

**Sermon: *Shabbat Noach* 5782**  
**A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall**  
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I recently started the new Apple TV+ series *Foundation*, based on the classic Isaac Asimov sci-fi books of the same name. When I was a kid of around Bar Mitzvah age, summering for a few weeks on Long Beach Island with my family, an old dog-eared copy of the original *Foundation Trilogy* became my constant companion, and hours on the beach were whiled away poring over Asimov's vision of human civilization some 20,000 years in the future, in which genius mathematician Hari Seldon issues a shattering prophecy:

The Empire that for centuries has held the disparate realms and peoples of the galaxy in what its official spokespersons would call "peace and stability" (and what its growing legions of detractors would describe as tyranny) will crumble and fall, ushering in a period of chaos and bloodshed anticipated to last 30,000 years. Given this grim prediction, humanity's best hope is to preserve the choicest products of our ingenuity, insight and wisdom by creating a "Foundation" that will allow humankind to rebuild a new and better civilization out of the ashes of the old.

Hari Seldon, the enigmatic figure behind this prophecy and proposed project, has developed a new field of science called "psychohistory," whose core premise is that, given enough data, the future of vast populations can be accurately predicted.

At the time Asimov first published in short story form the works that would become *Foundation*, the year was 1942 and Asimov was a stocky 21-year old Jewish kid with a pronounced New York accent studying at Seth Low Junior College, the downtown Brooklyn branch of Columbia University. He would go on to become the most influential science fiction writer of his generation, his visionary prose sparking the imaginations of luminaries like George Lucas and Gene Roddenberry of *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* fame, respectively.

And, like the best of the sci-fi genre, of which I am, as you now can tell, a fan, what makes Asimov's stories especially compelling are not the hi-tech gadgets and sentient robots and alien races and faraway planets but the timeless human dramas and all-too relevant moral dilemmas that fuel them. And, big ideas like this: access to massive amounts of data will yield conclusions indistinguishable from prophecy.

There is, I would submit, no sci-fi story more timely than *Foundation*, which makes this much clear: we ignore what science has to say at our own peril.

During last winter's sabbatical, I attended an online panel discussion hosted by my friend, colleague, and *chavruta* study partner, Rabbi Jennie Rosenn. Rabbi Rosenn is the founder and CEO of the start-up organization *Dayenu: A Jewish Call to Climate Action*, whose mission, in her words, is “[t]o secure a just, livable and sustainable world for all people for generations to come by building a multi-

generational Jewish movement that confronts the climate crisis with spiritual audacity and bold political action.”

She moderated a conversation with Bill McKibben, the educator, environmentalist, and author (most recently) of a disturbing book—and I mean “disturbing” in the best way possible, as in, “disruptive,” something that provokes new ways of thinking—called *Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?* It is rooted entirely in science and not at all in fiction.

“Ten years ago,” McKibben began, “Exxon was the biggest company on earth. Today, it’s not even the biggest *energy* company.”

“We are now midway through a sixty-year arc,” he continued, “between the first recognition of the climate crisis and the year 2050, when we *must* be off of fossil fuels. We squandered the first twenty years,” he added, to sobering effect. “Only in the last ten years have we seen the emergence of a serious, large-scale climate movement. What we need now is *rapid change*.”

From this opening salvo, McKibben went on to frame the role of large corporations, global banks (Chase Bank, for instance, is the world’s largest financier of oil), industrialized agriculture (which accounts for 18% of the world’s carbon emissions, much of it from livestock), and grassroots activism in bringing about this rapid change.

“Defeating communism and fascism were the existential challenges of our parents’ and grandparents’ generations,” he concluded, “and ours is climate change, which we have to approach with the same existential seriousness.”

We continue to grapple with the far-reaching consequences of a life-changing, world-altering pandemic. Even as so much of the world (and our country) continues to suffer the acute ravages of Covid-19, the scientists among us have begun to coalesce around a consensus that defeating the pandemic may be a very long game indeed, and that the disease is already well on its way to becoming *endemic*, meaning, consistently present, but limited to particular regions (whereas pandemics are defined by a disease’s exponential growth rate and spread over a wide area). Malaria—which came up in today’s news, as scientists have just announced a forthcoming vaccine that will prevent, and perhaps one day eradicate, this dreaded plague—is one good example of an *endemic* disease, frequently cropping up in certain countries and regions, and whose spread has become more or less predictable.

So we are likely to experience regional and/or seasonal outbreaks of Covid for quite some time to come, and, of course, unvaccinated populations, and people who live in poverty, many of them in communities of color, will bear the brunt of the ongoing toll.

As I see it, the pandemic has shone a stark spotlight on how poorly we are prepared—as a nation, as a global community, as a human species—to confront global crises. We are failing to do the hard

work of change *now* and instead continue to place disproportionate hopes, dreams, prayers, and resources on the emergence of technological “magic bullets” — such as the coronavirus vaccines which, while safe and effective, are nonetheless not infallibly protective, nor are they as widespread as they’d need to be in order to confer immunity more successfully.

The mindset and course of action we have adopted in response to Covid will not work in facing down the existential challenge of climate change.

Let me be clear. We cannot accept the death of millions of God’s children as a routine price of doing business in the 21st century. If we emerge from the pandemic unchanged in fundamental ways—as human beings, as a society, as a global community, as a *Jewish* community—we will have failed, and we will fail and fail again in meeting the even harder challenges on the horizon.

There is a *midrash* recounted about Noah, the namesake of this week’s famously waterlogged Torah portion. It comes from a collection of Spanish manuscripts from the Middle Ages called the *Zohar Chadash*.

“It is written that when Noah emerged from the ark, he saw a world destroyed, and began to weep. He said to the Holy One, ‘What have you done? Why have You destroyed Your world?’ And God replied, ‘*Now* you ask? When I said to you, “The end of all living things is

nigh,” you went into the *Beit Midrash*, the study-house, and did nothing to rectify your generation” (*Zohar Chadash, Noach, 28:1*).

We cannot run away from the climate crisis. It does not loom *ahead* of us; it has already come *upon* us. We cannot fix what ails us from within the walls of the *Beit Midrash*. We have to get out into the public arena. We certainly will not arrive at any meaningful action by way of endless debates with our ideological opponents from polarized political corners, saturated as we are in the blather of warring cable pundits and what passes for information on social media.

We have to organize *today*. We have to persuade our elected officials that their constituents demand bold legislation and visionary policy. Over the next two decades, our voices will either pull our imperiled global civilization back from the brink, or race our way to a planet so overheated, an atmosphere so suffocated by carbon pollution, that today’s wildfires and hurricanes will look like child’s play; in which the next tens of millions of refugees will be fleeing not only blood-soaked conflict zones but also ravaged coastlines and once-lush pastures desiccated into uninhabitable deserts.

One way to make our voices heard is to log on to the website of *Dayenu: A Jewish Call to Climate Action*, [dayenu.org](http://dayenu.org), and get involved, right now.

In smaller but still dramatic ways we can also model environmental responsibility in our homes and communities. If you live in Scarsdale

and have not yet begun recycling your food scraps in our Village-wide composting program, you are already the better part of ten years behind the curve. I say this not to shame us but to motivate us. With no judgment whatsoever—I promise—all you need to do is email me and I will put you in touch with WRT's Zero Waste volunteers who will show you how easy it is to soften your environmental impact.

In 1962, when the Beatles were still singing, “love, love me do/you know I love you/I’ll always be true/so please love me do,” Bob Dylan was singing:

*Oh, what'll you do now, my blue-eyed son?  
Oh, what'll you do now, my darling young one?  
I'm a-goin' back out 'fore the rain starts a-fallin'  
I'll walk to the depths of the deepest black forest  
Where the people are many and their hands are all empty  
Where the pellets of poison are flooding their waters  
Where the home in the valley meets the damp dirty prison  
Where the executioner's face is always well hidden  
Where hunger is ugly, where souls are forgotten  
Where black is the color, where none is the number  
And I'll tell it and think it and speak it and breathe it  
And reflect it from the mountain so all souls can see it  
Then I'll stand on the ocean until I start sinkin'  
But I'll know my song well before I start singin'  
And it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard  
It's a hard rain's a-gonna fall*

When pressed about these apocalyptic visions, Dylan, as usual, would be cagey about his meaning, allowing us listeners to formulate our own conclusions—the way poets often do. It has been said that his "hard rain" was the specter of nuclear fallout; Dylan premiered the song one month before (!) President Kennedy addressed the nation about a buildup of Soviet missiles in Cuba.

But Dylan's words have an uncanny way of outliving their original context, and our relationship with them evolves as well—the way poetry often does.

From Noah's time to our time, some words have the power to cut through the blaring white noise of a world in turmoil and say exactly what needs to be heard:

*And I'll tell it and think it and speak it and breathe it  
And reflect it from the mountain so all souls can see it  
Then I'll stand on the ocean until I start sinkin'  
But I'll know my song well before I start singin'  
And it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard  
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