

Kol Nidre Drasha 5780
Just Transition as Teshuva
 By Noam Lerman

Shalom Alekhem, peaceful wholeness upon all of us as we enter Yom Kippur together. Before diving into my drasha, I'd like to honor and acknowledge the Massachusett tribes, and the Wampanoag Tribes tonight as we gather together on their ancestral land, which has been and still is intentionally cared for by generations of their ancestors and descendants.

Thank you.

In Midrash Rabbah, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai once told a story¹ about a ship that was carrying a group of people through the sea. People were pleasantly sailing along until one of the men on the ship took a hand drill and started obnoxiously drilling a hole under his seat. “מה אתה יושב” מה אתה יושב? What are you doing?!” cried out the others on the ship. He responded, “מה אכפת לכם! Why do you all care so much! it shouldn't bother you all-- I'm only drilling under my own seat! It's not like I'm drilling other holes under your seats.” The others on the ship responded,

“

המים עולין ומציפין עלינו את הספינה But the waters will rise up through the hole under your seat, and will overtake us! Our ship will sink, and it's a long way back to shore. Your drilling affects our lives as well!” Thus, the Midrash says, it is taught that when one person transgresses, it is felt by the entire community.

¹ Midrash Vayikra Rabbah 4:6

From our perspective, and according to the people on the ship, it's obvious that drilling a hole on the floor of a ship is a dangerous thing to do for everyone aboard. This midrash doesn't tell us where this ship is going, or who the people are. We don't know what this man's intentions are, and why he felt inclined to drill a hole under his seat. Perhaps he thought that drilling a hole would help him catch certain fish, or maybe he wanted to soak his feet in a puddle.

Whatever his intentions were, it's clear that our sages believe that he was transgressing by not being mindful of his actions or their repercussions.

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The traditional liturgy that comes right before Kol Nidre says, *“By the authority of the court on high, and by the authority of the earthly court, with the consent of G-d, and with the consent of the congregation, we permit prayer with those who have transgressed.”*

I find this a *very* interesting attempt towards inclusion, actually-- because the prayer does not explicitly identify who the transgressors are. They could be anyone, or even everyone! The Talmud² teaches that, “a fast in which no transgressors are present is no fast at all.” Regardless of if we know who did what transgressions around us, the Yom Kippur liturgy reminds us again and again that there is a collective “we”. That “we” are culpable for the actions of those around us, and “we” feel the effects of the choices that other people make, *even* if we are morally opposed to these actions.

² Keritot 6b

In the case of this Midrash, it is clear that this one person has already caused damage. The people on the boat didn't notice that this man took out his drill. They didn't notice him start to use it. They only asked him to stop *after* he started drilling under his seat. This means that a hole might have *already* been formed, and that everyone aboard this ship, INCLUDING the man with his drill, were in danger of water overtaking them.

I am left wondering-- what would have happened if they had noticed his drill, and they preemptively stopped him from drilling in the first place? How are they going to convince this stubborn person that his drilling actually *does* affect every single person on this ship, and that he needs to stop immediately before more damage occurs, so they can focus on patching up the hole and saving the ship and their own lives before they sink into the sea?

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These exact questions are the ones I am grappling with as I have witnessed the earth's climate shift and change drastically, in my short 31 years on earth. As I learn statistics about the acceleration of climate catastrophe that are absolutely incomprehensible. And as deforestation continues, as big oil companies continue their drilling and fracking. As scientists say that dozens of plant, bird, and mammal species become extinct everyday³.

Maimonides⁴ asks, "How does one acknowledge transgression? One says, I implore you G-d! I regret what I did, and am embarrassed by my actions. I promise never to repeat this act again."

³ https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/programs/biodiversity/elements_of_biodiversity/extinction_crisis/

⁴ Maimonides, Laws of Repentance, 1:1

Rabbinic theology teaches that without embarrassment and the owning up of one's mistakes, true teshuva, true reconciliation, cannot be possible.

Okay. But what if the damage is being carried out by huge powerful governments and corporations? Protests, civil disobedience and boycotts just feel like small dents in the big destructive machine! It's so frustrating that other humans who ALSO live on earth are the ones behind the drill, and they can't see how their actions impact others as well as themselves. Our world is literally the only home we all know!

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In Hebrew, the word "Olam" means both 'world', as in the planet and 'universe' as in the sum total of creation. The word 'Olam' is derived from the root ayin-lamed-mem, which means invisible, and there is a mystical belief that our world, and everything inside of it, is part of the invisible garment of G-d. That G-d is both hidden and revealed in the majesty of our world, and we too are integral pieces of G-d and the world and it's function. So basically, one could argue that we are the little threads of G-d's invisibility cloak.

In Midrash Kohelet Rabbah⁵, we learn that "to whatever the Holy Blessed One created in *human beings*, a parallel was created on the *earth*". After this profound statement, there is a list of parallels between various human body parts and vital aspects of the earth. Then, Avot DeRabbi

⁵ Midrash Kohelet Rabbah 1:4

Natan⁶ comes in to say “whatever the Blessed Holy One created on *earth*, G-d also created in *human beings*.”-- and again, there is a list that compares aspects of the *earth* to aspects of the *human body*.

“In the world, G-d created wind, in human beings, breath.

In the world, G-d created channels, in human beings, ears.

In the world, G-d created forests, in human beings, a head of hair.

In the world, G-d created wild beasts, and in human beings-- lice.

In the world, G-d created stagnant water, in human beings, sinuses.”

And so on! It's really quite an amazing list of comparisons.

If our bodies reflect the different aspects of our earth's singular body-- then what is happening to our earth's body as we witness drastic changes in our climate? How is the health of our earth fairing, and how is our own health and the health of our neighbors fairing?

An incredible organization called Movement Generation makes similar connections between the earth's body and our bodies. Movement Generation teaches that, “Just like the earth, your body is a living system made up of interdependent living systems, and humans are an integral part of the Earth system.” They say that, “Rivers act as the planet's circulatory system. Like our body's

⁶ Avot DeRabbi Natan 31.3

circulation system, the planetary one doesn't work well when it's clogged. If a river's flow is its heartbeat, then we humans are the heart disease. We've blocked most major rivers with dams, and bled them dry with water diversions⁷.”

Movement Generation believes that The most important thing that we can do to stop climate change is to restore native sovereignty, because this restores biodiversity. Every 14 days, another indigenous language becomes extinct on our earth, and it's important to note that in places where there are the highest numbers of indigenous languages, there is also the highest amount of biodiversity.

When Europeans settlers first came to the US and killed 80% of the indigenous people of the western hemisphere, the global climate actually changed. Scientists believe that this led to the Little Ice Age of the 1500's⁸, which caused the deaths of many other people around the world. The Little Ice Age happened because so many indigenous people who had been in right relation with the earth in the Americas were killed, and land that had been cultivated in a certain way was left unattended, which ultimately affected the climate.

Before I learned this, I wondered how genocide affected other peoples around the world. I wondered if there was some spiritual mark left when the violence of genocide wipes out human beings, and their sacred traditions and cultural memory.

⁷ <https://movementgeneration.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Body-Earth-Metaphor-2014.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jan/31/european-colonization-of-americas-helped-cause-climate-change?fbclid=IwAR2PUSpC7OuwjyZ-IWLg2fskUvcW9XiPWB1GmCiVhn2ucnn8N0ewHSawSAU>

I am reminded of the dialogue after Cain kills Abel.

G-d says, What have you done?

קוֹל דְּמֵי אָחִיךָ צֹעֲקִים אֵלַי מִן־הָאֲדָמָה The voice of your brother cries out to me from the earth!

Here, it seems that the earth itself is a witness--- that the earth's life reflects human life.

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We learn in the Torah⁹ that during the revelation on mount sinai, the people were only able to handle hearing a few words directly from G-d, and then Moshe took over communicating the commandments on behalf of G-d. Throughout this process, the voice of the shofar steadily grew louder and louder. Medieval commentator Rashi comes in to say that normally, when we humans blow a shofar, as we lose breath the sound becomes weaker and fainter. But this holy primordial shofar was different-- it became louder and stronger so as to

לְשַׁמֵּעַ לְשִׁמְעָם, לְשִׁבֵּר אֲזַנֵּיהֶם מֵה שֶׁיִּכּוֹלִין לְשִׁמְעָם, to open our ears to becoming more and more able to listen to the powerful words being spoken. The shofar was agitating and waking up the pieces inside of people that wouldn't have been receptive to these words otherwise.

⁹ Exodus 19:19

For generations upon generations, indigenous people have been fighting for their sovereignty, for access to their culture and religion and connection with their lands. For decades, various tribes have gone before the UN and the US government, pleading for the protection of the earth and its environment. Their voices have been part of this holy, primordial shofar that is prying shut-ears open. Their voices have been continuing for hundreds of years, and my question to us here today is-- are we listening hard enough?

Many of our ancestors came to this land seeking refuge within the past few generations, yet the attitudes and actions towards indigenous people and the earth by many non-indigenous people here are still colonial. Coal and oil companies still are entitled enough to trespass onto reservations in order to extract the earth's resources for profit. It's as if we boarded the ship, and joined in or watched the man drill a hole under himself without successfully stopping him. His transgressions— the transgressions of this government's legacy, are transferred to those of us who are non-indigenous and dwell on this stolen land.

What can a true Teshuva look like in this situation?

In 2016, many ears turned to Standing Rock reservation to listen to the shofar trying to pressure an oil company from placing their pipeline into the fresh-water source of the reservation. This was a great momentum and turning point, because Standing Rock became a gathering place for indigenous and non-indigenous people from around the world— all praying and fighting the colonial actions and mindset that has been causing climate catastrophe for hundreds of years.

I went to Standing Rock during the week of Sukkot, and became friends with an indigenous elder named Qiwednoque. She asked me many questions about Judaism, and about the Sukkah that we had built with permission from some elders at Standing Rock. I told her that on Sukkot, our prayers are traditionally supposed to determine the rainfall, which is our freshwater, for the upcoming year. I said that this year, us Jews at Standing Rock were shaking our lulavs with the Missouri River's water in mind— rather than praying for rain as we usually do.

I will never forget what Qiwednoque said next! She put her finger in the air and said, “No! You Jews NEED to continue praying for rain! We need you! When it rains here, the oil company stops their construction.” I remember being silent for a moment, taking it in. I told her that I would tell the rest of my group what she said, and felt the comforting weight of this new specific responsibility for the rest of the week. We prayed for rain the way we were traditionally supposed to. The day we left Standing Rock, we couldn't believe that it actually started pouring rain. We let our tears mingle with the rain when we left that prayerful and unifying sacred ground.

So now, besides praying for rain during Sukkot next week, how can we as a community and as individuals plug- in to the efforts happening around the world to slow down climate change? We need all hands on deck to save this ship— how can we add our unique voices and yearnings to not only support life on earth, but to help it thrive? And how can those of us who are non-indigenous make Teshuva for these inherited transgressions against indigenous people and the earth?

Some steps towards teshuva can be to follow the lead of indigenous-led campaigns that work to end racist sports mascots, and that are pushing for an Indigenous People's Day bill. We can tap into coalition- building work, and show up to public events to support and listen to indigenous people locally.

Next Monday October 14th, which is the first day of Sukkot, is still called Columbus Day by the city of Boston. For decades, many Native people around the country have been asking cities to re-name this day Indigenous People's Day- to honor indigenous people around the US, and to stop praising Columbus¹⁰. On Monday, there will be an all-day event honoring Indigenous People's Day at the Isabella Gardner Museum. For those of you who plan to go to synagogue that day, the event goes until 5pm-- and I will be heading there after services! Also, stay tuned for the many events open to the public during November, which is Native American Heritage month.

Some individuals and organizations are working towards the teshuva of creating a Just Transition, which means shifting from an economy whose purpose is the enclosure of materialistic wealth towards an economy of sharing that looks at the whole ecological system's wellbeing. It is the process of creating a culture that moves from being extractive and exploitative to being reciprocal and sustaining, and sees no people or land as being disposable. It means creating tight networks of relationships with many individuals and communities in order

¹⁰ <http://www.indigenouspeoplesdayma.org/statewide-bill/>

to survive. Having a Just Transition framework includes investing in community, localizing food networks and globalizing understandings of people.

How can we heal our earth's heart from historical and present day colonization? How do we unclog our own hearts as we face the reality of our earth's health, and what this means for our own health and the health of our grandchildren? And How can we be part of creating a Just Transition?

I believe that gathering together to sing and pray is a powerful way for humans to unify. I also believe that feeling our feelings, and not ignoring them, is a vital thing for us to do right now. Learning about the truth of genocide and climate catastrophe is hard, and brings up so much pain— yet perhaps this is what Maimonides meant when he said that embarrassment and owning one's mistake, and saying it will not happen again, is a key step towards Teshuva.

Next Thursday evening I am part of organizing a local Sukkah teach-in with the Sunrise Movement and Extinction Rebellion, organizations that will explain the details of climate catastrophe. We will then have some time to tap into our grief about what is happening to our beloved world.

On September 20th, there was a world-wide climate strike led entirely by youth. Thirty other Rabbinical students and I blew our shofars as we participated in the march as adult allies. The first profound speaker was Wampanoag, and we then listened to young people from various

neighborhoods in the Boston area tell their stories and bare their souls to the crowd about the importance of life on earth.

In the words of Xiuhtezcatl (Shoe-tez-caht) Martinez¹¹, the 16 year old founder of the Earth Guardians, who has been speaking publicly about climate change since he was 6 years old, “Revolution is on the horizon, and youth are rising with the oceans to lead the movements that will shape our future”.

One form of Teshuva can be listening to the youth, who will be and are feeling the effects of climate catastrophe, and who are inheriting a world deeply wounded by colonialism and over-extraction. There will be many more youth-led climate strikes and actions that will be intending to disrupt business as usual. That will be dreaming up a world without environmental racism, and creating the world to come.

Amherst is the first town in the state of Massachusetts that has thus far declared a state of climate emergency. We can join the individuals and organizations that are working to pressure their cities and towns around the world to declare a climate emergency, so that Boston can join the momentum in working towards Teshuva and a Just Transition!

In the words of Aurora Levins Morales, “ I believe that we have it in us to rise to this moment, to end the failed experiment of greed, restore the streams of our creative power, and establish a

¹¹ <https://www.earthguardians.org/xiuhtezcatl/>

global culture of reciprocity and generosity as the beating heart of human life on earth. Every struggle is an ecological struggle, and the only path forward is to create fully inclusive and interdependent societies¹².

May we truly rise to this moment, and take part in creating culture that is generous, reciprocal, loving, relational, and nourishing. May we remember that our tradition teaches that whatever the Blessed Holy One created on *earth*, G-d also created in *human beings*-- and whatever the Holy Blessed One created in *human beings*, a parallel was created on the *earth*. May we take teshuva seriously, and be part of guiding our world into a just transition that is interdependent, and striving for wholeness and connection.

Gmar Chatimah tova!

¹² Medicine Stories, page 9