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