

High Holy Days 5783/2022

Kol Nidre Sermon

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Climate Change is Devastating Our Young People – A Jewish Call to Action

A rabbi and a soap maker once went for a walk together. The soap maker said: “What good is Judaism? Look at the trouble and misery in the world, after thousands of years of teaching about goodness, truth, justice, and peace, after all the study of Torah, and all the sermons on Midrash, and all the fine ideals of the Prophets! If Judaism is so wonderful and true, why should this be so?”

The rabbi said nothing. They continued walking, until he noticed a child playing in the gutter. The child was filthy with soot and grime. Then the rabbi said: “Look at that child. You say that soap makes people clean but see the dirt on that youngster. What good is soap? With all the soap in the world, that child is still filthy. I wonder just how effective or helpful soap is after all?”

The soap maker protested and said, “But Rabbi, soap can’t do any good unless it is used.” “Exactly!” replied the rabbi. “So, it is with Judaism. Judaism isn’t effective unless it is applied in daily life and used!”

This rabbi is telling us, it is not enough to call ourselves Jews, hang a Mezuzah on our doorposts, educate our children in the Jewish tradition or attend services. All that is important yes, and at the same time, it is completely ineffective – useless in the broader community and world – without our applying the very teachings of our faith in our daily lives for the betterment of the world around us. This simple story from a 1961 book entitled, *101 Stories for Jewish Schools, Clubs and Camp*, rings just as true now as it must have then. And although I wasn’t yet living, I would argue the rabbi’s words today are even more urgent 61 years later. The myriad of desperate causes crying out for our attention may seem so great, even choosing where to focus and taking the first steps appears daunting and futile. Parashat N’tzavim, which we read 2 weeks ago, provides a juicy morsel of inspiration:

“Surely, this Instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens, that you should say, ‘Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?’ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?’ No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it” (Deuteronomy 30:11-14)

In other words, despite the multitude of causes vying for our focused attention and the greatness of the tasks associated with each one, God gave us instructions which call us to action.

Action which I believe demands I spend the next few minutes addressing a grave concern shared by nearly everyone here this evening: The devastating impact our worldwide climate crisis is having on the well-being of our children. Make no mistake about it; climate change is taking a unique toll on our young people including in Jewish congregations across this country, even while they are in many ways leading or deeply involved in climate change activism.

The overwhelming reason for this involvement? Anxiety about their future on planet Earth. Climate change has critical implications for the health and futures of young people, yet they have little power to limit its harm, making them exceptionally vulnerable to climate anxiety. In a recent study of 10,000 children and young people up to the age of 2525 from 10 different countries (1,000 from each country) published in *The Lancet*, 84% of respondents said they were either moderately, very or extremely worried about climate change, including 75% who think the future is frightening and 83% who believe people (meaning adults) have failed to take care of the planet.¹ Climate anxiety and distress directly aligned with perceived inadequate government response and associated feelings of betrayal in young survey participants who rated governmental response to climate change worldwide negatively and felt overwhelmingly ignored and betrayed rather than supported and reassured by their government's responses. The increased distress brought on by these feelings is negatively impacting the daily functioning of most survey participants.

We must take urgent action as the climate crisis clearly has frightening long-term implications for the physical, mental and emotional health of our youth due to acute and chronic environmental changes – from devastating storms and wildfires to changing landscapes, from soaring temperatures to the destruction of homes and communities and the resulting familial displacement. So, what does Judaism have to say about our responsibility to act to protect our planet and ensure the mental and physical wellbeing of our children?

Consider the section of our Un'taneh Tokef liturgy that asks, "Who will live and who will die?" – specifically, "Who by fire and who by flood, who by drought and who by plague?" This year I suggest it is not just poetic liturgy, but current reality! Persistent drought and unprecedented heat in Alaska, the West, Southwest and Southern areas have left thousands of communities at increased risk of devastating wildfires. This year 6.9 million acres have burned in 53,000 fires

¹ [Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: a global survey](#), *The Lancet*, December 2021.

across this country – one million more acres and 7,000 more fires than last year at this time – 160% above the national 10-year average.² Puerto Rico recently saw over 30” of rain from Hurricane Fiona which, in an extremely rare event, also struck Canada as a tropical storm. Just this month, monster typhoons, wreaked havoc and took lives in Japan and Alaska and most recently, hurricane Ian has drowned and devastated parts of Florida leaving a trail of death and destruction as she raced up the coast to slam into South Carolina. Accelerated climate change has been linked to the unprecedented intensity of all these vicious storms which give us a glimpse of what we can expect will become the norm in our rapidly warming world.³

Yet at the same time, half the US is experiencing extreme drought after the hottest summer on record,⁴ and more than three billion people worldwide are suffering because of water shortages.⁵ And while our little corner of Fairfield, CT may have been only mildly touched by this summer’s drought or any of the other climate disasters I have mentioned, surely most of us have family or friends living in areas of the country or world that are deeply impacted. According to UNICEF, the effects of climate change put almost every child worldwide at risk.⁶

In just 2 ½ weeks, we will read Parashat B’reishit, the creation story set in paradise’s Garden of Eden, in which humanity’s task is delineated – we are to guard the Garden and indeed, the entire natural world. Clearly God requires human hands to both work (*la’avod* – Gen 2:5) AND guard (*ul’shomrah* Gen 2:15) our planet. God created humanity to steward the earth; yes, to work it and benefit from the literal fruits of that labor, and especially to tend it for longevity’s sake. The text clearly demands that we participate in the care of the world around us. I have just laid out evidence of the extent to which human beings assume we have a license to dominate – an assumption that puts the future of our planet in peril. Which means we who have inherited these Sacred Texts, are responsible for embodying the alternative version of human beings, not as dominators, but as guardians, charged with serving and tending the earth – that is, for maintaining, repairing, guarding and protecting it. In Kohelet Rabbah, a 6th-8th century collection of Midrashim we read of God’s caution to Adam as God shows him all the wonders of God’s creation; “See how lovely and excellent My works are; I have created them all for you. Take care not to spoil and destroy My world, for if you spoil it there will be no one to repair it after you.” My friends, we have failed to heed God’s words.

As parents, or friends of parents, it is incumbent upon us to act to protect and restore our planet, for doing so supports our children – mentally, emotionally and physically. In traditional

² National Interagency Fire Center, www.nifc.gov Year to date statistics 2022 (1/1/22-9/27/22)

³ Axios, September 19, 2022 – Energy & Environment, www.axios.com

⁴ <https://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/CurrentMap.aspx>

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/nov/26/more-than-3-billion-people-affected-by-water-shortages-data-shows>

⁶ <https://www.unicef.org/stories/impacts-climate-change-put-almost-every-child-risk>

Jewish homes when a child is born, families often cite a Midrash from Shir HaShirim Rabbah (1:4), “Your children are certainly good guarantors. For their sake I give the Torah.” Meaning, our children guarantee the continuation of our world and by doing so, make us worthy of inheriting Torah. If we hold this to be true, our Torah today must be to stand alongside and encourage our young climate leaders. We MUST take responsibility ourselves for ensuring a sustainable future for them. At the very least, our Torah and Sacred Texts compel us to walk with our children in support and to lead by example, to listen to their fears and concerns and encourage them to speak out. The Talmud instructs us in *Kiddushin 30b* that we are commanded as parents, leaders, and elders, to teach our children necessary life skills – instruct them in a trade so they can support themselves, show them how to cook so they are able to feed their own families, and how to swim – a vital life skill according to our Sages. In today’s volatile world, teaching, learning together and participating with young people in addressing climate issues is akin to making sure our children know how to swim – this way we can help to ensure they have water in which to swim, but not so much that they drown.

It is up to us to be the role models. God may have given us dominion over the earth and all that dwells upon it, but that did not come with a license to destroy it. Rather, it came with an entreaty to protect and care for this great gift, and we are failing God in this respect. Even more crucially, we have failed our children and grandchildren, and perhaps even their children, if we choose to do nothing at this critical junction. So, I implore you, talk to your children – your nieces and nephews, your grandchildren – and listen to them. Hear their fears and concerns and believe them. And vote with your feet – at our social action tables in the TBC lobby, at your local polling places a month from now, by participating in the RAC’s Every Voice Every Vote Campaign and filling out postcards to send to other cities encouraging people to vote.

And take steps in your own homes as well. Our children will overwhelmingly do what we do, so ask yourself, what am I doing each day to address this crisis? And what else can I do to ensure our children and young people are heard and supported as they fight desperately to ensure their future? Let us use our soap! It is the least we can ask of ourselves – our children’s mental health, emotional well-being and future lives on this planet depend on it...