



CHONI HAME'AGGEL: THE TALMUD'S MODEL FOR OVERCOMING CLIMATE ANXIETY



If not for the trees, human life could not exist. (Sifrei Devarim 203:9)

Weather is vital for survival. Without rain, food cannot grow, and without sun, we would freeze. In the past, humankind saw weather as something totally outside of human control, resorting to prayer and ritual as their only course of action under dire circumstances like drought and/or flooding. Today, we've learned to see the weather differently. First, we've learned weather is something we can and have made an impact on, for better and for worse. Second, we've learned that beyond the impact it can have on our physical and financial wellness, weather also can affect our mental wellness by causing a form of anxiety called "climate anxiety."

"Climate anxiety, or eco-anxiety, is distress related to worries about the effects of climate change...and is often accompanied by feelings of grief, anger, guilt, and shame, which in turn can affect mood, behavior, and thinking." (Harvard Medical School) Climate change has severe implications on our safety, but to rectify the impact we've had on our climate will require action, and that can feel overwhelming. Thankfully, the Talmud offers a model for self-empowerment in our fight against forces as seemingly unstoppable as nature.





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The Talmud presents several stories about a man named Choni HaMe'aggel that outline both the courage mankind is capable of, and what's at stake if we don't try.

In the first story about Choni, the Talmud describes him as a righteous man who would pray for the needs of the community, such as rain in times of drought.

The Sages taught that once, there had been no rain for most of the month of Adar, and Choni HaMe'aggel was asked to pray for rain to fall. He prayed, but no rain fell. Then, he drew a circle on the ground and stepped inside and exclaimed "Ruler of the Universe, I swear that I will not leave this circle until you show your children mercy and make it rain!" At that moment, raindrops began to fall. However, his students returned to him and said that the rain that had fallen wasn't enough, so Choni said to God: I did not ask for this, but for rain to fill the cisterns, ditches, and caves. Rain began to fall furiously, until each and every drop was as big as the mouth of a barrel, and the Sages estimated that no drop was less than a log in size. His students said to him: Rabbi, now it appears to us that rain is falling only to destroy the world. Choni again said before God: I did not ask for this harmful rain either, but for rain of benevolence, blessing, and generosity. Subsequently, the rains fell in their standard manner, until all of the people sought higher ground and ascended to the Temple Mount due to the rain. (Talmud, Tractate Ta'anit 23a)

We have countless stories of people praying for miracles and having their prayers fulfilled on account of their righteousness, but Choni was different. It was his actions, not his prayers, that forced God's hand and made rain come. He drew a literal line — or circle — in the sand and refused to cross it until his community's needs were met, even if it took time.





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We have countless stories of people praying for miracles and having their prayers fulfilled on account of their righteousness, but Choni was different. It was his actions, not his prayers, that forced God's hand and made rain come. **He drew a literal line — or circle — in the sand and refused to cross it until his community's needs were met, even if it took a few tries to get it right.** As we grapple with our climate challenges, we should consider what hard lines we can draw and refuse to cross until we see the changes we need to see in our world. These can be anything from committing to lessening our household carbon footprints, using more sustainable products, supporting organizations, companies, and politicians that promote and observe eco-friendly policies, and much more. **Climate anxiety is characterized by how powerlessness we can feel in the face of the power of nature, which is only heightened by the increasing natural disasters and other tangible changes we see on a daily basis.** But by following Choni HaMe'aggel's example and empowering ourselves to take action despite the enormity of the challenge, we can have a positive impact on both the climate and our mental health.

Still, our confidence shouldn't detract from our realism. Having a tangible impact on the climate is going to be hard, and it will take time. But like Choni, we need to remember it isn't just our well-being we are working for. In a second story, the Talmud recalls a lesson Choni learned about the value of the hard work we put into taking care of the Earth.



One day, Choni was walking along the road when he saw a certain man planting a carob tree. Choni said to him: This tree, after how many years will it bear fruit? The man said to him: It will not produce fruit until seventy years have passed. Choni said to him: Is it obvious to you that you will live seventy years, that you expect to benefit from this tree? He said to him: That man himself found a world full of carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted for me, I too am planting for my descendants. (Talmud, Tractate Ta'anit, 23a)



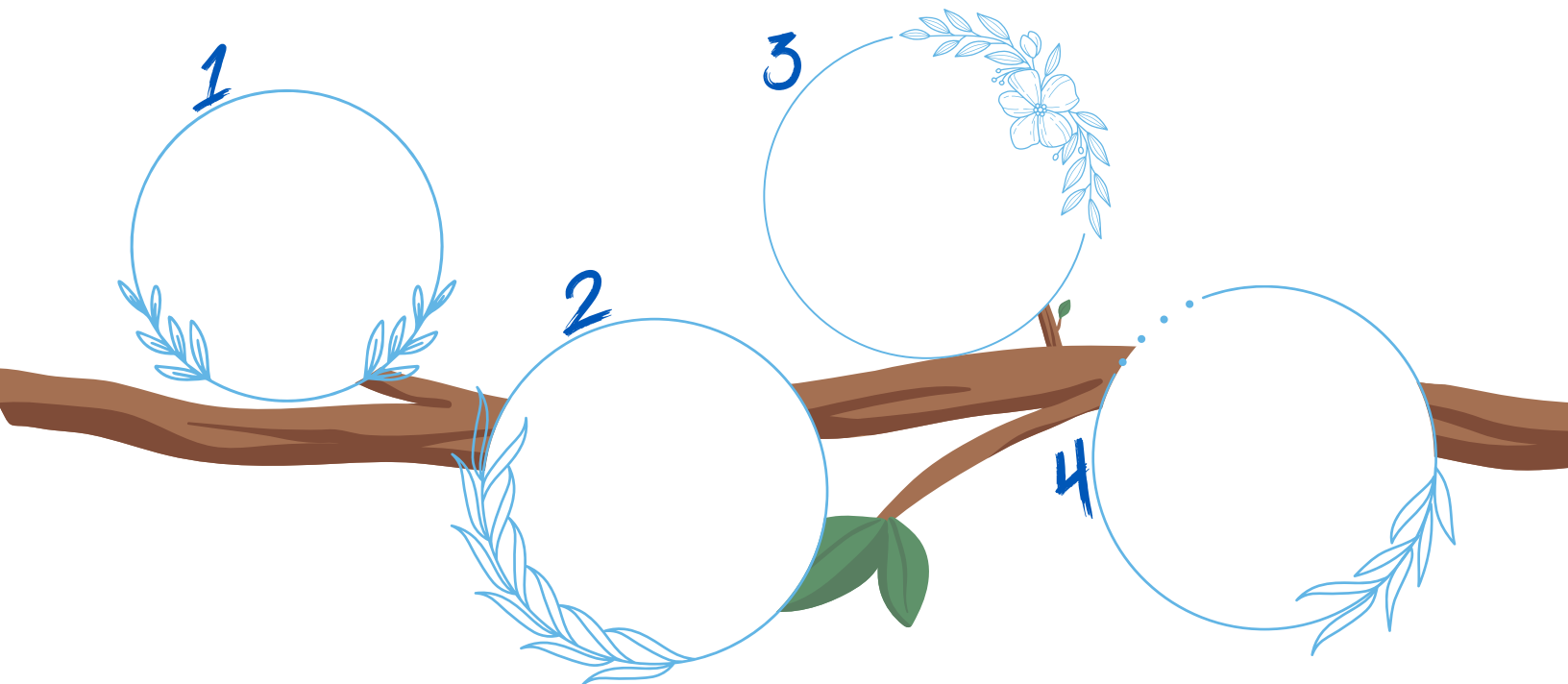
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Echoing the advice of Pirkei Avot, this nameless Jew reminded Choni, and us, of the eternal value of a healthy world even if we don't see the fruits of our labor: "It is not our duty to complete the work, but we aren't free from neglecting it."

When the Holy One of Blessing created the first human, He took them and showed them all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said: "See My works, how beautiful and praiseworthy they are. And everything that I created, I created it for you. Be careful not to spoil or destroy My world — for if you do, there will be nobody after you to repair it." (Midrash Kohelet Rabbah 7:13)

Activity

In the circles below, define what some of your hard lines will be in your effort to care for Earth. Then, in the corresponding numbered lines on the next page, write what steps you can take to bring those plans to fruition. Hang them up around your home as reminders of your circle.





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1

2

3

4



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To help the climate, I will

How will I do that?

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