

Let's Go Option Three

Rosh Hashanah Second Day 5784
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The temple on the hill was on fire, and then the city was on fire too. Flames blazed from ground to sky. Inhabitants scrambled to escape, wondering where they'd live, if they did live—since home was gone. It was like the world was ending, like God was dying, like nothing would ever be the same again.

Survivors fled to the north and to the west, made a home-of-sorts. They lived new lives, built new schools, established their bakeries and tanneries and shops, but never could come home again. Displacement and diaspora became a part of who they were; the disaster, the disruption, the crumbling, and the flames were never far from their mind.

This story is our story, a human story, an ongoing one. A story of destruction and displacement, of fear and loss and survival, that rings true in our time of rising sea levels, hotter temperatures and bigger fires, frequent floods and bigger hurricanes, hotter heat waves and life-threatening drought.

This story is also our story, a Jewish story, of when the Romans burned down the building we called God's House, the Second Temple, almost 2000 years ago. Of when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and with it our first spiritual home, the only spiritual home its inhabitants had ever known.

We are a people who knows loss and displacement, and creativity in the face of tragedy. How many stories like this one could I have brought? Destruction of the First Temple, expulsion from Spain, pogroms in the Russian Empire...We are a people who knows disaster and destruction, adaptation and resilience.

You've might have figured this out already, but this is a climate change sermon. In this climate change sermon, though, I'm not going to encourage you to take shorter showers, or switch to electric vehicles, or become a vegetarian, or minimize food waste—though those are all good things. I'm not going to talk about individual responsibility, or give a pep talk about how we can all do our part to prevent climate change! I already went to elementary school in the

early 2000s—I’ve had enough of that. Instead, I’m hoping to open a conversation about **adaptation and resilience** in the face of the climate disaster all around us.

So let’s go back to the story we started with, as the Second Temple came down in Roman flames, and let’s talk about what happened next. This is how Rabbi Benay Lappe explains it:¹ she teaches that every culture has a master story, a story designed to answer life’s big questions: Why are we here? What’s our purpose? How should I live my life?

The Jewish master story is Torah. And Torah teaches that the way we worship the God who delivers us from harm is through bringing sacrifices of animals, grain, and wine to one and only one Temple in Jerusalem! This master story worked for a long time. We worshipped God through temple sacrifice for centuries. But when we lost the Second Temple, when the Romans burned the city of Jerusalem and reestablished it as a pagan city with a temple to Jupiter on our Temple Mount, our master story fell apart. We couldn’t worship God the way we always had, and God didn’t deliver us from the Romans with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. Our master story **crashed**.

Rabbi Lappe teaches that every master story will ultimately and inevitably crash, and that when that happens there are three, and only three, possible responses. Option 1 is denial. We can pretend that nothing has changed and take refuge in our original master story. So when the Romans burned down the Temple, the temple priests mostly went option one, and insisted there would be a new temple soon. When the master story pays your bills, you’ll usually go option one.

Option 2 is to accept the crash, and completely jump off into a new story, which will also inevitably crash – like the thousands of Jews who left Judaism to worship Greco-Roman gods.

So what’s Option 3? Option 3 is accepting the crash, even embracing the crash, but looking back to tradition and finding a path forward that will provide the tools to cope with the next crash that will inevitably come. So who did that, almost 2000 years ago? A small community of Jews created an almost-new religion, centered on learning and prayer, with community at the center and a complex system of rules and practices with methods for

¹ See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CBWIEAR_GQY&ab_channel=ELITalks

adapting them to new realities. And what do we call that almost-new religion today? We call it Judaism, and we call the people who created it the Rabbis.

We have adapted and survived and thrived for this long because we go option 3 – we accept and even embrace the crash as we look to tradition to find a path forward. We know disaster and despair, how to adapt and move forward. We know how to go option 3.

So let's talk about climate change. Our first master story is Torah. As we heard Ray, Ethan, and Sarah chant so beautifully this morning, God says to the newly-created humans, "Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it, and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth."² Our first master story, Torah, tells us that we as human beings can successfully tend to the earth, that God can and should trust us with its care. In our first master story, God even promises Noah that God will never again flood the earth!

Well that master story crashed, I'd say, over the course of about 50 years, from the 1970s to the 2010s, as we learned about greenhouse gas emissions and how they trap heat within the atmosphere and warm our planet, as we learned how disastrous the resulting climate change could be, from sea level rise to severe weather and beyond.

Option 1 is denying the crash. Who tends to go option 1? When the master story pays your bills, you'll usually go option one. Oil companies and other corporations funded research to tell us that climate change wasn't really that bad, reminded the Religious Right that God would never flood the earth, pumped money into making climate a wedge issue, more about our individual political identities than about our shared future.

Option 2 is accepting the crash, and jumping completely into a new story. Option 2 was the can-do optimism so many of us grew up on—enthusiastic recycling, local produce, biking to work. Option 2 was the "youth soccer team" approach to climate action: if each of us does our small part, we can reach our goal! This became our new master story: we're all in this together, and we have the power to save the planet.

But every master story will ultimately and inevitably crash. And our new master story is crashing—because no amount of collective individual action can counterbalance corporate

² Gen. 1:28

emissions, and our governmental and intergovernmental bodies haven't been strong enough or brave enough to reduce emissions across our fragile globe.

Option 1 is denial, and some of us are going option 1, denying that our new master story of shared individual responsibility has crashed and holding onto the idea that with enough education and investment, the collective power of our individual choices can stop or slow climate change. I have really been an option 1 person on this new master story. I'm a vegetarian, an avid composter. I was even in a co-op in college where paper towels weren't allowed because of the deforestation impact. Like many of you, I've been "doing my part," even as it seems increasingly naïve to think I'm really doing anything.

Option 2 is accepting the crash, and jumping completely into a new story—like the story that none of this really matters, anyway, because we won't be alive to see the worst of it, or the story that we're totally powerless in the face of corporate greed and government inaction, and that all we can do is prepare for the impending end of the world and human life as we know it.

I think this tension, between the old option 2 and the new option 2, between a can-do approach and a why-bother approach, might be at the root of so much of the anxiety around climate, particularly among young people. We harbor fear about our future, anger that the generations before us bequeathed us a world whose natural future is so uncertain and so certainly different than what we know, and sadness about our collective human failure to prevent climate disaster. For those of us raised on the first option 2, on the cheerleading and the can-do attitude toward reversing the course of greenhouse gas emissions, the sense of collective failure and doom is acute, and it can be challenging to know how to adapt and be resilient.

But every story ultimately and inevitably crashes. And we are a people who knows crashes.

So how do we go option 3? What in our tradition can we look to as we accept the crash to find a path forward? The first thing that happens when a story crashes is we feel. And we feel bad. Our master stories answer those three key questions: Why are we here? What's our purpose? How should I live my life? And it feels awful to not have answers to those questions.

There are three primary negative emotions: sadness, anger, and fear—most of the rest are variations of those three. And as we contemplate the future of our climate and our planet, many of us are sad, angry, and scared. So let's take those emotions, one by one, and talk about how our sages, who taught us how to go option 3, channeled them into action.

Let's start with sadness. Over the centuries following the loss of the Second Temple and our spiritual center in Jerusalem, the Rabbis instituted not just a one-day holiday for mourning its loss, but a three-week cycle of grief and remembrance that culminates each summer in Tisha b'Av. We, too, can acknowledge and fulfill our need to grieve for the world as we knew it and know it, for our hope that we could fix it. Taking time for grief over a changing climate might feel silly, or dramatic, but it's something that would behoove us to do together, rather than apart. After all, it's the world we all share that is changing.

Anger is the emotion we use to fight back—sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn't. Many of our Sages fought back against the Romans in the Bar-Kochba revolt, which could have been the way that we returned to Jerusalem, but it wasn't. The Roman army was too powerful. Our anger—that the biggest polluters aren't being held accountable, that our human community is failing to stop or slow climate change, that our forebears left us a world that is becoming less inhabitable—our anger is what we channel into fighting back—into marching, lobbying, pushing our institutions to take the steps they can still take to slow climate change. But we need to plan for what's next if we're not powerful enough.

That's where fear comes in. And I think our fear, for ourselves and for the generations to come, be they our own children and grandchildren or not, might be the emotion most worth channeling into action. Because though fear can keep us in place and push us to ignore what we know to be true, when we channel our fear into action, we can begin to prepare for an uncertain future.

Our forebears feared that since the Temple, which they called the House of God, was gone, that Judaism would be gone too—that their children and grandchildren would have no way to be Jewish. So they built Judaism anew, all over the Mediterranean world, with prayer

instead of sacrifice, our houses and tables and challahs in the place of God's house filled with grain-offerings. They channeled their fear into building for the future.

We, too, might fear that God's much bigger House—our entire world—is falling apart and becoming unknown to us. We fear more frequent severe weather, drought and sea level rise making places disappear or become uninhabitable. We fear a loss of the home we know.

But we are a people who knows loss and displacement, adaptation, resilience, and creativity in the face of upheaval. So here's one way for us to use the wisdom of our tradition to pursue option 3, and have hope for what is still possible. We can reasonably deduce, with the help of experts, that there will be a massive global increase in refugees and people who are internally displaced over the coming decades. So now is the time to commit or recommit to welcoming refugees into our communities, our country, and everywhere in the world with the resources to cope with climate change. It's time to act on our fear of an uncertain future and build a new version of the world, of God's house, where we're committed to having a place for everyone, even when their place is gone.³

We are inheritors to centuries of displacement, and among us are so many who know personally what it takes to make a new place into home. And we are inheritors of a community, here in the United States and especially at Anshe Emeth, that knows how to mobilize for refugees. We have been involved right in our Highland Park backyard with Interfaith RISE, which works to find and furnish housing for recent refugees across Central and South Jersey. We have advocated for refugees in government, perhaps through L'taken, our Reform Movement's seminar for teens to lobby Congress on the issues that matter to us. Many of us have contributed to refugee organizations like HIAS, which helped Jews flee pogroms and the Holocaust, and today helps refugees of all religions and cultures flee danger and make new places into home.

I know that this is not an easy time to double down on our efforts to welcome refugees to our country and our community, as so many Americans have our own fears about changing demographics. But this is the time to commit, to act on our fear and build for the future to

³ This section of the sermon was inspired and deeply influenced by conversation with Fred Traylor, a Ph.D. student in sociology at Rutgers and a teacher in our Religious School.

shore up the resources to cope with climate change and prepare for more people to need us to welcome them to their new home. This is one way we can channel our fear for the future into action and realistic hope—for ourselves, for our children, and for the generations to come.

It won't be easy and it's not a quick fix. But I'm reminded of the time that one of our Sages was walking on the road and saw a grown man planting a tree. He asked the man, "Don't you know that it will take seventy years for this tree to bear fruit? Are you sure you have seventy more years to live that you should eat the fruit of this tree?"

And the man said: "I was born to a world full of fruiting trees. Just as my ancestors planted for me, I too am planting for my descendants."⁴

Let us plant for our descendants and the world, the House of God, that they will inherit from us. The Psalmist said,

לְמַעַן בֵּית־יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֶבְקֹשֶׁה טוֹב לְךָ:

"For the sake of the House of Adonai our God,
I seek your good."⁵

The House of Adonai our God was the Temple, but the House of Adonai our God is also the world, in which we dwell with all humanity. For the sake of God's world, our world, let us take action to seek the good of each and every person, to make sure there is a home for each and every person, to make use of our fear, and prepare for what is known and unknown in the year and years and decades to come, because we are a people who knows adaptation and resilience. Let's stand on the shoulders of our ancestors, and go option 3. Shanah tovah.

⁴ b. Taanit 23a

⁵ Ps. 122:9