

The World is a Bira Doleket (On Fire and Illuminated) & It's up to us to save it.

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How many people here went to summer camp? How many of you count as one of your favorite memories eating s'mores by the campfire on a beautiful summer evening? Amid the trees and starlit sky with a roaring campfire, you thought there'd always be enough marshmallows, graham crackers and chocolate, and that you'd always be 12 or 13 years old, right?

Today I'd like to talk with you about marshmallows, what they can teach us about our changing climate, and why it's important.

In the 1960s, Stanford professor Walter Mischel conducted a now famous research study on the question of what makes people successful. In the study, he brought preschool aged children, one at a time, into a room where researchers offered each one a deal. The researcher said he was going to leave the room and that if the child did not eat the marshmallow while he was away, he or she would be rewarded with a second marshmallow. However, if the child decided to eat the first one before the researcher came back, there would be no second marshmallow. The choice was simple: one treat now or two treats later.

As you can imagine, what happened next was quite entertaining. Some kids jumped up and ate the first marshmallow as soon as the researcher closed the door. Others wiggled and bounced and scooted in their chairs as they tried to restrain themselves, but eventually gave in to

temptation a few minutes later. And finally, a few children managed to wait the fifteen minutes the researcher was out of the room.

As the years rolled on, the researchers conducted follow up studies. What they found over a 40-year span was amazing. The children who had delayed gratification had higher SAT scores, lower levels of substance abuse, lower likelihood of obesity, better responses to stress, better social skills as reported by their parents, and generally better scores in a range of other life measures.

Author and former dot com business executive Seth Godin says this decades-old study reveals more than just an awareness that delayed gratification leads to success; it demonstrates that the kids who did not eat the marshmallow were able to hold two opposing ideas in their minds: “I want to eat the marshmallow” and “If I don’t eat it, I will get more later.” As F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote: “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.”

And it is precisely this idea of holding two truths in our mind at the same time, especially when it comes to how we approach the crisis facing our planet, that I want to explore with you this morning, in particular, through the character of our ancestor Abraham.

Prior to Abraham’s call from God to Lech Lecha, to leave his history behind him, Abram was an enigma. We know little about him, *gurnisht*. So, building his back story, the rabbis who wrote the Talmud created numerous rationales as to what made him so special. Here’s one:

**“The Eternal said to Abram: Go forth from your native land . . . ” (Gen. 12:1) . . .**  
**Rabbi Isaac said: This may be compared to a man who was traveling from place to place when he saw a *birah doleket*. ‘Is it possible that this palace lacks a caretaker?’ the man**

**wondered. The owner of the palace looked out and said, 'I am the owner of the palace.'**  
**Similarly, because our ancestor Abraham said, 'Is it possible that the world lacks a**  
**caretaker?'** the Blessed Holy One looked out and said to him, **'I am the Sovereign of the**  
**Universe.'**

If you noticed, there is a term I kept in Hebrew. That was intentional. The Hebrew is ambiguous. A *birah doleket*. In his masterpiece [\*God in Search of Man\*](#), Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel points out that *bira doleket* can be translated as either a palace lit by a bright light or a palace in flames.

The first read that Heschel gives this midrash of the *bira doleket* is the one that sees it as a palace in flames. In this read, Abram looked around a world engulfed in an inferno of chaos and evil. God's answer to Abram's query represents the still, small voice of resilience that somehow provides courage and hope in the face of tragedy and destruction. Seeing the world in flames, serves for Abram - and for some of us - as the fuel for *tikun olam*, the inspiration to put out the fire.

My friends, when you wake up in the morning and read the headlines, how do you see the world, how do you see this bira doleket, this interconnected planet of ours? When you look outside, do you see it in all in flames, do you see it illuminated or perhaps, or, like the children who mastered the marshmallow test, do you see it as both? If you hold both truths at the same time - that the world is on fire AND it is illuminated - how does that inspire you to act?

The world IS on fire. We know that our planet is getting hotter at a rate unparalleled in two millennia. The accumulated amount of man-made, global warming pollution in the upper atmosphere now traps as much extra heat energy as would be released by 500,000 Hiroshima-class atomic bombs exploding every day, 365 days a year. Fourteen of the 15 of the hottest years

ever measured have been in this young century. We have witnessed stronger hurricanes, more destructive fires and longer droughts than ever before. Scientists say we have now entered a new era called the Anthropocene, a Sixth Extinction, in which humankind is killing off species at a rate 100 to 1,000 times higher than previous extinctions. Last year, the [UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#), released a report stating that humans will need to reduce their man-made carbon emissions to “net zero” by the year 2050 if we are to limit global warming to 1 and a half degrees centigrade.

Hearing this alphabet of woe, I often wonder, why haven't these facts transformed us? After 30 years of warnings, do we no longer hear the alarm when it sounds? Has headline fatigue made us deaf to the warnings? Are we like the Israelites of old, unwilling to listen to the prophets - the Isaiahs, the Jeremiahs - who predict doom if we do not change our ways? Do we find it simply easier to not listen? We make excuses: “My neighbor, he has a much bigger car than I do so I'm doing my part." Or, "I recycle –what more do you want from me?" We may make incremental changes - like changing to more energy-efficient lightbulbs or composting our scraps—but we avoid the radical kind of change - like moving to a completely plant-based diet or jettisoning our SUV's or putting solar panels on every roof we own. Are we not willing to sacrifice either because we don't believe that we can make any difference or because it requires too much of us? Right now, we might notice the bira doleket on fire but like the car fire at the side of the road, we slow down but don't come to a full stop. What then might inspire us to believe the battle can be won, to move from fear to faith, from anxiety to action? Here is where I believe a second reading of the bira doleket text might inspire.

In this, Heschel sees the bira doleket, not as a castle on fire but as a castle illuminated, as something utterly beautiful, inspiring awe and wonder. In imagining the world as "a palace full

of light," Heschel develops Abram into a personality who discovers through wonder that there must be a Creator who would both design and care for such a stunningly magnificent domain. So Abram acts not just because he feels a sense of awe but in his response to God's answer that God is the caretaker of the universe, we too then can tap into that same sense of awareness and can act accordingly



A half-century ago, the astronauts of Apollo 8 took this photograph. Called "Earth Rise," it is considered to be one of the most important photographs ever. For the first time, it allowed us to see ourselves in a mirror. It kicked off the environmental movement because it reminded us of the preciousness of this blue marble suspended in the infinite cosmos, we call home. Whether seen from the vastness of space, or the solar system that seems to replicate itself in the microcosm of every atomic particle, this universe we inhabit inspires awe and wonder all the time. Camping under a starlit night, cresting a hill to see the mountains descending into the ocean, walking through the woods along Long Island Sound, or just staring out the window to catch the sun dancing on the gold and red leaves, it is easy to become breathless by the beauty that surrounds us. And this inspiration is, I believe inspiring people to do things to ensure that this garden of life is here for generations to come.

The research and development dollars going into renewable energy is incredible. Through microlending, solar and wind power provide the cheapest sources of new

electricity in much of the developing world. Within five more years, these sources are expected to provide the cheapest new electricity around the globe, cheaper than the electricity that existing fossil fuel plants will be able to provide. Today, the fastest-growing occupation in the United States is [solar installer](#) and it has exceeded average job growth sixfold in the last five years. The second-fastest growing job: wind turbine service technician. The number of electric vehicles on the road [has increased by 450 percent in the past four years](#), and several automobile manufacturers are shifting research and development spending away from internal combustion vehicles, because soon, electric cars will be cheaper than gas cars. I proudly point to Israel—little Israel, who, despite her own political woes—is leading the way with a sense of chutzpah, of innovation, driven by a permanent dissatisfaction with the status quo in areas of water management and food security as positive responses to climate change. Even the Jewish National Fund, founded in 1901 to help reclaim the land of Israel and to make the desert bloom, is helping governments around the world with ambitious tree planting projects as Israel is the only country that entered the 21st century with a **net gain** in its number of **trees**. People see this planet as a bira doleket, as a castle illuminated and they are doing their part to see that it remains aglow.

On Friday September 20, I participated in the [School Strike for Climate](#) with my daughter Noa. Inspired by the activism of Swedish teenager [Greta Thunberg](#), we, along with an estimated 4 million around the world, marched so that, in the words of one teenager, we will have a ground to stand on. Imagine that for a moment. Generations past may have worried about war, sickness, and poverty, but I doubt that they ever wondered if they would have an earth to stand upon. This crisis is existential. As former Vice President and environmental activist [Al Gore reminds us](#), “This is our generation’s life-or-death challenge. It is Thermopylae, Agincourt,

Trafalgar, Lexington and Concord, Dunkirk, Pearl Harbor, the Battle of the Bulge, Midway and Sept. 11.” Which is why the march reminded me of another truth: There may be wonderful things to be optimistic about - sources of renewable energy, electric cars, tree planting, better tasting veggie burgers - but all of these efforts together will not be enough to reduce greenhouse gas emissions sufficiently without significant policy changes. During World War II, the Allied Powers joined forces to defeat one of the greatest evils humanity had ever known. After 9/11, eight nations came together to wage war against the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan. This battle is no different. This effort to combat climate change requires an all-out effort by every nation of the world to utilize every resource, to underwrite every incentive, to uncover every opportunity to slow down this charging locomotive. We need to be working in concert with political leaders who can make it easier to put up solar panels, to drive electric cars and acquire the right lightbulbs; who encourage the development of wind and solar power and who put in place kitchen scrap recycling and who reduce waste themselves. Once upon a time, the cafeterias on Capitol Hill sported compostable cups, plates and flatware. No longer. And that decision was made long before this administration. We are staring at a world on fire and our tradition does not allow us to be indifferent or morally neutral or silent, certainly not a crisis as existential as this one. The Rabbis teach how God led Adam and Eve around the Garden of Eden saying, “Take a look at my works! See how beautiful they are! I created them for you. See to it that you do not spoil and destroy My world; for if you do, there will be no one else to repair it,” or, as one sign at the Climate Strike read, “There is no Planet B.”



As a global community, we have the capacity to change. What about each of us? What can you change? Can you put solar panels on your roof? Can your next car be a hybrid or electric vehicle? Admitting that you like eating meat while at the same time knowing that a plant based diet is better for the environmental health of the planet, can you hold those two truths at the same time and intentionally reduce your consumption of animal products to once a day?

In 2006, I stood on the bima at the Rye Town Hilton and asked the congregation, “[How many Jews does it take to screw in a lightbulb?](#)” Perhaps you recall that sermon. Perhaps you recall how, at its end, I came off the bima to throw t-shirts into the congregation with the intent of creating a [Green Team](#), an environmental action team here at CSR that is still going strong. The sermon made the connection between the deep environmental ethic that is at the heart of Judaism and our desire as human beings to do what we could to help save the planet. But when I looked back at that sermon, I realize that I left out a major piece. On this Day of Atonement, forgive me. The piece I left out is the cornerstone of a Jewish environmental ethos, the mitzvah of Ba’al Tashkhit.



In the Book of Deuteronomy, we learn that one is not permitted to do acts of wanton destruction during wartime. The rabbis expand this to say that whoever breaks vessels, or tears

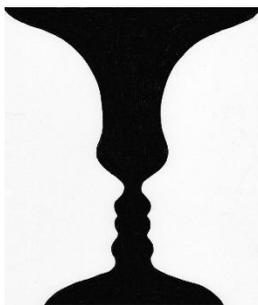
garments or clogs a well or does away with food in a destructive manner violates this mitzvah. While the average American throws away 80 pounds of used clothing every year, 800 years ago, the great Sage Maimonides taught us to train ourselves not to be destructive by offering the following example: “When you bury a person, do not waste garments by burying them in the grave. It is better to give them to the poor.” Long before we learned the slogan “Reduce, Reuse, Recycle,” our sages understood that wasting and destroying was more than just an environmental ethic, it was an act of immorality, it was, in the words of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, “treachery against God’s world, murder and robbery against God’s property!” When we destroy, when we waste, when we over-consume we are, in essence, worshipping the idols of our own desires, living only for ego gratification, without a thought for the Divine. By observing this mitzvah of Ba’al Tashkhit, of neither wasting nor destroying, we restore our harmony not only with the world around us but with the Divine Will, which our tradition teaches us to place ahead of our own. When it comes to impacting climate change, to ensuring that our planet will be hospitable and welcoming for future generations, let us each commit to one act of ba’al tashkhit, one act of not wasting. And then, as one mitzvah leads to another, let that one good deed influence another and another and so on and so on and so on until we’ve really made an impact. And when Yom Kippur is over, please open and read the email you’ll receive from me with positive steps you can do to observe this mitzvah.

Recently I have adopted a spiritual practice. Before I speak I try to ask myself, “Is it necessary? Is it kind? Is it true to my experience?” So too, when it comes to acquiring more stuff, you might ask yourself one question. Do I really need this? The order of reduce, reuse, recycle is purposeful. If you don’t need it, don’t buy it. If you do, look for it used. Can’t find it used, buy recycled. As the text in this Patagonia catalogue reads (yes, you can learn Torah from

anywhere), “The planet shouldn’t be a victim to a dizzy preoccupation with the need to consume, for a desire for everything new. And besides, even if it’s too late and we humans are a blip between epochs, the only right thing to do is try.” Even if all those scientists and activists are wrong about climate change, is what we are doing to save this planet so horrible? Is it bad to harness sun and wind for energy? Is it bad to eat less meat? What is wrong with young girls around the world becoming educated so that they can learn about birth control, so that they can have fewer babies, so that there are fewer mouths to feed? Where is the flaw in having those who live in skyscrapers become more connected to the earth below?

“The Eternal said to Abram: Go forth from your native land . . . ” (Gen. 12:1) . . . Rabbi Isaac said: This may be compared to a man who was traveling from place to place when he saw a bira doleket. ‘Is it possible that this palace lacks a caretaker?’ the man wondered. The owner of the palace looked out and said, ‘I am the owner of the palace.’

At the end of *God in Search of Man*, Heschel finally reveals his hand. It’s not that a bira doleket is a burning castle or that a bira doleket is an illuminated one, but like Rubin’s vase that confuses our minds, it is not one or the other. It is both. The palace is burning AND it is illuminated.



This is what qualifies Avraham to be the original Jew – he was the first one to sense God’s Presence and to hear God’s call in both the beauty and wonder of a glowing castle AND in the flames and destruction of a world on fire. As my teacher Rabbi Shelia Peltz Weinberg put it:

Life is a sandwich between two slices of beauty and pain. In both readings – the illuminated castle and the burning castle, Avraham heard Lech Lecha and was called to action to be a blessing. This is the legacy that Avraham bequeathed to us: An abiding combination of wonder and discontent, of gratitude and outrage, of radical amazement and radical responsibility.



In the marshmallow experiment, most of the kids ate the marshmallow right away, a few squirmed and wiggled and waited but succumbed to the temptation. Only a few restrained themselves enough to receive a second marshmallow. When it comes to our environment, let's face it, since that picture was taken 50 years ago, we've been told to restrain ourselves, we've been told to conserve our resources. We didn't. We ate our allotment of marshmallows and the youth of today say we ate theirs as well. We are breathing their clean air, drinking their clean water and enjoying their nice weather. We all know that nothing is limitless or without cost. If we don't begin seriously conserving our resources and demanding action from our leaders, there will be nothing left.

A Final story: After leaving Egypt our ancestors found themselves in a quandary. Before them was the Sea of Reeds and nobody knew how to swim. Behind them, Pharaoh's chariots coming at full speed. Everyone panicked. They only saw one truth - they were all going to die; except for one man, Nachshon ben Aminadav. He held the possibility in his mind that they

might die. He also held the possibility in his mind that they might live. He knew that walking back towards Egypt was sure death so he did the only thing possible. With a clear head he turned toward the water and began to walk. Those who saw him - and it was few as most were consumed with their own panic - began screaming at him. “You’re going to die! You’re going to drown!” But Nachshon held onto those two truths. You might die and you might live. So he kept walking. What did he have to lose? And wouldn’t you know it, the moment his toes hit the water, the sea split and our ancestors walked on dry land... to freedom. All because Nachshon held out the possibility that things might turn out differently. All because he was willing to take a single step.

My friends, the world is on fire, the world is illuminated and we still have the ability to function... for now... but we are quickly running out of marshmallows. To bring our planet back from the brink each of us needs to be like Nachshon. We need to take some bold and courageous steps because the world is on fire and it is beautiful. Our planet is worth saving. It is the only home we have. Our children are counting on us. Our planet is counting on us. God is counting on us. What steps will you take? What will you do? It’s time to make some noise. It’s time to ring some bells.

(cantor sings, “[Ring Them Bells](#)” by Bob Dylan).

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[1] Al Gore, “The Climate Crisis is the Battle of Our Time, And We Can Win.” NY Times, September 20, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/20/opinion/al-gore-climate-change.html>

[2] **Carlos M. Gutierrez, Jr.** Israel Leads the Way In Water Technology Innovation, The Jerusalem Post. 05/01/2019