

How Religion Will Save Our Planet

Rosh Hashanah – I Tishrei 5780 – September 30, 2019

Rabbi Adam Stock Spilker – Mount Zion Temple

It is an unsettling feeling to be standing in a place of absolute stunning, natural beauty and feel sick to your stomach. This summer my family was able to travel to Iceland, to hike behind cascading waterfalls and on moon-like surfaces and alongside steaming geysers. On the day we hiked on the glacier called Solheimajokull, we first stood by a makeshift sign stuck into the ground showing the place that the glacier reached a decade ago. Beyond the sign lay a long stretch of desolate terrain in front of the glacier in the far distance. At that moment, in my awe of the landscape, the clean, quiet air, and aware of the cataclysmic changes happening to our planet, I knew that I would be speaking about our climate crisis on this Rosh Hashanah.

I also knew that I would have to pronounce the name of the glacier. And let me tell you, it is not easy to pronounce Icelandic words. In 2010, when the major volcano erupted in Iceland and affected world travel and weather, news anchors resorted to calling the volcano E15 for the 15 letters in eight syllables that followed the E. E-Y-J-A-F-J-A-L-L-A-J-O-K-U-L-L. Seth Meyers went on SNL Weekend Edition and said he finally figured it out. It is pronounced, “volcano”. In case you are curious, the volcano’s name is pronounced, *Eyjafjallajokull*.ⁱ

We are living in a critical time, but we don’t all know it. How does one ever know that historians of the future will consider whatever years you are in to be pivotal? History does not announce itself and say, “this is the moment your children and grandchildren will ask you what you did and what choices you made?”

This is a moment of *hitorrerut*, waking up. This Rosh Hashanah day is the day of commemorating our creation, but not the first day of creation, nor the second to fifth days. Midrash teaches that Rosh Hashanah commemorates the sixth day, the birth of humanity, and the beginning of our responsibility for the world that preceded us.ⁱⁱ

Rosh Hashanah is not mentioned anywhere in the *Tanakh*, our Bible. There is a Day of Remembrance, of Sounding the Shofar, but not a Rosh of the Shanah, a beginning of the year, not until our exile in Babylon and not fully until rabbinic times and even then, there was ambivalence about a holy day about remembrance and the shofar being the new year especially in the seventh month of the year. If we are to embrace this holy day as a new year, then it should be about a return to our story of creation and our role in it.

We have language from our tradition to recover awe and wonder of nature. The myth of creation can give us meaning and most importantly, hope and resilience, as we face the climate crisis. And it is this spiritual dimension of our relationship to nature that will elevate our conversations about climate change, lifting them above politics.

When it comes to caring for our planet, three different realms intersect: science, politics, and religion. There are also three fundamental questions about climate change. If we situate each in a different realm, our conversations may achieve better action.

1. Is there climate change?
2. Did we humans have anything to do with it?
3. And can we do anything about it?

The first question belongs to science. The second to politics and the third, I would argue, to religion. Let me explain.

Is there climate change? Standing before the glacier in Iceland certainly made it clear. A museum in Reykjavik, capital of the land of fire and ice, has models of the disappearing glaciers showing that all would be gone within 150-200 years which may sound like a long time, but along the way our planet will be forever altered. Iceland held a memorial service this summer for the first glacier that is now completely gone. 97% of climate scientists have proven beyond any reasonable doubt that our earth is heating up.ⁱⁱⁱ The five warmest years on record have been the past five years.^{iv} Is there climate change? This question is proven scientifically.

The question of what caused this crisis I consider to be in the realm of politics. Yes, science has a clear answer, so I wish it were not in the realm of politics. But wishing is not the same as reality. The challenge with talking about what is causing climate change is that there are many competing interests, different industries which will lose market share with regulations. When there are interests, there is money and influence, and thus politics. With politics comes concern about partisanship. I want to name that and say clearly, we are not entering the realm of partisan politics in this sanctuary.

The last question is most important: can we do anything about climate change? If we want the answer to be yes, solutions will come from science and politics, but I suggest this question belongs to religion. Religion can help us with values-clarification to look beyond short-term interests for future generations. It is also a question for religion because frankly the scientific predictions can be frightening and cause us to lose hope. It might not happen this year with Greta Thunberg's popular school strikes and her demand that world leaders start panicking, but what about in three years and five and ten as more and more fires, floods, and hurricanes batter larger numbers of populations. Tens of millions of people are expected to become refugees because of the climate. Nations that are poor and people who are poor will be disproportionately affected by climate change. Will nations and people with wealth, who have resources to protect them, do the right thing, act with justice, and not lose hope?

These are questions for religion, for our spiritual values. While science approaches the planet as a problem to solve, religion looks upon it as a mystery to revere.^v

If you revere something, you will work harder to preserve it. The Hebrew word *tov*, "good" appears seven times in the first chapter of Genesis. Again, and again, after speaking the world into being, "God saw that it was good." Anytime a word appears seven times in the Torah, it is the most important theme for that Torah chapter.

Then there is this gorgeous, ancient midrash: “Upon creating the first human beings, God guided them around the Garden of Eden. God said:

‘Look at My creations! See how beautiful and perfect they are! I created everything for you. Make sure you don’t ruin or destroy My world. If you do, there will be no one after you to fix it.’”^{vi}

If you think about it, you might not expect an ancient text to care so much about the planet. Compared to our world since the industrial revolution and recent awareness of the precariousness of our planet, was there that much harm being done long ago? Yet from fifteen-hundred years ago come these prescient and prophetic words: “There will be no one after you to fix it.”

Today there are millennials who are choosing not to have children because they feel it is irresponsible to bring more people into our world. “Be fruitful and multiply,” is the first commandment to Adam and Eve. To be afraid of our future that much to choose not to have children! Can you imagine?

The Torah continues after being fruitful and multiplying: “...and replenish the earth and master it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and the flyer of the heaven, and every live creature that creeps on the earth.” (Gen 1:28). We are unapologetically in control in our creation myth. The Torah privileges humanity made in the divine image. We have dominion over other creatures. But this privilege is about responsibility. “There will be no one after you to fix it.”

In Genesis, *Bereishit*, chapter 2, an alternate creation story, our role is clearly to till and tend the land *לְעֹבְדָהּ וּלְשָׁמְרָהּ*. (Gen 2:15). And to give us a little humility, we are told that the gnat was created on day five, well before us.

Our story of creation is not meant to be taken literally, that would be blaspheme, a *hillul hashem*. It is our way of perceiving God’s role in the world, of affirming mystery. It means seeing the Presence of God within all existence which can go hand in hand with evolution.

If we see nature through the lens of awe and wonder, what Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel calls radical amazement, we can, as we must, affirm science and still praise God.

Pope Francis understands this. In August he said, “We have caused a climate emergency that gravely threatens nature and life itself, including our own.”^{vii} In his 2015 encyclical called *Laudato Si*, he writes: “The creation accounts in the book of Genesis contain, in their own symbolic and narrative language, profound teachings about human existence and its historical reality. They suggest that human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself. According to the Bible, these three vital relationships have been broken, both outwardly and within us.”

This focus on relationships is underscored in a proverb that has been shared since the 1970s: “We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children.”

It is underscored in the cleaning supply brand called *Seventh Generation* which comes from the Native American idea that we should think of the impact of our chemicals and our actions not just for our children or their children, but down the line, seven generations.

Which brings us to action and what we can do.

This is about our personal responsibility in the realms of religion, science, and politics. Religion supplies the language, purpose, values, and the hope; science, the instruments of change; and politics – as the realm of collective action in society – the wherewithal to act together.

On an individual level, you should know a few facts about climate change, not many. It takes only a few basic startling facts to awaken action. On November 20th, we will have a presentation at Mount Zion about climate change for our further learning.

And importantly, hold onto hope by speaking in spiritual terms: Here is what Torah teaches in summary: Creation is said to be good seven times, *v'yi tov*. Seven is the number of perfection. What do we do with what is inherently good? All the days of our creation myth suggest purpose, meaning, interconnectedness and limits. Humanity is created on the sixth day to instill both humility and the right to use our earth, to have dominion over it. But after one simple infraction, eating of one fruit – think about how many infractions against the earth you had just this week – after that one infraction, we lose our right to the garden of Eden. These are the messages of Torah.

We need to act. Don't shy away from small things. We are now composting at Mount Zion. Every plate, cup, or knife or fork you pick up from our oneg tables is compostable. Please place them in the green, compost bins.

Making small change is about building habits. A newspaper article earlier this year spoke about a man who went to the gym for 10 minutes a day for six weeks. Just 10 minutes. After that, going to the gym was a habit. He started going for longer. Making any change in one's life is figuring out how to make it less painful. I personally have Starbucks to thank for no longer using disposable cups for my coffee. Starbucks ran a promotion to buy their travel mug this past January. If you bought this particular mug, they would give you free coffee for a month. Thirty days was long enough for me to change my behavior and now I always use a travel mug and clean it at night before putting it in the car each morning. It is a daily reminder of doing my part. A very small part, but I am reminded, and I actually do it.

Actions can also be on a larger scale: insulating your home, putting solar panels on the roof, and dreaming up extraordinary actions. Ethiopia planted 353 million trees in just 12 hours this summer even while the Amazon burned. We must keep the faith doing such actions despite the tragedies and not lose hope.

In Minnesota, groups such as [Minnesota Interfaith Power and Light](#) are encouraging a commitment to moving to 100% renewable energy.^{viii} A few states have already done this this.

Minnesota is already a leader in renewable energy and can do even more.

On the global level, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has said that we must limit global warming to 2.7 degrees Fahrenheit over pre-industrial revolution levels in order to ensure a more sustainable and equitable society. We have already warmed up 1 degree, so now we need to limit it to 1.7 degrees more^{ix}.

Can we do it? I was born in the year we landed on the moon. That moon landing changed our view of what was possible as humans, and it happened because of a concerted effort over a decade during the 1960s. Fifty years later we need to dream not of a mission to Mars, but how to harness all scientific efforts to hold global warming to 2.7 degrees above pre-industrial levels by the end of this decade.

Yes, we do have the moral right to use our planet for our benefit, but we also have the moral responsibility to make sure it is there for future generations. Noah is said to have had 120 years to build his ark in order to warn his generation and have them change their ways. He was unsuccessful. That's right, our ancient midrash imagined Noah spending 120 years building the ark.^x We don't have 120 years; we maybe have 12.

In a year of the tragic horrors of Pittsburgh and Poway, when we have faced the most significant uptick of anti-Semitism in a generation and challenging connections to anti-Zionism--*as well as the tremendous and beautiful support for our community that far outstripped the hate in numbers and volume but could not erase the loss and fear*—in a year such as this, how do we spend precious moments not focused on our own security? The answer is self-evident. Humanity is facing an existential crisis. We potentially hold part of the key for solving it, a tradition of faith and hope, of universal human rights, and book-smarts for scientific discovery. We need to wake up, *hitorrerut*, and each of us do our part.

By the way, in case you forgot, it's pronounced Eyjafjallajokull. And it's our responsibility, the whole circle of *b'reishit*, God's creation, from Iceland to Antarctica, to the vulnerable urban coastal floodplains in Asia and Africa to San Francisco to Miami to Indonesia. It's time to wake up and hope and restore our faith in saving our planet and act now for our sakes and for the sake of our children's children, and all the generations to come.

ⁱ How to pronounce Eyjafjallajökull: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hSo_ND4I-6g

ⁱⁱ *Vayikra Rabbah* (Midrash on Leviticus) *Parashat Emor*, Parasha 29. This midrash dates the creation of the world to the 25th of Elul, making Rosh Hashanah the anniversary of the creation of humanity itself. The midrash places humans at the center of creation because we are the creatures who exercise immense power over the future of our planet.

ⁱⁱⁱ As quoted in “The Planet in Peril” by Rabbi Rachel Greengrass in the anthology [MORAL RESISTANCE AND SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY: OUR JEWISH OBLIGATION TO SOCIAL JUSTICE](#). “Authors of seven climate consensus studies – including Naomi Oreskes, Peter Doran, William Anderegg, Bart Verheggen, Ed Maibach, J. Stuart Carlton, and John Cook – co-authored a paper to settle the expert climate consensus question. The two key conclusions from the paper are as follows: 1) Depending on exactly how the expert consensus is measured, somewhere between 90-100% agree that humans are responsible for climate change, and most of the studies find 97% consensus among publishing climate scientists; and 2) the greater the climate expertise among those surveyed, the higher the consensus on human-caused global warming. J. Cook et al, “Consensus on Consensus: A Synthesis of Consensus Estimates on Human-Caused Global Warming,” *Environmental Research Letter*, 11, no. 4 (April 13, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/11/4/048002>.”

^{iv} According to NASA and NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) of the US.

^v Ellen Bernstein, [The Splendor of Creation](#), p. 3.

^{vi} *Kohelet Rabbah* (Midrash on Ecclesiastes) 7:13.

^{vii} From an address on August 28, 2019.

^{viii} 100percentmn.org and <https://mnipl.org>

^{ix} https://report.ipcc.ch/sr15/pdf/sr15_spm_final.pdf

^x *Breishit Rabbah* (Midrash on Genesis) 30:7