

Climate on the Bimah



Dvar Torah Notes

Shabbat *Vayera*, November 15-16, 18 Cheshvan 5780

Torah portion: *Vayera* / פרשת וירא (Breishit/Genesis 18:1 - 22:24)

Haftarah for Ashkenazim: *Melachim Bet*/II Kings 4:1-37, Haftarah for Sephardim: *Melachim Bet*/ II Kings 4:1-23

How can our Jewish communities take action on climate change and for environmental justice?

Our tradition teaches the sacred worth of every person, and affirms our interdependence with each other and with our natural world. But too often, only some have been able to enjoy nature's abundance, while others have been forced to bear more than their share of our pollution and waste. This is not right.

Our pollution is impacting communities across Virginia: our air and water are poisoned by coal mining and burning; our land is seized for pipelines; our low-lying neighborhoods are flooded by rising sea levels and our land is targeted for landfills and other toxic facilities. Pollution disproportionately burdens marginalized communities. Yet residents of these communities persist in advocating for their health and environmental quality, demonstrating resilience and power. We must stand with them.

The climate crisis makes our sacred responsibility to address environmental injustice even more urgent: burning fossil fuels is pouring heat-trapping climate pollution into our atmosphere, and those least responsible for damaging our climate, here and around the world, are among the first to be suffering the consequences.

This Shabbat, our congregation is raising up environmental justice alongside fellow faith communities. As we work together to repair our damaged climate, we affirm that every person has an equal right to "*eitz chayim*," the Tree of Life.

As we address climate change, we must make sure that everyone most impacted—including low-income people, people of color, the vulnerable, and those on the frontlines—are part of every solution.

Today, our *shul* is joining with faith leaders and congregations across the Commonwealth who are calling on our elected leaders at all levels of government to create fair and just climate policies. Please fill out the post card included in your bulletins after Shabbat or next time you're here.

The post card calls on our elected leaders to act on climate change with a focus on the concerns of those most vulnerable and most impacted by the climate crisis. Specifically, it calls on our legislators to create a permanent Council on Environmental Justice and fund it appropriately, to require new projects to be analyzed for their impact on environmental justice, and to require state and local agencies to regularly conduct environmental justice reviews.

Notes for grounding a *drash* on climate change in the readings for Shabbat *Vayera*:

By Joelle Novey for IPL-DMV:

The opening lines of this week's *parsha* have become our quintessential example of profound hospitality. Avraham looks up to see three mysterious visitors approaching in the desert, and runs out to offer them food, drink, and a place to rest. Setting aside his own discomfort as he recovers from his circumcision, Avraham works with Sarah to greet visitors who turn out to be angels with good news for their family.

Every Jewish community I've ever been a part of works hard to be welcoming to newcomers and guests, and to reflect on how we can improve as places where all people who wish to join us feel embraced and that their needs are met.

But how hospitable are we being *to other species*? Here in Virginia, we are burning fossil fuels and pouring heat-trapping climate pollution into our atmosphere, warming our planet, making our Earth less

hospitable, not only to people but to thousands of species of plants and animals. In disrupted ecosystems, many species of animals cannot find the plants or other creatures they need to eat, or sufficient water to drink.

This Shabbat, we're invited to think about how our failures to welcome all people equally, the persistence of racism and ageism and other bigotries that interfere with our communities' extension of hospitality to people, intersects with our failures to maintain the natural world in a way that is fully hospitable to the plants and creatures with whom we share our planet.

In our work for environmental justice, perhaps we can learn from Abraham and Sarah's example. Their story teaches profound hospitality, which centers the needs of others, and asks us to put aside our routines and assumptions. Ultimately, those mysterious guests in the Torah being welcomed so warmly led to them bringing blessing and good news to Sarah and Abraham, that they would have a son and continue their legacy into future generations. May this work to live in a spirit of more profound hospitality ultimately bring blessings to our communities as we work for justice and resilience in a warming climate.

By Jimmy Taber for AJWS:

This week, in Parashat Vayera, Avimelech, king of Gerar, faces a grave threat to himself and his household. Avraham enters the town and repeats his prior ill-fated decision to present Sarah as his sister instead of his wife upon arriving in a foreign land. Unaware that Sarah is married, Avimelech takes her for himself. To Avimelech's great surprise, God confronts him in a dream, threatening to kill him unless he returns Sarah to Avraham ... Although the Torah's narrative presents a direct dialogue between Avimelech and God, the midrash reveals a difficult decision-making process in which Avimelech finds himself caught between competing voices:

In the morning, when the king awoke, in agony and terror, he called all his servants and told his dream in their ears. One of their number said: "O lord and king! Restore this woman unto the man, for he is her husband . . ." There were some among his servants who spake: "Be not afraid of dreams! What dreams make known to man is but falsehood."

The response of the group of servants implies that dreams were not a universally accepted medium for communicating with the Divine. Thus Avimelech is faced with a difficult choice. He can listen to the lone voice encouraging him to believe that his dream was, in fact, a communication from God and take action by returning Sarah. Or he can listen to the near consensus of his servants who dismiss the validity of his dream and choose to preserve the status quo, avoiding action by maintaining willful ignorance ...

Avimelech's struggle parallels one of the most difficult challenges we face today in the pursuit of global social justice. How do we identify which voices are speaking the truth—and how do we respond when those truths implicate our own actions? What responsibility do we take on when, like Avimelech, we hear the dissenting voice of truth urging us to change the decisions we've made?

... The story of Avimelech can provide us with inspiration to listen to unpopular voices that oppose the status quo in our own lives. Even when the dominant voices try to invalidate those who speak truth to power, we have a responsibility to listen to the voices of truth and act accordingly. Only through courageous action can we transform the way our personal consumption impacts those beyond our immediate sphere. We are not powerless. We have the ability and the responsibility to change the way we live, and thus create a more just world for everyone.

Texts to Inform a Jewish Response to Climate Change

Compiled by Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb, Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation

The stakes are high. We can't afford to make too much of a mess.

- *"G-d led Adam around all the trees of the Garden of Eden. And G-d said to Adam: 'See My works, how good and praiseworthy they are?! And all that I have created, I made for you. [But,] be mindful then that you do not spoil and destroy My world - for if you spoil it, there is no one after you to repair it.'"*
—Midrash Kohelet Rabbah 7:13 (Commentary on Ecclesiastes); ca. 8th Century CE

Remember whose Earth it is in the first place, and what we're supposed to be doing with it.

- *"The Earth is G-d's, and the fullness thereof; the settled land, and its inhabitants."—Tehillim/Psalm 24:1*
- *"The land shall not be sold forever; for the land is Mine; you are strangers and sojourners with me."*
—Vayikra/Leviticus 25:23
- *"God placed the human in the Garden of Eden, l'ovdah (to serve/till) u'l'shomrah (and to guard/tend it)."*
—Bereishit/Genesis 2:15

Wasting anything is a shame, especially when it's so easy to use less electricity or get better mileage.

- *"When you besiege a city... do not destroy (lo tashchit) any of its trees..." —Dvarim/Deuteronomy 20:19*
- *Rav Zutra said: "Whoever covers an oil lamp, or uncovers a naphtha lamp [causing them to burn fuel inefficiently] transgresses the law of bal tashchit."—Talmud Bavli/Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 67b*
- *"Righteous people ... do not waste in this world even a mustard seed. They become sorrowful with every wasteful and destructive act that they see, and if they can, they use all their strength to save everything possible from destruction. But the wicked ... rejoice in the destruction of the world, just as they destroy themselves." —Sefer HaChinuch 529; 13th Century*

Justice: We in the US are 5% of the world's population, yet cause a quarter of all climate pollution. And who will rising sea levels and other climate changes harm most? People in the poorest countries.

- *"Justice, justice, you shall pursue, in order that you may live..." —Dvarim/Deuteronomy 16:20*
- *"God loves righteousness and justice; the Earth is full of God's loving-kindness." —Tehillim/Psalm 33:5*
- *"Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor ... Love your neighbor as yourself." —Vayikra/Leviticus 19:16-18*

Preserving life: Climate change will likely cause the spread of new diseases, longer heat waves, more intense hurricanes, food scarcity ...

- *"One is forbidden from gaining a livelihood at the expense of another's health." —Rabbi Isaac ben Sheshet, Resp. 196*
- *"Shabbat, like all the mitzvot (commandments), is pushed aside by danger to human life."*
—Rambam/Maimonides, MT Zmanim 2:1

Saving endangered species: Everything's part of the plan, yet global warming moves too fast for most of Creation to adapt, threatening many species and whole ecosystems.

- *"Even those creatures you deem superfluous in the world — like flies, fleas, and gnats — nevertheless have their allotted task in the scheme of Creation." —Midrash Shmot Rabbah/Commentary on Exodus 10:1*
- *"It should not be believed that all beings exist for the sake of humanity's existence ... [rather] all the other beings, too, have been intended for their own sakes..." —Rambam/Maimonides, Guide of the Perplexed III*

The Precautionary Principle: We must take action even in an uncertain situation.

- *“When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof, so that you do not bring bloodguilt on your house if anyone should fall from it.” —Dvarim/Deut. 22:8*
... from which Rambam/Maimonides deduces:
- *“Similarly with all potentially dangerous objects. Remove them far from yourselves and from the way of the community.” —MT Hilchot De'ot*
- *“A burning object left in a place where the public can be injured by it — one is allowed to extinguish it [even on Shabbat], whether it’s of metal or of wood.”—Yosef Caro in Shulchan Aruch, Oreh Hayim 334:27*
- *“A sick person in danger—we attend to all their needs on Shabbat, at the advice of skilled local healer. If there is a doubt whether or not we need to violate the Shabbat for them — or if one doctor says to ... but another doctor says there’s no need — we violate the Shabbat for them, since [even] doubtful danger to human life pushes aside the Shabbat.” —Rambam/Maimonides, MT Zmanim 2:1*
- *“... We don’t need an expert [to save a life by violating other laws like Shabbat], since ... [even] doubtful danger to human life [makes the law] lenient. And it’s forbidden to delay the [treatment]...”*
—Tur, Oreh Hayim 328
- Yosef Caro adds: *“The one who rushes to [take action in an uncertain case of danger to human life], look, this is praiseworthy! But the one who [stops to] ask, look, this is a murderer.”*

A sample *drash* on climate change:

The First & Last Generation, by Rabbi Shoshana Meira Friedman

Delivered at Adas Israel in Washington, DC, on the eve of the People's Climate March, April 29, 2017

Shabbat shalom! At family holidays and gatherings, my father has raised a glass with tears glistening in his eyes to toast to my great grandparents. All eight of my great grandparents came over to this country, leaving behind their entire world. Some of them came as young teenagers, and never saw their family again.

I was raised with deep gratitude for these immigrants, who had the foresight and the courage to leave Europe when they did. The branches of my family that did not come over in the early years of 20th century died in the Holocaust. Had my great-grandparents not made the journey, I would not be free, or even alive. I know many of us in this room have similar stories.

My great-grandparents were part of a tide of immigrants who sought life and thriving in America. They did what was necessary so that their children and grandchildren could live as free Jews here. Now it's our turn to do what is necessary, for the sake of our great-grandkids, and for the millions of people currently alive today who are already feeling the effects of climate chaos. If we don't address climate change, there is no *goldene medina*, no golden land, to sail away to. Our descendants will live on a livable planet or they won't live at all. This is the job we have being born now. We are the first generation to feel the effects of climate change and we are the last to be able to do anything about it.

One of the most phenomenal and noteworthy religious events of last year was *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis' encyclical on climate change. This global religious leader claims, "The human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together. We cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation. The Earth herself," he writes, "burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and malreated of our poor. She groans in travail. We have forgotten that we are ... made up of her elements."

But we as Jews don't need to go to the Pope to know this connection! Torah teaches us many ways in which social justice is linked to how we treat the land, to how we allocate her riches to each other, and how we spiritually understand ourselves in relationship to her. We are taught to let the land rest every seven years and to remit debts at the same time, to leave the corners of the field and the fallen gleanings for the poor, and to understand rain or drought as a direct mirror of the health of our relationship to God, a sign how well we are holding up our end of the Covenant.

We as Jews care about the neighbor, the stranger, and *l'dor va'dor*, the continuity of generations; we care about Israel with her fragile ecology, and those great low-lying Jewish lands of Manhattan and Florida that are at risk from rising seas. We care about the sick, the hungry, and the vulnerable among human beings and animals. So we care about climate. This work ultimately brings us together, as Jews, as Americans, as global citizens. We belong in this movement.

But how do we address a threat that is so powerful, so overwhelming? How do we orient ourselves in the face of it? How do we avoid being paralyzed by the obstacles, feeling despair at the odds, and burning out from the hard work? These are questions I am struggling with every day, so I offer not solid answers, but three ideas that help me. I offer them to you, and hope they are useful in all our struggles for justice.

Love. We draw strength not from rosy pictures or false optimism, but from fierce love for life. Love for our children, love for people across the globe whom we will never meet, love for the birds we see on our porches and love for the buzzing vibrancy of thousands of species in the tropical forests. Love for our home – quite literally our own neighborhoods and houses, but also this great Home that is the biosphere.

When I tune into that love and all that is at risk, I feel sorrow and I feel anger, and yet I am lifted out of paralyzing despair. I find an inner strength that is my birthright as a human being with a conscience. This love has helped me wake up and get more and more involved, and the more involved I get, the more love I feel.

Bring our own gifts. As I'm sure the DC community understands, I used to think policy was the only way to make a real difference. I felt terrible guilt when I discovered that I wasn't drawn to working in policy! When I finally let myself off the hook for this imaginary ideal, I was able to bring my own gifts to this movement. We each have gifts we can bring to social change, and thank God they are not all the same. We need parents, poets, writers, analysts, people who can facilitate meetings, people who can arrange carpools. We need people with loud voices and people who can sing and cry and comfort the weary. We need people willing to risk arrest and people to feed the kids lunch. We need educators, administrators, and visionaries. With all of these skills together, we need bold action in the public arena, not just private life style changes. The stories of great social transformation, from Abolition to marriage equality, are stories of a tide of human beings in different strata of society realizing an injustice and working to change it. The courts and lawmakers and industry follow our lead.

Sacred story. As religious people, we know the power of sacred story. Coming out of Egypt, receiving Torah, wandering in the wilderness... these stories help us navigate our lives and become at home in the world. Sacred stories are crucial to our ability to sustain climate change work, and indeed any justice work where the odds are daunting and the stakes are sky high. One sacred story that inspires me these days is from Paul Hawken's book *Blessed Unrest*. Hawken describes a great global movement to protect the future from the forces that would squander it to satisfy greed in the present. This movement includes all those working for so many causes, including democracy, conservation, healthy food systems, the rights of women, children, the poor, and indigenous peoples, and animals the world over. Hawken likens the movement to an immune system. It springs up organically from the organism of the living Earth. It is decentralized and robust.

When I understand myself as a cell in this immune system, I feel energized and hopeful. I don't know if we will win, if we will keep warming under 2 degrees Celcius or be able to deal with the consequences of even that much. Honestly, the odds are not good. But I know that being part of the resistance and holding vision of a just future is holy and obligatory work. It is the tremendous opportunity of those of us living right now, in the first generation to feel the effects of climate change and the last to be able to do anything about it.

Faith. We as a religious community are called to lead the charge on climate, not only because a strong prophetic and moral voice is needed to take on powerful systems of oppression, but because this movement needs faith. Faith, in this case, doesn't mean blind trust it will all be ok. It means faith that showing up for justice matters - that it matters to other people around the country and the world, it matters to our children and people reading the histories of our time years from now, it matters to ourselves when we look in the mirror and I believe it matters to G!d. History cherishes the stories of those who stand up for justice even when they are not obviously successful in their time. It is a terrifying but beautiful opportunity to summon kind of faith that we need right now, as the climate science continues to be bleak but our movement continues to grow.

When we are faced with giant challenges, and odds of success are really small, we are not called on to be successful — we are called on to be faithful. I love this line, which I learned from my interfaith activist mentors: We are not called on to be successful; we are called on to be faithful. We will work like hell for success, but we actually have no control over it, and we can burn ourselves out and drive ourselves crazy trying to have control. Instead, we can work in a way that bears witness to the love we feel for life: it is the same love that gave my young great grandparents the courage to cross an ocean and leave behind everything they knew. It is the same love that draws us to serve our families, the world, and God.

This kind of radical devotion makes room for all emotions — hope, fear, grief, joy, even rage. It just doesn't make room for sitting out.

Thank you for being cells in the immune system together. *Shabbat shalom.*