

## How Many Trees in the Garden?

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5783

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I confess that climate change was not a priority for me until my young adult sons intervened. I know that I'm not the only Boomer or Gen Xer to have such a conversation with their Millennial or Gen Z children or grandchildren!

Four youthful climate activists wrote last year, "For children and young people, climate change is the single greatest threat to our futures. We are the ones who will have to clean up the mess you adults have made, and we are the ones who are more likely to suffer now. Children are more vulnerable than adults to the dangerous weather events, diseases and other harms caused by climate change."<sup>i</sup>

Even if we were not concerned about the future, climate change already assaults us. United Nations scientists warn that extreme weather phenomena such as floods, fires, droughts, and storms are increasing in intensity and frequency, have exacerbated global hunger and malnutrition through crop destruction, and have enabled wider spread of malaria and dengue.<sup>ii</sup> Over the past decade, weather-related events displaced an estimated 23.1 million people on average **each year**, with the majority of refugees coming from countries that are most vulnerable and least ready to adapt to the impacts of climate change.<sup>iii</sup>

The cause is clear: "Fossil fuels—coal, oil and gas—are by far the largest contributor to global climate change, accounting for over 75 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions and nearly 90 per cent of all carbon dioxide emissions. As greenhouse gas emissions blanket the earth, they trap the sun's heat. This leads to global warming and climate change. The world is now warming faster than at any point in recorded history."<sup>iv</sup>

Shamefully, we Americans are terrible offenders. The United States is home to less than five percent of global population but is responsible for more than a quarter of the world's carbon emissions,<sup>v</sup> leaving more defenseless members of the human family at greatest risk.

We will be held accountable for our abuse of the environment.

*Hayom harat ha-olam*, our prayer book proclaims: Today is the birthday of the world! But our sages teach that Rosh Hashanah does not mark the first day of creation, when God said, "Let there be light." Instead, Rosh Hashanah is the anniversary of the sixth day, when the first humans were created. On that same day, the rabbis taught, Adam and Eve were commanded not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Only an hour later, they sinned, eating that fruit. And an hour after that, they were judged.<sup>vi</sup> Rosh Hashanah, therefore, comes to be

known as *Yom HaDin*, the Day of Judgment. Today, we stand before God, who has every reason to judge the generations living today for the very same sin that Adam and Eve committed in the Garden. Like our mythical first ancestors, humanity has, for more than a century, been taking too much fruit from the garden that God has provided.

Torah describes two special trees in the Garden of Eden: The Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. However, Rabbi Tamar Elad-Appelbaum teaches a midrash which claims that there was only one tree in the Garden of Eden. Its **fruit** bore the knowledge of good and evil, but the tree as a whole was the Tree of Life. “At times, it was called the Tree of Life; at others, the Tree of Knowledge, after its fruit.”<sup>vii</sup> The problem, Rabbi Elad-Applebaum suggests, is that, instead of seeing the whole, the magnificence of the Tree of Life, taking a bit here and there, Adam and Eve identified what looked best to them, the fruit, and they greedily consumed it.<sup>viii</sup>

Since the industrial revolution, humanity has looked at our planet, the Tree of Life that is home to us all, not as a Tree of Life but as the source of the fruit, resources we consume. We have devoured that fruit greedily, at first unaware of the consequences and then denying them. We have chosen short-term economic prosperity over our children’s future. Time and again, we have elected the simplest method of powering our economy, burning yesterday’s fuels with abandon, instead of transitioning to sustainable alternatives. Thus, have we damaged our Tree of Life, our planet, creating a climate crisis that threatens all humanity.

Rabbi Elad-Applebaum urges us to consider that the most important word God says to Adam and Eve is *lo*, “no:” “but as for the tree of knowledge of good and evil, you must **not** eat of it.”<sup>ix</sup> “No” is a boundary! We can take only so much of that tempting fruit from the Tree of Life if we want to keep it alive and life-giving.<sup>x</sup>

A midrash teaches that the ram, caught in the thicket by its horns, the one that Abraham found to offer in place of his son, had been there since the days of creation, tangled up in the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.<sup>xi</sup> The Jewish people would have died after one generation had that ram not been there to take Isaac’s place. Our salvation in the epic past is tied up with negotiating those twin trees, those two trees in one.

In our own day, in a different way than in Abraham’s, time is running out. Let the ram and its horns, its *shofarot*, teach us that, for our children, as for Isaac, salvation is possible, even at the last minute. Like Abraham, we must resist the temptation to sacrifice our future on the altar of our desire to enjoy the earth’s fruit

without limit. The time to put down the proverbial butcher's knife is now. Let the shofar stir us to urgency: We must work to end our reliance on fossil fuels. No action could more effectively avert God's harsh judgment and the judgment of our own children and grandchildren. No action would be a better birthday present to this warming world.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> [Opinion | After Greta Thunberg's Strike, Adults Are Still Failing Children on Climate Change - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#)..

<sup>ii</sup> [Central Conference of American Rabbis Resolution on the Climate Crisis - Central Conference of American Rabbis \(ccarnet.org\)](#). The facts cited are footnoted in the Resolution.

<sup>iii</sup> [Causes and Effects of Climate Change | United Nations](#). Emphasis mine.

<sup>iv</sup> [Causes and Effects of Climate Change | United Nations](#).

<sup>v</sup> [U.S. Leads in Greenhouse Gas Reductions, but Some States Are Falling Behind | Article | EESI](#).

<sup>vi</sup> Pesikta d'Rav Kahana 23:1.

<sup>vii</sup> *Sefer Ma'aseh Adonai*, Genesis 15.

<sup>viii</sup> Rabbi Tamar Elad-Applebaum, High Holiday Sermon Seminar, Rabbinic Torah Seminar, Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem, July 13, 2022.

<sup>ix</sup> Genesis 2:17. Emphasis mine.

<sup>xx</sup> Elad-Applebaum.

<sup>xi</sup> *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* 30, taught by Rabbi Elad-Applebaum. See also *Pirkei Avot* 5.6.