



DAYENU
A Jewish Call to Climate Action

CLIMATE AS LANGUAGE OF COVENANT

Most human beings around the world feel the first effects of climate change in the form of too much or too little rain. As Jews, the importance of the right rain at the right time should be familiar to us. The Hebrew calendar, as well as much of Jewish liturgy and practice, is based on the fact that the land of Israel has a rainy season and a dry season, and no major rivers. In other words, our ancestors were dependent on rain – in the right amount and season – for their families to survive.

What effects of climate change have impacted your life so far?

What role has rain played?

Rabbi Dr. Julia Watts Belser writes the following in [Power, Ethics and Ecology in Jewish Late Antiquity: Rabbinic Responses to Drought and Disaster](#), pp. 1-2:

When the Israelites come forth from the stark desert wilderness into the land they have been promised, their loyalty and fidelity to God will ensure the abundance of the earth and the fluid generosity of the heavens. [The Book of] Deuteronomy figures rain as God's gift to the land and those who live upon it: a gift that blossoms into grain and grapes and seed, that nourishes the wild grasses of the field. The land, the herds, and humans alike drink from heaven's bounty. Their food, their satisfaction, their very survival rests on rain... Disobedience brings drought, and drought is death.



This idea is expressed in the second paragraph of the Shema, repeated twice a day in the siddur (prayer book):

Deuteronomy 11:13-21

(13) If, then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, loving YHVH your God and serving God with all your heart and soul, (14) I will grant the rain for your land in season, the early rain and the late. You shall gather in your new grain and wine and oil— (15) I will also provide grass in the fields for your cattle—and thus you shall eat your fill. (16) Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods and bow to them. (17) For the YHVH's anger will flare up against you, and God will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce; and you will soon perish from the good land that the YHVH is assigning to you. (18) Therefore impress these My words upon your very heart: bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead, (19) and teach them to your children—reciting them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up; (20) and inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates— (21) to the end that you and your children may endure, in the land that the YHVH swore to your fathers to assign to them, as long as there is a heaven over the earth.

(יג) וְהָיָה אִם־שָׁמַעְתָּ תְּשָׁמְעוּ אֶל־מִצְוֹתַי אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי
מְצַוֶּה אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם לְאַהֲבָה אֶת־ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וּלְעִבְדוֹ
בְּכָל־לְבַבְכֶם וּבְכָל־נַפְשְׁכֶם: (יד) וְנָתַתִּי
מִטֶּר־אֶרְצְכֶם בְּעִתּוֹ יוֹרֵה וּמִלְקוֹשׁ וְאֶסְפֹּת דְגָנְךָ
וּתִירְשֶׁהָ וּצְהַרְתָּ: (טו) וְנָתַתִּי עֵשֶׂב בַּשָּׂדֶה
לְבִהֲמֹתֶיךָ וְאָכַלְתָּ וּשְׂבַעְתָּ: (טז) הַשְּׂמְרוּ לָכֶם פֶּן
יִפְתֶּה לְבַבְכֶם וְסָרְתֶם וְעַבַדְתֶּם אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים
וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתֶם לָהֶם: (יז) וְחָרָה אַפ־ה' בְּכֶם וְעָצַר
אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְלֹא־יִהְיֶה מָטָר וְהָאֲדָמָה לֹא תִתֵּן
אֶת־יְבוּלָהּ וְאֶבַדְתֶּם מְהֵרָה מֵעַל־הָאָרֶץ הַטֹּבָה
אֲשֶׁר ה' נָתַן לָכֶם: (יח) וּשְׂמַתֶּם אֶת־דְּבָרַי אֵלֶּה
עַל־לְבַבְכֶם וְעַל־נַפְשְׁכֶם וְקוּשְׁרְתֶם אֹתָם לְאוֹת
עַל־יָדְכֶם וְהָיוּ לְטוֹטְפֹת בֵּין עֵינֵיכֶם: (יט) וּלְמַדְתֶּם
אֹתָם אֶת־בְּנֵיכֶם לְדַבֵּר בָּם בְּשִׁבְתְּךָ בְּבֵיתְךָ
וּבְלִכְתְּךָ בְּדֶרֶךְ וּבְשֹׁכְבְּךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ: (כ) וְכַתַּבְתֶּם
עַל־מְזוּזוֹת בֵּיתְךָ וּבְשַׁעְרֶיךָ: (כא) לְמַעַן יִרְבוּ
יְמֵיכֶם וַיְמֵי בְנֵיכֶם עַל־הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע ה'
לְאַבְתֵּיכֶם לֵאמֹר לָהֶם כִּי־יִמֵּי הַשָּׁמַיִם עַל־הָאָרֶץ:
{ס}

If the people follow God's commandments, what will happen?

If they do not follow God's commandments, what will happen?

Why do you think this paragraph is cut from some modern prayer books?



YHVH (יהוה) is the name of God used here. English translations often say “LORD.” Jewish practice renders it Adonai. But at its most basic level, YHVH is a mysterious conjugation of the verb To Be that means Is-Was-Will-Be. We could translate it as Underlying Reality, The Way It All Unfolds, or Natural Law.

Read Deuteronomy 11:13-21 above one more time, with these meanings in mind.

What emerges?

How does the paragraph speak to you personally?

What do you hear it saying to us, in the era of climate change?

While troubling to many modern people, the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic texts almost always view drought not as an arbitrary climatic event, but as a sign that we have strayed from the covenant. That is to say, when disaster strikes it is not because God has abandoned us, but rather that we have left the way of God.

What do you think about this theology?

How might it be relevant to us in the era of climate change?

How is climate change impacting your relationship with God/the Sacred?

As indigenous botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer observes, many of us say we love the earth, but few say we experience the earth loving us back. How do you - or how might you start to - feel the earth loving you, despite or even because of climate change?



FOR FINAL REFLECTION

Shadows

By Mary Oliver

Everyone knows the great energies running amok cast
terrible shadows, that each of the so-called
senseless acts has its thread looping
back through the world and into a human heart.
And meanwhile
the gold-trimmed thunder
wanders the sky; the river
may be filling the cellars of the sleeping town.
Cyclone, fire, and their merry cousins
bring us to grief—but these are the hours
with the old wooden-god faces;
we lift them to our shoulders like so many
black coffins, we continue walking
into the future. I don't mean
there are no bodies in the river,
or bones broken by the wind. I mean
everyone who has heard the lethal train-roar
of the tornado swears there was no mention ever
of any person, or reason—I mean
the waters rise without any plot upon
history, or even geography. Whatever
power of the earth rampages, we turn to it
dazed but anonymous eyes; whatever
the name of the catastrophe, it is never
the opposite of love.



What do you hear *Shadows* saying about how we are to understand natural disasters?

What does the poem imply about nature's relationship to us?

“Whatever / the name of the catastrophe, it is never / the opposite of love.” Put this closing line in conversation with the texts on drought and covenant. How are they similar? How are they different?

Have you survived a major storm, drought, fire or other catastrophe? How does this poem read to you in light of your experience?

Mary Oliver published this poem in 1986, in her collection *House of Light*. Does this poem read differently to you today than it would have in 1986? How?

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*Text study by Rabbi Shoshana Meira Friedman, Dayenu's Rabbinic Ambassador,
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