



“I’M NOT MOVING ”

Do you remember Choni? If you’ve been to a Tu Bishvat seder or learned a lesson on the holiday in Youth Education, you’ll probably heard a story about Choni and the carob tree. Today I want to tell you another Choni story. In the Talmud, Choni was a great scholar and a miracle worker. Miracle workers weren’t all that uncommon in those days. One year when the winter rains weren’t coming as expected and everyone was getting pretty freaked out because, you know, no rain literally means no food. Our friend Choni draws a circle on the ground and stands in it. He says to God, “I’m not moving until you bring the rain.” Lo and behold it starts to drizzle. Choni says, “Nope, not good enough.” Then it pours and Choni is like “Seriously God??? This isn’t going to work. We need a steady rain not this meshugas, this craziness.” (I’m paraphrasing, obviously) So God brings a normal rain that waters the crops and brings the fields to life. And everyone is happy.

Except that - the other Torah scholars are appalled and they want to throw Choni out of the Beit Midrash, out of their esteemed company. They’re looking at this incredibly brave guy and the actual results of his miraculous intervention and they’re all mad because Choni had the chutzpah to tell God what to do. “Who is this guy to think he can order God around?” But Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach, whose sister, by the way, was Queen Shlomit Zion. In the first century BCE she ruled over Judea, one of only 2 women to do that... but I digress... Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach says, “What are you all shrying gevalt about? Clearly Choni gets God and God gets Choni. And thank God someone did something about the rain. It’s all good.” (again paraphrasing) So, it’s not surprising to me in our own day that there has been an incredible response of mocking and meanness and shrying gevalt in the face of a miraculous intervention about the rain. [click] I’m talking about Greta Thurnberg (Greta Toon-berry), the 16 yr-old Swedish teen who did a miraculous thing. She drew a circle and said, I’m not moving until you DO SOMETHING about this crisis we’re in. I’m not moving even when fully-grown celebrities and heads of state call me names and make fun of my autism (really?) or say that I’m a puppet being controlled by my crazy left-wing parents. Greta said, “I’m not moving about this climate crisis that we’re not addressing. I’m not moving.”

And I believe, at least I hope, that maybe something quite miraculous and just as necessary as the rain Choni delivered can happen in our time. I hope that we can get busy before our food quite literally depends on it.

I heard a wonderful lecture by Katherine Hayhoe, one of the top 100 climate scientists in the world who was a lead investigator on the last two major reports produced by our American climate science experts. She was speaking to a group of her fellow Evangelical Christians. She herself is married to a pastor. She told this group that the single most effective thing for any of us to do right now, to change the trajectory we’re on...ready for this?...[click] is to talk about it. Look up her TedTalk online - you’ll definitely be inspired. Hayhoe says that we have to talk about the effects of climate change and we have to talk about how our values, the things we say matter the most to us, are what’s at stake

here.

In the TedTalk she cites recent polls that say, “70 percent of Americans do believe that the climate is changing. And 70 percent also agree that it will harm plants and animals, and it will harm future generations.” I’m personally really heartened about that because if you believe the voices who shout the loudest you’d think every other person in America thinks the world-wide consensus of scientists is bogus. They don’t. Turns out it’s a minority of Americans who actually don’t believe the fact that our earth’s atmosphere is warming because of human use of fossil fuels and that the warming is already and will continue to impact human civilization.

By the way, Hayhoe has a great line. She says, “Science doesn’t actually demand belief. My colleagues and I don’t need to stand in a circle holding hands saying, “I believe in gravity. I believe in gravity.””

Coming back to that poll, though, we begin to see why we haven’t done nearly enough to make the changes we should. The poll said that 70 percent of Americans think it’s true, but only about 60 percent think it will affect people in the United States. And only 40 percent of people think it will affect them personally.”

Hayhoe goes on to say, “And then when you ask people, “Do you ever talk about this?” two-thirds of people in the entire United States say, “Never.” And even worse, when you say, “Do you hear the media talk about this?” Over three-quarters of people say no. So it’s a vicious cycle. The planet warms. Heat waves get stronger. Heavy precipitation gets more frequent. Hurricanes get more intense. Scientists release yet another doom-filled report. Politicians push back even more strongly, repeating the same sciencey-sounding myths.” But I’m not a scientist, you might say, how am I supposed to talk about climate change? The answer might surprise you. Don’t talk about the science. 16 year-old Greta Thurnberg told the UN “For more than 30 years the science has been crystal clear.” And Climate Scientist Katherine Hayhoe says that actually the science has been clear far longer than that. In the 1850s scientists first discovered that digging up and burning coal, gas, and oil is producing heat-trapping gases essentially wrapping an extra blanket around the planet. And the first US president formally warned of the dangers of a changing climate? Lyndon B Johnson. 50 years ago.

“And what’s more,” Hayhoe continues, “the social science has taught us that if people have built their identity on rejecting a certain set of facts, then arguing over those facts is a personal attack. It causes them to dig in deeper, and it digs a trench, rather than building a bridge.”

So, no more trenches. Let’s build bridges. Let’s talk about something everyone of every political persuasion can get behind. Let’s talk about our kids and grandkids.

I remember many years ago, we hosted a panel on the environment and my friend Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin said something quite

striking. She said, 'We need to stop framing discussions about the environment as if it is separate from us. It is not. We are the environment and the environment is us. So, let's stop talking about polar bears and coral reefs and things that we know are important but don't actually change our day-to-day lives if they aren't there any more. Let's get selfish and human-centered about it. Climate change is about us. It's about our values and what we care about in the world.

I started with Choni and I want to come back to him now. There's another story in the Talmud about Choni and it might actually be the one you're more familiar with from those Tu B'shevat Seders. Choni is walking along a road and sees a man digging a hole. He's planting a carob sapling. Now carobs are important in the ancient world because their pods are a good source of nutrients and fiber. Carob is sometimes called St. John's Bread because the Christian tradition says he survived on it alone in the wilderness. So, this guy is not planting something decorative, he's planting food. Anyway, Choni walks up to the guy and challenges him saying, "Hey man, how long do you think that tree will take to bear fruit?" The man says, "Probably 70 years." Choni laughs at him and says, "Well do you really think you're going to be around to eat that fruit?" The man says, "Probably not." But then he continues, "When I came into the world, I found carob trees bearing fruit for me to eat. As my ancestors planted for me, I plant for my children."

It's going to take some Choni-sized chutzpah on all of our parts to speak to the ones who say, "There is no problem here. Global warming is a myth." And harder, we're going to need to speak to the ones who agree that it's real, know that it's happening, but don't want to make the sacrifices necessary to really make things change. And hardest still, we're going to need to talk to the people who hold the power to make really big changes, not just little ones that we can make on our own. (and that we should make, btw, because they make a difference)

It's going to take us standing in our circle and refusing to move. But if the values we hold dear are real and not just sayings we pull out when we're feeling nostalgic - values like we sang earlier in the service, "L'dor vador nagid godlecha - from one generation to the next we sing your praises." We're going to have to stand and speak. Because if we don't plant the carob trees now...[click]

In 2014 this glacier in Iceland, whose nickname is OK and whose real name I cannot pronounce, lost its glacier status. It was the first one in Iceland to be destroyed by global warming. This is what it looked like in the 1980s. This is what it looks like now.

In August of this year, scientists affixed a memorial plaque and it reads in English and Icelandic, "OK is the first Icelandic glacier to lose its status as a glacier. In the next 200 years, all our glaciers are expected to follow the same path. This monument is to acknowledge that we know what is happening and know what needs to be done. Only you know if we did it."

Greta Thurnberg said, "You say you hear us and that you understand the urgency. But no matter how sad and angry I am, I do not want to believe that. Because if you really understood the situation and still kept on failing to act, then you would be evil. And that I refuse to believe." I refuse to believe it as well. Shana Tova U'metuka.