Nature’s Neilah

Rabbi Josh Weisman’s Neilah Sermon, Kavana Cooperative, 2019/5780

We begin with some hard material, but I promise we will not stay there!

I want to share with you some images from High Holiday traditions past:

In shuls of old Eastern Europe there was a designated literate woman who would lead the women’s section through the service that many of them could not follow in writing. She would tell them what was going on and lead them in prayers.

At a certain point in the High Holiday service, she would turn to the women and say “Sisters, now we weep!”

Another image, this one from my father: On Yom Kippur my dad vividly remembers going to the traditional shul and seeing his grandfather and the other men from the Old Country whip themselves with switches made from branches.

Now, I’m not sharing these because I propose bringing back these customs! But there’s something of the urgency of these gestures that I think may be coming back even though no one wishes it.

We’re now at Neilah, which is the point in the High Holidays when all that urgency reaches its peak. In the traditional imagery, the gates of Heaven that have been open to our repentant prayers are closing and will clang shut at the end of Yom Kippur. So this is the moment in the High Holidays for last-ditch petitions; it’s the moment when we desperately hurl our words and our very souls at the gates, asking to be forgiven before it’s too late.
But it’s been a long time since this was fully real for most of us. Most people today probably see the Gates of Heaven as metaphor, if that. We may give ourselves over to an extent to the imagery of the High Holidays and use them as a time for introspection and self-improvement – and our prayers may indeed quicken at Neilah – but not because we have to, just because we think it’s good for us, or we’re moved by the imagery. Now, I totally encourage that, and I do it myself. But the whole need for literal urgency, the notion that we need to repent, or else, is out. That’s because it rested on the idea that every action was seen and recorded by an all-knowing, all-powerful God, and that there would be life or death consequences – eternal consequences – for those actions, and all of that just isn’t real for most of us anymore. The supernatural is out, and with it, all of this. And it’s been like that quite a while now.

Then, something surprising and, frankly, terrifying happened. It became real again. It turns out that our every action is recorded, and recorded very precisely, and there are life or death consequences – eternal consequences – for those actions. Only this time, it’s not a supernatural Being recording and issuing consequences, it’s nature itself.¹

So all the urgency, fear and trembling, that our forebears experienced on the High Holidays would actually not be irrational or anachronistic any longer, not only on the High Holidays, but at any time. As Greta Thunberg put it, “I want you to act as if your house is on fire, because it is.”²

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¹ There is a certain similarity between this and a notion of nature as witness expressed in Torah: “Lend an ear, O Heaven, and I will speak. Listen, Earth, to the words of my mouth.” Deuteronomy 32:1

But I’m not here to recommend exactly the same fear and trembling expressed in those stories I started with. First, you may be feeling them anyway. Secondly, there are some differences between High Holidays and the global climate crisis.

First, the consequences are different ... only the difference is that now they’re worse. I’m not trying to freak you out, because you’ve read all this before, but I briefly want to summarize the situation:

Jonathan Franzen wrote in the New Yorker recently that “the scientific evidence verges on irrefutable. If you’re younger than sixty, you have a good chance of witnessing the radical destabilization of life on earth—massive crop failures, apocalyptic fires, imploding economies, epic flooding, hundreds of millions of refugees.”

And because Yom Kippur is a time when we are contemplating death anyways, it’s only fair to mention that the most conservative estimates are that global warming will lead to the deaths of at least 5 million people between 2030 and 2050. Presumably there will be many times more deaths after that if we don’t change course.

Secondly, the timeline for these consequences is different than the High Holidays. Fortunately, these consequences won’t all be decided one way or another when this Yom Kippur ends in an hour and a bit. But there is a timeline, and the consequences will be decided much sooner than any of us would like – in approximately 10 years and 2 and a half months, according to the internationally accepted timeline. That’s

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3 Jonathan Franzen, The New Yorker, September 8, 2019
how long we have to cut emissions by 45%, the first step on the way to the next deadline: becoming carbon neutral by 2050.

So, we have until 2030.

But politically speaking, many say the deadline is ten years earlier, that is, one year and change from now, when the plans need to be in place in the UN and in Washington DC to meet the 2030 goals. It's all riding on the US Presidential election and a UN conference that takes place later that same month.

So, the timeline isn’t an hour and a bit from now with the end of Yom Kippur, it’s a year and a bit from now, specifically one year and one month. Call it nature’s Neilah.

In the words of Rabbi Tarfon, “the time is short, the work is great [...] and the Master is pressing.” So with all that said, the only question is, what can we do about it.

I start with the knowledge that we all already want to do something about this. Over 90% of the Kavana community said we are already concerned or very concerned about the climate crisis. And I assume that to the extent that we are not yet doing everything we need to do, it is either because we feel discouraged, or don’t know what to do, or both. So tonight I want to offer some resources for confronting despair and helping us take action.

The High Holidays and Judaism do provide an amazing amount of guidance for how to confront such a crisis – how to overcome despair, and how to effect change. And this is not accidental, because the High Holidays have always been a laboratory

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5 "As countries usually scope out their plans over five and 10 year timeframes, if the 45% carbon cut target by 2030 is to be met then the plans really need to be on the table by the end of 2020. COP26 takes place in late 2020, as does the US Presidential election.” Climate Change: 12 years to save the planet? Make that 18 months. Matt McGrath, BBC News, July 24, 2019. https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-48964736

6 Pirkei Avot 2:15
precisely for a situation like ours: how to effect rapid transformation in the face of serious consequences and even death. That’s what they’re for!

I want to focus on just some of these aspects.

**Collective problem, collective solution**

First, the High Holiday liturgy – like most of Jewish liturgy – is in the collective. “Ashamnu” – we have sinned – “Al cheit shechatanu” – for the sin that we have committed – “Selach lanu” – forgive us. So too the task ahead of us must be collective. Because although every car trip we individually take, every flight we take, every industrial animal product we buy is in fact recorded in precise measure by nature, each one on its own doesn’t incur any perceptible consequences. It’s only the collective effect of our actions that incurs consequences.

So, the solutions too must be collective. We have to change how we operate at all levels, from city to globe. Individual consumption change won’t do the trick, though we should do it anyways. The solutions must be economic, political, and cultural.

And the means that what is required is collective action. We have ten years and change – or really a year an a month – to create movements… that will create policies and laws… that will change the way we do business, travel, grow food, and manage resources and waste.

So everything I say from here on out applies primarily at the collective. If you want to apply it to yourself as an individual, you can, but the focus is on the collective.

As soon it’s stated that way, we all realize the enormity of the task. And I too can feel the heaviness, the impulse to jump straight to “it can’t be done.” But it must be done. And fortunately, we already have the resources necessary to do it right here in this community, in the High Holidays, in our tradition, and in ourselves! Not only that, but
this could be the most important – and therefore the most meaningful and exciting – task of any generation in human history: to secure the future of humanity and life on earth as we know it! If the High Holidays have occasioned a search for greater meaning in your life, I can pretty much guarantee you that – in addition to whatever else you’ve hit on – if you spend a meaningful amount of your time, energy, talents, and money on securing the future of humanity and life on earth as we know it, at the end you will feel yours was a life well lived.

Kavana

Let’s start with Kavana. One of the fundamental resources needed for this mission is already in our community’s DNA. Consider this: emissions are climbing – heading in an upward direction. But we need to change society enough for emissions to start declining – to head in a downward direction very, very soon.

*Kavana* is intention, but it’s a particular kind of intention, specifically the intention to orient in a certain direction…. For example, the people of Kavana *intended* to create a community out of the scattered, disconnected isolation of contemporary American life, to *move in the direction of community*, and it happened! Kavana created something out of nothing.

In fact, people intend to head in new directions all the time and it happens. Human will is extraordinary. We each have examples in our lives of intending our efforts in a certain direction. In Olympia, our representatives, with our support, intended to move from rising emissions to decreased emissions, and *in just one year* succeeded in passing laws that will get the State of Washington 80% of the way to our share of the US’s commitments under the Paris accords, with plans for the remaining 20% in the works for next year.
Teshuvah

And this notion of kavana is closely related to a concept native to the High Holidays. Kavana is to have direction, Teshuvah is the ability to change directions. And the High Holidays not only demand that we make teshuvah, they insist that we can. It’s implicit throughout the High Holidays, but it’s perhaps most clearly stated in the Unetaneh Tokef prayer, where we affirm that God has faith that we can do it. In a heartbreaking passage, the prayer says that all God wants is our turning, our making teshuvah, so that we may live; until the last day God waits for us, and if we shuv, turn, God immediately accepts us! God does not wish for our death – the end of life on earth as we know it, including the literal deaths of millions of people and countless species – but rather that we turn, even at the last minute.

Tikkun haYetzer

OK, so the tradition has faith that we can make teshuvah, but how? We have to deal with the yetzer hara, the evil inclination, which is all the human impulses that got us into this climate mess in the first place.

But, the yetzer hara isn’t all bad. Without it, the tradition says, we would not have the drive to build a house, to procreate, to make a living, and so on. So dealing with the yetzer hara requires finesse. Here I am drawing on the work of one of my teachers, Rabbi David Jaffe, and his understanding of the Mussar tradition.7

To an extent, we just need to conquer the yetzer through self-control. Here that means limiting emissions and consumption. This is necessary, but it’s not the whole story.

The real goal is *tikkun hayetzer*, repairing or refining the *yetzer*. This means harnessing our drives for positive ends, in our context, for *tikkun olam*, literally, repair of our broken world. It means harnessing the drives we have for accomplishment, excitement, recognition – and in some cases, yes, even for good food and profit – for the sake of sustainability. If you have a drive for building teams, creating or improving organizations, building better machines, writing better computer programs, persuading people to try new things, making better business models, creating great food, or doing politics, all of those things and more are needed, right now, for building the multi-faceted movement for sustainability that we need and changing the way we do just about everything.

It’s all possible. We can make *teshuvah*. Avraham was about to end the future when he *turned* 180 degrees with the knife in the air at the last possible moment, a second before it was too late.

**Earnestness**

These resources – *kavana* and *teshuvah*– are actually species of a more general phenomenon that is so central to the High Holidays and our tradition in general that it doesn’t even have a name in Judaism. I’ll call it earnestness. High Holidays – and Judaism in general – *are nothing if not earnest*.

What do I mean by earnest? Let me define it in negative terms. It is not the current state of things, which many have described as a sort of collective careening towards a cliff as if in a daze. That dazed careening is nowhere to be found in the *Machzor*. Nowhere in the *Machzor* will you find it saying “that’s the way things work,” or “well, everybody does it.”

Now let me define earnest by positive example: Sunrise Movement, Eleventh Hour, the Global Climate Strike of a few weeks ago. All of these movements are led by
youth. Youth are famously earnest. We owe it to them to follow their example and rediscover our own earnestness.

I’m not saying we shouldn’t be strategic. I love a good strategy! But if the conventional wisdom in our spheres says that there is no strategy to get to where we need to get, then our task is to change the conventional wisdom about what’s possible and what passes for good strategy. Judaism says that a higher moral authority determines what is possible, not us, and certainly not convention. And that higher moral authority is very earnest and exacting, and it tells us that we can turn and redirect ourselves and render possible a future that is life-giving.

At our Climate Forum, our State Senator Reuven Carlyle urged us to each use our own “personal moral authority” to create change in our own spheres. That struck me. This means that there are as many ways to act on this as there are spheres in which we live our lives – school, work, business, profession, government. Using your personal moral authority is earnestness in action.

And let’s use our collective moral authority as a Jewish community, and as the Jewish community more broadly, and as people of faith in general, to earnestly encourage a change in direction. We are already beginning to do that with Kavana’s endorsement of the Seattle for a Green New Deal campaign, which aims to eliminate Seattle’s carbon emissions by 2030. Now that we’ve endorsed it, the next step is to earnestly and strategically put our shoulders to the wheel to move it forward.

**Yom Kippur as rehearsal for death**

Which brings us back to this moment, just before Yom Kippur ends. Yom Kippur sharpens our focus on these questions of our direction and *teshuvah*, makes us suddenly very earnest about them. It does so through an elaborate ritual that essentially constitutes a rehearsal for death. That’s why we don’t eat, don’t drink, don’t have sex; that’s why many wear white, like we will in death. It makes a sort of
intuitive sense that death would have something to do with all these things, but Rabbi Alan Lew makes the connection explicit. Yom Kippur is a rehearsal for death, he says, because the approach of death has a way of forcing us to answer what is most important. As he puts it, “As we approach death, we approach wisdom.”8 The rabbis who designed the rituals of Yom Kippur, he says, “wanted to bring us to the point of existential crisis. They wanted to bring us to the point of asking the crucial questions, What is my life all about?”9 He continues, “This is what Yom Kippur asks us today. What is the core of our life? Are we living by it? Are we moving toward it? We shouldn’t wait until the moment of our death to seek the answers. At the moment of death, there may be nothing we can do about it but feel regret. But if we seek the answers now, we can act in the coming year to bring ourselves closer to our core.”10

As with Yom Kippur and the eventual death of each person, so too with the threat of the death of life as we know it on this earth. The only difference is that while each of us as individuals are sure to die some day, life as we know it on this earth is not guaranteed to die, not yet. This hope should only make the urgency of these few years left – the few years before the gates clang shut and the decision is finalized – that much greater, not less.

Forgiveness

Lastly, Yom Kippur gives us one additional, crucial resource, and that resource, believe it or not, is forgiveness.

How can we speak of forgiveness in the midst of this crisis, when the consequences and our collective inaction are so stark? How can we speak of forgiveness when we

8 Alan Lew. This Is Real And You Are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation. 225.
9 ibid. 228
10 ibid. 230
know that, once certain limits are passed, the earth – which only responds according to very inflexible laws of nature – is not capable of forgiveness? How can we speak of forgiveness when Greta Thunberg reminded us, just a few weeks ago “You’re failing us, but the young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you. And if you choose to fail us, I say, we will never forgive you.” And she’s right – we don’t look kindly on past generations that failed major moral tests, and future generations will be even less kind with us if we fail this test. These are the warnings. Our children and future generations will not forgive us if we fail to change course; the earth will not be able forgive us. But in the meantime, while we still have a chance to earn their pardon, we need to speak of forgiveness from another source, because we need forgiveness in order to act.

Rabbi Alan Lew gets to the heart of the matter. We need the promise of forgiveness to be able to change. Without believing that we can be forgiven, we rarely even examine our behavior, much less admit fault, much less make change. Without the hope of forgiveness, we are too afraid of the possibility that we are “bad people,” to even ask questions about our behavior – we turn away from the whole thing in pre-emptive shame; in Rabbi Lew’s words, we “bury our misdeeds – [...] hide from our reality, [...] [...] deny that we’ve done anything wrong.” We need to believe that we will be forgiven to have any chance of making change.

This moment in the High Holidays actually promises that we will be forgiven. The tradition holds that, as long as we speak the vidui and make confession, Yom Kippur itself atones for us. As Neilah ends, not only are the gates closed, but we are also forgiven. The slate is wiped clean and we can go forth into the New Year able to act, without the crushing burden of shame and guilt. We can then actually make good on all the teshuvah we promised.

11 Greta Thunberg, at UN Climate Summit, 9/23/19
12 Lew, 127
Despair is an obstacle to action, but I think that guilt and the fear of not being forgiven are the biggest obstacles to change. I honestly believe that that’s the reason we as a society isn’t fully facing this crisis – we’re afraid of what it would mean about us to admit that we’ve done this. That’s why Yom Kippur promises forgiveness – that’s what it’s for. Nature and future generations won’t forgive us if we miss the deadline. But in the meantime, on a different level, God forgives us and we can forgive ourselves – every Yom Kippur, and in every moment – at least when we own up to it. And that forgiveness is precisely what we need to continue to make an earnest effort to change.

So as we rush the gates of heaven with our last fervent, earnest prayers tonight, sneaking in one more confession before these gates close this year, let us also feel the promise of Yom Kippur – that we are forgiven. And let that forgiveness allow us to move forward with all earnestness and haste to create the changes that will truly seal us and future generations in the Book of Life.

LeShanah Tovah Tikateivu veTeichateimu.