

Climate for Change

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5779 – September 10, 2018

Temple Beth Torah – Fremont, California

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On this day of Rosh Hashanah, my heart yearns to rejoice. It is uplifting for us to be together, to join in prayer and lift our voices in song. The sounding of the shofar awakens us to the grace of God's goodness.

And yet, in my soul, there is an ache that is profound. I have felt a pervasive sadness that affects me deeply. For the longest time I have not had the words to describe what I am feeling. I have not known how to name this experience. Somewhere in my soul I know that I am experiencing something akin to grief. Yet I have lacked the words to share this powerful sense of loss.

However, two weeks ago, I read an article that touched not only my mind but also my soul. It gives voice to my sense of loss. It names what I have been feeling. It provides a framework for understanding my grief.

Perhaps you are carrying a similar feeling - an unnamed spiritual sense of loss. So allow me to share with you insights gleaned from an essay written for Sojourner, a monthly Christian magazine that seeks to integrate spiritual renewal and social justice. The author, Katharine Preston, entitles her article, "Mourning for the Earth." It is not written from a scientific perspective, nor does it address the political, economic, and social issues of a changing climate. Instead, Katharine Preston pinpoints about how climate change affects our souls.¹

Most of us this morning are aware of the phenomena of a changing climate. We acknowledge the inconvenient truth that human actions are directly impacting our planet. Global temperatures are rising from the increasing release of greenhouse gases from burning fossil fuels. Oceans are warming, ice caps are melting, storms are more powerful, and droughts more widespread. We see in our mind's eye "the majestic polar bear mother with her cub on a shrinking ice flow, or the head of state of a small island nation pleading with delegates at yet another international conference to save his homeland from disappearing under the rising ocean waves."

Here in the United States, at this time last year, two hurricanes - Harvey and Maria - brought unprecedented devastation to Houston and Puerto Rico. There is little doubt by the scientific community that the intensity of these storms is a result of climate change.

In California, we have experienced severe drought six of the last seven years. The period between 2011 and 2014 was the driest in California's history since record keeping began.²

We are acutely aware of the horrific fires that have scorched California, claiming lives, destroying homes and structures, including our beloved Camp Newman, and displacing thousands. Experts agree that global warming, with higher temperatures, less rain, and drier landscapes have greatly increased the risk and intensity of wildfires. Our brave first responders are taxed to the maximum.

Climate change produces another threat linked to flooding. Melting polar caps lead to rising oceanic levels. The impact is not something that will happen far off in the future. A study by the Union of Concerned Scientists predicts that in 17 years, less than two decades from now, 170 coastal communities will experience chronic flooding, including cities here in the Bay Area.

“Economically vulnerable communities are especially hard-hit by these extreme weather patterns as fishing, farming, and tourism jobs are lost, as property is destroyed, and as extreme heat or cold threaten health.”³ There is increasing sense of urgency that we are reaching a point where human life on the planet will be increasingly under threat

Most likely, you have heard before many of these descriptions of a changing climate. I know I have been aware of human impact on the environment literally for decades. More than 40 years ago, I attended the University of California at Santa Cruz, which even then was a strong proponent of environmental consciousness. We had our communal farm and community garden which were internationally known for modeling organic horticulture and agriculture.

42 years ago, I gave up eating meat, in part because I read Frances Moore Lappe's *Diet for a Small Planet*. I was convinced that protein from cattle and fowl was not only obviously destructive to living creatures, it is also highly inefficient. In addition, large scale factory farms cause harm to the environment.

Over the years, I've tried to help the environment by adhering to the 3 R's of Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle. At our home, we adhere to guidelines for composting.

Judaism is meant to reinforce our spiritual connection to the earth. We celebrate the fall harvest during Sukkot. When Tu B'Shevat rolls around, we delight in joining our children in celebrating the holiday of the trees. This very morning of Rosh Hashanah is not only the beginning of the new Jewish year; we proclaim that this day commemorates God's creation of the world. It is the birthday of the world. Yom HaRat Ha'Olam – on this day the *spirit of the Eternal hovered over the deep*. God said, '*Let there be light and there was light.*'

But truth be told, on this day I do not see the light. I do not feel fully joyful. There is a lingering unease I feel deep in my soul.

Not until I read Katharine Preston's "Mourning for the Earth," have I found words that address climate change from a spiritual perspective. Preston provides a framework for talking about climate change that profoundly connects to the human experiences of loss and grief.

She writes that in this age what we are losing is our accustomed relationship to the planet. We have lost the confidence that we are bestowing to future generations a world that is more secure, more inhabitable, and more welcoming. "We are the first generation of people who now know that our children's grandchildren will indeed not walk the same Earth. They will live on a planet so less hospitable and predictable than it is now that it is unimaginable to us."

Words barely express our sense of loss and grief. Yet, Preston notes that grief in itself is not static. “Grief is a process, not a state of being.” There is no cure for grief. But there can be different stages in this journey.

Katharine Preston then draws upon the work of Dr. Steve Running, a scientist who first coined the phrase “climate grief.” When I first read that term, ‘climate grief,’ it hit me like a thunderbolt for it encapsulates my own experience.

Dr. Running draws upon the work of psychiatrist, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, who identified different stages in the grieving process. Running links our grieving for the planet to five specific stages. They are:

- Denial
- Anger
- Bargaining
- Depression
- Acceptance.

Let’s take them in order as they apply to five stages of ‘climate grief.’ The first is denial that the earth is warming due to human action. Despite overwhelming scientific evidence of climate change, we know that corporate entities for decades have issued a blizzard of obfuscations and outright lies meant to confuse the public and preserve their profits.

Yet, even if many of us intellectually accept that climate change is real, it is tempting for us to deny that change impacts us. We think it’s happening to somebody else– to poor people in faraway lands. Or to future generations 50 or 100 years from now.

Living here in the Bay Area, which is such a spectacularly beautiful region, it’s tempting to deny there are threats to our way of life. We hike in the hills, glory in the Bay, and relish the Pacific Ocean. All seems so well.

But deep down, we know better. A poem by Bob Hicok expresses a truth. It begins:

The water's rising

But we're not drowning yet.

When we're drowning

We'll do something.

When we're on our roofs.

When we're deciding between saving

The cute baby or the smart baby.

When there aren't enough helicopters

Or news crews to circle

Over everyone. When sharks

Are in the streets. (When people are dying.) When people

With wine cellars

Are dying. We'll build dams

And dikes, put stilts

On our V-8s and golf courses,

Cut down anyone

Who cuts down a tree...

We'll grow wings, we'll go

To the moon. Soon.⁴

Denial is the first stage of climate grief. The second stage is Anger. A portion of our anger is directed at public officials who deny climate change and deregulate policies meant to protect the environment and the health of our citizenry. Some of us are angry at a president who is hell-bent on reversing the protections of previous administrations: pulling-out of the Paris Accord, propagating the falsehood of 'clean coal,' stripping the Environmental Protection Agency of regulatory power, and appointing officials who are either incompetent or beholden to corporate interests.

Our anger, however, cannot be focused just on Washington. We ourselves can be irritated when we are admonished to use water more wisely. We are aggravated by the calls to be more mindful of our consumption: don't print that article on your computer, think of the tree you will save. Don't drive that SUV, think of all the gas it guzzles. Don't use a plastic bag for groceries, bring your own. Don't drink from a plastic straw, think of all the waste that goes into the water and harms aquatic life.

Denial and Anger, are followed by the third stage, Bargaining. We bargain with ourselves thinking that with climate change, it won't be all bad. With the melting icecaps, think of the shipping lanes that will open for commerce to move freely year round. Think of previously uninhabitable places that will become accessible for tourism. Think of the growing seasons that will be extended in some places. Think of the milder winters in the Midwest and Northeast. In March you can go to New York City and instead of a winter coat you can wear shorts!

We bargain that science will find answers to climate change. They will invent giant scrubbers that clear the atmosphere of carbon dioxide. We will learn how to seed clouds with chemicals that will bring rain to parched lands. We'll colonize the Moon and eventually Mars. It will be a challenge, but heck, if Matt Damon's character, Mark Watney, can survive on Mars, surely we can too!

The fourth stage of climate grief is Depression. We feel enormous sadness at the almost unimaginable scope of our self-destruction. How could all this be happening in our lifetime? It all seems so overwhelming. Gigantic multinational corporations operate at a level we barely comprehend. Even if we get a handle on things here in

the United States, other countries, especially China, are causing great harm not only to their own populations but globally as well.

It all seems too much, leaving us numb and immobilized.

But if we acknowledge these four stages of grief, we do not need to be paralyzed. If we bring to mind our attempts at Denial, if we can recognize our Anger at our government and ourselves, if we stop Bargaining that it all won't be so bad, if we acknowledge how Depressed we feel about the peril we face, then we can take the next step in our process of climate grief, we can reach Acceptance. Acceptance of the reality of our feelings. Acceptance of the enormity of the challenges we face. Acceptance that we are more than passive players in the most important drama of our age.

In two days, people from all over the world are gathering in San Francisco to participate in a Summit for Global Climate Action. Convened by Governor Jerry Brown, the mission of the summit accepts that "the tide has turned in the race against climate change." This tidal turn is not for the better. However, the summit seeks to mobilize bold new commitments to combat our deteriorating climate.

I am proud that our governor is a global advocate for addressing climate change. Neither should we think that we are powerless to effect change. We can begin by giving our attention to this summit, monitoring it online or however we receive our news.

There are additional actions we can and must take. In two months, our nation will hold mid-term elections on November 6. Every Congressional seat and 1/3 of the Senate are up for election. Study the candidates' positions on the environment. Give of your resources to candidates both locally and nationally who reflect your perspective on climate change. Above all, be sure to vote.

In this regard, our congregation's Social Action Committee is taking the lead. They have attached to grocery bags for the High Holiday Food Drive a postcard. It reminds us that "As Americans, we know nothing changes until we act. As Jews, we

know that where there is room to act, there is reason for hope.” Put this postcard on your refrigerator as a reminder to vote.

In addition, a few weeks from now, the committee will hold a voter registration drive. On Sunday morning, September 30, registrars will be here at Temple. Remember: you can't vote if you aren't registered. If there are young adults in your family who are eligible to vote but have not registered, nag them endlessly until they sign-up! It is not only a sacred duty to vote, it is a sacred duty of parents to nudge!

We can take further action here in our congregation. At Temple Beth Torah, let's make this a year when we reduce our use of plastic goods. Yes, it is convenient to throw away plastic cutlery and cups. But we can do better. Compostable cutlery, plates, and cups are increasingly available and the price for these items continues to decrease. At our onegs and our social functions, let's all take responsibility to reduce, recycle, and compost.

Let's take pride in being a Greener Congregation. In the coming year, let's strive to bring our garden back to life. Let us cultivate this tiny little corner of the planet as a place for children to pick ripe tomatoes. Let us grow fruits and vegetables to be enjoyed not only at congregational meals but also given with gladness to the people we serve at the Abode Shelter.

In this coming year, let's join hands in greening our world. We can do so at home as well as in our communal home, Temple Beth Torah.

I know it's a hard challenge, a daunting challenge, to address climate change and its impact on our lives. It can feel completely overwhelming. But I believe that we can journey through the five stages of climate grief: from Denial to Anger; from Bargaining to Depression; and then to Acceptance. But as Jews, let us be sure to add a sixth stage that is essential to our journey. Acceptance alone is not the final step, for beyond Acceptance there is Action.

Action is the moral imperative of being a Jew. It means being God's partner in Creation and taking responsibility for our stewardship of the earth; of being upstanders for children around the globe and the hundreds of millions who live in impoverished nations who are most impacted by climate change. We fulfill our destiny as a light unto the nations when we partner with people of all faiths – Christian, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Sikhs – who share our love for Mother Earth and seek to protect her.

There is no better time to begin than today on Rosh Hashanah. Yes, it is possible that a sermon about climate change can make us feel overwhelmed and sad. But we can take heart from a passage that is from the Biblical Book of Nehemiah.

More than two thousand years ago, Ezra the priest gathered all the Israelites to read to them the words of Torah. It was Rosh Hashanah. For many of the Israelites who had recently lived in exile, the Torah's teachings were unfamiliar. The Israelites had lost their way and were unaware of Torah's meaning. As a result, the people were saddened, even grief stricken as they realized all the ways they had transgressed. "For all the people were weeping as they listened to the words of the Torah."⁵

But then Ezra instructed the people on Rosh Hashanah and proclaimed, "This day is holy to Adonai your God: you must not mourn or weep. Go, eat choice foods and drink sweet drinks and send portions to those who have nothing prepared since this day is holy to our Eternal One. Do not be sad, for your rejoicing in the Eternal is the source of your strength."

Let us heed the words of wisdom offered by Ezra the Scribe. Let us not be sad and grief stricken on this day. Let us eat and drink and rejoice in our faith in God. We can perceive climate change as something that is happening to us. Yet we are capable of transforming climate grief to a climate for change.

Let us be strong and clear-minded. Let us lift our spirits and vow to bring healing to our damaged world. This will take courage and boldness. We can educate ourselves, vote our conscience, and take actions to better our world. In this New Year of 5779, let us vow to choose life and blessing, abundance and peace.

Amen.

1. <https://www.utne.com/environment/the-reality-of-climate-change-zm0z13ndzlin>
2. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Droughts_in_California#2011%E2%80%932017
3. <https://urj.org/what-we-believe/resolutions/resolution-addressing-impacts-climate-change>
4. “Hold your breath: a song of climate change,” Bob Hicok, *The New York Times Magazine*, September 9, 2018
5. Nehemiah, chapter 8, verse 9.