

Kol Nidre 2021: For the Sin of Ignoring Climate Change *Rabbi Yael Ridberg*

When Jeff Bezos boarded his rocket ship *New Shepard* along with his brother Mark Bezos, Ms. Wally Funk, an 82-year-old pioneer of the space race, and an 18-year-old student, they travelled in a capsule with the biggest windows flown in space, offering stunning views of the Earth.

When the capsule touched back down after the 10-minute, 10-second flight, Jeff Bezos exclaimed: "Best day ever!" Criticized for offering what some see as joy rides for the super-wealthy, Bezos insists he has an environmental vision: "We need to take all heavy industry, all polluting industry and move it into space, and keep Earth as this beautiful gem of a planet that it is."

"It's going to take decades and decades to achieve, but you have to start, and big things start with small steps...that's what this sub-orbital tourism mission allows us to do, it allows us to practice over and over."¹

It's true that big things start with small steps, and maybe that practice makes near perfect, but for most of us, maybe even *all of us*, that trip to space *is not the smallest step* we might take to address the encroaching climate crisis and the not so existential threat to our existence.

I know because this is moment, right now, is my first step. This is the very first time I am speaking about climate change. Ever. I know, because perhaps like many of you, I have engaged in the sin of a conspiracy of silence, whereby well meaning, intelligent people collectively ignore something of which each one of them is personally aware. Essentially underscoring the difference between knowing and acknowledging, between personal awareness and public discourse.²

I have a very clear memory of *not* seeing Al Gore's 2006 documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*, precisely because it was inconvenient. It's not that I didn't believe in the science, I did, but I had a four-year old, and THAT was my inconvenient truth. I didn't connect to this idea that the earth was warming,

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-57849364>

² <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/shadows-of-war/social-sound-of-silence-toward-a-sociology-of-denial/B26C3D00D57F6C2A95C7347B149158C0>

and I simply did not think it had anything to do with me.

In the last 18 months as we have needed to retreat from so many areas of life grounded in production and consumption, I have found myself newly aware of climate change in a much more focused way.

The fallowness of the last year has revealed to me an understanding of the biblical notion of *shmita* – giving the land / our lives / our souls a rest to enable greater abundance. It's an overhauling the entire society as we know it – agriculturally, economically, socially – a great pause and equalizer.

The irony of course, is that *this year* of 5782 is the real year of sabbatical as outlined in the Torah that every 7 years debts are forgiven, borders are dissolved, and land returns to its original owners.³ What is the release on a personal and societal level? How easy or challenging might it be to release objects or patterns we are accustomed to?

Thinking about this prompted me to realize for myself the interlocking quests for justice as indicative of what is at the heart of climate change.

Admittedly, I haven't read the nearly 4,000 page long, report from the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) with 234 authors and some 14,000 citations to existing scientific studies. But I understand it includes mountains of evidence detailing the scope of human-induced climate change and expectations of what the future might hold if greenhouse gas emissions continue to climb.⁴

I'm more interested in the fact that I, like millions of Americans and others all over the world have not been paying attention to this issue, and whether it is therefore, a sin of commission or omission, or both.

We've had 30+ years of evidence how is it that I am / we are still so detached?

I was reminded of this when we read in *Parashat Ki Tavo*, "Moses summoned all Israel and said to them: You have seen all that God did in Egypt before your very eyes, to Pharaoh, to all his servants, and to all his land. Your own eyes

³ Exodus 23:1-11

⁴ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2021/08/10/ipcc-report-un-takeaways/>

saw the great miracles, signs and wonders. *But until this day, God did not give you a heart to know, eyes to see and ears to hear.*"⁵

That is a perfect description of me, and perhaps many of you. We have seen and heard with our own eyes and ears the direction in which our planet and our species have been headed for decades, but tonight, at the start of the holiest day of the year, I am asking how we might emerge with a new heart not only to believe it, but to act on it?

Al het she'hatanu lifanecha b'yodim u'velo yodim – For the wrong we have done before you wittingly or unwittingly

The Torah calls us both to imagine and fight to manifest the ideal laid out in Genesis: placing the human being in the center of the garden to till and to tend it.⁶ The Torah imagines that God created the earth for human beings to enjoy, protect and defend.

The rabbis offered the prescient midrash that “God led Adam around all the trees of the Garden of Eden. And God said to Adam: 'Look at My works—see how magnificent and wonderful they are! Know this: everything I created, I created for you. But be mindful that you don't spoil and destroy My world, for if you spoil it--*aiyn mi sheyitaken acharecha*—there will be no one after you to repair it.”⁷

But only a few chapters later, we understand that humanity is unable to embrace this idea, in the narrative of Noah and the flood: “The earth became corrupt before God; The earth was filled with lawlessness. 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 the earth.”⁸

Here, in the early chapters of our sacred stories we find a pattern that will repeat over and over again - human beings act in an inappropriate way, God responds with widespread destruction.

⁵ Deuteronomy 29:4

⁶ Genesis 2:13

⁷ Midrash Kohelet Rabbah 7:13

⁸ Genesis 6:11-13

Not only do human beings have responsibility of stewardship of the planet, but, if we don't act on our responsibility, we cannot escape destruction.

So as fires burn in Northern California, the East Coast recovers from Ida, hurricanes and massive storms threaten the Gulf Coast, there are blizzards in Australia, and there is massive drought in South Africa, we might remind ourselves that over the course of time, we have forgotten what it means to hold this sacred inheritance.

The climate crisis is here, and we have about a decade to possibly reverse and recalibrate our attachments, because, indeed, there is no one after us to repair it. And for all of you who are already concerned, knowledgeable, and active on issues of climate change, there are twice as many of us who aren't.

This summer I heard an episode of the podcast *Hidden Brain* – a program that delves into life's “unseen patterns.” Entitled *Losing Alaska*, the host Shankar Vednam takes us on a recent family vacation to Alaska when he encountered the very real fact that the Mendenhall Glacier has receded more than a mile and a half in the last century.⁹

While the receding glacier isn't *proof* of climate change, it is a visible and tangible expression of the changing landscape of the earth, that some see as ominous, and others easily brush it off as something that is happening, but at such a slow pace as to not care too much about it.

When Vednam got back from vacation, he called George Marshall, the Director of Projects at [Climate Outreach](#) and author of *Don't Even Think About It: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change*, to try to understand why people understand climate change to be a concern, but *aren't actually* concerned enough to talk about it.

Marshall shared the thinking of Daniel Kahneman, the Israeli Nobel Prize winning behavioral scientist whose pessimistic theorizing made me, once again, feel like he was describing me:

⁹ <https://www.npr.org/2016/04/18/474685770/why-our-brains-werent-made-to-deal-with-climate-change>

Why have I been detached? Well, first of all, climate change has seemed abstract, distant, and far in the future to capture our attention. Without attention, there is no action.

Second, human beings are generally very averse to making sacrifices to a greater end. Not only financially, but also what we might have to sacrifice/give up to save the planet. So that's to say when there is a reward, we respond strongly. But when we have to sacrifice something important, we prefer to delay it as much as possible.

And finally, we're reluctant to deal with uncertainty. If things aren't certain, or we perceive them to be uncertain, we just say, well, come back and tell me when they're certain.

Marshall says climate change is the worst possible combination because for many it's in the future, involves unknown costs, and it's uncertain.¹⁰

But is it really?

It's happening now, but we cannot assign direct responsibility for it. When you drove here tonight, when you adjusted the temperature in your home, when you got on a plane to go somewhere – your intention was *nothing but good* – and yet, *the impact may not be good*. The responsibility for climate change is therefore, widely distributed, and much easier to dismiss as not urgent.

Marshall explains that while we are tempted to call the disconnect a “blind spot” which connotes knowing something is there even if we can't see it and our brain being able to “fill it in.” With climate change, our brain *doesn't fill it in*. We know it's there, yet we have constructed the social means to *not talk about it*.¹¹

There's a degree of helplessness that has settled in because over the last 2 decades the effects of climate change have been manifest by mild disasters in

¹⁰ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/chunkamui/2019/10/01/3-reasons-there-might-be-no-path-to-success-on-climate-change/?sh=452f0d9f19de>

¹¹ https://www.harvard.com/events/hbs_channel/george_marshall/

one area, large disasters in others, and in some regions, no obvious effects at all.

We already know that climate change *isn't* experienced like the global flood of Genesis, but in every area of impact, sub-categories of who you are matter: If you have resources or not, if you can change your lifestyle, move to another area that doesn't experience large weather events or not. Lending further credence to the shift in the conversation from one of understanding science, and the human impact on the planet to one where political divides drive the conversation, and we can conveniently forget or ignore what is happening somewhere else.

In many ways, this is even worse than the science itself.

All of us have immense value in how we comport ourselves as a community – sharing and listening to one another and constructing the narrative of climate change around that effort. Because it's not just about us here, now. We know from the book of Numbers 14:18 that God is “slow to anger, abounding in love, and forgiving of sin” – but the next line in the text that we *don't sing* when the ark is open, is how God is imagined to inflict punishment for our actions on the third and fourth generations. It's why young climate activists like Greta Thunberg have the moral clarity to speak truth to power. They want us to panic, to feel the fear of the next generation when they think about climate change, *and they want us to act.*

At the end of the flood narrative, the Torah imagines that God placed the rainbow in the sky as a reminder *to God* of the eternal covenant with humanity.¹² The word **remember** is used twice in the span of 2 verses, which makes me think it wasn't to be *just a reminder for God, the rainbow has to be a reminder for us as well.*

Jonathan Safran-Foer writes about this in his book, *We are the Weather: Saving the Planet Begins at Breakfast*. He writes: “The rainbow reminds us of the possibility of destruction which reminds us of something that seems so essential, it shouldn't require any reminder, but because it's so essential, requires a reminder more than anything else does: We don't want to be

¹² Genesis 9: 15-17

destroyed...A rainbow is also a rope: it can be thrown to a drowning person, or it can be tied into a noose. No one who isn't us is going to destroy the earth, and no one who isn't us is going to save it. The most hopeless conditions can inspire the most hopeful actions. We have found ways to cause a total collapse of life on Earth. We are the flood, and we are the ark."¹³

Let's say that one again. We are the flood, *and* we are the ark.

We have brought about the catastrophe, now we must embrace our responsibility to save the planet. "Judaism and other religious traditions offer an approach to uncertainty and responsibility... religion harnesses our brains yearning to be part of a tribe, to be connected to deeper and grander values than ourselves, our yearning in some ways to do things for others in a way that might not be tangible right now but might actually pay off for future generations *and* even in the world to come that we cannot yet imagine."¹⁴

30 years ago, I heard Rabbi Saul Berman teach that in the modern Hebrew lexicon there is no word for owner. There is *baal* – which is master, there are the verbs of *shayachut* – which connote belonging, but there is no way to say, "I own it." That is because, taught Rabbi Berman, there is only one actual owner of the world – God.

This teaching has stayed with me all these years, because in the context of climate change, I feel as though we human beings have convinced ourselves otherwise –that *we are the owners*, and the more blessed we have become in advancing technology, medicine, industry, and the like, the more likely we have become to forget the source of such blessings.

And as we think about this year of *shmita* – *what might it mean for us to "return the land to the owner"* – making decisions that involve conservation, sustainability, and sacrifice.

So, what is the response to this sin of both omission *and* commission? Beating our chests is not enough. Speaking for myself, I believe I/We can and must develop a deeper awareness of the preciousness and precariousness of the earth. I/We can and must see the trees as the life sustaining miracles that they are; I/we can and must protect biodiversity and invest in renewable energies;

¹³ P. 161

¹⁴ <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/474685770>

I/We can and must embrace our role as stewards of the Earth – connected, inter-dependent, and committed to the understanding that the divides about climate change are social, not scientific. And therefore, the solutions to this are not scientific, they are psychological, cultural, and spiritual.

In every moment, we have a choice. We can be part of the flood waters, or we can be a part of the life-saving ark. Most of us, sadly, are already part of the flood waters. What will it take for us to be the ark? We are charged by the tradition that in matters of importance – *lo alecha hamelacha ligmor, Vlo atah ben horin l'hibatel mimena*. We are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are we free to neglect it.¹⁵ There is quite a continuum between “finish” and “neglect.” This simple and well-worn teaching offers us the chance to overcome the cognitive distortion of thinking in all or nothing terms.

Our attention matters, our choices matter, and our actions matter. There is no single prescription here, no “to do list” for all – except that denying, ignoring and neglecting what is happening to our planet is no longer an option.

We can do all some if not all of the little things we already know: It matters how and what we eat. It matters how we shop and what we buy. Reducing, re-using, recycling, consuming less, flying less, moving to renewable energy. It matters that we vote and for whom. These are very real actions people can take *right now*. They're not *everything*, but *they're still worth doing. If not entirely than more than we do now*.

On Kol Nidre we renounce our vows, so I'm not asking for promises of you and I'm not making any myself. I'm asking of myself and of you to find our way to environmental teshuvah, to learn, understand, and do what we can – we are not powerless.

Let us reflect on our behavior, commit to thinking and doing differently, and let us make amends for the damage we have done. *Ein mi sheyitaken acharecha – There is no one after us to repair it*.

Gmar Hatima Tova – May our journey towards environmental teshuva be inspired.

¹⁵ Pirke Avot 2:16