



The Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life  
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## HIGH HOLY DAY GREEN THOUGHT-STARTERS

### On Climate:

- In every morning's *Yotzer* prayer, we celebrate the Divine as *m'chadesh ma'aseh bereshit*, renewer of the work of creation. "God has no hands but ours" in this holy effort of protection and renewal.
- At **Rosh Hashanah Musaf** (the additional service), with each set of shofar blasts we say *Hayom Harat Olam*, "today is the world's birthday" - a call to consider how the Earth is doing compared to its previous or upcoming birthday - and thus, like the shofar itself, a call to action.
- At **Yom Kippur Vidui** (the confessional), we admit our triple failure: we are wronging the Earth and the many species with which we share it; we are wronging the poor, who are most vulnerable to pollution and climate change, yet did the least to cause it; and we are wronging the generations after us, our own descendants included (see Ex. 34:6-7).
- In the **Yom Kippur Torah** reading, many congregations read Deut. 30:19 - "I've set before you this day life and the blessing, or death and the curse; you should choose life (*u'vacharta ba'chayim*), that *you* and *your descendants* may live" - today, choosing life means tackling climate change with all we've got.

## On Justice:

- This **Rosh Hashanah**, we hail the dawning shmita as tradition's clearest integration of ecology (the land and animals rest) with social justice (the poor are released and debts annulled).
- The powerful **Unetaneh Tokef** piyut (pietistic prayer) sees cosmic implications behind our inter/personal reckoning - *ba'shofar gadol yitaka, v'kol d'mama daka*; "the great shofar is sounded, and a still small voice is heard" - then celebrates *tzedakah* (righteous action and generous giving) as the rare step that can lessen the decree's severity.
- At **Shabbat Shuvah** (or any time we reflect on *tshuvah*, re/turning and repentance), we review Mishnah Yoma 8:9: Yom Kippur atones for sins between a person and Makom/God, but not for transgressions *l'chavero*, against our fellow. What happens now, when the *chaverim*/fellows we wrong are millions of other species, billions of global poor, and countless future inhabitants of a planet denuded by our own actions?
- With the piyut **L'El Orech Din** ("To God the Law-Arranger"), we might step back and consider how law and priority-setting appears from on high - how large might the degradation of Earth's vital systems loom, viewed from the Divine bench?

## On Shmita:

- The seventh/sabbatical/shmita year—the time of release, of letting land and people and animals rest—begins now, this **Rosh Hashanah**. During shmita, we traditionally annul debts, and promote equality; we develop communal and personal resilience; we intertwine our economic, social, and spiritual/religious ideals.
- At **Erev Rosh Hashanah**, we welcome the shmita year with fanfare; name its core values; and begin our year-long exploration of them.
- In **Avinu Malkeinu**, this one year in seven really puts the *chadesh* (“new/renew”) in *chadesh aleinu shanah tovah*, “renew for us this year as a good one”.
- At **Shabbat Shuvah** (the Sabbath of Repentance amidst the Ten Days), we consider shmita as *tshuvah* (re/turning) on a grand global scale, re-orienting social priorities toward ethics, holiness, and sustainability.
- At **Kol Nidrei** (Yom Kippur eve) we acknowledge our own imperfections, and the limitations of the efforts and initiatives we get behind; shmita is a prime example of something to be imperfectly, but continually, applied.
- And the timeless **Yom Kippur Haftarah** (Isaiah 57-58) insists that we align our ritual life with our ethical life, keeping moral behavior front and center - precisely the logic of the ethically-oriented, year-long set of rituals that is shmita.

Source: Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb and Rabbi Steve Gutow