

THE CLIMATE CRISIS IS HERE. WHAT WE DO NOW MATTERS.

*The temperatures are rising, the Amazon is burning, storm surges are devastating our cities.
It matters how we respond to this crisis. Even while we can't do everything,
there is no moral or scientific calculation that justifies doing nothing.
We must be part of a culture shift, a shift in consciousness.
We must build islands of spiritual resistance. דבר זה תלוי בנו-- the matter depends on us.*

Rosh Hashanah I, 5780

Let me start with what should be plainly obvious: it did not have to be this way.

In the 1980s, NASA scientists modeled out just how quickly the earth was warming. Armed with these models, they warned Congress of the looming crisis, and pleaded for steps to be taken to shift course and avert disaster. At the same time, Exxon, the largest oil company in the world, had scientists build similar models. They came to the same conclusion as their colleagues at NASA, but their findings led the company to do two things: First, it raised the decks of its offshore platforms, "[quietly safeguarding](#) billion-dollar infrastructure projects from rising sea levels, warming temperatures and increasing storm severity" all indicated by the climate science. And second, in the words of Bill McKibben in his new book, *Falter*, "It began spending... money to build an architecture of deceit and denial and disinformation that for the next thirty years kept us locked in a pointless debate about whether global warming was real—a question that, remember, both sides knew the answer to from the get-go... That turned out to be the most consequential lie in human history."

And here we are, nearly 40 years later. Hurricane Dorian ravaged the Bahamas a few weeks ago, nearly flattening the Abaco Islands. Dozens of people were killed. Those who survived lost everything.

In Brazil this summer, more than 80,000 fires burned across the Amazon-- which produces 20% of our planet's oxygen. Even as scientists warn that the future of human civilization depends on the integrity of the Amazon, Brazil's Foreign Minister declares, "There is no climate change catastrophe!" Climate denial is now, apparently, one of America's chief exports.

We are running out of food. Extreme weather events are already contributing to a dramatic decline of essential nutrients in the world's staple foods. Climate scientists [predict](#) that by 2050, we'll likely see protein, zinc, iron and vitamin deficiencies, which will threaten the health of much of the human population all around the world.

In the next 30 years, there may be up to [one billion](#) climate refugees— people who are forced from their homes because of catastrophic extreme weather conditions, food shortages and the wars and violence that they will inevitably provoke. In the first half of this year alone, there were [seven million](#) climate refugees.

We are finally connecting the dots between the growing intensity of the hurricanes each summer and the warming of our oceans. New Yorkers are preparing for the possibility of massive storm surges flooding lower Manhattan, as foreshadowed by Hurricane Sandy. And barring dramatic intervention,

New Orleans, Houston, Miami and other American cities are at risk of frequent, massive flooding, as scientists predict the possibility of six feet of sea-level rise by century's end.

Our own precious California is burning, and we hear dire warnings of future and even longer enduring droughts. Predictions indicate that our state will see both [floods and critical water shortages](#) in the coming years.

We've all now [heard](#) that that we have less than ten years to take strong actions—including making huge strides to transition off fossil fuels—to avert the most catastrophic effects of climate change. If we hit two degrees Celsius warming, we'll increase the likelihood of dramatically and irreversibly changing the quality of life on this planet.

We have spent the past several decades careening toward catastrophe, desecrating our most precious and sacred inheritance and laying the foundation for a world of suffering for our children and theirs.

עולם היום—היום הרת עולם—Today, Rosh Hashanah, is the birthday of the world.

We have to talk about the earth today. To celebrate, to stand in judgment, and to determine what we—each of us—are going to do about it.

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All of existence was a dark, chaotic void, until God created order. Light, earth, sea, rich and varied vegetation and diverse species of plants, trees and animals, spread from the highest mountaintops to the depths of the seas. Waterfalls and sand dunes, majestic seaside cliffs and sacred valleys. Dense jungles and forests, filled with all kinds of life. And then human beings—the pinnacle of creation, made in God's own image, and placed right in the heart of it all—גֶּן־עֵדֶן, the Garden of Eden. Told that they are to not just to enjoy nature, but לְעַבְדָּהּ וּלְשָׁמְרָהּ -- to care for it, to serve it, to protect it.

Of course, it took only ten generations for human beings to destroy all that beauty. Their violence and cruelty was more than God could bear.

The LORD saw great human wickedness on earth, how they thought only of evil, all the time. And the LORD regretted making human beings, and was deeply distressed. The LORD said, "I will blot out from the earth the people I created—people and animals, creeping things, and birds of the sky; for I regret that I made them." (Genesis 6:5-7)

It was a great extinction: *And all flesh that stirred on earth perished—birds, cattle, beasts, and all the things that swarmed upon the earth, and all humankind.* (Genesis 7:21)

But when the flood subsided, and Noah and his family emerged from the ark, God had a new regret: destroying the world. The LORD said, *"Never again will I doom the earth... Never again will I destroy every living being, as I have done."* (Genesis 8:21)

And in that fateful moment, the earth was entrusted not to an impulsive and punitive God, but instead to an insatiable, rapacious and impetuous human community.

God will never again destroy the earth. But if we're not careful, we very well may.

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When Dr. King prepared to launch the Poor People's Campaign in 1968, he spoke of three major evils plaguing our country—the evil of racism, the evil of poverty, and the evil of war. “Somehow these three evils are tied together,” he said. “Wouldn't it be absurd to be talking about integrated schools without being concerned about the survival of a world in which to be integrated?”¹

When Bishop Barber relaunched Dr. King's movement, last year, with many of us present in solidarity—he added to Dr. King's three evils the threat of ecological devastation. Why? Because it is impossible today to address racism, poverty and the false moral narrative that upholds them, without addressing the greatest, most widespread and most existential of the challenges we face: environmental devastation.

And the inverse is also true: it's willfully ignorant to talk about environmental devastation without recognizing the disproportionate toll it takes on the poor and on people of color. People who are socially and economically vulnerable to begin with already suffer far greater consequences from extreme weather events.

We need to talk about the water crisis in Flint, and now in Newark, and other cities, and how children of color are far more likely to suffer from [lead poisoning](#). About how, because of our nation's history of racism and economic inequality, Black communities are much more likely than white communities to live next to coal plants, landfills, and hazardous waste sites—resulting in a greater likelihood of asthma, heart attacks, lung disease and premature death.

Oil drilling and refining is happening literally next door to residential homes right here in LA County in [Wilmington](#) and Carson. Freight movement to and from the ports is doing real damage to the Black and Latino communities. Sidle up to Sean Hecht—professor of environmental policy at UCLA-- over Shabbos lunch—he'll tell you about the devastating effects of lead poisoning on the families that live in these neighborhoods. Talk to my sister, Dev Brous, a frontline community organizer, and she'll tell you about how environmental racism affects food access in the black and brown communities she works with on Skid Row.

Dr. King didn't directly speak of the environmental crisis—the science emerged in the decades that followed his death—but he did plant the seed for the climate justice movement when he [preached](#), again and again words we all know well: “All life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. We are made to live together because of the interrelated structure of reality.”

Today, [Raoni Metuktire](#), chief of the indigenous Brazilian Kayapó people, offers the same message: “We all breathe this one air, we all drink the same water. We live on this one planet. We need to protect the Earth.”

¹ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., America's Chief Moral Dilemma, 1967

If only we listened.

In Vayikra Rabbah (4:6), R. Shimon bar Yohai brings a teaching you may have heard:

It's like a group of travelers on a ship at sea, when one inexplicably takes out a drill and begins boring a hole beneath his seat. The other travelers are stunned: 'What do you think you're doing?!' He replies: 'I'm just drilling under my own seat—what difference does it make to you?' They respond: 'Don't you get it? When the water comes in it will flood the ship for all of us!'

You're not just drowning yourself; you're drowning me too. Your toxic waste pollutes my water and sickens my soil. The oil refinery that produces the gasoline powering your car shortens the lives of Latino residents of Wilmington. Freight emissions, from the transport of overseas goods to Amazon delivery, cause asthma in residents of Boyle Heights. It's all connected. We're all connected!

In Honduras, farmers who have lived off the land for generations now face crisis, as the land has turned arid and fallow from declining rainfall and rising temperatures. The cruel irony, of course, is that the nations and communities hardest hit by climate change are those that have contributed least to global carbon emissions. Meanwhile, the US is both the wealthiest nation and the single greatest overall contributor of harmful emissions. And is now hellbent on closing its doors to refugees and asylum seekers.

For better and for worse, we do not stand separate and apart from the rest of humanity.

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I very rarely find myself wishing we could time travel back to the 80s. The hair was big, the metal was heavy, and the phones were all attached to walls. But in this one way, I do wish we could go back: In the late 70s and 80s, humankind stood at a crossroads. Armed with the scientific evidence, we could have made a different choice. But corporate greed and craven politicians made the choice for us, and with contemptuous lies sold our future for unprecedented financial gain.

What now? Elon Musk envisions colonizing Mars. The rest of us simply don't have the luxury of escaping this planet, so rife with pain and so full of beauty.

Torah calls us both to imagine and fight to manifest the ideal. God created the earth for human beings to enjoy, protect and defend.

But over the course of time, we forgot what it meant to hold this sacred inheritance, and instead, we burned, polluted and destroyed.

The only choice now is to radically recalibrate. We recognize that *l'hathila*, from the outset, we would/ could/ should have developed a deeper awareness of the preciousness and precariousness of the earth. We should have seen trees as the life sustaining miracles they are. We should have protected our biodiversity and invested in renewable energies and been responsible stewards of all we had been entrusted.

We should have recognized the interconnectedness between all people and all beings, which Dr. King, Raoni Meuktire and the Rabbis in Vayikra Rabbah all tried to awaken us to.

But big profit overwhelmed the voices of the prophets, ancient and contemporary. And the rest of us wittingly and unwittingly followed the script set before us: we consumed, we burned, we wasted.

No longer.

Climate adaptation—the work to reduce social and economic vulnerability and to increase resilience to a range of possible futures—is now being actively pursued around the world. And at the same time, it would be madness to give up on mitigation strategies, like the fight to reduce damaging emissions and slow the rise in temperature. As Professor Hecht puts it: “We need to help all people and communities become more resilient, even as we work like hell to minimize the changes that people need to be resilient to.” Anything short of that, and we may as well all pull out our own drills and bore holes beneath our seats. Why not? The ship is sinking anyway.

Sadly, we are not leaving our children the world we could have, *l’hathila*. But when we don’t achieve the ideal, we don’t give up and give in. We shift to a *b’deavad* reality. We do the very best we can, given our limited options.

The Rabbis in the Talmud (Brakhot 32a) tell a story:

Moses and God were wrapped in intimate embrace up on Mt. Sinai for 40 days and 40 nights, when the people despaired of Moses’s return and built themselves a new god, a calf made of gold. They sang and danced around it singing, “This is your god, o Israel, that lifted you up out of Egypt...” (Ex 32:10)

It’s a terrible betrayal. Moses is devastated. Physically flattened by the shock of it all.

But God is burning with anger. God wants revenge. וְעַתָּה הִנֵּיחָה לִי --*Now leave me alone!* God shouts to Moses. *Go away so I can destroy these people, and then make for you a new nation.*

That should be the end of the conversation, right?

But Moses—despondent, dismayed—has an epiphany: If I have to leave before can destroy the people, then maybe I’m not as powerless as I feel.

Moses says to himself: דבר זה תלוי בי –*It must be that this matter depends on me.*

And immediately, Moses recovers his strength, stands up, and grabs the Holy One, Rabbi Abbahu teaches, as a person might grab a friend by his shirt. He says: Master of the Universe, I will not leave until You forgive these people. You love them—that’s why you brought them out of Egypt. You must not harm them!

It is an act of incredible, almost unspeakable hutzpah.

And, unbelievable as it may be, God relents.

Moses says to himself: דבר זה תלוי בי –*It must be that this matter depends on me.*

I am asking us today to do something counter-instinctual. I'm asking us to consider: what would we do if we really believed that it mattered? If you and I believed we could, through our actions, materially limit the destruction we're barreling toward today. What then would we do?

We would do every little thing—and every big thing—we possibly could.

You know who's got real clarity on this? Our kids.

Four million of them skipped school last week to tell us that they're not going to stand for the reality we've left for them. They're furious, and they're right. "If you were smarter, we'd be in school" said the sign of one teen at the Climate Strike in LA last week, standing beside a friend whose sign read, "The earth is hotter than my imaginary boyfriend."

One 9-year-old boy took the mic and said, "Sometimes I wish I didn't know so much. Sometimes I wish I could sit inside a giant mansion and eat Oreos all day and not think about all the palm oil it took to make them." But he does know what he knows, and that has changed him. And it ought to change us too.

The crisis is here. Our kids are telling us that #thisisZeroHour to act on climate change. The least we can do is join their call.

Some holdouts in my kids' Day Schools argue that the science is inconclusive and any action for climate justice is just partisan politics. But the science is *indisputable*. And we are obligated, as citizens of the world, not to indulge such fantasies and equivocations, but instead do everything we can to protect the earth.

We need policies that will end the burning of fossil fuels for energy. The corporations and industries responsible for the climate destroying emissions need to be held accountable—and help pay for some of the damage they've caused. We need to make bold and robust change, while giving displaced workers and poor folks—who can't afford electric and solar—opportunities to work in the new green economy.

We need to support candidates for office—local and national—who understand this crisis. I can't believe I even need to say this, but it is a *moral imperative* that we do whatever we can to ensure a responsible, forward-thinking, science-believing government. To achieve that, we'll need to prioritize massive voter engagement efforts in the coming year, and fight with all we've got against voter suppression, a cynical and immoral strategy to maintain power against the will of the majority by marginalizing black and brown voices in our democracy.

Yes, we need deep, systemic, structural change. We have to do whatever we can to elect government officials who take climate science as seriously as our 9-year-olds.

But we need not only policy change. We have to be a part of a culture shift, a shift in consciousness. Here at IKAR, we're working to build new spiritual and social norms. Islands of spiritual resistance—where we live in accordance with our own values—which reverberate out and hopefully inspire broader change.

I'm asking you this year to join me in IKAR's Eco Challenge. Our team—led by Brooke Wirtschafter and Ingrid Steinberg and made up of rabbis, activists, organizers and professors—has created a series of

actions for us to take on this year. The goal is to shift one habit at a time. Month by month, we're asking our community to challenge ourselves with behavior changes in areas that have the [greatest potential impact](#) on the environment.

I am asking us to believe that it just might matter what we eat, what we plant, what we throw away. I know we all want to be on the right side of history; we're going to make it easy for you to know how to do that. A few examples:

1. Today there is a world-wide Indigenous-led [call](#) to boycott beef, in light of massive Amazon deforestation, 80% of which is directly tied to ranchers in the beef industry. I know none of you want to hear your vegan-ish rabbi tell you to wean yourselves off meat, but that's exactly what I'm doing. We are challenging our community—those who are medically able—to boycott beef and ideally eat a plant-based diet for one month. And who knows? You might enjoy it, in which case you can join David and me on line at Monty's for an Impossible Burger any time.
2. We'll cut out single use plastics. Levi and I tried this for a week last month—it was not easy. But by logging our failures, we realized how much of our use can be attributed to convenience rather than real need, and we've already made changes in our home and routines. For a month, we'll ask you to bring not only reusable water bottles wherever you go, but even Tupperware for leftovers when you go out to dinner, like Lisa Friedman does.
3. Studies show that food waste is at record highs, and accounts for significant amounts of harmful emissions. For a month, we'll buy what we need. We'll put on our plates only what we'll eat. We'll practice restraint.

Does some of this sound nutty? Excessive? *These are no longer times that can sustain the old norms.* If individual behavior changes like these are adopted at scale, they could “reduce about a third of the projected cumulative emissions from [2020 to 2050.](#)”

Voting, planting, cutting back, skipping meat, carpooling—these things won't save the planet. But they will remind us that we are not powerless. They will allow us to develop new social norms, which can spark collective action. When Beth Edelstein brings her reusable bamboo utensils to shul each week, it inspires me to carry around my own. The first time someone brought a cloth bag to a supermarket, people probably stared. But that culture shift paved the way for plastic bag bans in LA and statewide. And behavioral scientists make a compelling [argument](#) that “Each individual's choices, especially when amplified through social influence, help create a social environment ripe for political change.”

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I know our aspirations are high on the High Holy Days. That's why we put spiritual pledge cards in your hands now—when you feel like leading with your best selves. But as the year progresses, when you're tired and despairing and you feel like none of this will make a bit of difference anyway, I beg you to remember that real people are already suffering from this ecological disaster, a human tragedy of our own making.

I hope you'll [remember](#) the tens of thousands of residents of Paradise, CA, who all tried to evacuate on one road at the same moment, as they were overwhelmed by the massive wildfire tearing toward them. Remember the teachers crowded kids into their cars to try to escape from school. There was bumper to bumper traffic as the fire, consuming trees and homes beside the road, overcame the cars. Remember

the story of one little boy, stuck in a stifling car packed with students, surrounded by flames, who asked the teacher for permission to pray. In a small voice, he asked God for help. They drove for two hours through flames, smoke and flying, burning debris. That boy made it out safely that day, but 86 other people did not.

We're not talking in abstraction. People are dying. The cost of inaction is simply too high.

In a Midrash written nearly 1000 years before the Industrial Revolution, the Rabbis teach: "God led Adam around all the trees of the Garden of Eden. And God said to Adam: 'Look at My works—see how magnificent and wonderful they are! Know this: everything I created, I created for you. But be mindful that you not spoil and destroy My world, for if you spoil it-- אין מי שיתקן אחריך-- there will be no one after you to repair it.'" (Midrash Kohelet Rabbah 7:13)

There is no one after us to repair it.

We must do what those oil execs, presidents and senators failed to do back in the 80s: give a damn about the human and ecological toll of this disaster. Affirm that we are all tied together in a single garment of destiny. That climate refugees—paying the price for our addiction to fossil fuel—are already at our border. That we sink or swim together. That while the poor will be the first and the hardest hit, none of us—or our children—will be sheltered from the torrent of punishment being visited upon the earth.

"I am a scientist," writes Kate Marvel, "so I believe in miracles. *I live on one.*"

What we need above all, she argues, is courage. Let us find the courage to treat our planet like the miracle it is.

It matters how we respond to this crisis. It matters that we vote and who we vote for. It matters how and what we eat. It matters how we shop and what we buy. Even while we can't do everything, there is no scientific or moral calculation that justifies doing nothing. דבר זה תלוי בנו-- the matter depends on us.

Shanah tovah.

I hold immense gratitude to my friends Mayor Eric Garcetti, a [global climate leader](#), Sean Hecht, professor of environmental law and policy at UCLA, & Scott Schulman, a journalist who has witnessed first-hand the devastating effects of climate change in the hardest hit regions, and to my sister Devorah Brous, a front-line community activist and sustainability thought leader who has been working on this issue for decades in Israel and the US. They helped me identify the real questions, pointed me to the most compelling research and encouraged me to think deeply about what must be done.