

The Year We Decided To Save The World Yom Kippur 5782
Rabbi Elliott Tepperman September 16, 2021

This past Saturday we observed the 20th anniversary of 9/11. The weather on Shabbat was strikingly reminiscent of the weather 20 years ago. A clear, crisp, beautiful day. Unbidden almost everyone as services, took a moment to share a memory from that day. If you are old enough, I am confident you clearly remember September 11th, 2001.

I was in Philadelphia, farther away from ground zero than many of you. In my last year of rabbinical school, I remember a note being passed to our professor David Teutsch. He read it and shared that the first tower had been hit. He said the most important thing we can do in the face of terror is to not let it interrupt our lives and he continued teaching. At the break, we gathered around a TV and watched the towers fall, and then everyone went home.

I am not going to speak to you today about 9/11, but before going on I want to acknowledge the trauma of that day for many of us. Some in our community did *heroic* things. Some were saved *heroically*. Many experienced loss. Almost all of us experienced fear, a sense that our view of the world would be forever divided between *before and after* this day. Just notice how much you remember and that feeling of divide between *before* and *after*.

Now while it might not be quite as clear think about when you realized that Covid-19 was a pandemic, that it would likewise divide your life into *before and after*.

I remember being asked to cancel the convention for my colleagues in the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, where I was to be elected President. I would ultimately be elected by Zoom.

I remember debating in front of the Montclair Clergy Association with Rabbi Ariann about whether or not we would stop having indoor services. That Saturday we were streaming Shabbat services.

I remember my wife Sarah coming back from the grocery store with bags of dried beans. Afraid she had made a mistake to even be in the store. Committed to getting by on what was in the pantry for a long time.

My memory of the start of the Covid-19 pandemic is not as sharp as 9/11. Maybe yours is a little more or less sharp, but I am pretty sure you can remember *before and after*. And I know that we all acted *heroically* in the face of this emergency.

Now, I want to ask you to remember when you first learned that we were approaching climate disaster? That coral reefs were dying, the ice caps melting, that island nations were sinking into the sea that we were on the precipice of mass extinction. Do you remember the day, when you realized our world was on the brink of catastrophic climate

change? The moment *before* when you took the future of life on earth for granted and *after* realizing we might be among the final generations of humanity? Do you remember?

Me neither.

Ledor vador means from one generation to the next. When we pray these words during the Amidah we are affirming our role in passing the traditions of Judaism from generation to generation. Many of you share with me that one of the most powerful parts of being Jewish is your sense of inheriting a profound tradition from our ancestors. Of being a link between generations. We need to begin asking ourselves how we can be a good link? How we can be good ancestors to future generations?

Because climate change will cause more death and more disruption than Covid.¹ Bloomberg News reported that this year alone, more people died from climate change than all those who died from Covid19.

I am not going to focus on statistics. You are intelligent. You have read the paper. You have seen it unfolding in your lifetime. Though we don't like to face it, my guess is you know in your heart that the world is in danger.

Here are some moments when it sank in for me. When the fires in California destroyed so many places I went camping as a child including my Jewish summer camp. Seeing all the artwork, crafts, and buildings of that camp incinerated, burnt to the ground. Hearing the bitterness and anguish in the voices of so many young people who doubt

¹ CNN Lancet report conservatively estimates that 250,000 deaths in 2019, rising. #
<https://www.greenmatters.com/p/climate-change-death-toll>

Climate Change Linked to 5 Million Deaths a Year, New Study Shows Almost 10% of global deaths can be attributed to abnormally hot or cold temperatures, according to new research linking extreme weather to mortality By [Laura Millan Lombrana](#) July 7, 2021, 6:30 PM EDT#

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-07-07/climate-change-linked-to-5-million-deaths-a-year-new-study-shows>

HELI is a global effort by WHO and UNEP to support action by developing country policymakers on environmental threats to health. Environmental hazards are responsible for an estimated 25% of the total burden of disease worldwide

Since 1988, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has reviewed scientific research, and provided governments with summaries and advice on climate problems. In its most recent report, the IPCC concludes that the average temperature of the earth's surface has risen by 0.6 °C since the late 1800s. It is expected to increase by another 1.4–5.8 °C by the year 2100 – a rapid and profound change. Even if the minimum predicted increase takes place, it will be larger than any century-long trend in the last 10 000 years. The principal reason for the global increase in temperatures is a century and a half of industrialization, with the burning of ever-greater quantities of oil, gasoline, and coal; the cutting of forests; and use of certain farming methods. **Climatic changes already are estimated to cause over 150,000 deaths annually.**

<https://www.who.int/heli/risks/climate/climatechange/en/>

that the world will be preserved for their children. Noticing that more people died from Hurricane Ida in New York and New Jersey than in Louisiana.²

When did it begin to sink in for you? That we were heading toward climate catastrophe. Climate change will be more world-changing than 9/11 but until recently has been moving at an entirely different pace.

If we stop and stare, we can see the clouds to see them moving. If we watch long enough we can see a storm roll in or the sky clear. If we pay attention over years we can *watch* a tree grow. If we are lucky we live long enough to see, a generation born, moving out into the world, having their own children. Over decades we notice ourselves aging.

The last major extinction, when the dinosaurs died was 65 million years ago. The four other mass extinctions were hundreds of millions of years ago. With the exclusion of the extinction that killed the dinosaurs, the current belief is that every *other* mass extinction was caused by climate change.

The most massive extinction³ nicknamed the Great Dying because 95% of marine life died and 70% of land animals died, was caused by global warming, acidification of the oceans, and reductions in oxygen over thousands of years. All of which are now happening at speeds that could outstrip that disaster in decades, not millennia. Many scientists now believe that we are in the midst of the next mass extinction. This one is due to global warming caused by humans primarily through the burning of fossil fuels.

The climate crisis is happening at lightning speed geologically but for much of our lives, we could only barely see it generationally. But have you noticed, these changes are speeding up?

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane_Ida

As of September 7, a total of 109 deaths have been confirmed in relation to Ida, including 91 in the United States and 20 in [Venezuela](#). In the United States, 31 deaths were in Louisiana, 29 in New Jersey, 18 in New York, 5 in Pennsylvania, 2 in Mississippi, 2 in Alabama, 2 in Maryland, 1 in Virginia, and 1 in Connecticut.

³ <https://www.amnh.org/shelf-life/six-extinctions>

Our findings predict that a temperature increase of 5.2 °C above the pre-industrial level at present rates of increase would likely result in mass extinction comparable to that of the major Phanerozoic events, even without other, non-climatic anthropogenic impacts. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-021-25019-2>

But this is not the first time that life on our planet has faced an epic challenge. The worst came a little over 250 million years ago — before dinosaurs walked the earth — in an episode called the Permian-Triassic Mass Extinction, or the Great Dying, when 90% of life in the oceans and 70% of life on land vanished. ... The rate of release of heat-trapping greenhouse gases now is much more radical than it was back then. "Right now our emissions are 10 to 20 times higher than what happened at the end of the Permian mass extinction, which was the largest and biggest mass extinction," he said.

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/great-dying-permian-triassic-extinction-event-warning-humanity/>

This year when we chant the *Unetaneh Tokef* chanting, “Who will live, and who will die,” it seems more reality than metaphor. It reads like newspaper headlines. “Who dies by fire and who by drowning who by hunger and who by thirst...”

It is understandable that many of us can’t remember the day we realized we were heading toward climate disaster. But I am hoping that will change. That at least for our community, in years to come, we will remember this *shmita* year, this year of focus on creation, as a period that separates the time *before* and *after*. *Before* we realized we were facing catastrophe and *after* when we began to creatively work together to limit and God willing avert this disaster.

The climate activist Joanna Macy has lived an extraordinary life. She worked for the CIA. She helped her husband as he started the Peace Corps. She resettled the first Tibetan refugees in India where she met the Dalai Lama. She has fought for climate justice and has taught around the world a spiritually grounded approach to nonviolence and climate change.

Joanna Macy teaches that to face climate change we must first stop suppressing our grief and anger about it. That the other side of our pain caused by this destruction is our love of the world we live in, our love of life. She asks what breaks your heart about the danger the world is facing? What are your fears for the next generation?

To address climate change, Joanna Macy teaches the need to understand three major stories. Business as Usual, The Great Unraveling, and The Great Turning. Most of us, swing back and forth between the first two stories of Business as Usual and The Great Unraveling.⁴

When we are in Business as Usual story we see little we need to change. We accept the assumption that economic growth is essential. We see clearly that our world is filled with those who do better and those who do worse. Winners and losers. Despite our worry for those who are disproportionately suffering, we put the majority of our energy into being on the side of those who do better, the side of the winners.

When living in the middle of this story, (which we all are doing) it’s easy to think of it as just the way things are. Young people are told there is no alternative, “Find your place in this scheme of things.” We encourage each other to focus on our own needs rather than the problems of the world.

For most of us here today, there is much that is attractive about this world. But the airplane trips, the cars, the exponential growth increase in electricity, the cooling agents in our refrigerators and air conditioners and most of all the assumption that the economy, must grow and we have a duty to produce and consume, are all contributing to the Great Unraveling of this world we so value.

⁴ Much of what follows are drawn from Joanna Macy’s books: *Coming Back To Life (Upated Guide to The Work That Reconnects)* and *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We’re in wtihout Going Crazy*

The story of the Great Unraveling draws attention to the disasters that Business as Usual is taking us toward and has already brought. It is an account, backed by evidence, of the collapse of ecological and social systems, the disturbance of climate, the depletion of resources, and the mass extinction of species. But the unraveling is so overwhelming, so hard to grasp, so diffuse that we tend to look away. We suppress our fear. It is slow-moving enough that we allow it to be sidelined, by other pressing issues. It is overwhelming enough that we seek distraction. And there are many, many distractions.

But things have not always been this way. What we call Business as Usual is really just the norms marked since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, not even a few hundred years ago. And the instability arising because of the Great Unraveling also makes room for dramatic *positive changes*.

Joanna Macy calls this story, The Great Turning. If I ever meet Joanna Macy I will have to ask her if she chose this name knowing that the Hebrew word for repentance, *teshuva* means turning. We came together today on Yom Kippur to do *teshuva* prepared to return to our souls. To turn our lives in more wholesome directions. But I am asking us to *also engage* in a collective *teshuva*, a Great Turning of society.

Just as most of us participate in Business as Usual, and have moments of recognizing the Great Unraveling, most of us are already participating in The Great Turning. We participate in The Great Turning whenever we recognize the story of Business as Usual is leading us to catastrophe and whenever we refuse to let the second story of Great Unraveling have the last word.

We are already trying to live into this world in so many ways. For you, it might be when you garden or buy organic food. Or it might be when you get a more energy-efficient car. When you take time to recycle. When you investigate and choose cleaner energy options or install solar panels. When you try to reduce plastics.

These personal choices are important because they are small moments of facing the destruction happening in the world. They are moments of trying to bring *our* actions into alignment with *our* aspirations. They are healing in the way that prayer is healing. They help us to practice stopping like resting on Shabbat. They help us to align our vision for a just world like a Passover seder. They can be life-changing just like fasting and praying on Yom Kippur. But they will not by themselves be enough to begin the kind of turning, the kind of *teshuva* required to avert climate disaster. I say this having dedicated my life to Jewish prayer and ritual because I know that these practices have the power to change our lives and how we live in the world.

But as the climate journalist Bill McKibben writes, “The climate crisis no longer yields to individual action. There is no way to make the math work one Tesla or one vegan dinner at a time...”

In 2020, when most of the world was homebound and shut down, carbon dioxide emissions fell just 7%. The other 93% of emissions are baked into our infrastructure and economy even when no one drives or flies.⁵ To avert climate disaster the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change recommended we cut emissions by this amount every year. We need to cut carbon dioxide emissions by 47% by 2030.⁶ That is enormous!⁷

As my close colleague Rabbi Jennie Rosenn, who founded Dayenu: A Jewish Call to Climate Action puts it:

"We need to not just focus on "what car do I buy?" but "what cars are manufactured"? Not on how do I get to work, but on what public transportation is being built, for what kinds of jobs? Not just "where do I bank?" but on "why are the biggest banks in the world pouring trillions of dollars into fossil fuels and how do we stop them"?

When I spoke to my friend Rev. Fletcher Harper, the Executive Director of GreenFaith. He said it would be a sin of omission to not say clearly, we face a climate emergency because the fossil fuel industry has put its own profits above the well-being of people and the planet.

Yes, industrial agriculture and massive deforestation are also to blame. But the fossil fuel industry has spent massive amounts to deceive the public, lobby, and block change. They have systematically targeted vulnerable communities that *already* bear the brunt of coal, oil, and gas operations. And Governments have outright supported the destruction or played both sides of the fence. Banks are still bankrolling the problem. And all these enormous institutions, with their massive wealth and power, dwarf other causes of the climate crisis.

From one generation to the next, *ledor vador*. What will future generations inherit from us?

When we sing, "*Adonai, Adonai, el rachum vechanun...*" we declare that God extends kindness to the thousandth generation. It is a powerful thought, that our actions, could impact the universe in a way that extends kindness for a thousand generations.

We don't sing the very next line from Exodus, which declares our sins will impact our children's children's children. It's too rough a truth when we are praying for forgiveness. But in response to this kind of climate change, it feels to me like it is trying to be gentle. Euphemistic even. The choices made in the next five years will determine the fate of generations for thousands of years. *Ledor vador*, what will future generations say about

⁵ This is language and statistics shared with my Rabbi Jennie Rosenn, [Dayenu](#).

⁶ To limit the earth's temperature to rise to 1.5 degrees celsius over pre-industrial norms we need to decrease emission by 6% a year, every year this decade.

⁷ [Climate reporter Emily Atkin reminds us](#): "The most harmful lie being spread about climate change today is not that it is fake. It's that nothing you can do can help save the world."

our efforts to turn away from constant production, and turn toward sustainability? To turn from constant depletion of the earth's resources and turn toward replenishment?

Our generation has a heroic task in front of us. It will require creativity at an existential level.

The major climate treaties are simply not enough. They are only a reflection of what was politically possible when they were signed.

As Jews, as a community, we have an obligation, to creatively envision and morally proclaim criteria that line up with the weight of our inherited tradition. Criteria⁸ that assure we can pass down *blessings* and not *curses* to future generations.

Criteria like: An immediate end to new fossil fuel projects and deforestation, divestment from fossil fuel industries; a generous welcome for climate refugees;⁹ funds *for* developing countries *from* the nations like ours responsible for the lion's share of historic emissions; access to renewable energy for absolutely every person, especially the 700 million people living without electricity; a massive commitment to rebuild the infrastructure of human civilization.

Yes a heroic effort is required of us. It will happen one step at a time.

The first step is *teshuva*, to create a turning in the story of our lives a turning that marks the moment before we knew that a heroic effort would be required and after we began that heroic work necessary for a story that could proudly be told *ledor vador* for generations to come.

May we, and all of humanity and all of the earth be sealed in the book of life for a good year.

⁸ This vision is also based on my email conversation with Rev. Fletcher Harper of [GreenFaith](#).

⁹ In an older version of this sermon I tried to explore the question of which oil pipeline to support, which type or how much fracking of natural gas should be allowed. I was inspired by one of the speakers for the [People Vs. Fossil Fuels Action](#) who said simply: "All pipelines leak, pollute and poison."

And we could add:

All fracking introduces chemicals into the earth and water stream that will remain for generations.

All the fuel we remove from the earth will increase carbon dioxide levels, increase warming.

All of it delays the reckoning required to move towards 100% clean energy as soon as possible.

Which is why movements like the Stop Line 3 campaign in Minnesota are so powerful. This is a movement led by Indigenous women fighting for clean water, to protect access to wild rice and ancestral foodways, and to push back the crush of an oil over water economic model. Line 3 has spilled 3 million gallons of oil in the US since 1973, and the company building it--Enbridge, "seeks to build a new pipeline corridor through untouched wetlands and the treaty territory of Anishinaabe peoples, through the Mississippi River headwaters to the shore of Lake Superior."