

Rosh Hashanah 5787 - Day 2

"A World on Fire"

By Rabbi Gabriel Botnick

This summer, I had the privilege once again of enjoying a few weeks on Sicily with my family. But different from the past four summers was that it was actually cooler there than it was back here in the UK, at least for part of the holiday. And while we were fortunate that our place in Sicily had air conditioning, we weren't so fortunately upon our return to London. Rather, we were stuck dealing with the heat, as I was unable to find a portable AC unit available to buy anywhere, either here in London, or even online. It was so hot in our house throughout August, often 35-38° in the evening, that I spent most of my time at home shirtless and sweaty, or trying to get tickets for the lido.

We all have stories about how we powered through the heat. I know some of you who are blessed to have air con opened your homes to family and friends. I know many of us spent a fair amount of time outdoors. But for many people, there simply was no reprieve — in fact, there have been more than 30,000 excess deaths across Europe this summer, and that toll is still rising. Here in England alone, more than 2,800 people died just from the first two heatwaves, in May and June. And due to the numerous wildfires around the UK, more than 60,000 acres of land were destroyed, including at least 37 homes.

And so, it was one night last month, after reading the news about these wildfires, that I found myself wondering: what if we had acted sooner on the warnings of climate change? Might we have been able to avoid the overwhelming occurrences of climate events we've been experiencing in recent years? I was particularly curious, because around twenty years ago, I had the privilege of going to a screening of the documentary film "An Inconvenient Truth," based on the book by former US Vice-President Al Gore, who happened to be holding a Q&A following the film. Both that film, and the book it was based on, reinforced my keen interest in environmental concerns that I had first begun exploring a decade earlier, when I led a campaign to introduce recycling at my high school. In fact, prior to deciding to become a rabbi, I had given rather serious consideration to becoming a green builder, as part of the nascent industry that was about to boom in California.

And so, I turned to the internet to see what I could learn. First, it became quite clear that had we acted in 2005, we wouldn't be fighting today against two decades of additional cumulative emissions that have made the remaining task far more challenging and urgent. For instance, the heatwaves we experience the summer: the World Weather Attribution, a serious scientific consortium, found that these heatwaves were 200 times more likely than they would have been 20 years ago. And compared to heatwaves 50 years ago, this summer's temperatures were 3.5° higher. And while it's difficult to pin down exact numbers, it is clear that with less extreme heat, there would have been fewer droughts,

fewer and less-intense wildfires, and less-severe flooding, that is exacerbated by rain falling on parched land.

One of the most frustrating aspects of this, from my perspective, is how futile it now feels to worry about recycling or composting, saving water, or switching to energy efficient home goods, particularly because the domestic impact on climate change pales in comparison to the far larger role played by industrial, agricultural, and infrastructural entities. For instance: 27% of global emissions come from power generation, namely coal- and gas-fuelled power plants. 22% come from the agricultural and forestry sectors, such as the rearing of livestock, the growing of feed crops, and the deforestation making room for these activities. 15% come from transport, including freight vehicles and air travel, but also passenger vehicles, which make up nearly 50% of those emissions. Finally, about 11% of global emissions come from industrial manufacturing, like cement, steel, and chemical plants.

The impact each of these sectors makes on global emissions could have been greatly reduced, not by the choices of individual citizens, but by the policies and regulations of governments. In fact, in 2005, 37 industrialized nations, plus the EU, entered into what was meant to be the binding Kyoto Protocol, the world's first legally binding climate treaty. While its goals were relatively modest, they were a valid and important first step towards making real change. Sadly, the treaty failed to have the impact it deserved, due to the US refusing to ratify it, for what they saw (somewhat validly) as an unfair bias in favour of the rapidly developing industries in both China and India. Just two years later, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the IPCC, declared with 90% certainty that global warming was linked to human activity, and that developed nations would need to cut their emissions by 25-40% by the year 2020, and 80-90% by 2050. There was another failed attempt at reaching a consensus in 2012, and then there was the non-binding and self-policed Paris Agreement in 2015.

But here we are now, 20 years after receiving concrete and urgent warnings, and still heading for nearly double the "safe" target. But that doesn't mean it's too late to act. And this isn't only about the world our children and grandchildren stand to inherit. Scientists tell us that if the world's governments were simply to deliver on what they've already promised just two years ago: tripling renewables, doubling efficiency, and cutting methane, then the pace of warming itself would be cut in half within fifteen years. By 2040. Within the lifetime of many of us sitting in this room today.

But why should we — of all people — worry about this issue, out of all the issues our people are currently facing? Because our tradition does not allow us to ignore a matter, especially when we have the ability to do something. As it says in Deuteronomy (22:3): *Lo tukhal l'hit'aleim* — you are not permitted to be indifferent.

Actually, the Torah tells us a lot about our obligations vis-à-vis the environment. In the story of creation (Gen 2:15), we read: *Vayikach Adonai Elohim et-ha'adam, vayanicheihu v'gan-eiden, l'ovdah ul'shomrah* — God took Adam, and placed him in that delicate garden,

both to work and protect it. That is, according to our tradition, humanity is not only permitted to work the land and use its resources to our benefit, but we are even commanded to do so. However, at the same time, we are equally commanded to look after the land, and the precious gifts it contains.

Later in the Torah, we learn the laws of waging battle, and laying siege to an enclosed town. We're told that, while we can cut down some trees in order to make battle rams, catapults, and the like, we are not permitted to cut down any fruit-bearing trees. Most rabbis are in agreement that this is because — should we be successful in our fight — we will take over that town, and will rely on those trees for our own sustenance. The Torah tells us we must not destroy this precious resource — *bal tashchit*. And from this lesson, the rabbis instruct us that we must never needlessly destroy anything God has given us, especially nature.

In fact, there's a beautiful Midrash (Ber Rab 39:1) that perfectly illustrates our obligation to take action: in Rabbi Yitzhaq's explanation for how Abraham came to be the originator of monotheism, he provides the following parable: imagine a man walking from town to town who happens to pass a large manor house all aglow with candles. Seeing this, the man declares surely there must be a person in charge of this impressive and beautiful estate. Just then, the owner of the house leans out of an upper story window and calls out: I am the owner of this home. According to the traditional read of this midrash, this is Abraham looking at the world around him, and reasoning that there must be someone in charge of it all. This is what led him to create the belief system that has been entrusted to each of us.

But there's another way to read this midrash. Because the language it employs is somewhat vague, the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks points out that the Hebrew for the house all aglow with candles — *birah doleket* — could also be understood as the house being on fire. So when the owner calls out from the window, he isn't just announcing his presence, he's actually calling for assistance to put out the flames. That is, we — as humanity — are called upon to assist God in preventing God's domicile from going to ruins.

Of course, Abraham was just one man. What could he truly have done on his own to quench those hungry flames of destruction? He might not have been able to save the entire house, but he might have been able to save a wing, or at least the owner.

Similarly, while climate change needs to be addressed by those who wield the most power to make a difference, that doesn't mean we should refrain from taking action. As we're taught in Pirkei Avot — Ethics of Our Ancestors (2:16): *Lo alekha ham'lakhah ligmor* — you are not required to complete the task, *v'lo atah ben chorin libateil mimenah* — but neither are you free to desist from trying. And so we must continue our own, personal efforts to make a difference, and we should continue our collective efforts as a community to do what we can.

Here at Belsize, we're already recognised by EcoJudaism as an EcoSynagogue. But we're only on the Bronze level, not silver, nor gold. Certainly we can do more: whether it be composting, or separating recycling from general waste wherever we have a rubbish bin. I'm certain solar panel technology and grants have changed since we last looked into them.

However, as noble as these individual and communal efforts could be, I think there's something far more effective that we could certainly do, and that would be to engage in rigorous public advocacy. Whether we join up with other organisations already entrenched in this work, or we take initiative through our own contacts, I believe we cannot continue to remain indifferent. We cannot simply sit back and tell ourselves there's nothing we can do. Whether you're a late-career lawyer, a frustrated 30-something, an idealistic student, or any other demographic, this is surely an issue we can all agree needs to be addressed sooner than later.

Today is Rosh Hashanah, Yom Harat Olam - the birthday of the world, which calls us to celebrate the wonder of creation, and that — on its own — should be enough to move us into action. But with the ever-expanding impact climate change is having on our lives, like this past summer of unbearable heat, and too many avoidable deaths resulting from that heat, we simply cannot remain impassive.

So if this is something you are passionate about, if you believe, like I do, that it's still not too late to make a difference, if you want to be part of making that difference, then stand up and make yourself known. After yontif, you can even email climate@synagogue.org.uk to let us know that you're interested, so that you can lend your voice, your talents, and your energy, and that maybe, as a community, we can indeed make a difference.

Shanah Tovah