What’s the Point?

A Call for Responsibility in a post-Shoah, pre-Climate Change World

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I. The Abyss

You of course remember the story of the two Jews sitting on a park bench, discussing the fate of their people.

“How miserable is our lot,” said one. “Pogroms, plagues, quotas, discrimination, Hitler, the Klan… Sometimes I think we’d be getter off if we’d never been born.”

“Sure,” said his friend. “But who has that much luck—maybe one in fifty thousand?”

(Big Book of Jewish Humor, p. 61, for those following along.)

I was having lunch last week with a friend. And like one of those jokes about old Jewish men sitting on a park bench in Minsk, we found ourselves feeling pretty despondent about the state of the world. Israel and Gaza, ISIS and the West, Russia and the West, climate change and our very existence—as the old punchline goes, “Look who thinks he’s a nothing.”

My friend noted that what’s so troubling is that the nature of our challenges feels so enormous, unsolvable even. As one writer observed recently, the bitter irony seems to be that our capacity to solve our problems is inversely proportional to the size of the problem: just when we need ways to make communal decisions the most, our decision-making systems seem to be the most broken.

So it leads many of us to a sense of despair, a sense that we’re running out of time, that we’re not going to solve these problems. And on any day, but especially on Rosh Hashanah, despair leads us to ask ourselves, “What’s the point?”

What’s the point, I find myself wondering, in teaching or writing, in posting on Facebook, in voting?

What’s the point in having and raising children, in paying tens of thousands of dollars a year in day school tuition?

What’s the point in attending a Kol Sasson committee meeting?

What’s the point in all that cooking, in fasting on Yom Kippur, in putting up the sukkah, in keeping 3 sets of 3-day Yom Tovs over the next month?

I mean, it's nice and all, and I certainly feel responsible for my kids and our community and the things and people I was reared to respect. But if the oceans are going to rise, and Manhattan is going to be under water, and all of southern Florida will need to be relocated, and our crops won't grow, and God knows what diseases will be unleashed as the permafrost melts in Siberia… Well, seriously, what's the point?

Part of me wants to apologize for being a downer. But I would feel dishonest not naming the abyss that I, and so many others, feel us staring into. And let's face it: today is Rosh Hashanah. Today, we tell ourselves, we're on trial for our lives. So maybe, just maybe, we should get serious about that, let it really sink in, and force ourselves to stare into that abyss ahead.

Yet that leads us to the question of the hour: Why are we here, in this room? On this day of our reacclaiming God as our sovereign, how do we understand what's going on? Because it seems pretty hard to make God the ruler over a world in such lousy shape.

II. Shoah Theology as Prelude

It strikes me that, when we put the question this way, the issues raised by climate change are really an extension of the issues raised by the Shoah. Fifty years ago, young rabbi-scholars like Yitz Greenberg and Richard Rubenstein and Eliezer Bekovits and Emil Fackenheim began to write about a similar set of questions: What's the point of Torah, what's the point of the covenant, what's the point of God, if such suffering, such evil, is present in the world? How do we begin to understand that?

To give you a very brief refresher on Holocaust theology, there were a number of significant answers to these questions. On one end, Richard Rubenstein argued that the Holocaust essentially meant that God was no longer relevant—if not dead, then at least impotent. For Rubenstein, it would simply be dishonest to recite words about God's sovereignty today.

On the other end, plenty of Haredi rabbis maintained the precise opposite: that God continues to be sovereign, and that the Shoah is a punishment for the Jewish people's embrace of secularism and modernity.

Of course I'm drawn to the work of Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, who, as he so often did, struck a dialectical middle ground: God is still sovereign, but in an essentially democratic way—we have to choose to make God our sovereign. The covenant is not binding on us simply because we were born into it; it is binding on us because, and only because, we choose to make it so.

Beyond that, Greenberg agreed with Eliezer Berkovits, that the Shoah ultimately represented a radical self-limitation on the part of God. God concealed God's face, and in so doing created an opportunity, and indeed a demand, for humans to take even greater responsibility for the world.

Finally, what distinguished Greenberg's approach was his insistence that, while God was radically absent in the world, God was simultaneously radically present. In a 1981 essay called "The Third Great Cycle of Jewish History," he wrote:

"If the divine presence resided on Jerusalem's holy mount, then [after the destruction of Jerusalem] the hidden God could be found everywhere. So synagogues could be located anywhere. By this logic, the God who, after the Holocaust, is even more profoundly hidden must be found everywhere."

And by this logic, God was found precisely in "the secular enterprises of society building, social justice and human politics." In the wake of the Shoah, Greenberg insisted, "the religious enterprise must focus on the mundane."

Amazingly, there hasn't been a whole lot of Holocaust theology written since those giants were in their heyday. But it seems to me that the realities we're already experiencing, and the realities that seem all but certain to await us and our children and grandchildren, invite and demand us to pick up where Greenberg and Berkovits and Rubenstein left off.

Their question was our question: What's the point? What's the point of Jewishness in a world of such brokenness? What's the point of trying to maintain a relationship with God in a world of seemingly impending catastrophe? What's the point of continuing to hope, when all the systems seemed arrayed to distract and entertain us, to feed us false hopes, and to keep us from attending to what we urgently need to focus on?

III. The Point: We are responsible for the covenant

And here's my answer: The point is that we have no choice but to be responsible. We have no choice. Each of us as individuals, and all of us as a community here and beyond these walls: You and I and we have no choice but to say, Yes, we take responsibility for the planet . Yes, we take responsibility for our governments. Yes, we take responsibility for our communities. Yes, we take responsibility for our children, our grandchildren, for the past, present, and future. We have no choice. We have to take responsibility.

The Zichronot section of Rosh Hashanah Musaf reminds of this. While the verses we recite indirectly refer to the covenant of Sinai, and more directly the covenant with Abraham, they begin with the covenant with Noah:

"And the Lord remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark, and the Lord caused a wind to pass over the earth and the water subsided."

We begin with Noah, and we also end this section with Noah. We bless God as zokher habrit, the One who remembers the covenant—an abbreviated, perhaps more essential version of the blessing we say when seeing a rainbow: zokher habrit v'ne'eman b'brito v'kayam b'ma'amaro—God, who remembers the covenant, who is faithful in God's promise, and who upholds God's word. The covenant we refer to here is the one that a rainbow reminds us of, the covenant with all humanity, with Noah. That covenant is primary. It is foundational. And unless we are willing to allow the planet to become a place unfit for human habitation, a place of tohu vavohu, our responsibilities to that covenant are not optional. They are required.

In saying this, I am, perhaps, going past mori v'rabi Yitz Greenberg. Because where Rabbi Greenberg emphasized the aspect of choice—the voluntariness of the Covenantal relationship—I no longer believe we have such a choice. How we express our responsibilities, what ritual behaviors we engage in, how we relate to our tradition: in those respects, I agree that we have choice, and I value and admire religious pluralism. But when it comes down to the basic question of the continued viability of the planet, to the future of human life, I don't believe there's a choice.

In other words, I'm suggesting that where the covenant of Sinai and the covenant of Abraham may be, as Rabbi Greenberg suggests, voluntary in a post-Shoah, pre-climate change world, the first brit, the covenant with Noah is not. Brit Noah is not optional. It is required. We are responsible. There is no choice.

IV. Where to from here?

So where does that leave us, as we listen to the shofar, as we recite Musaf, as we do heshbon nefesh today?

First, the message today is no different than it has always been: We can't just go through the motions. We can't live our lives as though nothing has changed and nothing is changing. Everything has changed, and everything is changing. Uru, uru: Wake up, wake up, the shofar calls! We have to be awake, we have to open our eyes and ears.

Second, and again not so new but perhaps even more urgent: Slow down. Start forming habits of slowness. Turn off the screen idol. Notice your children, notice the world, and teach them to notice the world. Slow down and pay attention and develop habits of paying attention, of manifesting and seeing the radical presence of God. As Rabbi Greenberg, like Rav Kook, taught: where God is seemingly most absent, it just means we have to look even harder for God's presence. Remember the wise words of poet Marge Piercy,

Connections are made slowly, sometimes they grow underground
You cannot tell always by looking what is happening.
More than half the tree is spread out in the soil under your feet.

When we slow down, when we listen, when we pay attention, we can hear ourselves, we can hear each other, we can hear the still small voice. We've always known this. But we have to relearn it. There will be storms, there will be fires and earthquakes and violence—but those aren't where God is. God is in the quiet. As Piercy says,

Penetrate quietly as the earthworm that blows no trumpet.
Fight persistently as the creeper that brings down the tree.

As the shofar sounds today, as we sing together today, I urge as all: Listen. Really listen, really open. There is hope, there is possibility. But it will require an incredible effort on our part. God will not do it for us, but God will do it with us.

Marge Piercy says it better than me:

Weave real connections, create real nodes, build real houses.
Live a life you can endure: Make love that is loving.
Keep tangling and interweaving and taking more in,
a thicket and bramble wilderness to the outside but to us
interconnected with rabbit runs and burrows and lairs.

Live as if you liked yourself, and it may happen:
reach out, keep reaching out, keep bringing in.
This is how we are going to live for a long time: not always,
for every gardener knows that after the digging, after the planting,
after the long season of tending and growth, the harvest comes.

Shanah tova.