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D'var Torah, Rosh HaShanah 1  
Shabbat shabbaton and sh'mitah: rescuing life in a burning world

When I was in high school, my sister's house burned down.

The first thing I knew about it was Britt and her husband and three young kids arriving in our home in the middle of the night, smelling of smoke, eyes tired, faces tight with fear. An electrical fire had started in their rented Lexington house among some cords late at night; my niece had woken up, smelled smoke, and roused her parents. They grabbed the kids, wallets, a few pictures, that was it. Everything else burned. For several weeks they slept on our beds and living room couches, a paper screen hastily put up for some privacy. Their flight from their home because of that fire reverberated for decades in our family. It interrupted their school, and work, and regular sleep. It was traumatic. It had intense financial and emotional consequences.

And they were lucky. They had us to come to.

Like my niece, I too woke up on a late July morning this year to the smell of smoke. Only this smoke came from across the country: smoke from the Bootleg fire and California in our Massachusetts air. The West burned again this summer. Record temperatures, terrible fires. Mid-August, NPR reported on an unprecedented drought in the Colorado River, which will force communities along it to begin reducing water usage.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released a report in early August. Human activity and pollution have heated our planet up, past one degree Celsius, with more catastrophic warming still to come. We feel the effects of this warming already, not just in hotter temperatures and uncontrollable wildfires. We feel it too in water—extreme floods, changed rainfall patterns, and droughts. Hurricane Ida killed scores of people last week from flooding, and hundreds of thousands remain without power.

The hour is late. But it is not too late for meaningful action. Dr. Elizabeth Sawin wrote on Twitter, August 6 (the night before release of the IPCC report): “Repeat after me: Every fraction of a degree [of increased global temperature] averted is suffering (human and non-human) averted. Just because you can't stop all suffering is not a reason to not prevent what suffering you can. There's no giving up my friends. Also: there are tipping points in the human heart and the collective consciousness that could be just as sudden and big as any in the earth system. Just because the IPCC isn't charged with documenting them does not mean they don't exist, latent, stirring to life. And there's nothing worse than giving up just shy of a tipping point, and no way to know how close you might be.”

B'Rosh haShanah yikateivun, uvYom tzom Kippur yechateimun. On Rosh HaShanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed, says our liturgy, who by fire and who by water, who by earthquake and who by plague.... BUT t'shuvah, restorative action, and t'fillah, spiritual self-support, and tz'dakkah, acts of justice, ma'avirin et roa hag'zeirah: they cause the worst of the decree to pass away. Never has our liturgy been more literally, globally true. We know that

climate change is here, and we cannot avoid it. But we can avert the worst ravages of the climate change decreed by our past relationship with the earth. If we cultivate life-saving, massive, global changes in practice, we can let green grow back through the ash.

A famous midrash<sup>1</sup> in the name of Rabbi Yitzchak compares Avraham to a man who, journeying, comes across a burning palace. “Is it possible that this palace has nobody to look after it?” the man asks. Whereupon its owner looks out from the palace and says, “I am the master of this palace.” Similarly, Avraham, seeing the universe, asks, “is it possible that this universe lacks a person to look after it?” and the Holy Blessed One looks at him and says, “I am the master of this universe.” We should not abandon a house, or world, on fire. We can continue to live in this world and still own our own responsibility. Our actions, like God's, make or break life on earth. Self-interest and moral obligation walk hand-in-hand here.

Combating climate change is also an issue of social justice. Fire losses disproportionately affect people with fewer resources—poorer countries and poorer individuals. In 2017, Grenfell Tower, a British apartment block in West London of mostly immigrant families, went up in flames. It was swathed in cheap external cladding for construction, which caught fire with terrifying speed. Sprinkler systems inside had been out of order for months if not years, with resident complaints about them unanswered. More than eighty people died that night. Safety measures undertaken for poorer people are too often inadequate, and as long as those in power are not directly affected, change is slow.

Folks with thin margins of survival are hit hardest by changes in their environments beyond their control. Enormous numbers of people are now climate refugees, fleeing from earth that will no longer support the growing seasons and crops and occupations that have traditionally helped them stay alive. Climate change damages national economies and, as a consequence, national security. The World Bank estimated in 2018 that more than 140 million people will be forced to move by 2050 because of environmental factors.<sup>2</sup> Climate refugees flee from Syria. From fields in Honduras and Guatemala that will no longer grow coffee, corn, and beans because the earth is hotter and the rains are no longer regular. They flee from more variable and dramatic weather that threatens both family and livestock husbandry in the East and Horn of Africa, Somalia and Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Many climate refugees end up at the borders of the USA, as we've seen.

But our country is not an island, and climate change is here, too.

Climate change is not a potential, or a future issue. It's happening right now. It needs immediate work to mitigate. The problem can feel as overpowering as God, God's self, and as difficult to influence. But we must try. To quote Rabbi Benjamin Franklin's reported quip on the eve of the American Revolution: “We must hang together, or most assuredly we will hang separately.” Or as the climate prophet Bill McKibben said: “The best thing an individual can do right now is to become less of an individual.”<sup>3</sup>

People who study and combat climate change have been telling us for generations that only a worldwide, group effort will succeed. I think of the work of *Festivales Solidarios*, indigenous Guatemalans organizing for environmental justice. Their members were attacked with machetes

last year while attempting to prevent illegal logging in Totonicapán communal forest.<sup>4</sup> Festivales' action affirms that their land and water cannot survive without mutual, worldwide cooperation. They put their bodies on the line to protect the earth that nourishes them physically and spiritually.

Opportunities for communal action are thick on the ground. There is a Jewish organization, Dayenu, specifically dedicated to supporting climate change activism and the Jewish n'shamot, the souls, invested in this work. Its name, Dayenu, means both “we've had enough” of climate destruction, and “we are enough” for the work of saving humanity. Members of our Temple's social action committee are investigating starting a Dayenu circle, a group of people that meets monthly to find and share spiritual support and action opportunities. Social action committee member Karen Godek will speak about our Jewish environmental connection and responsibilities this afternoon at our Tashlich service. And the year to come will bring more opportunities for education and advocacy. Please talk to me, Karen, or another social action committee member if you are interested in being part of a Temple Emanu-El Dayenu circle.

We can each become less of an individual by becoming part of the movement to mitigate climate change, in whatever ways we are personally able to do. Activism may not be typical for you. As Bill McKibben, speaking on Hebrew College's podcast, said, “The earth is outside of her comfort zone, so we must be too.”<sup>5</sup> Recycling and taking shorter showers and eating less meat are helpful habits. But we are not going to recycle our way out of this one. We cannot turn back the clock to prevent dangerous global warming. What we can do, however, is to slow that clock down, by urging our governments and industries to listen carefully to climate scientists and to act immediately on their recommendations. We can give ourselves more time to mitigate the effects of what we've already wrought.

Both we and the earth need to rest from our human carbon-dioxide-exuding, resource-stripping, planet-cooking habits. We need time and space to cool down. We need to return to the integrity of air, water, land, and practice that help support life on earth. And, Baruch Hashem—thank God—we have a model for this kind of rest and renewal in our Jewish texts: the Sh'mitah year, which begins next year in our Jewish calendar. Every seven years, Torah mandates,<sup>6</sup> a year of rest for the land and the animals: rest from cultivation, rest from labor. Debts are forgiven, things put in pawn are redeemed. This year is called the Sh'mitah year.

This past year of our American Jewish lives, hemmed in by COVID-19 and its restrictions, has been a year of enforced pause, but it hasn't been fallow. We've been in survival mode. Sh'mitah is coming when we need it most. We need time for the seeds this year of reckoning have yielded to germinate. We've been acting from fear and survival instinct, adrenaline rather than reflection. Our discourses have lurched towards scorched-earth, with people becoming angrier and angrier at one another online without the precious hydration of in-person interactions. We need more time.

Yom Kippur is called “Shabbat Shabbaton” by God, the Shabbat of Shabbats.<sup>7</sup> Shabbat and Sh'mitah are intimately related. Sh'mitah is a longer-term version of Shabbat, the culmination of a week of years.

Rabbi David Seidenberg proposes, in his book *Kabbalah and Ecology*, that “One might even say that the purpose of Shabbat is to practice for Sh'mitah.”<sup>8</sup> Yom Kippur, as a Shabbat of Shabbats, is then “al achat kama vachamah”—all the more so. If we consider Shabbat and Yom Kippur to be practice for the Sh'mitah year, they suggest Jewish practices for living in a world where the climate is changing. When we must at once save what life we can from a burning place while trying to extinguish the fire, and at the same time, keep up our own spiritual strength, what Jewish tools do we have?

We are offered:

- regular practice of rest, connection, and don't be afraid to try prayer
- make sure we have what we need without surfeit or waste (bal tashchit) and sometimes even use less, as we fast on Yom Kippur
- stay in community. Ease your heart by sharing climate concerns and climate action with other people who care about you.

We think of Shabbat as a time for rest and abstaining from action. But our need for rest walks hand-in-hand with our need to preserve life, to band together and work to put out this fire. The Talmud rules that we can't work to put out a house fire on Shabbat or even rescue items from it. Shabbat is more important than saving our stuff, even sacred writings and Torah scrolls.<sup>9</sup> But saving life is more important than refraining from work. Rav Chaim Benveniste ruled that because fire spreads quickly from house to house, and every place has elderly and sick people who have trouble evacuating, any house fire is a life-threatening danger. Therefore, we violate Shabbos and extinguish any house fire to avoid the potential threat to life.<sup>10</sup>

Just as those homeowners in the Talmud, we acknowledge that this Sh'mitah year will be full of work. Urgent, difficult work, trying to work with our neighbors to put out the fires in our collective home, trying to rescue every scrap of living holiness that we can.

Too often, humans set ourselves up as masters of the earth. We're not. We're one species living here among the glorious biodiversity that God, in all of our texts, specifically wants and creates for other species' own sakes. The great Spanish rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, the Rambam, writing more than nine hundred years ago, wrote: “It should not be believed that all the beings exist for the sake of the existence of man. On the contrary, all the other beings too have been intended for their own sakes and not for the sake of something else.”<sup>11</sup> Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer, scientist and author and Native American Potawatomi Nation member, writes in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, “What happens to one happens to us all. We can starve together or feast together. All flourishing is mutual.”<sup>12</sup>

The earth wants to flourish. It will always choose life. Mike and I drove into the east side of Glacier National Park over a decade ago. Acres and acres of trees were burned black from a massive fire, charred and stabbing at the sky as far as I could see. But all around their bases, we saw fresh green life springing up. Our planet has its own drive to survive. The question is: will we help it?

Last Thursday, the weather here changed. Suddenly the air was cooler, drier. I walked down my street, and in my nostrils, unmistakably, I smelled New England fall, the season I love best in the

place I love best. Since I was a child, I've gotten an extra rush of excitement and energy as each fall begins. Crisp motes of leaves, sunshine that touches up every red-gold color and hardens the sky's blue. The air smells of plant matter going wet and dormant, and the possibility of harvest.

We want our children to breathe in the scents of changing seasons as they grow up, not the smoke of a burning world. And we have no time to waste. We can do this. We are a people, a species, who survived and rebuilt after the Flood. If we and our world seize this moment, we may beat down this fire too, and co-create the livable future we desire. In the fallow opportunity of this Sh'mitah year, let's redeem the future we placed in pawn by prioritizing human consumption and dominance, rather than contribution and humility. May each one of us find our practical and spiritual niche in the earthwide ecology of survival and help life in this world flourish for ourselves and the generations of humans and other living beings yet to come. Kein y'hi ratzon.

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1. Bereshit Rabbah 39:1.
  2. World Bank, *Groundswell: Preparing for Internal Climate Migration*, (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2018).
  3. Bill McKibben, "Be a little less of an individual," interview by Maria Virginia Olano, *Climate xChange*, September 16, 2020, <https://climate-xchange.org/2020/09/16/be-a-little-less-of-an-individual-author-and-activist-bill-mckibben/>.
  4. "Activists Attacked in Guatemala for Exposing Illegal Logging," *Nobel Women's Initiative*, September 24, 2020, <https://nobelwomensinitiative.org/activists-attacked-in-guatemala-for-exposing-illegal-logging/>.
  5. Rabbi Shoshana Friedman and Bill McKibben, "Challenging Destruction: We Speak Up Despite the Odds," July 26, 2021, in *Speaking Torah*, podcast produced by Hebrew College, <https://hebrewcollege.edu/blog/challenging-destruction-speak-up/>.
  6. Sh'mot 23:10–11; Vayikra 25:1–7; D'varim 15:1–6.
  7. e.g., Vayikra/Leviticus 23:32.
  8. David Mevorach Seidenberg, *Kabbalah and Ecology: God's Image in the More-Than-Human World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 13.
  9. Talmud Bavli Shabbat 115b:2.
  10. Sheyarei Kenesses Ha-Gedolah, Orach Chaim 334, Hagahos Beis Yosef 11.
  11. Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, Moreh N'vuchim/Guide for the Perplexed, 3:13 and 1:72, 452.
  12. Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 15.



East side of Glacier National Park, 2010, Cantor Vera Broekhuysen