

Shmitah: A Call to Release the Strings on our Heart
2nd Day Rosh Hashanah Drash
Nehar Shalom Community Shtibl
Rabbi Adina Allen
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This past Sunday the streets of midtown Manhattan were flooded with people dressed as bees and sunflowers, riding giant bicycle-powered floats, carrying signs in their hands with messages expressing the urgency of now. More than 400,000 people from around the world—including members of our own community—gathered in New York City for the People’s Climate March. This was the largest march ever organized to call attention to the destruction being caused to the planet and its implications on our future. Marching together were people of all faiths, backgrounds, races and ages. A few minutes before 1:00pm the crowd observed a moment of silence, followed by a loud blast of noise. Horns, drumbeats, and people’s cries mixed with sounds of the shofar, together sounding the alarm of climate change.

It seems no coincidence that this march was held the weekend preceding Rosh Hashanah. As we celebrate the New Year we engage in the inner and outer work of *teshuvah*, of returning. Through this process we proclaim the possibility of new beginnings and repaired relationships. There is perhaps no relationship more in need of repair than that of ours with the Earth.

The stakes are high and who knows how long we’ve got. The planet is warming at a rate faster than any time in the past 10,000 years.¹ The seas are rising, threatening coastal communities. The ice is melting, weakening the global ocean circulation system in ways that could make earth uninhabitable. Already we are experiencing massive die-off, with species going extinct at 1,000-10,000 times the natural rate.² And we have seen firsthand the devastating effects of extreme weather patterns—storms like Katrina and Sandy that left entire cities in wreckage.

Our actions are having a drastic impact on the planet, and perhaps more compellingly for us, on our own future survival. It shakes us to our core to realize that at this rate it is unclear how long human life on Earth as we know it will be able to continue. We know that the Earth has an incredible capacity to heal. She is resilient. The question is not of her survival, but of our own.

Reversing the decree of Climate Change will demand overhauls to our entire way of life. As Naomi Klein writes in her new book *This Changes Everything*, “Either we embrace radical change ourselves or radical changes will be visited upon our physical world. The status quo is no longer an option.” Change is required at every level of society—from the transformation of the systems that govern our lives to changes within each individual.

¹ http://wwf.panda.org/about_our_earth/species/problems/climate_change/

² <http://theconversation.com/extinction-just-how-bad-is-it-and-why-should-we-care-13751>

While we call for sweeping reforms of politics and policy, we simultaneously must seek within ourselves the reforms that *we* are being called upon to make. As the shofar cries echo at the windowsill of the UN Climate Summit, rousing our leaders to action, we pause to turn and feel the effects of that call on ourselves.

We ache at the destruction being caused to the planet, yet, disconnected from the chain of production we embrace all that it has afforded us. The very fabric of our society—our entire way of life—is fueled by the forces fueling Climate Change. It is the objects we rely upon like cars, phones and computers. But more than that, it's the larger systems in which these items are embedded: jobs, prosperity, choice, mobility and freedom.

A recent article in *TIME* magazine on the psychology of sustainability articulates our challenge: our inability to radically shift the needle on Climate Change stems from the mental barriers we face. “We’re reluctant to come to terms with the fact that what we love and enjoy and what gives us a sense of who we are is also now bound up with the most unimaginable devastation.”³ We remain in a state of cognitive dissonance in which our complicity is unseen and unfelt.

This year, the blasts of the shofar reverberate in the heart of the earth, amplifying her cries. Are we courageous enough to let those sounds penetrate each of our own hearts, to draw out our own cries?

Even as I write this I yearn to be writing a different drash. It would be much nicer to think about our relationship to the environment in terms of the beauty of the outdoors or the spiritual practice of gardening. But, as people of faith, we don't shy away from the hard stuff. The texts and rituals of our tradition are here to provide the insight and spiritual sustenance necessary to help us change our course of action when circumstances demand it.

This year, as we sound the shofar to bring us into the New Year, we simultaneously usher in the period of time known as Shmitah, or Sabbatical year. Shmitah comes once in every seven years as a biblically ordained time period, commanding us to press the reset button regarding our relationship to the earth. During the Shmitah year we are instructed to cease cultivating the land. As we read in Exodus, “Six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but in the seventh you shall let it rest and lie fallow.”⁴ In the Shmitah year, Leviticus teaches, we are not to plant, prune, or harvest our crops, as “it is a year of rest for the land.”⁵ Shmitah commands us to cease from the usual ways we relate to the Earth in order to create the space for a different way of relating to emerge.

³ Kharunya Paramaguru, “The Battle Over Global Warming is All in Your Head” *TIME* Magazine, August 19, 2013. <http://science.time.com/2013/08/19/in-denial-about-the-climate-the-psychological-battle-over-global-warming/>

⁴ Exodus 23:10-11

⁵ Leviticus 25:1-7

At this time when our relationship to earth is so strained, we ask how this New Year, marked by this period of Shmitah, might help us change the course of Climate Change. As twenty-first century North American Jews living through what might end up being catastrophic climate collapse, can this Shmitah year come to bear on our lives today in a way that could profoundly affect our future?

I imagine that the facts of environmental destruction are not news to any of us. Predictions about the life-altering affects of Climate Change have been written up in scientific papers, broadcast in the news for decades. And yet, significant changes that might radically alter the course we are on have yet to occur. For the most part, the dire predictions of Climate Change's affects echo around us like ambient noise. Perhaps every now and then we are pierced with questions about our grandchildren's future. Most often, though, it feels too big, too scary, too all encompassing and depressing and so we find ourselves turning away.

This back and forth ricochet between overwhelm and apathy regarding Climate Change is something I have experienced since college. During my studies I was assigned countless books and scientific reports on the havoc we were wreaking on the environment. Finishing one of these books, I'd look up, devastated, guilty, jolted awake by the accounts of pain and suffering of our actions are having on the planet and on those least responsible yet most vulnerable to Climate Change's effects. I'd look around, expecting to meet eyes with others sharing in this heart-stopping realization. Instead, life simply continued to carry on around me. I'd glance down at my syllabus and see that a test was coming up. Time to move on.

I imagine that many of us in this room have had similar experiences. We read an article, see a news story, or witness something in nature and our heart begins to break open to let the world in, but then, just as quickly, we realize we have to get to work, change the baby, go food shopping, or check our email. Our culture has trained us to be constantly on the go. There is no system for slowing down, for processing and digesting what is happening. There isn't time, space or support for the feelings to enter. So, we push these experiences aside, we try to live as best we can, and, likely, we shy away from engaging with the issues in the future.

"This refusal of feeling takes a heavy toll on us," writes environmentalist John Seed. "Numbness and apathy do not stem from ignorance or indifference; on the contrary, most of us are aware of the destruction of our planet at the deepest level. But we do not face it; do not integrate it for fear of experiencing the despair that such information provokes. We fear it may overwhelm us." More over, our society has constructed taboos against the communication and expression of such anguish."⁶

Without stopping to witness and feel the effects of our actions on the planet, we stand only to perpetuate the same structures and follow the same course generation after generation. As Albert Einstein famously said, problems cannot be solved from the same

⁶ John Seed, *Thinking Like a Mountain: Towards a Council of All Beings*. New Society Publishers: 1988.

level of consciousness that created them. It is hard and lonely work, so we resist. But, Seed says, “despair, grief and anger” have the potential to be “creatively channeled.” By going bravely to the heart of these feelings “new energy and creativity can be released.” Best of all, “Unblocking these feelings also opens us to experiencing our fundamental interconnectedness with all life.”⁷ When the reality of our interconnection becomes a felt experience rather than an intellectual idea, change becomes possible.

So here we sit, as a community, at a time when the gates are open for our cries to enter. During this period of reflection the soul of humanity is called to wakefulness as we recount our misdeeds. Ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu – these confessions are, quite purposefully, written in the plural. Our transgressions against the planet are too big and too interconnected for any one of us to tackle on our own. This Shmitah year let’s allow our hearts to ache open together. As the Rambam says, “In regard to a community, whenever they do teshuvah, crying out wholeheartedly [together], they are answered immediately.”⁸ Let us help rouse one another from our slumber.

In the words of Rav Kook, “Stilling the tumult of social life from time to time,” as Shmitah commands, is meant to move us toward “an encounter with the heights of our inner moral and spiritual life.”⁹ The Shmitah year beckons us, pleading for us to be brave. This is our invitation to release the ways we’ve protected ourselves from knowing what’s happening on the planet and to allow it to enter our hearts. We yearn to turn away, yet we return. We endure the discomfort that arises, and, quite miraculously, a small opening appears. Something shifts. That which was tightly held begins to unwind. We stay through the intensity and it transforms—into a prayer, an insight, a means to repair. This is the process of reweaving the fabric of life. There are no shortcuts really. From here, the wisdom that awaits us will come, knocking softly yet urgently on our heart’s door, opening for us our next right steps.

Kein yehi ratzton, may it be so.

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Maimonides Hilkhos Teshuva 2:6

⁹ Rabbi Julian Sinclair, *Rav Kook’s Introduction to Shabbat Ha’aretz*, (New York: Hazon, 2014) 9.