

Comeuppance Above, Comeuppance Below.
Rabbi David Z. Vaisberg, Yom Kippur Sermon 5782
Temple B'nai Abraham, Livingston, NJ

There was in recent years a pious gentleman who in return for his piety always felt that God would have his back. He felt enormously blessed in life.

This man happened to live on a snowy mountain in a region known for its earthquakes. One day there came a warning that an earthquake was imminent. Adding to the danger, a blizzard was on its way. The state called for everyone to evacuate the area. The gentleman heard these warnings, and thought to himself, "I have no need to evacuate, I'm safe right here. God will protect me." Well, the snow came and got deeper and deeper. At three feet, looking out his window, a neighbor came by on her snowmobile and said, "this is getting really bad. Hop on and come with me to safety." "No thank you, I know that God is going to look after me." Then, the snow came up past the first story of his house, and looking out the window, he noticed a rescue chopper searching for anyone who might have remained. They noticed him in the window and dropped down a ladder, saying "Sir, come on up. This is the last rescue attempt; we want to help." "No thank you, God's going to take care of me." Then, the earthquake came, there was an avalanche, and he didn't make it. Upon reaching heaven, he meets God and asks, "What happened? I served you with every ounce of my being my whole life. How could you let me die?" God answers, "I sent you a warning, a neighbor, and a rescue team. What more could I do?"

The signs were there, and the signs are here today, too.

A friend the other day said to me that everything happening now just feels so biblical. In the Torah, we read about plagues and disasters as consequences of greed and corruption. And with everything going on in the world, we can't help but wonder if there is something similar taking place. In the story of Noah, God sends the flood to push the reset button for humanity, as human beings had become too corrupt. The earth was filled with people doing whatever was right for them rather than being a little more kind and just. It was a world of individual entitlement and no mutual responsibility. And so God sent the flood, a natural disaster of the greatest magnitude, and it wiped out nearly all life on the planet. Of course, after this massive force of destruction, we did receive reassurance that God would never wipe out life again in the form of a rainbow, but sometimes, I wonder.

It so happens that we Jews are not the only people with a large scale disaster in our narrative. The ancient Sumerians, living at the other end of the fertile crescent in what is now modern-day Iraq, told of a great flood, which also happened to be from God (actually gods), angry at humanity. The ancient Greeks, on the other hand, would not have suffered a flood at the hands of the gods, as Greece is mountainous. Instead, they spoke of total destruction by fire, something far more common for that landscape.

And now, along with everything else, came the devastating and yet unsurprising news from the UN on Climate Change: human activity has raised the planet temperature by 1.1 degrees Celsius (just

about 2 degrees Fahrenheit), a rapid and significant enough change to explain many of the changes in weather patterns such as the melting glaciers and the more intensely violent storms. But we didn't need this report to know it, we had Hurricane Ida, the 200-year or 500-year or 1000-year storm that may now be coming back annually. We're no longer in doubt or disagreement. Climate change is here.

Two weeks ago, some of you may have seen the map in the New York Times that showed that parts of the United States are becoming much drier and at greater risk of fire, and that other parts are becoming wetter, with storms and flooding. The country was pretty much split down the middle, with few areas left untouched. It's ancient Greece, Mesopotamia, and Israel all over again.

The Un'taneh Tokef prayer feels all too real this year, again. In the limits of our mortality, we literally ask, *mi yi'hiyeh, mi yamut*— who will live, and who will die, *mi ba'esh, mi bamayim*, who by fire, who by water?

And, if we— Jews and humanity on the whole—fail to take significant action, if we fail to turn from following what may feel right and quite possibly be easier to following the counsel of serious experts; if we fail to take the steps needed to live in better harmony with this gift of a planet and this blessing of life, if we fail to grab that helicopter ladder, things will get significantly worse.

There's a section in the V'ahavta that we pray silently in services. I imagine that it's rare that we consider the implications of this text. This time, let's pay attention:

If you carefully heed my commandments, the ones I command you today, to love Adonai your God and worship God with all your mind and body, then I shall grant your land's rain in its season, in the autumn and in the spring, that you might gather your grain, wine, and oil. I shall grant grass in your fields for your cattle, that you might eat your fill. Take care lest your mind tempt you to rebel by worshipping other gods and by bowing down to them. For then the fire and fury of Adonai will turn against you. Adonai will stop the flow of the sky. There will be no rain. The earth will not grant its produce. You will quickly perish from the good land that Adonai grants you.¹

And the text continues, telling us to teach our children and theirs, so that our days and their days “may be as numerous as the days that the sky overlooks the earth.”

In the middle of this text of love called the *V'ahavta* (literally meaning you shall love), God essentially says, “if you show Me your love through your performing the mitzvot, all will be well. And if not, well, things won't be so well. And in discussing mitzvot here, perhaps the text isn't just

¹ Deut 11:13-17

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hinting at sacrifices and prayer, laws of kashrut and laws for holidays; there are numerous environmental mitzvot as well: mitzvot about living well with the land, not wasting, being conscious of consumption, and respecting and serving as stewards for all of God's creation.

Looking out for life has been our job from the time of Adam, when we were given this earth. The Midrash warns us, "you are receiving a beautiful gift: this planet with everything on it. Look after it well, as you will only get one."

For those of us who grew up in Reform synagogues, this text may be particularly unfamiliar, as the early Reform Jews cut it from the *siddur*—it presented a belief counter to their modern theology. They didn't believe that God would directly intervene in the world, and give us a one-for-one consequence for our actions.

Contemporary environmentalists, however, have looked at this text in a brand new light. Theologian Judith Plaskow writes,

In a world whose survival depends partly on the human capacity to value creation and care for it wisely, it is possible to interpret the passage more naturalistically. If we are able to develop an ecological consciousness, if we treat the earth with respect, if we are aware that we are embedded in a great web of life of which God is the ultimate source and sustainer, then the earth will bear fruit for us and the rain will come in its season. But if we believe we can trample on or transcend the constraints of nature, if we forget the sacredness of all things and make idols of our own wealth and power, "the earth will not grant its produce," and both we and our world may perish.²

Perhaps there is an even simpler message: actions have consequences. And inaction has consequences, too.

The Israeli Reform movement and the Reconstructionist movement offer a different approach to the V'ahavta. Instead of a stick, they use a carrot. The Reconstructionists offer an alternative Deuteronomic text, telling us that if we heed the mitzvot, all we will know is blessing, in our towns, our fields, in our coming and goings. And the Israeli siddur *Avodah she'balev* uses a similar text, telling us to choose life over death, blessing over curse, and good over evil, so that we and our descendants might live.

What is the legacy we leave to our children and theirs? What is the legacy we will leave beyond them, to all of humanity? Is it time to speak up, for all kinds of injustice, or to remain silent,

² Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman. *My People's Prayer Book Vol 1*. Turner Publishing Company. Kindle Edition.

focused on our own needs? Is it time to finally look at our patterns of behavior and make changes where necessary, or as soon as COVID lets up, return to how we lived before? Are we ready to make *t'shuvah*— to acknowledge, out loud, what's not working, and commit, with every ounce of our being, to a sustainable future, to being God's partners in upholding creation, to being good ancestors to future generations?

The time for deciding has come.

I often listen to a podcast called *How to Save a Planet*, and in one episode they discussed whether or not one person alone can make a difference. The hosts discussed the most significant actions we can individually take, which include five things: fewer children (a problem in Judaism), driving less or driving electric, flying less or not at all, becoming more energy efficient, and cutting out meat (even Montreal-smoked) and switching to a plant-based diet. This would be the best that each of us could do. And yet, one of us doing all these things would solve almost nothing, as we're each a statistically insignificant part of the problem. However, it's not about what each of us can do. It's about what all of us can do, together. It's about how we use the gifts we each bring to the table, to support and complement each other. It's about how we use our influence—our social capital, our connections, and our resources, to bring about change at a much larger scale.

Though many of us are suffering, each in many different ways and legitimately so, we remain among the most powerful and influential people in the world, in this community. All of us in this room, physically and digitally, together, we have the ability and we have the capacity to change the world.

We have so much for which to be grateful, the ultimate being this gift of life, a divine blessing we did nothing to deserve, and yet, here we are, blessed by it each and every day. Rabbi Yitzhak Hutner, an early 20th century rabbi, taught that each blessing we receive in this undeserving manner carries with it a spiritual requirement to reciprocate and return these blessings to the One who bestowed them upon us. Each one of us, rather than being a vessel for these gifts, keeping them for our own, is expected to be a conduit, spreading blessing wherever we can.

Making a change might start simply, by starting a conversation and speaking up. Dr. Anthony Leiserowitz, a senior research scientist and director of the Yale program on Climate Change Communication, teaches about a spiral of silence. Essentially, when we don't speak of something, we'll continue to not speak of it. It will become taboo. But when we do speak of something, it becomes common language. Ignore climate change and we'll never do anything, but if we name it, over and over again, after our friends get over being sick of us speaking like this all the time, we'll begin to think about it at every moment that we come to a relevant crossroad. Like so many teachings from Torah, the more we revisit the issue, the more it will come through in our behavior.

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And with more of us so aware, with more of us actively concerned, we will be moved to be louder and louder, until the pressure is enough to bring change at the highest levels.

And speaking of teachings from Torah, if you don't know where to start, start with Torah. Torah is the original chopper rescue team, offering the wisdom we need to get through this. Wisdom on how to live in harmony with the earth, wisdom imploring us to trust the counsel of experts who know what they're talking about. When in doubt, the rabbis say, come and learn. If you do it properly, action will most certainly follow.

God once told us this ought never happen again—the destruction, the flood, and of course, the behavior that preceded it. God gave us the warnings, through the wisdom of science and the sage teachings of our tradition. Let us not ask what happened when it's too late. Let us take heed of the signs all arounds us— the warnings, the pathways out, the changes that need to take place—those unusual people building arks in their various forms. Let us not only have to teach the V'ahavta to our children and theirs, but also be able to tell them of that time we human beings came together to overcome the greatest threat in humanity's history as they look towards a hopeful future. It is time for us to channel our blessings. It is time for us to choose life together.

Gamar Chatimah Tovah, may we be sealed for a good life.