

## Rosh Hashana Dvar Torah 2019 – 2<sup>nd</sup> Day

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Over the last few months, I've found myself watching and re-watching a mesmerising video on YouTube called "[Timelapse of the Future](#)". 29 minutes of astonishing visuals, based on some of our best knowledge, showing how the universe will end.

The clock at the bottom of the screen ticks over – 100,000, 200,000 years into the future; super volcanoes explode, constellations begin to wonder, new island chains form on Earth.

1 million, 1 billion, 10 billion years pass – deadly gamma rays burst forth from the sun, Saturn's rings vanish, a major asteroid collides with planet Earth and a new supercontinent forms. And as the sun runs out of fuel, photosynthesis stops, all plant life dies, and the oceans evaporate.

At about 10 billion years into the future the sun's core collapses, causing it to expand further.

And at this point, 3 minutes and 20 seconds into the video, **the Earth is destroyed by our dying sun**. Our planet is decimated only 10% of the way into the video, when the vast majority of the story of the universe is still ahead.

The narrator then declares:

...the fate of the sun is the same as for all stars; one day, they must all eventually die and the cosmos will be plunged into eternal night... There will be no more new stars created and the universe will end not with a bang, but with a whimper.

*Kol de'mamah daka yishama*. A thin, small, voice will be heard.

The narrator continues:

With the death of the last sun, the age of starlight comes to an end... zombie stars will take us into the future... Eventually, all stray matter is sucked into blackholes... and as the universe expands, even the supermassive blackholes that consume all other blackholes will also be destroyed. As the last supermassive blackhole evaporates, it bathes the universe in light one last time.

As I'm sitting there, watching the light of the final blackhole get fainter and fainter, I feel a huge waves of sadness rush over me. I want the light to remain. I don't want the eternal darkness.

The video concludes with the narrator declaring:

Once the very last remnants of the very last stars have finally decayed away to nothing, and everything reaches the same temperature, the story of the universe **finally comes to an end**. For the first time in its life, the universe will be permanent and unchanging...

Nothing happens, and it keeps not happening forever.

**וַיְכַלּוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ וְכָל צְבָאָם**

**The heaven and the earth and the multitudes were complete.**

The video ends and YouTube suggests that I watch a Jerry Seinfeld stand up video from 1987, and that I also watch “One Ballet Student’s Sacrifice For Her Dreams”. You know me so well, YouTube.

But then I’m left wondering: *What now? What shall this speck of dust do? Make dinner? Hang up the washing? File my tax return? What now?*

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It will come as no surprise to any of you that a profound answer can be found in the fibers of this important day:

**הַיּוֹם הָרַת עוֹלָם**

**הַיּוֹם יַעֲמִיד בְּמִשְׁפָּט כָּל יְצוּרֵי עוֹלָמִים**

**Today the universe was conceived**

**Today *all* beings of *all* universes stand in judgment**

What is the meaning of this obscure idea? It is Rabbi Elazar’s opinion in the Gemarra<sup>1</sup> that Tishrei is the month during which the world was created. And why does this idea help me respond to YouTube video of eternal darkness?

Because of an interpretation of this line given by the Lubavitcher Rebbe. The Rebbe notes that instead of translating “*hayom harat olam*” as “today, the universe was conceived”, we should read it as “today, conception came to the world”. That is, today is the day on which the very *possibility* of new ideas came to the world; the day on which Creativity is born, which will flower and grow over the year ahead.

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<sup>1</sup> Rosh Hashana 10b.

What then of the line that follows: *Today all beings of all universes stand in judgment?*

It is saying that, not only are new ideas spontaneously born on this day, but the *consequences* flowing directly from them are *built into* the ideas themselves. The idea and its consequence are inextricably linked.

This past week and past year something new appeared in the world and amongst humankind; an idea, in-built with a judgment that will shape the final chapter of the human story.

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The Global Climate Strikes which began just over a week ago, on the 20th of September, attracted some 4 million people in almost every country in the world - 163 countries in total across 7 continents. Broadly, they call on governments to take serious, swift and effective action to halt the devastating impacts of climate change on our planet and civilisation. As many of us know, last year the world's leading climate scientists warned, in an unprecedented report, that we have only about 12 years remaining to halt global warming to a maximum of 1.5 degrees compared with pre-industrial levels. If we fail, it will have devastating impacts on ecosystems and millions of people in the years ahead.

It is no wonder that millions are protesting the inaction.

In Antarctica, a small group of researchers joined the strike. In Kabul, youth marched under the protection of army troops. In Hong Kong, despite the violence of the Hong Kong demonstrations, a small rally was *still* held in the CBD. And of course, in Australia hundreds of thousands protested including, I'm sure, many in this shule.

**But I wasn't there.** Not only that, when my girlfriend, Leora, asked me the night before: "*Are you coming to the protest?*" I said: "*What protest?*" Reading afterward that it was the largest climate-related protest in the history of humankind, I was floored. How was I so oblivious to it?

It occurred to me that I have always, largely, denied or ignored the full implications of climate change happening around me. And why? Probably because the issue is what social scientists call a "super wicked problem". The idea of humans creating too much CO<sub>2</sub>, methane and CFCs in our atmosphere is hard to grasp. Gasses are invisible. Those who created the problem are also those in charge of finding the solution. There are seemingly countless interconnected ecological, social, cultural, financial and technological considerations. There is no template for the solution as it's never happened before. And time is running out. It's super wicked.

### **And yet scientists know conclusively that:**

- we have too much undesirable gasses in the atmosphere
- we need to stop emitting them
- we need to get rid of a lot of them
- and we must do it *now*.

So I decided, in preparation for this *dvar torah*, to allow myself to be *impacted* by this issue, properly, for the first time. I watched reels of videos of the climate strikes and read piles of online articles. And as I'm watching a mass of people march down the streets of a global capital city, I begin to cry. I am overwhelmed. I look within myself and notice that it's not *sadness* that I feel, and it's not really *hope* either.

**Then it hits me.**

**It was a feeling that we are preparing for something.**

You see, in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo, there were also protests on 20<sup>th</sup> September. And do you know what they called their day of protest? "The March for Peace". And the reason given was:

There is no peace without development and there is no sustainable development without environmental protection and no protection of the environment without stability.

In Kinshasa, the climate strikes were about peace.

In Greece, there were protests as well. And when the Greek Prime Minister described what he saw among the protestors, he said that the protection of the environment is an issue 'that finds all the Greeks united'. This, in a country that only moment ago was on the brink of economic collapse.

In Jerusalem, 14-year old Dana Rivlin protested opposite the municipal building on 20<sup>th</sup> September, saying: 'The government of Israel must join with the world – join the struggle and declare a state of emergency.'<sup>2</sup> This, from a citizen of a city and a country with more reasons than most to fear the world.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.globes.co.il/news/article.aspx?did=1001301449>

And in Lebanon and Tunisia students were also striking. I'm watching BBC videos of their protests and, in one sense, I've got no idea what they're saying because it's in Arabic. And in another sense, it is crystal clear, and they are speaking the exact same language as the Congolese, the Greeks and the Israelis.

In all the countries the protests are astoundingly diverse; children, young people, older people, parents with their families, a wide spectrum of ethnicities and cultures, entire companies shutting down to make space for staff to attend.

**It is as if we are preparing for something.**

**But what?**

The Akeidat Yitzchak, a text written in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century by Spanish Rabbi, Isaac ben Moses Arama, gives a beautiful clue. In the story of the Tower of Babel, humanity all speaks the same language. And they come together to build a city and a tower that can reach the sky. God sees this and is angry. He decides to change their languages and scatter them over the earth.

I've always thought God's actions were to humble mankind in the face of its technological arrogance - to remind humanity of who is *really* in control. But the Akeidat Yitzchak explains differently. He says:

God decided that some physical dispersal, while preserving the spiritual ideal of striving towards moral perfection intact, was preferable to mere physical togetherness. In this way... a further step was taken towards making man concentrate on the attainment of higher objectives.<sup>3</sup>

It is not sufficient, says the Akeidat Yitzchak, that humanity collaborates on a joint project – multinational corporations already do that perfectly well. Rather, we have been dispersed until such time that we decide, and are able, to concentrate on a higher objective.

I cried watching those videos because it seems that the opportunity has finally arrived, for the first time, to meet the challenge set for us at the Tower of Babel. We have not, perhaps until this very year in human history, been able to meet the challenge. Terry Patten, a community organiser, philosopher and teacher writes in "A New Republic of the Heart":

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<sup>3</sup> Akeidat Yitzchak 14:1

...it is as though evolution, all along, has been working to create a way of seeing and knowing **itself** - and now, in our lifetimes, the universe is seeing itself for the first time with a new, more granular clarity. It is as though you and I are the **eyes** of the universe as it **suddenly glimpses its own image**...[and] in an awe-inspiring coincidence we are also just now **at the very same time** seeing that we must co-operate to change our behaviour on a massive scale if we're going to be able to keep evolving.<sup>4</sup>

The challenge set down at Bavel is now unfolding. It is an “awe-inspiring coincidence” – at the exact time when we *must* come together, we also have the *ability* to do so. The idea of “world peace” is so derided because it’s regarded as fantastically naïve. It has historically been reserved for beauty pageant contestants and 1960’s, pot-smoking hippies – two groups of people commonly regarded as removed from reality. But now, for the first time, world peace is becoming more mainstream, scientifically-grounded and viable.

**As they said in Kinshasa, this is the March for Peace.**

And what of my original question? Why would I bother to join the global climate movement when 3 minutes and 20 seconds into the YouTube clip the Earth explodes and everyone dies - by Fire *and* by Water, *ba'mayim u'baesh*?

The Akeidat Yitzchak will have the final word:

It is a well-known fact that a period of motion is usually followed by a period of rest. The Shabbat at the end of six days of creative activity, during which something had been created out of nothing, was such a period of rest. The purpose of all creative activity had been to attain this goal, the Shabbat... Moving into a new home, living in it, testifies that the building process has been completed successfully... Death represents the successful completion of life, since the latter is a state of inertia vis a vis the state of motion called life. Though we have a tendency of viewing death as the opposite of life ... it is nevertheless what life had aimed at since birth... When life is lived correctly, death is but the ultimate purpose of life<sup>5</sup>

As the Sages say:

**מי שטרח בערב שבת יאכל בשבת<sup>6</sup>**

**One who prepares on Friday afternoon, eats on Shabbat.**

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<sup>4</sup> A New Republic of the Heart (NROTH): An Ethos for Revolutionaries, pp.88.

<sup>5</sup> Link: [https://www.sefaria.org/Akeidat\\_Yitzchak%2C\\_Neilat\\_Shearim?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Akeidat_Yitzchak%2C_Neilat_Shearim?lang=bi)

<sup>6</sup> Avoda Zara 3a.

In preparing this *dvar*, I resolved to join the global climate movement not to save the Earth and help humanity attain eternal life – the world and humanity will end at 3 minutes and 20 seconds into the video while there is still 26 minutes left to go. And in an appropriate Jewish twist, the Torah inverses this ratio - devoting only 2% of its verses to the story of the cosmos and reserving the remaining 98% to the story of the Israelites and humankind.

To me, joining the global climate movement is about, as Terry Patten puts it: “*writ[ing] the end of the human story well.*”<sup>7</sup> For the first time ever, Erev Shabbat has arrived and we have a unique opportunity to prepare for the Final Shabbat.

I’d like to end on a practical note, because movements must be grounded in reality. A fear of mine in joining the global climate movement is that, by protest or otherwise, I may need to vocally and publicly confront authorities; do the messy things that have always been part and parcel of social change. Governments and vested interests depend on our fears to maintain the status quo. Timothy Snyder, acclaimed historian and author, published a treatise in 2017 called “On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons From the Twentieth Century” – a basic guidebook for citizens to combat the rise of regimes and protect their freedoms.

Lessons 8 and 13 give me strength and may fortify you in the turbulent journey ahead:

**Lesson # 8: Stand Out** – Someone has to. It is easy to follow along. It can feel strange to do or say something different. But without that unease there is no freedom. Remember Rosa Parkes. The moment you set an example, the spell of the status quo is broken and others will follow.

**Lesson #13: Practice corporeal politics** – power wants your body softening in your chair and your emotions dissipating on the screen. Get outside and put your body in unfamiliar places with unfamiliar people. Make new friends and march with them. Nothing is real that does not end on the streets. If tyrants feel no consequences for their actions in the three-dimensional world, nothing will change.

היום הרת עולם

**This past week and year, a new *concept* came into the world**

**That for humanity, it is Erev Shabbat and there are preparations to be done.**

היום יעמיד במשפט כל יצורי עולמים

**We will be judged not on whether we save the world,**

**But on the manner of our preparation.**

**Let us prepare.**

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<sup>7</sup> NROTH, pp.43.