

I'd like to tell you the story of Na'amah. While Noah is busy gathering all the animals, Na'amah, his wife, is told by G!d to gather all the seeds of the earth. All the flowers from amaryllis to zinnia and all the trees from acacia to ziziphus and all the fruits and vegetables from apples to zucchini. After the flood G!d tells Na'amah to plant the seeds and fill the earth with foods, and medicines and beauty. To envision a world in full bloom and to start by planting a seed. (adapted from Sandy Sasso The Story of Noah's Wife: Na'amah)

This is my Elul Story. This is the legacy I want to leave - an earth that feeds us, gives us clean air to breath and fresh water and has a hospitable climate for all creatures. We only have one earth and it is our Jewish responsibility, and our human responsibility, to take care of it. Think about it, nothing else is going to matter, if we end up perishing - by fire or by water or by famine or by drought. So let's use all our physical and spiritual resources to sustain the planet for everyone.

**How can we each be Na'amah? How can we change our world view to reclaim the notion that the earth is a gift we should treasure and take care of?**

We more often see the land as something to use and exploit. And because that has been an acceptable view for so long, we are destroying the world! Our actions, factory farms, industrialization, and single use items are leading to global warming - or I like the term "weather weirding" - rain in

Dubai, record high temperatures in Canada; flooding in Miami; forest fires in California, Greece, Turkey and Jerusalem, that can barely be contained. Hurricane Ida dumped as much water on NY as it did on Louisiana.

There is so much evidence that our actions are contributing to the problem, so is it not that far a leap to make that our actions are what we need to help fix the problem?

Covid showed us the impact we are having. It was as if the pause we took in March 2020, all over the world, allowed nature to press the reset button. We see the skies get bluer and the air get fresher. In fact CO2 emissions decreased 17%. In Bangladesh, the color of the sea changed to a more vivid shade of blue and Dolphins, that hadn't been seen in years, were reported in the Bay of Bengal; and hundreds of miles away in Venice where dolphins were seen swimming in the canals.<sup>1</sup>

If these positive changes could happen so quickly, we know that we have a role to play in saving our planet. And Covid showed us what that was too.

At the beginning of the Covid pandemic we changed our behaviors- we stayed in our homes and put masks on when we went out, we cooked more and had food delivered- even if we didn't always get the right brand, or even the right item.

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<sup>1</sup> ([Rahman, 2020](#); [Kundu, 2020](#)). <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7498239/>

Why did we do this? Well, sometimes because there was no choice. But also, because we want to help something greater than ourselves, we want to contribute to a greater good.

**We are willing to sacrifice.** This is what we need to do to save our planet. Rabbi Gellman set the stage for my thoughts today in his moving sermon on bringing back a culture of sacrifice.

So let's explore the concept of sacrifice as found in Judaism.

It is a way of saying thank you for the gifts we've been given by giving something of worth, back to the Source, in this case, G!d.

I've often wondered-Why would someone give their best to G!d? The best of their flocks, the best of their grain or their crops? Wouldn't people say, I'll keep this one for myself, G!d won't mind if I offer up my second best or this slightly dented fruit. Human nature would say- keep the best for yourself, you deserve it.

But the Israelites didn't see the world this way- they were sincerely saying Thank you to G!d for the rain in the sky, the produce from the harvest, the blessings of a successful flock. There was a give and take- I have been blessed and it is my joy to share my blessings. They would not think to bring any less than their very best.

The theologian Martin Buber explains, "God's 'bringing' Israel into the land and [the people] 'bringing' the first fruits [for G!d] are set into a mutual relationship... [Which expresses] the reciprocity between God and the

individual members of the people.” We see that our covenantal relationship with God is a two-way street.<sup>2</sup>

Can we put ourselves in that reciprocal frame of mind, into the covenant? In which we believe that the Land and G!d have a responsibility to us and we have a responsibility right back. To do so, many of us will need to change our mindset- From one of feeling like we are giving up and being deprived, to one of knowing we are doing our part and leaving a legacy for future generations to thrive.

I have been greatly influenced by the native American botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer on the power of reciprocity to help both humans and the land to flourish. She believes “A great longing is upon us, to live again in a world made of gifts.”<sup>3</sup> Can we reclaim the concept of sacrifice- of giving and receiving gifts - of reciprocity?

We know that the Jews gave the world the notion of a monotheistic G!d. In the Torah surrounding people worship natures gods - the tree god, the river god.

There is a teaching in Deuteronomy, to not plant a tree, next to an altar for worship of God. (D 16:20) Eitz Chayim explains, people who walk by might think you are worshipping the tree, and not Adonai.

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<sup>2</sup> (ii. Martin Buber, *Israel and Palestine* (Farrar, Straus and Young, 1952) pp. 5f; qtd. in W. Gunther Plaut and Chaim Stern, eds., *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: UAHC Press, 2005), 1365.)

<sup>3</sup> Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding SweetGrass*. 2020 Milkweed edition. P. xi

This strikes me as very important teaching. If we worship nature, as opposed to finding G!d in nature, or believing in a G!d who transcends nature; **we would no longer feel responsible for the world around us.** We would expect Nature/God to take care of us. We would be tempted to abdicate our responsibility to till and to tend the earth. This was the shift that Judaism and monotheism brought to the world. We have a responsibility to care for the earth. That we are partners with G!d.

We receive this teaching in another way that is particularly relevant this year. It is a shmita year, a sabbatical year. Every seven years the farmers in Israel, ancient and modern, are commanded to let their land lay fallow and to leave all the gleanings for the poor. We do this to acknowledge that G!d, and not humans are the true owners of the land. We are at the mercy of the land.

I lived in Israel during a Shmita year, and there are workarounds, like importing fruits from Europe. But it is a real hardship for farmers and consumers. It is an act of faith that there will be enough food from the previous year. There might not be as much variety or unlimited supply, but there will be, enough. The land and G!d will provide. And this physical reminder, of this spiritual truth, is a powerful lesson.

So I ask, What are **you** willing to sacrifice? Can you create your own shmita and give up something for a year? How will you show your gratitude?

Bringing sacrifices like the best of your flock or your first fruits, won't work for most of us. But not buying any new clothes, using only organic cleansers for your house or only eating fruits and vegetables grown in a 50 mile radius could be very powerful.

It would help us to shift from being exploiters to being caretakers. We can ask a new question. Not what do I need, but what does the earth need?

There was a scary article in the New York Times Magazine last month about how the Colorado River, which provides water to California, Arizona, Utah and Colorado is drying up. And while this doesn't sound like it would affect us, feed for livestock and seeds for plants grown on Long Island are grown with water from the Colorado River.

What if mindsets shifted from the river being a commodity to over use, to a resource to be cherished. How can we make this change. Sacrifice. And that is what is being called for.

“One way or another, farms will have to surrender their water, and cities will have to live with less of it. Time has run out for other options.”<sup>4</sup>

And it is not just the farmers who need to change. “... **it may fall to consumers to drive change.** Water usage data suggests that if Americans avoid meat one day each week they could save an amount of

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/27/sunday-review/colorado-river-drying-up.html>

water equivalent to the entire flow of the Colorado [river] each year, more than enough water to alleviate the region's shortages.”

Wow! It sounds so simple. But this would be huge.

Anytime we give up something or try to change a behavior, it can feel like a sacrifice. We can frame this as a deprivation and feel sad or angry. Or we can reframe it as giving something up, to make things better.

What other changes can we make? How can we write ourselves into the solution?

Where should we start? I started by listening to my own sermon,(it was nice to realize someone is listening!) from a few years ago, on Jewish Trees. Since then I have taken lots of small steps. Sacrifice? Maybe. My gift back to G!d, back to the world. My thank you. - Definitely.

I stood here in 2018 and said I had dabbled with veganism but it was still a distance goal, not a reality. Today I'm vegan or as I like to say “veganesque”.

I'm not holding myself up as an example because I am so amazing, it is more that I am shocked. I didn't think that this would be possible for me. I had a meat or dairy protein with almost every meal. I thought I would be hungry and malnourished, I would starve-without them.

But then a friend pointed out that I could just eat more frequently if I was hungry. That no one in the US was protein deficient. I was also inspired by

vegan athletes who broke world records and showed tremendous strength. And large animals, including Gorillas and Hippos who grow big and strong on greens. (Not that I want to look like a hippopotamus. But you get the idea.)

I took baby steps. I started with breakfast and made my shake vegan, then I tried meatless Mondays and weekday veganism and now it is just what I do, all the time.

Jonathan Safran Foer in *We Are the Weather* - points out that not eating animals is the single best thing we can do to help reduce the negative effect of climate change. I'm willing to sacrifice or adapt what I eat if it is going to help the planet. The Torah says it is a good idea as well, although it compromises to accommodate the human desire to eat meat.

While several of my family members have become plant strong with me, Ari, my son, who is getting a masters in Agroecology and Food Sovereignty, actually this week, eats meat. He is an advocate of not wasting any part of the animal when you eat it. When he buys a salmon he grills the meat, broils the skin and makes a stock with the bones and fishheads. We won't get into all the parts he uses of the cow. (But trust me, sometimes talking to him feels like he is channeling my grandmother in not wasting anything and using every part of the animal). I think my method is easier and then I can compost almost all my scraps, something else I started doing in the past few years. But we both have the same goal- to leave a thriving planet for us to care for and enjoy now and for the future.

I've learned from Ari about the slow food philosophy and I've been trying to put that into place. Eating local, knowing where your food comes from, growing your own food, eating what is in season- so no peaches in January or strawberries in the Fall "and even better, when it's in season in your region-brings eating to another level." In "All Good Things", Molly Marquand says, "Not only is it infinitely more flavorful, but it's healthier for you and the planet too: Nutrient levels in locally grown, seasonal produce are higher, more complex, and use far fewer fossil fuels to make their way to your stomachs."<sup>5</sup>

Along those same lines, have you heard of slow travel? Reducing your carbon footprint by driving instead of flying or better yet cycling or walking. Focusing on a smaller area and doing a deep dive into one or two places. As opposed to "checklist travel", in which you work your way down a list of the top ten things to see and then rush to the next destination.

Here are some more little actions we can do at home or at work or school and that we are doing at TBT:

Changing to energy efficient lightbulbs, using cloth napkins, using both sides of a piece of paper, refilling reusable water bottles, shopping Vintage.

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<sup>5</sup> Molly Marquand in All Good Things. (Summer 2021 p. 7)

The Temple recently bought vinyl table cloths - one set for eating on and another for arts and crafts -in an effort to create less landfill and waste. Can you create less waste at home?

Jane Goodall said at a Climate summit in 2018 "It's important to understand that each one of us makes an impact on the planet every single day. We have a choice when it comes to that impact—what we eat, buy & wear. Does it destroy forests? If it does, we have to be strong enough to not buy it." [@JaneGoodallInst](#) [#GCAS2018](#)

Not all these little steps are going to make a difference in the environment, especially if only a few of us do them. But changing our mindset to joyful sacrifice will have a huge impact. Acting from a place of gratitude for the gifts that have been given to us, will make a difference in our souls.

This shmita year, we need to ask what does the world need and what do I have to do to make it better. This isn't easy, change never is. So the rabbis in Pirkei Avot teach: Lo alecha hamlacha ligmor, V'lo ata ben chorin lehibatel mimena - It's not for you to finish the task, But you are not free to cease trying. Start by "Stretching out and mending the part of the world that is within your reach."(Clairssa Pinkola Estes)

Na'amah reminds us that we can replant after a flood, or after years of neglect, overuse and abuse. She tells us to plant seeds for tomorrow from acorns to zebra-plants. To leave a legacy for the next generation. To create a planet that is hospitable and safe for all creatures.

We all carry the seeds of hope within us. Let them bloom.