of tons of [your] CO₂ out of the air with technologies that barely exist.” The risks, she said, are not acceptable to her generation “*who have to live with the consequences.*”

⁵ “You Have Stolen My Dreams and My Childhood’: Greta Thunberg Gives Powerful Speech at UN Climate Summit”. Mahita Gajanan, Time Magazine, September 23, 2019

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Base on Joel 3:1

Her biting critique was painfully stark. She said, “The eyes of all future generations are upon you, and if you choose to fail us, I say, we will never forgive you.”

Her clarion call echoed the prophetic voice of Isaiah in today’s *haftarah*. “Today, you do not fast in such a way as to make your voice heard on high. Is this the kind of fast I delight in? A fast merely to deprive one’s body? [Is it bowing the head like the willows, or reclining in sackcloth and ash? Do you call that a fast, a day in which THE HOLY ONE delights?] Is not the fast that I desire--the unlocking of the chains of wickedness, the loosening of exploitation, the freeing of all those oppressed, the breaking of the yoke of servitude?”⁸

Thunberg may be the most well-known, but she is far from the only young person leading this fight for *their* future. Jamie Margolin is another, a high school senior in Seattle. She was profiled in *The Jewish Forward* recently⁹. Jamie spends her time running *Zero Hour*, a climate activist group run by and for teenagers. “Margolin is one of several teens whose utter fed-up-ness with the world’s indifference to the climate crisis has given them a spotlight.”¹⁰ Margolin and other youth involved in this activism say they need the grown-ups to act. They can’t do it alone.

Jewish tradition is filled with teachings celebrating the earth as God’s creation. The Psalmist voiced awe, wonder and gratitude for the glory of creation. Later, these texts gave the rabbis of the Talmud and the mystical Zohar much to parse for meaning, declaring of our responsibility and accountability for caring for the earth.

⁸ Isaiah 58:3-7

⁹ “This Teen Activist is Done with Adults Saying ‘Kids Will Save the World’”. Ari Feldman. *The Forward*. July 1, 2019

¹⁰ *Ibid*

The Psalmist declares, “When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and stars that You set in place, what is man that You have been mindful of him, mortal man that You have taken note of him, that *You have made him little less than divine, and adorned him with glory and majesty; You have made him master over Your handiwork*, ... O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is Your name throughout the earth!”¹¹

Jewish texts are *our* foundation, and in addition to that, today moral leadership for Climate Action comes from many different corners. Former Vice President Al Gore is well-known for his passionate activism for preserving the earth. Yet, before I share a tidbit of his teaching, I need to take a step back to articulate a pressing thought. It is really important that Al Gore’s voice not be heard through a partisan filter, nor should any of these words be taken as a partisan position. This is not a right/left, Democrat/Republican issue. This is about our shared destiny on earth. There is no value more central to Torah than our careful stewardship of God’s earth.

Al Gore published an op-ed a few weeks ago,¹² “*The Climate Crisis is the Battle of our Time, and We Can Win.*” There he lays out the problem and the solutions.

“Things take longer to happen than you think they will, but then they happen much faster than you thought they could. The destructive impacts of the climate crisis are now following the trajectory of that economics maxim as horrors long predicted by scientists are becoming realities.

¹¹ Psalm 8

¹² “Al Gore: The Climate Crisis Is the Battle of Our Time, and We Can Win.” Al Gore. The New York Times. September 20, 2019

“More destructive Category 5 hurricanes are developing, monster fires ignite and burn on every continent but Antarctica, ice is melting in large amounts there and in Greenland, and accelerating sea-level rise now threatens low-lying cities and island nations.”¹³

Tropical diseases are spreading to higher latitudes. Cities face drinking-water shortages. The ocean is becoming warmer and more acidic, destroying coral reefs and endangering fish populations that provide vital protein consumed by about a billion people.”¹⁴

The UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released its latest report in September. The report was prepared by 104 authors and reviewed by editors from 36 countries. This scientific report has a global imprimatur. The scientists reported that “global warming has already reached 1°C above the pre-industrial level... There is overwhelming evidence that this is resulting in profound consequences for ecosystems and people. If we reduce emissions sharply, consequences for people and their livelihoods will still be challenging, but potentially more manageable for those who are most vulnerable,” Hoesung Lee (chair of the IPCC) said. “¹⁵

The report finds that strongly reducing greenhouse gas emissions, protecting and restoring ecosystems, and carefully managing the use of natural resources would make it possible to preserve the ocean and...[to] limit risks to livelihoods and offer multiple additional societal benefits.”

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁵ IPCC Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. IPCC Press Release. 25 September, 2019. IPCC Secretariat

Al Gore pointed out that “We have the technology we need. For example: solar and wind provide the cheapest sources of new electricity in two-thirds of the world. Within five...years, these sources are expected to provide the cheapest new electricity in the entire world. And in 10 years, solar and wind electricity will be cheaper nearly everywhere than the electricity that existing fossil fuel plants will be able to provide.”

“Today, the fastest-growing occupation in the United States is solar installer.... The second-fastest growing job: wind turbine service technician.”

As Gore says “Evidence now indicates that we are in the early stages of a sustainability revolution that will achieve the magnitude of the Industrial Revolution and the speed of the digital revolution, made possible by new digital tools.”

“And so far, the best available technology for pulling carbon dioxide from the air is something called a **tree**. That’s why many nations are starting ambitious tree planting effort.”¹⁶ But much more is still needed. And *we* have to make it happen.

Trees play a prominent role in our religious imagery and spiritual imagination. Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav gave us this kavannah/spiritual intention:

"Grant me the ability to be alone, May it be my custom to go outdoors each day among the trees and grasses among all growing

¹⁶ ibid

things and there may I be alone, and enter into prayer to talk with the one that I belong to." Nachman of Bratslav

Once when Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was a young man living in Vilna, he and a companion entered a forest. They paused and stood in silence, and then Heschel's friend watched as Heschel took a kippah from his pocket and placed it on his head. Later, Heschel's friend, who was secular, asked him why he had put a kippah on his head in the forest. "That grove of trees was like a synagogue to me," Heschel answered.¹⁷ (Jacobson)

And then there are the glorious olive trees in the land of Israel. An article in the Jewish Forward, from the Israeli Science and Environmental News Agency, reported: "It is no coincidence that the tradition of Hanukkah is related to the olive tree. On Hanukkah, the olive harvest ends, and the oil production begins...However, the effects of climate change do not spare the relatively robust and resilient olive tree, causing a decline in the quantity and quality of olive products in Israel and around the world."¹⁸

Oy, a world without olive oil! Unimaginable! But this is just one of many consequences of climate change. The entire ecosystem is intertwined. If we sustain wonder and awe for the beauty and brilliance of creation, we can't help but to plant trees. The Talmud tells a fanciful story of "Honi the Circle-Maker:"

¹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸ "Climate Change Is Affecting Olive Oil Production. Will There Be Another Hanukkah Miracle?" Racheli Wacks/ZAVIT. December 6, 2018

“Once Honi the Circle-maker was walking on the road and saw a man planting a carob tree. Honi said: “You know a carob tree takes 70 years to bear fruit; are you so sure that you will live 70 years so as to eat from it?”

“I found this world provided with carob trees,” the man replied, “and as my forebears planted them for me, so will I plant for my offspring.” Honi then sat down to eat and was overcome with sleep. As he slept, a small cave formed around him, so that he was hidden. And thus he slept for 70 years. When he awoke, he saw a man gathering carobs from that same tree and eating them.

“Do you know who planted this carob tree?” Honi asked. “My grandfather,” the man replied. “I must have been like a dreamer for 70 years!” Honi exclaimed....”¹⁹

Today is Yom Kippur, the Day of Judgement. We are given an opportunity to look deep inside and, surrounded by caring community, in the presence of our loving God, we can decide to change. Rabbi Burt Jacobson wrote, “If the earth is to survive, there are many crucial things we must do to change our ways of living. We know that we must deal both as individuals and as a society with our patterns of consumption.”²⁰

While the news of dramatic effects of our changing climate may motivate us to action, we need more. What will make us actually change our behaviors and our priorities? The Hasidic master, the Ba'al Shem Tov taught that the environment is not just something that surrounds us. *“We are the*

¹⁹ Babylonian Talmud, Ta'anit 23a c. 200–c. 600 CE transl. based on H. Malter

²⁰ “The Eclipse of Wonder: Abraham Joshua Heschel and Our Ecological Crisis” Rabbi Burt Jacobson. Submitted by Rabbi Arthur Waskow on 10/6/2007

environment, plain and simple. Destroy the world around us and we destroy ourselves.”²¹ (Rabbi Burt Jacobson)

Thousands of years ago, our ancestors feared for the earth’s destruction. Of course, they couldn’t have imagined the technological advances that have led to today’s accelerating global climate change. The story of Noah was told to awaken us to the dangers of abandoning our responsibility to the earth, and to God.

*Noah and the Flood:*²² “When God saw how corrupt the earth was...God said to Noah, “I have decided to put an end to all flesh, for the earth is filled with lawlessness because of them: I am about to destroy them with the earth. The waters swelled and increased greatly upon the earth, and the ark drifted upon the waters.

And all flesh that stirred on earth perished...All existence on earth was blotted out. Only Noah was left, and those with him in the ark.

After the flood: “The LORD said to Himself: “Never again will I doom the earth because of man, since the devisings of man’s mind are evil from his youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living being, as I have done. So long as the earth endures, Seedtime and harvest, Cold and heat, Summer and winter, Day and night Shall not cease.”

Oh, good! -- God proclaimed that we are safe, God will never again destroy the earth!

Wait, not so fast! It’s not so simple. Maybe God is not going to destroy the earth, but this time, *we are*. We are given mitzvot/commandments to direct our moral and ethical actions, along with rituals to nurture our relationship

²¹ *ibid*

²² Genesis 6:12-13; 7:18-19-21-22-23; 8:20-22

with our Creator. If we neglect our responsibilities to care for the earth and the creatures of the earth, this time, it's on us.

J.J. Goldberg, editor emeritus of the Jewish Forward began a recent opinion column²³ about climate change with a story from Chelm, the mythological Eastern European village of fools. It goes like this:

“The story is told of the melamed, the wise schoolteacher, who was walking along the back streets of Chelm one dark night when he was accosted by a masked bandit with a large pistol.

“Your money or your life!” the bandit said. “Take my life,” the melamed replied. “I’m saving my money for my old age.”

This message is worth contemplating today.

About one-third of methane emission comes from cows’ indigestion. Evidently, as global poverty declines, there is a growing demand for red meat. We need to talk openly about the emergent need to modify our diets- this is more than a public health crisis. It is planet earth crisis.

Goldberg cites, “By current estimates, if we don’t start turning things around by 2030, stop burning carbon and emitting methane, we’ll pass a tipping point and the warming will build on itself until our grandchildren’s grandchildren inherit an uninhabitable planet.”

Some of us are uncomfortable with this message. “Which brings us back to the schoolteacher of Chelm,” Goldberg commented. “In the end, he is us.”

²³ “This Rosh Hashanna, Jews Must Commit To Ending Climate Change.” J.J. Goldberg September 3, 2019

“Impending doom?” some question. “It can’t be as serious as you say,” others say. Others, say, “I’m saving my money for my grandchildren.”

The earth is crying out, “Enough!” We are obligated to keep the world whole for its true Owner, God.

Greta Thunberg and Jamie Margolin and thousands of other youth are showing us how to act. It takes courage to reprioritize how we use our resources and reorder our lives. But we can do it together. There are many resources available to help us figure out how to live energy-efficient lives. This is our charge on this Yom Kippur.

I close with a midrash from Rabbi David Wolpe:

I Sent You²⁴

A woman once stood before God,
Her heart breaking from the pain
And injustice in the world.
“Dear God,” she cried out,
“Look at all the suffering, the anguish and distress in
Your world. Why don’t you send help?”
God responded, “I did, I sent you.

²⁴ “*I Sent You.*” David J. Wolpe, in “Teaching your Children about God”