

Climate Change Sermon, RH2 2019/5780

The story is told of the wise schoolteacher of Chelm, who was walking along the back streets one dark night when he was accosted by a masked bandit with a large pistol.

“Your money or your life!” the bandit said.

“Take my life,” the teacher replied. “I’m saving my money for old age.”

Rosh Hashanah has a dual identity. It is both the anniversary of the creation of the world and a day of moral reckoning. This simultaneous celebration and reckoning is reflected in the Rosh Hashanah liturgy after the shofar is sounded, “Today is the birthday of the world. Today all of the world’s creatures stand in judgment.” This dual nature of Rosh Hashanah: celebration of Creation and day of soul searching provide the perfect opportunity to wrestle with the way we’ve been treating the earth and the effects of climate change. (J.J. Goldberg, “This Rosh Hashanna, Jews Must Commit To Ending Climate Change”)

At first, I wasn’t going to write this sermon. I thought, “The people who want to do something are already taking steps and the people who don’t think climate change is a problem won’t be swayed by my words.” There was a robust debate on the Conservative rabbis facebook page last week. I have a colleague in Florida who said he wouldn’t talk about Climate Change on the High Holidays because it’s too politicized. Another colleague responded, “As someone from the Netherlands, it’s been a non-partisan issue...for over three decades.” She continued, “It should be about the science, not the politics, and I fear we are missing out on being both a moral voice and a catalyst for change in our communities if we shy away from presenting the evidence and the urgency.”

I was still on the fence about writing this sermon, until I had a conversation with my dad. My parents recently returned from a wonderful vacation in Scotland and Ireland. We were talking about highlights from the trip and where he wanted to go next. Australia and New Zealand are at the top of his list. I went to Australia and New Zealand in high school and loved it. I gushed to my dad about the Sydney

Opera House and my experience snorkeling at the Great Barrier Reef. He said, “Well I don’t know about the Great Barrier Reef. By the time we get there, it might be totally dead.” It was like a punch in the gut. The beautiful ecosystem I visited in 1997 is dying. The Great Barrier Reef is dying because of warming oceans and pollution.

A few weeks ago, the Health and Wellness Caring Collective hosted a workshop on Project Drawdown: The Most Comprehensive Plan Ever to Reverse Global Warming. Participants in the workshop expressed their fears. We’re headed to a tipping point, the world we are leaving for our grandchildren will have enormous problems related to the environment. They expressed anger that more isn’t being done. The time to act is now. Climate Change isn’t simply a political problem; it’s a moral and religious one as well.

Before we get to the Jewish teachings, let’s look at some of the science of what is happening. According to NASA, the planet's average surface temperature has risen about 1.6 degrees Fahrenheit since the late 19th century. Most of the warming occurred in the past 35 years, with the five warmest years on record taking place since 2010. NASA scientists say that 2019 has a 100% chance of being among the top 5 warmest years. According to NASA, effects of climate change have already been seen in warming oceans, shrinking ice sheets, sea level rise, and extreme weather events like hurricanes, drought, heatwaves, and flooding. NASA says the changes are driven largely by increased carbon dioxide and other human-made emissions into the atmosphere.⁴

As a rabbi and a Jew, I look to Jewish tradition for wisdom in response to modern problems. Here are three Jewish values that relate to climate change. (Six Biblical Values For An Age of Climate Crisis by Hody Nemes, Jewish Climate Action Network NYC):

1. We Do Not Own the Earth but we are responsible for it
2. Shabbat: Restraint Must Be Regularly Woven into Our Lives
3. Bal Tashchit: We Cannot Be Reckless, Wasteful Consumers

1. We Do Not Own the Earth but We have Responsibilities for Creation

There is a concept in Judaism of the shmita year and the Jubilee year. We read in the book of Leviticus, “The Holy Blessed One said to the people Israel: plant for six years, and don’t plant during the seventh year, so that you will know that the land is Mine...” (Lev. 25:23)

This is a radical concept. The earth does not belong to us, but to God. We are here to enjoy and to get sustenance from it. We read in the opening chapters of the Torah, “The Lord G-d took the human and placed him in the garden of Eden, to work it and protect it.” It is the job of humanity to work the earth, to use it, benefit from it, and protect it. Humanity’s role is to be stewards of God’s earth. A midrash on this verse has a powerful message:

“When the Blessed Holy One created the first human, God took him and led him round all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to him: “Look at My works, how beautiful and praiseworthy they are! And all that I have created, it was for you that I created it. Pay attention that you do not corrupt and destroy My world: if you corrupt it, there is no one to repair it after you.” (Kohélet Rabbah 7:13:1)

Those words are haunting: “if you corrupt creation, there is no one to repair it after you.” We need to cease destroying the earth AND repair it. I was going to tell you what we should be doing to protect and repair the world, but I’m not going to. Instead, I encourage us all to educate ourselves and be proactive in seeking and implementing solutions. For some of us, the first step might be opening our minds and hearts to do the Jewish thing: educate ourselves from a variety of sources, be ready to challenge beliefs and assumptions to get a nuanced understanding.

2. Shabbat: Restraint Must Be regularly Woven into Our Lives

Is there a more central concept to Judaism than Shabbat? We are commanded to rest and enjoy creation, just as God did. To stop doing and to focus on simply being. We need to practice self restraint. There was an amazing study done in Israel in 2013. It measured the daily pollution levels of nitric oxide in Tel Aviv

during the week of Yom Kippur. Nitric oxide, emitted by cars and industry, harms human health. On Yom Kippur, many Israelis refrain from driving, and emissions plummet. The study showed nitric oxide levels decreasing by 83–98% at different sites. Perhaps the Jewish vision of Shabbat and Yom Tov restraint can help repair our atmosphere. What can you use or do less of to make a positive impact on the earth? This can range from taking public transportation and carpooling to eating less meat to refraining from single use products like plastic cutlery, plastic bags, and paper towels.

3. Bal Tashchit: We Cannot Be Reckless, Wasteful Consumers

An important Jewish value is “Bal Tashchit” do not be wasteful. The general prohibition against needless destruction, derived from a verse on fruit trees, concerns not destroying directly or indirectly anything that may be of use to people. It applies to wasting energy, clothing, water, money, and more. According to the Talmud, this prohibition includes wastefully burning oil or fuel. Maimonides (1135–1204, Spain) explains that wasting food in a destructive manner transgresses the commandment of *Bal Taschit*,

The United States wastes as much as 40% of its food each year, according to the USDA. Global food waste releases as much carbon dioxide each year as automobile emissions. And that’s just the food we waste! This says nothing about water left on while brushing teeth, lights left on after we leave the room, clothing bought that we don’t really need, and more. What can you do to live by the mitzvah of Bal Tashchit: do not be a wasteful or reckless consumer.

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L’chayim, we toast. “To life!” Judaism values human life above all else. Almost any religious commandment can be broken in order to save the life of a human being. Climate change is already killing people. Fossil fuel air pollution causes

as many as 3.6 million deaths per year worldwide, due to heart disease, asthma, and cancer.

The Center for Disease Control, the CDC, lists a variety of health threats brought about by Climate change, which include increased allergens (anyone feel like your allergies just keep getting worse?), asthma and other respiratory illnesses. Climate change increases the spread of mosquito and tick borne diseases like West Nile Virus and Lyme Disease. It increases food and waterborne disease like salmonella and E Coli. This is in addition to weather related changes such as flooding and drought, stronger more frequent hurricanes and tropical storms, extreme heat and cold, and increased wildfires.

Every month seems to bring another record-breaking calamity. The prayer Unataneh Tokef, which we'll recite later in the service, asks, "Who shall perish by water and who by fire?" North America has recently dealt with devastating hurricanes that have taken lives, destroyed houses, and left people without basic necessities. These storms are made more intense and dangerous by the warming of our planet. We've seen devastating wildfires in California and the Amazon rainforest is in flames.

The [prayer] ends, "teshuva, tefillah, u'tzedakah maavirin et roa hagezera/repentance, prayer, and tzedakah avert the severity of the decree." Repent: change our behavior. Pray: soul search and connect with our tradition and community. Give tzedakah: use your resources to make a difference.

It must begin now. It is not too late. L'dor vador, we must act for future generations. If not, what will be left for our grandchildren, and what will be our legacy? Remember that schoolteacher of Chelm? He is us. Impending doom? I don't have time to worry about it. I have more important things to do. It can't be as serious as you say. Talk to me later. Burn my planet — I'm saving my money for my grandchildren.

May this be the year we take action. Shana Tova