

Impasse.

The sea stands roiling in front of the Hebrews. They cannot go forward. The angry army's at their backs. They cannot retreat. Trapped between a natural boundary and a human barricade, they are out of options. They have lost.

Moses, their great leader, sees the people's terror. He seeks to quell their fears. The human and natural worlds conspiring against him, he turns to the supernatural. "Don't be afraid," he says. "Stand firm and watch God do the work of salvation for you today. Take a good look at the Egyptians today, for you're never going to see them again" (Exodus 14:13¹). Moses, who stood on holy ground and stared into the flames of the burning bush. Moses, who knew God's sacred name. God's reply to Moses? "Why are you asking me? You hold the solution to your problem. Solve it."

Last night, I shared my fears about climate change. The systems we've created tear up the earth for profit. Our vehicles fill the skies with carbon dioxide. The seas brim with plastic, acid, and sonic pollution. The soil is eroding and growing less productive. The sea level is rising and the permafrost is melting. Our inability to curb our appetites, to live within limits, has led to the sixth great extinction of species – happening now. The impact on human life will range from horrible to catastrophic. It's already begun.

In the face of a rapidly deteriorating world, I told you last night that feel powerless and helpless. I feel powerless to change my way of living, and helpless because no change I make will make a difference. I feel like Abraham, sleepwalking to Moriah, his son's doom approaching. I feel like one of the Hebrews, trapped and defeated.

All of this is scary. And confusing. And depressing. It makes me want to withdraw from the world. Sometimes, I want to give up.

But these feelings, though real, accomplish nothing. And they are not the Jewish way. Our way is to hope, and to work towards a better day.

At the seashore long ago, at that desperate moment, God taught Moses – and us all – a profound lesson: we're never out of options. When all seems lost, take a breath, look up, find a way. There are always steps to take. Some of them are grand and some are subtle. Some are political and some are soulful. All of them are real.

Today I will present seven changes each one of us can take on behalf of a healthy future: seven ideas for the seven days of creation we've just read. I've solicited input from experts in the field: scientists, strategists, scholars, activists, theologians.

¹ Translation adapted from The Message Translation, BibleGateway.com

These are their practices, their wisdom, shared in the hopes that it will inspire you to move forward in the face of daunting odds.

1. EXPERIENCE NATURE

Most of us lead lives profoundly cut off from nature. We get our food from the store, not the earth. We don't know the sources of our water. We don't pay attention to the moon's phases. I don't even own an umbrella! When we never encounter the wild, we fear it rather than respect it. When we stop appreciating the wonder of nature, we feel free to treat it as a commodity.

Casey Yurow, director of Eden Village West, a Jewish camp with an environmental focus in Northern California, advises: "Take time just to be in nature. To find a 'sit spot' and literally just sit somewhere outside, even for 5 minutes, and to observe, listen, and notice. Notice the birdsong, the breeze, the clouds. This is one of the best ways to grow our cords of connection with the more-than-human-world, which naturally over time translates into appreciation, empathy, and eventually love. This also leads to wiser, more sustained, and more potent action."

Temple Emanuel's wonderful hiking club is a great way to get out into the desert, and to meet good people. There are monthly hikes in a range of difficulties. Sue and Steve Ochs lead the club – Sue and Steve, would you please stand up? They'll be available in the lobby after services, if you'd like to meet them.

When we are removed from the cycles and realities of nature, our lives are diminished. We become disconnected from our core selves. This year, make an effort to reconnect.

2. SOLAR

Although going "full solar" isn't a viable option for many of us, activist Korey Hjelmeir suggests that "there are plenty of smaller options now that only require a small panel. From landscape lighting, small device battery banks, rechargeable batteries to generators there is a solar option out there for everyone." Maybe you'll help me organize workshops on this at Temple Emanuel.

On Wednesday, October 3 (during evening religious school), Temple Emanuel hosts a panel discussion on solar power in Arizona. Let's educate ourselves.

3. REDUCING OUR CONSUMPTION OF MEAT, ESPECIALLY BEEF^{i ii iii iv v}

The United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that livestock production generates 18% of the world's greenhouse gases². That's more than all forms of transportation combined. Forest and jungle are cleared for profitable cattle, even though meat production is highly inefficient. It takes vastly more grain, energy, land, and water to produce beef than chicken. Chicken requires far resources more than vegetables.

Livestock effluent pollutes streams and rivers, and promotes the spread of antibiotic resistant strains of bacteria. When huge amounts of grain are used to feed animals, cereal costs go up and poor people eat less.

This doesn't mean we need to eliminate meat. Mark Bittman³, former food writer for the New York Times, suggests moving meat to the side of the plate, rather than the center. Try a salad with chicken, rather than a full breast and a side of salad. Try a vegetable stir fry with beef, rather than a steak with a side of broccoli. Some people go meat free on Shabbat. Some commit to vegetarian breakfasts. These changes diminish animal suffering, change an industry, and help the environment.

4. PERSONAL DECISION MAKING

Many of us struggle with the small, individual choices we make throughout the day. What does one more disposable cup matter? One more plastic bag? One steak? Professor Bruno Sarda, from ASU's Global Institute of Sustainability, told me that our individual choices truly do matter. They add up to become social change. "One example," Professor Sarda writes, "is the move away from animal-based dairy and meat products. It started small, but now the plant-based alternatives are flourishing, in large part because some early adopters were willing to send that demand signal to the food industry that it wanted something better, healthier and more ethical."

And when we're talking about personal plastic waste, he adds, "everything counts." Decisions to reduce plastic waste, "made at scale, absolutely make a difference."

Next time you're wondering whether to toss out that empty aluminum can or carry it until you can recycle it, make the better choice – even if it's less convenient. Next time you can avoid using a plastic fork or container, do so. Better yet, prepare yourself with

² <https://woods.stanford.edu/news-events/news/meats-environmental-impact>;
<http://www.fao.org/ag/AGInfo/programmes/en/lead/lead.html>

³ Markbittman.com

re-usables, so that you don't need the disposables. Each piece of plastic not consumed and discarded is a gift to our children and the generations to come. And it's a gift to yourself.

5. ACTIVISM

Some of us have more influence than others. Citizen-activist Sarah King made a pledge: contact one elected official involved with managing natural resources each day – Federal, State, and local. She calls or she emails to tell them that she's concerned about air quality, water availability, protection of public lands, or any other environmental issues. Our electoral system privileges immediate returns over long-range planning, but long-range planning is exactly what's needed now. Representative decision makers need to hear from us and, as King writes, "it's our job to hold them accountable." She says it takes her no more than two minutes a day. And, of course, we are just a few weeks away from an election. Where do the candidates stand on the environment? Express your values in your vote.

6. TZEDAKAH

The organizations that defend the natural world are going up against entire industries, global corporations, and governments. They are like David against Goliath, and they need our financial backing to conduct research, protect habitat, and bring lawsuits. Unetaneh Tokef, the most haunting prayer, tells us that tshuvah, tfilah u'tzedakah temper the harshness of the decree. That is precisely what each victory on behalf of the environment does.

If you're concerned about Environmental Justice, donate to the people and organizations that advocate for species, indigenous people, wilderness, and the future. If you are seriously concerned, donate a lot.

7. SHABBAT

The Reverend Michael Dowd, who spoke at Temple Emanuel this past spring, recommends we "honor 'the sacred principle of enoughness' – by joyfully using LESS: less energy, less stuff, less stimulation." We try to teach our children the difference between "need" and "want," but we hardly acknowledge it ourselves, what with our supersized meals, hyper-sweetened drinks and closets full of clothes. We've been trained buy more than we need "just in case" or because "it's a great deal." We've been trained not to borrow from one another. We haven't been trained to make do or do

without, or to wait, or to repair. This compulsion to consume is an illness with a name: “influenza”.

But Judaism has the antidote, and it’s our people’s greatest technology: Shabbat. Shabbat teaches the principle of “enough.” Try making Shabbat the day you tone it down, scale it down, experiment with less – less meat, less sugar, less TV, less internet, less driving, less spending, less bright light. Experiment with more: more friendship, more spontaneity, more reading, more sleep, more fresh air and nature. It would be my pleasure to meet with you to discuss how to create a meaningful Shabbat practice. It doesn’t have to be all or nothing. It just has to be “enough.”

Will any of these steps change the trajectory of life on earth? Individually, they certainly will not. Collectively, they might budge the needle. If their impact won’t be great, why do them?

We do them for the good of the world, and also for the good of our own souls. We do them to remind ourselves of what matters to us: Convenience or durability? Emptiness or depth? ASU’s Professor Sarda puts it this way: “At the end of the day, we don’t only choose to make ethical choices because of the implications for others. We do it because it aligns with our morality and values. It makes us feel good about our choices and the life we chose to lead, setting a positive example for others.” The choices we make, the ways we live, are the ultimate expression of our values. If your values and your actions are misaligned, then let me humbly suggest that bringing them into alignment should be a focus of your prayer and *tshuvah* these High Holy Days.

If we do not live the changes we wish to see in the world, our values are just so much hot air. And we have enough of that already.

Humanity stands, like the Israelites of the Exodus, before a rising sea. It is the metaphoric rising sea of climate change, and it is the literal rising sea caused by melting polar ice. Humanity stands, like the Israelites of the Exodus, with an army at our backs: human complacency, human industry, and the army of lobbyists and corporations determined to keep us enslaved to systems that are killing us.

The ancient rabbis understood that the moment of the Exodus was a moment for all time. It describes the human being in dilemma. Where to turn? What to do?

In the midrash, the rabbis’ fanciful and ideological re-imagining of the Torah, they spin two alternative stories, designed, I believe, to teach us about our options when it appears we have none.

Back at the seashore, Moses stands frozen in time. Where to turn? What to do? Noting his indecision, the midrash imagines that a single man emerges of the crowd. They call him Nachshon. Unwilling to die on Egyptian swords, Nachshon walks into the brine. He takes one step after another, as the water rises to his calf, his knee, his waist. Undeterred and full of faith, Nachshon continues until the water fills his mouth. Then God, in response, parts the seas and makes a path forward.

Through this story, the rabbis teach us that individual action is powerful, and that everyone can lead. When we make small steps towards a better future, we are like Nachshon. We inspire others, and we change both history and ourselves.

Back at the seashore, Moses stands, frozen in time. Where to turn? What to do? Noting his indecision, *another* midrash imagines that the Israelite women approach the shore. Unwilling to go back to the way things were, they link arms with each other and walk as one into the sea. God, in response, parts the seas and makes a path forward.

Through this story, the rabbis teach us that collective action is undeniable. Group participation amplifies impact. When we join together to pursue change, we are like the women. We change both the future and our communities.

And when we employ both these techniques? When we make sound personal choices AND work in conjunction with one another to share solutions, amplify our voices, call out wrongdoers, demand systemic change? Then all things are possible.

And when we run out of steam? When we give up hope? We come together to sing and to pray, to lift our spirits and reconnect with our values. As our siddur reminds us:

Standing on the parted shores of history,
We still believe what we were taught
Before ever we stood at Sinai's foot;
That wherever we go, it is eternally Egypt
That there is a better place, a promised land;
That the winding way to that promise passes through the wilderness.
That there is no way to get from here to there
Except by joining hands, marching together.⁴

⁴ Elyse Goldstein, adapted from "At The Shores of the Sea" in *Mishkan Tfilah* p. 157

Seven Days/Seven Ideas
Rabbi Dean Shapiro
Rosh Hashanah, 5779

ⁱ <https://woods.stanford.edu/news-events/news/meats-environmental-impact>

ⁱⁱ <http://science.time.com/2013/12/16/the-triple-whopper-environmental-impact-of-global-meat-production/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/meat-and-environment/>

^{iv} <http://theconversation.com/five-ways-the-meat-on-your-plate-is-killing-the-planet-76128>

^v <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/jul/21/giving-up-beef-reduce-carbon-footprint-more-than-cars>