

Repentance 5784: What We Owe the Future
Kol Nidre 5784
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Yesterday, I heard about the coming “atmospheric river” predicted for tonight and tomorrow and wondered not “who will live and who will die” but “who will show up for services!” Thank you for being here. Until a few years ago, I had never heard of “atmospheric rivers,” or “heat domes.” Yesterday’s headline called this the “first atmospheric river of the season.” So now it’s a season? While I know that it is impossible to know if any particular weather event is related to climate change, it is clear that a warming planet produces new and different weather patterns. And we are certainly seeing a rapidly changing environment.

The opening episode of the new PBS nature series “Evolution Earth”¹ features my good friend Dr. Camille Parmesan, a biologist and expert on the effects of global climate change on biodiversity. Camille is a leading member of the Nobel Prize winning Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the UN body assessing the science of Climate Change for governments world-wide. The show’s narrator declares himself a “fanboy” of Camille, which makes me very happy as her friend. It was about 30 years ago, the narrator explains, that Dr. Parmesan’s NASA funded research conclusively demonstrated for the first time that animal species around the world were moving and evolving due to climate change.² The series shows some of the ways that animals are adapting, or dying, in our rapidly changing world. Many species will go extinct. Many already have. As a biologist, Camille speculates if humans will similarly adapt. She doubts it. The earth will continue, she says, life on Earth will continue. Humans, though, not so much.

I tend to be more optimistic. But I know the stakes are high. If we want a future for humanity, the responsibility starts with us. Which makes me ask, if we want to avoid human extinction, what do we today owe future generations?

Nearly 2500 years ago, the biblical Prophet Malachi noted the human tendency not to think about future generations, requiring actual divine intervention to bridge the gap. He said:

¹ <https://www.pbs.org/video/earth-5erh2k/>
<https://www.pbs.org/video/the-ediths-checkerspot-butterflies-and-climate-change-zog0u0/>

² “Climate and Species’ Range”, *Nature*, 1996. Her follow-up 2003 *Nature* paper ‘A globally coherent fingerprint of climate change impacts across natural systems’ with Gary Yohe was the highest cited paper relating to climate change, with over 3000 citations in 2015 and 6000 in 2020.

הַגָּה אֲנֹכִי שְׁלַח לְכֶם אֶת אֵלֶיָּה הַנָּבִיא
וְהִשִּׁיב לִב־אֲבוֹת עַל־בָּנִים וְלִב בָּנִים עַל־אֲבוֹתָם פֶּן־אָבֹא וְהִכִּיתִי אֶת־הָאָרֶץ חָרָם:

I [YHWH, Breath of life] will send you Elijah the Prophet to turn the hearts of elders to the youth and the hearts of the youth to the elders, so that I do not come to destroy all Earth.³

The prophet was envisioning a future time of great challenge and destruction. “For lo! That day is at hand, burning like an oven”⁴ he said. But the promise was in the elders considering the next generation to turn away the evil decree.

Earlier this summer, a ground breaking ruling in Montana declared that the state had violated the constitutional rights of a group of young people.⁵ 16 plaintiffs, aged 5 to 22, had alleged that their state’s pro-fossil fuel policies contributed to climate change and denied them their state’s constitutional guarantee of a “clean and healthful environment.” District Court Judge Kathy Seeley found that the policies the state uses in evaluating fossil fuel permits – which does not allow agencies to evaluate the effects of greenhouse gas emissions – is unconstitutional.

The young people were represented by an Oregon environmental group, “Our Children’s Trust,” which has filed similar lawsuits in every state since 2011. In a statement, Julia Olson, one of the attorneys from Our Children’s Trust, who represented the Montana plaintiffs said:

As fires rage in the West, fueled by fossil fuel pollution, today’s ruling in Montana is a game-changer that marks a turning point in this generation’s efforts to save the planet from the devastating effects of human-caused climate chaos. This is a huge win for Montana, for youth, for democracy, and for our climate. More rulings like this will certainly come.⁶

This past summer has been filled with continuous news of the effects of climate change. Early this month Phoenix Arizona broke another record for the number of days for a US city at or above 110 degrees Fahrenheit. The previous record, 53 days, had been set by Phoenix itself in 2020, more than doubling the average number of days over 110 degrees seen between 1991 and 2020.⁷ And it is not limited to one city. According to NASA’s global temperature analysis,

³ Malachai 3:23-23; Translation by Rabbi Arthur Waskow, The Shalom Center email 8/18/2023

⁴ Malachi 3:19

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/aug/14/montana-climate-trial-young-activists-judge-order>

⁶ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/judge-sides-with-young-activists-in-first-of-its-kind-climate-change-trial-in-montana>

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/sep/09/phoenix-breaks-heat-record-as-city-hits-110f-for-the-54th-consecutive-day>

June 2023 was the hottest June on record.⁸ That was followed by the hottest July and the 533rd-consecutive month with temperatures above the 20th Century average.⁹

Flooding in the deserts of California and Nevada and Libya, devastating fires on the Islands of Hawaii, Canada and in Oregon, ever more powerful hurricanes striking Florida and southern California – the effects of climate change, long predicted by scientists, are inescapable today. It is no longer reasonable to deny them, call them a hoax or deflect that these are natural events; and politicians who continue to do so are increasingly out of step with their constituents. We are seeing a changing world profoundly affected by human action, by our action. The damage has been accumulating for generations, but scientists like my friend tell us we are reaching a tipping point now.

And we know that the human effects of climate change are not shared equally. People speak not only of “climate change” but of “climate justice,” out of the recognition that those most profoundly affected are often those with the least ability to respond. They are the ones with the least responsibility for creating the conditions which are leading to climate change. And none fit these categories of injustice more than young people.

What strikes me about the prophetic call of Malachi is the promise of one generation becoming aware of the needs of the other, caring not just about immediate needs, but about the future. The Montana case is remarkable, because it speaks to the harms that climate change brings to future generations. Carbon buildup in our atmosphere is cumulative – our recent ancestors helped to create our current conditions and we are creating the conditions for our children and our children’s children for centuries to come. וְהָשִׁיב לִבְאֲבוֹת עַל־בָּנִים *And the hearts of the elders are turned towards the youth.*

Yom Kippur is a time of reflection and repentance, leading us to change. We are accustomed to the idea of reflecting on our personal failings, the harms we have caused one another. But, as Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg notes in her book “On Repentance and Repair” whole nations can engage in the process of repentance, as Germany after WWII and as South Africa after Apartheid have tried to do. Their national work is imperfect and ongoing, but they have at least begun the process of healing. They started with Repentance – publicly acknowledging their wrongs. As Ruttenberg notes: “Repentance does not unbreak what has been broken so much as interrupt the cycle of repeated harms.”¹⁰ If nations can repent, perhaps all humanity can as well.

⁸ <https://climate.nasa.gov/news/3276/nasa-finds-june-2023-hottest-on-record/#:~:text=June%202023%20was%20the%20hottest,on%20ships%20and%20ocean%20buoys.>

⁹ <https://www.noaa.gov/news/record-shattering-earth-had-its-hottest-july-in-174-years#:~:text=The%20average%20global%20surface%20temperature,Earth's%20warmest%20month%20on%20record.>

¹⁰ Ruttenberg, Danya *On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World*; Beacon Press, 2022; Page 138

Repentance begins with an acknowledgment of harms caused. Harms cause by ourselves and, sometimes, harms caused by our ancestors. As Ruttenberg says “We are held accountable for the harm that was done before our time – for all the injurious deeds that we have held onto, for all that we have not actively worked to undo.”¹¹ As we read in Leviticus and echo today on Yom Kippur: “and they shall confess their sins and the sins of their ancestors.”¹²

With a subject like climate change that can be hard to do. When dealing with the entire planet, with harms that may be realized sometime in the future, to whom do we acknowledge? To whom do we ask forgiveness?

The prophet suggests that just as we are called to acknowledge the harms of the past – and feel the gaze of the children calling us account, so too do the hearts of the elders need to turn towards the children, towards the future. We have failed to acknowledge the harms done to our climate by our ancestors and we have compounded those harms ourselves. The effects will fall to the future: to our children and to our children’s children for generations to come.

But we are not trapped by the mistakes of the past, or of the present. That is what repentance is all about. Our first task is to acknowledge those mistakes and then to begin to repair what has been done.

Eight years ago, world leaders approved a landmark agreement in Paris to begin to undo some of the harms of human-caused climate change. According to a recently released “report card” – a United Nations official global assessment of progress - countries have made only limited progress in staving off the most dangerous effect of climate change.¹³ There are important accomplishments – renewable energy sources have become orders of magnitude less expensive and more widely implemented. Huge, historic investments have been made by the United States during this administration and by other nations into decarbonizing our economy. These investments take time, but progress is happening. We are in an era where climate change denial is falling and commitment to change is on the rise. And yet, much more remains to be done. We have to be committed to the work, even when the results may not be seen for some time.

But we are not committed. A recently released Pew Research poll shows climate change’s low priority for most Americans. It ranks 17th out of 21 national issues with only 37% of Americans saying it should be a top priority for the President and Congress.¹⁴

¹¹ Ibid., Page 132

¹² Lev. 26:40. See also Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Fasts 5, 1.

¹³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/08/climate/paris-agreement-stocktake.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare>; <https://unfccc.int/news/implementation-must-accelerate-to-increase-ambition-across-all-fronts-taking-an-all-of-society>

¹⁴ <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/08/09/what-the-data-says-about-americans-views-of-climate-change/#:~:text=Overall%2C%2037%25%20of%20Americans%20say,a%20Center%20survey%20from%20January.>

For the sake of future generations, our national commitment has to be much more. When the hearts of the elders are turned towards the youth, we think of the world we are bequeathing to them. We cannot make it someone else's responsibility. It is ours. A judge in Montana understands. She found the constitutional right to a livable environment as a responsibility not for the future but for now. The efforts we make today – to reduce the use of carbon, to remove existing greenhouse gases from the atmosphere – will have impacts for generations into the future.

Jewish tradition has long taken future generations as an imperative for the present. A 9th Century midrash tells of a conversation between the Israelites and G-d, as G-d is about to present to them the Torah. "Will you accept my Torah?" G-d asks. "Indeed!" the people reply. "Then," G-d answers "give me a surety that you will accept it." The people offer their ancestors as a promise. "No," G-d replies, "your ancestors also required guarantors for themselves." "Then our children will be our guarantors!" the people exclaimed. And immediately G-d accepted them as a promissory and gave the people the Torah. Therefore, the midrash concludes, when the people neglect their promise, the negative effect falls to the next generation – as the prophet Hosea said: וְתִשְׁכַּח תּוֹרַת אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁכַח בְּנֶיךָ גַם-אֲנִי: *As you have forgotten the Torah, I will also forget your children* (Hos. 4:6).¹⁵

We cannot let our children be forgotten.

When I was young, the Environmental Movement loudly warned of the toxic effects of air and water pollution. "Acid Rain" in the mid-1960's – a result of sulfur dioxide released from power plants - frightened the nation. In 1969, images of the Cuyahoga River in Cleveland repeatedly catching fire caught the public's attention as one of many symbols of pollution gone rampant. Shortly after, Republican President Richard Nixon united with a Democratic Congress to pass a series of landmark legislations: the Clean Air Act of 1970 and the Clean Water Act of 1972. These bipartisan bills have proven remarkably effective over these past 50 years in preventing an existential crisis. In a well-publicized signing ceremony, Nixon told reporters:

I think that 1970 will be known as the year of the beginning, in which we really began to move on the problems of clean air and clean water and open spaces for the future generations of America.¹⁶

Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas¹⁷, a great supporter of Conservation values, echoed Nixon's focus on the future:

Those who oppose wilderness values today may have sons and daughters who will honor wilderness values tomorrow. Our responsibility as life tenants is to make certain that there are wilderness values to honor after we have gone.

¹⁵ Midrash *Tanchuma, Vayigash* 2

¹⁶ <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2017/03/how-the-epa-and-us-environmental-law-works-a-civics-guide-pruitt-trump/521001/>

¹⁷ In office April 17, 1939 – November 12, 1975

We did it before. And we can rise to this even greater challenge. It is not our individual actions that will turn this around – it is our combined efforts to make climate change a national and international priority. To turn our hearts to our children and to our children’s children, and the world we are bequeathing to them.

A few years ago, our congregation’s Social Action Committee – now called the Tikkun Olam Committee - set up an online meeting with our teens and Congresswoman Suzanne Bonamici to discuss climate justice and pending legislation. It was during Hanukah and was called “Sharing the Light.”¹⁸ It was inspiring to see how engaged and knowledgeable these young people were. Those teens are just now, a few years later, approaching voting age and their voices will be the influence for future policy. They get it and they are energized. But we can’t wait for them. The Reform Movement’s Religious Action Center has created a campaign for Climate justice called “Power for Purpose”¹⁹ where each of us can be called upon to add our voice to influence government action. I’m told that when our Tikkun Olam Committee put out a call for participation, too few of us responded. Even though we in Oregon are blessed with a Congressional delegation, including our fellow congregants Congresswoman Bonamici and Senator Wyden, who are national leaders in this realm, they also need to hear from us that this is not issue #17 out of 21 for us. For the sake of our children and the world they will inherit, Climate Justice needs to be a top priority. It can seem overwhelming, but it is work that cannot wait. As we read in Pirke Avot:

רַבִּי טַרְפוֹן אָמַר, הַיּוֹם קָצֵר וְהַמְּלָאכָה מְרֻבָּה

Rabbi Tarfon said: the day is short, and the work is plentiful

And he also said:

*It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it.*²⁰

My biologist friend has worked for 30 years since her groundbreaking research was published, to help warn governments and the public of the dangers we face. She put up with disbelief and disinformation, but her voice is being heard today. I have hope. I believe humanity, led by our nation – the richest and most powerful nation in human history – has the ability to take charge of our fate and make the changes necessary for future generations. But our leaders won’t do it if we don’t demand it. The future needs to be our priority.

Tomorrow morning, we will invite our recent B’nei Mitzvah kids up to the bimah to chant the Torah portion of *Nitzvim*: “You stand here this day, all of you.” How can we ask them to stand proudly as Jews if we stand idly by for the world they will inherit? As our ancestors did on Mount Sinai, as our national leadership did over 50 years ago, we today cannot forget what we owe the future. We cannot forget that we have a responsibility to the generations to come - to give them a clean and livable environment. In this time of Repentance and Renewal of Yom

¹⁸ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=anPGbo-J_GA

¹⁹ <https://rac.org/take-action/reform-movements-2023-justice-campaign>

²⁰ Pirke Avot 2:15-16

Kippur, it is time for us to confess our sin of complacency. It is time – as the prophet said: וְהָשִׁיב לְבָב־אֲבוֹתָ עַל־בְּנֵיהֶם - to turn the hearts of the elders towards the youth, and to commit to prioritizing them for their livable future.

This Yom Kippur, may we stand with our youth and all the generations to come, all of us together, to build a livable future for our world.