

# Slifka Center

Jewish Life at Yale



## Tu Bishvat - The Future of Earth, and of our Hearts [1 of 3]

Dear beloved, dispersed members of Yale's Jewish community,

As this new year enters its third week and the pandemic approaches its third year, I hope my note finds each of you, and those you love, well. I am continually eager to hear from you - regarding what follows, or with updates or inquiries from your lives.

To the extent that we've established a rhythm in this dialogue, you've likely grown accustomed to my messages weighing in around 1,400 words. This one is more ambitious: an attempt not only to illuminate an issue from a single vantage point, but to offer a new and intersecting set of Jewish resources for climate change. At around 7,000 words it burst the bonds of a single email, even by my generous standards, so I am serializing the essay as three weekly installments. Today's message is the first of those.

When the moon rises on Sunday evening, the fifteenth day of the Jewish month of Shvat, known by its Hebrew acronym Tu Bishvat, will begin. From obscure Mishnaic origins as the fiscal new year for fruit-bearing trees according to the School of Hillel, Tu Bishvat has blossomed over two millennia. In the 16th century it received Kabbalistic embellishment with a seder guiding participants on an ascent through four planes of spiritual reality; over the last two generations it has become the 'Jewish Earth Day' in both Israel and America.

Some contemporary rabbis see this as a politicized [distortion](#) of Judaism's true message; I couldn't disagree more. If you spend your days as I do, speaking with young people about the dreams that inspire them and the fears that haunt them, you will encounter no topic with greater frequency or urgency than climate crisis. Yale students, exceptional in so many ways, are ordinary in this one: a staggering five-sixths of young people [report](#) being "moderately," "very," or "extremely" worried about climate change.

The degree to which climate crisis permeates and shapes the psychic reality of the people becoming adults right now is difficult for those of us even a half-generation older to grasp. Many people born after 1997 believe they may decide [not to have children](#) because of the planet's grim future. Most subtly, but I believe most powerfully, the majority of young people

characterize the past two generations' refusal to slow carbon emissions over a span of forty years in the terms of [betrayal](#). In dithering, we have compromised not only the future of complex life on earth, but also the moral standing of our society and its accrued power - and thus of young people to believe in their teachers, leaders, institutions, and traditions, which have collectively failed them on the largest of scales.

Climate crisis is not merely a biological, political, economic, and technological reality - though it is all of these - it is a psychic and spiritual one as well. We are losing not only biodiversity, but also our hope in the future and in the integrity of the institutions that shape our society and our shared future. The closest parallel I have to my students' loss of faith in their ostensible leaders, who together allowed greater carbon emissions in the [thirty-four years following the documentation](#) of the greenhouse effect than in the two centuries preceding it - is the ways revelations of US atrocities in Vietnam devastated the faith of my parents and their friends in America's exceptionalism and even goodness.

Judaism, to have a prayer of relevance, much less importance, needs to speak to this crisis of hope, and do so well. This crisis, and therefore the necessary response, is not primarily political, but pastoral. Our community is blessed to have powerful voices for climate justice - I am thinking especially of my teacher Rabbi Jennie Rosenn, founder and CEO of the rapidly growing [Dayenu: A Jewish Call to Climate Action](#). This year, I want to add to the body of Jewish engagement with climate crisis with an approach that is generally ignored, if not repressed, in our framing of the issue: tragedy. This framing of the meaning of climate crisis was put forward in a singular [piece](#) by the climate reporter David Roberts. Roberts begins from the the Paris Accords' establishment of 1.5 degrees C as the threshold for non-catastrophic climate change:

We've waited too long. Practically speaking, we are heading past 1.5°C as we speak and probably past 2°C as well. This is not a "fact" in the same way climate science deals in facts — collective human behavior is not nearly so easy to predict as biophysical cycles — but nothing we know about human history, sociology, or politics suggests that vast, screeching changes in collective direction are likely.

What bothers me about the forced optimism that has become de rigueur in climate circles is that it excludes the tragic dimension of climate change and thus robs it of some of the gravity it deserves... it would be shallow, and less than fully human, to deny the unfolding tragedy that provides the context for all our decisions now...

To really grapple with climate change, we have to understand it, and more than that, take it on board emotionally.... The consequences are difficult to reckon with and the moral responsibility is terrible to bear, but we will never work through all those emotions and reactions if we can't talk about it, if we're only allowed chipper talk about what's still possible in climate models.

Roberts unflinchingly centers our fears and the enormity of our loss. In the presence of these dark weights we realize that a blindered focus on what we can, or will, or ought to do is a psychic defense against the pain of a more honest and less hopeful picture of the earth's

future. Roberts is no defeatist: his prolific [Substack](#) is evidence, and a piece, of his dedicated body of work on behalf of humanity's future.

How can a person live purposely and energetically without a ballast of hope, without “deny[ing] the unfolding tragedy that provides the context for all our decisions now”? What happens to our lives when we realize that the cherished motto of liberal American Judaism, “repairing the world,” is tone-deaf to the catastrophic sequelae of a disintegrating biosphere, and we will have rendered heroic service to humanity if we “merely” arrest the accelerating impoverishment the earth's capacity to sustain life, leaving it not-much-worse than we found it? Can a human being live courageously in such a condition?

The answer is an unequivocal and perhaps unintuitive ‘yes’, and the evidence is our Rabbis of blessed memory, the authors of the Talmud and of the Judaism we live. The religious life they crafted is a template for living purposefully in a depleted world, without the crutch of confidence in one's own actions, those of the Jewish community, or even humanity at large to substantially improve the global state of affairs. I want to tell this story in four scenes: (1) highlighting the parallels between climate catastrophe and Biblical prophecy, (2) examining the Rabbinic rejection of prophecy as a mode of rhetoric and moral suasion, and then over the next two weeks (3) the centrality of mourning in Rabbinic spirituality, and (4) *tzedakah* as a practice of agency in the face of large-scale suffering that could and should be mitigated by society at large, but is in fact exacerbated by it.

## **I. Climate Catastrophe, a Prophecy of Doom**

Warnings of climate catastrophe bear an uncanny resemblance to Biblical prophecies of doom. Because I want to reserve the close analytic work of this already-long essay for other texts, I won't cite any here; as Michael Walzer said in a different context, “I needn't cite specific passages, these are among the most familiar parts of the Bible.” Climate predictions and Biblical prophecies each unfold, on their own register, along these lines:

- a. You were given the blessing of a fertile place to inhabit, and with it rules for maintaining its viability.
- b. Over several generations you have consistently violated those rules, despite multiple clear warnings.
- c. At this point, if your generation adds to the accumulated damage done by your ancestors, you will bring about the irreversible destruction of the place you inhabit. This loss will begin ecologically and develop into full-fledged economic, social, and moral catastrophe.
- d. False prophets have misled you with the comforting message that your current, complacent path is right and safe. You heed their indulgent directives at your own peril.
- e. One cannot hear these warnings within the corridors of wealth and power. And taking these directives seriously entails pitched conflict with the inhabitants of those corridors.

f. We receive this life- and civilization-saving message by listening carefully to the subtle communications of the Source of our vitality, either nature (and its dwindling species and shifting weather patterns), or the God of Israel.

This analysis is necessarily schematic, as both prophecy and climate predictions admit of many forms. Nonetheless the parallel holds, and I hope in another context to more fully study this parallel with its attendant questions of intellectual history: Is today's climate movement an eruption of prophetic morality lying dormant since the death of Malachi, the last of Israel's prophets? Is there a genetic connection between the two, along the lines of Jonathan Franzen's wry suggestion that Jonathan Edwards's [Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God](#) have been resurrected as late-capitalist [sinners in the hands of an angry earth](#), down to their shared fiery punishment?

As Jewish human beings living into the future in the first-person plural, rather than as third-person students of the history of ideas, our urgent question is, "What life-giving perspective can we glean by placing our climate fears in dialogue with the Biblical prophecy?"

## II. Sages, Not Prophets

It's tempting to see this parallel between climate catastrophe and prophecy as an endorsement of the former: what better pedigree for an idea than the Prophets of Israel? And - one of our Torah's inexhaustible blessings is the reliably stubborn presence of a countervoice. Here, though, the countervoice is no mere voice: it is an entire movement, Rabbinic Judaism itself. The Rabbinic project that created the Judaism that guides and inspires us is, both explicitly and implicitly, a rejection of prophecy as a mode of morality, community-building, and rhetoric.

Our Rabbis of blessed memory, surveying their prophetic inheritance, asked a bold and surprising question: did these Jeremiads work? As political speech acts, what effect did the prophetic broadsides have on their audiences? This question is the Rabbinic parallel to the move [Charles Seeger](#), who taught Yale's School of Music in the 1949-50 academic year, [taught his son Pete to make](#), "The important question is not 'Is it good music?' but 'What is the music good for?'" And secondarily, ought they (and we), as inheritors of the prophetic tradition, model ourselves on the Biblical prophets, or forge a new path?

The Rabbis consistently answered these questions in emphatic negatives: the prophets, while right about the stakes, were completely ineffective at marshaling, and thereby saving, the people they addressed. This shocking and unqualified rejection of the prophetic mode could be put as a paraphrase of Marx's famous [eleventh thesis on Feuerbach](#), "The prophets have only railed against the world in various ways. The point is to change it." Reading the prophets' immortalized poetry, we recognize that they were, and remain, surpassingly good - but evaluated by their purpose of averting calamity from the Jewish people, they weren't good for much.

The Rabbinic rejection of the prophetic stance allows us to reassess climate thinking that focuses on what we must do to avert catastrophe, and towards the rhetorical practices and

normative frameworks that will hold communities together and our hearts open in the face of the accelerating degradation of the earth's capacity to sustain life. In other words, the Rabbis anticipate Roberts's point: we cannot focus only on averting catastrophe, and need to learn to live with loss.

Skepticism of prophecy's efficacy didn't begin with our Rabbis - its origins are not even human, but Divine (and prophetic!). God was the first to despair of the prophetic project, telling Jeremiah (7:25-7):

From the day your fathers left the land of Egypt until today, I kept sending all My servants, the prophets, to them daily and persistently - they would not listen to Me or give ear. They stiffened their necks, they acted worse than their fathers. You shall say all these things to them, but they will not listen to you; you shall call to them, but they will not respond to you.

In three anguished verses, God throws up the (metaphorical) Divine hands in the face of accumulated, incontrovertible evidence of the prophets' collective inefficacy. This thesis of prophetic failure is built on several data: God has tried many times, many generations of Israelites and through the personage of countless prophets - to no avail. Further, the prophets have not only failed to achieve God's dreams of reforming the people - the people have deteriorated despite (or partly because of?) incessant prophetic instruction. These data have led God to a hypothesis: Jeremiah's mission will fail as well. The remaining 37 chapters of Jeremiah bear out God's pessimistic prediction.

At least twice the Talmud compares prophecy unfavorably to other social forces. Critically, neither of these passages is contested by a divergent opinion.

The first instance is local and exegetical. Rabbi Aba bar Kahana, impressed by the Jews of Susa's coordinated prayer and fasting in response to Ahashverosh's empowerment of Haman, deflatingly contrasts the power of this political event with the lackluster results of prophetic exhortation, "The removal of a ring [from Ahashverosh's finger to Haman's, signaling royal approval of the destruction of the Jews - JR] was greater than the forty-eight prophets and seven prophetesses who prophesied to Israel. Not one of them caused Israel to change for the better - but the removal of a ring caused them to change for the better" (bMegillah 14a).

The force of Rabbi Aba bar Kahana's comparison comes from the fact that the prophets threatened destruction on the same scale as Haman. In other words, this is not a contrast between the inefficacy of lofty rhetorical appeals compared to terrifying threats: threats are the common denominator between Israelite prophets and Persian governments. Rather, the reports and announcements of the political machinery of Susa registered to Israelites as real in a way that the pronouncements of generations of prophetesses and prophets never did. It may be that there are no atheists in foxholes; the prophets simply failed to convince the people that they were indeed in a foxhole.

The Talmud's second contrast between prophecy and other social forces is global and categorical. Reflecting on the significance of the self-conferred title 'sage' or 'scholar' (*hakham*), by which the Rabbis referred to themselves, the late Babylonian sage Ameimar summons the

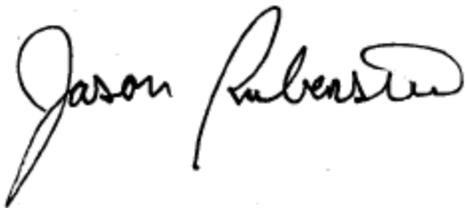
*hutzpah* to flatly pronounce, “Sages are greater than prophets” (bBava Batra 12a). There is no starker contrast to the popular conservative idea of “diminution of the generations” that sees each successive generation, further removed as it is from Sinai, as spiritually inferior to its predecessors (to be sure, this opinion is voiced elsewhere in the Talmud, but never invoked to challenge Ameimar). Ameimar, without dissent, asserts the superiority of rabbinic study, teaching, and leadership over prophetic exhortation and warning. One could scarcely imagine a more radical or less submissive approach to the earlier strata of one’s tradition.

Most important of all, an unquestionable acceptance of Ameimar’s preference for analytic scholarship over prophetic homiletics is the deep structure of each and every page of Talmud. Instead of addressing a nation collectively in sweeping, apocalyptic terms, the Rabbis construct a detailed, at times nearly obsessive, way of life for individuals and a community. Rather than exhortations, threats, or promises, the sages describe a life of conscientious, local piety. We find neither predictions of doom nor soaring poetry, but the careful analysis of when to recite the evening Shema, liturgies of blessings for food and news both good and bad, a system of torts and rules of criminal procedure, and countless similarly quotidian concerns.

In other words, when our rabbis of blessed memory sized up the rhetorical strategies and normative frameworks bequeathed by prior generations of Jewish religious leaders, they found the prophetic mode wanting, and charted a new method to derive and convey God’s will. Translating this non-prophetic posture back into the register of climate crisis, we should ask: what might a rabbinically-derived approach to climate crisis look like? Abandoning prophetic strategies, what would be its priorities, its methods, and its narratives?

Over the next two weeks we will take up these questions. We’ll begin next week by extending the preceding analysis to the other half of the prophetic corpus, promises of consolation and restoration - and the Rabbis’ principled refusal to promise an imminent restoration of Israel’s future on God’s behalf.

Until then - Shabbat shalom and Tu Bishvat sameach,  
Jason

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jason Rubenstein". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'J' and 'R'.