



Climate on the Bimah

VOTE: Committing Ourselves to Climate Justice and Beloved Community 2020

Dvar Torah Notes

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Shabbat Sukkot, October 2-3, 15 *Tishrei* 5781, and *Sukkot II*, October 3-4, 16 *Tishrei* 5781

Sukkot I (on Shabbat)

Torah Reading: Leviticus 22:26-23:44, Numbers 29:12-16 and Haftarah: Zechariah 14:1-21

Sukkot II

Torah Reading: Leviticus 22:26-23:44, Numbers 29:12-16 and Haftarah: I Kings 8:2 - 8:21

How can our Jewish communities take action on climate change right now?

As Jews, we are responsible for the impact of our choices in the world. And one of the biggest impacts we have in the world each day is through our use of fossil fuels. Burning fossil fuels for our energy and for our transportation is pouring heat-trapping climate pollution into our atmosphere, hurting our neighbors here and around the world.

This *Sukkot*, as we spend time outdoors and contemplate our interconnectedness with each other and the natural world, let's commit to protect our world from more harm: to move our economy off of fossil fuels, to clean our air and repair our damaged climate. And one of the most important ways we can live out that Torah this fall is to vote!

In a *drash* or when gathering with family in your *sukkah*, invite folks to request a mail-in ballot (Maryland and Virginia voters; DC registered voters will be mailed a ballot and do not need to request one), vote safely, and help to choose leaders who share our commitment to repairing our damaged climate. If your community is gathering online and it fits your community's practice to do so, we invite you to provide a few minutes, while you sing a *nigun* or play a few minutes of music, such as [this song](#) (4:18 minutes) from Romemu to words from the *Maariv* service: "Spread over us your *sukkah* of peace." You can place this link in the chat: <https://ipldmv.org/vote>, or share it with your community after Shabbat and *hag*. All who wish can click on that link to open a form that will walk them step-by-step through making sure they're registered to vote and have a chance to request a vote-by-mail ballot. Additionally, and whether or not you live in Maryland, you can text MDLCV – for "Maryland League of Conservation Voters" – to 52886 and our friends at the League of Conservation Voters can help you find the same information.

Notes for grounding a *drash* on climate change in the themes of *Sukkot*:

Sukkot marks a change in seasons, and as the holiday concludes, we will recite "*geshem*," an elaborate liturgical prayer for rain, after which Jewish communities re-insert the words "*mashiv haruach u'morid hageshem*" into the daily liturgy of the *Amidah* prayer, praising the One who causes wind to blow and rain to fall. Our ancestors understood their dependence on the rhythms of the natural world, only praising God's role as a rainmaker when rain was in season.

As the climate crisis unmoors us from the rhythm of seasons and patterns of rainfall on which our ancestors relied, we can reflect on what it means that, too often, human beings have become the driving force in the Earth's climate, that we, too, now cause wind to blow and rain to fall. That said, we can also find hope in the liturgical changes at this time of year, remembering to appreciate the blessing and creative power of the wind, literally "*ruach*," or spirit, which can be a source of clean renewable energy.

A Warming Climate Is Changing Sukkot, by Jordan Salama

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/14/opinion/sukkot-climate-change.html>

In our town, fall weather has always meant the harvest holiday was near. Now, I fear that connection will be lost.

"... To me, that is what Sukkot is about. It's not only a religious holiday but also a seasonal one that asks us to remember a time when understanding the intricacies of the living world around us was not only crucial to a successful harvest season, but a matter of survival. I guess it's fitting that for me the arrival of Sukkot has always been announced by the feeling that autumn is here – but lately, in a world where summers are growing longer, I can't help but be reminded that it might not last.

"Now, so many of us are lucky to sleep with solid roofs over our heads rather than thatched ones. We buy our food from expansive supermarkets. We live in houses and buildings with walls so tough it is never questioned whether or not they could withstand the autumn winds. We pass our days in the protected enclaves of cities and suburbs that allow us the luxury of forgetting, and of caring, that our very existence is ruled by this land where we live, that if we take too much we will suffer the consequences.

"This year's weather patterns have come in following a summer of heat and furor over the damage caused by such carelessness ... Over a warming climate that will cause catastrophic damage to people in places that have less stable roofs and walls as ours, places that world leaders do not seem to care enough about to do something until it will be too late for them, too.

"We must make an effort to notice the detailed inner-workings of our surroundings and rejoice in them – things as simple as the fall breeze, the leaves changing color, the comings and goings of the rains – no matter how urban or modern or developed our lives may seem, no matter how removed we may feel from the natural world around us. We must remember the *Sukkot* lesson of

sleeping beneath the stars every once in a while, so that we will never forget our place in the circle. So that we can keep things moving in the right direction, changing in the ways that they should, and not as they shouldn't."

Sukkot Highlights Climate Change by Sarah Horvath

<https://jewishweek.timesofisrael.com/sukkot-highlights-climate-change/>

"The *sukkah* is fragile ... Over the week, *schach*, the greenery that covers the roof, starts to wilt and dry up, the decorations start to droop and the remains of the holiday meals are evident on the ground. A storm, however, can take down the *sukkah* or blow the *schach* off, rendering it unkosher.

"Our environment is equally fragile, as we know from the effects of climate change. We should remember that, like the *sukkah*, the environment needs care. Strong natural forces and human disregard have the ability to inflict detrimental consequences on our planet. Both are precarious.

"On Sukkot, we are commanded to bring together the *hadass*, a myrtle branch; the *etrog*, a citron fruit; the *lulav*, a close frond from the date palm tree; and the *aravah*, a willow branch. We bring those four items together and wave them during parts of the prayer. One accepted interpretation finds that the four species allude to body parts. The *hadass* represents the eye. The *etrog* represents the heart. The *lulav* represents the spine. The *aravah* represents the mouth.

"Consequently, use your eye, the *hadass*, to be aware of the dangers confronting our earth and the damage being done to our environment. Care about the environment and its effect, just like the *etrog's* beautiful heart. Just as a spine stands tough and strong, stay true to your convictions and stand up for them to bring about positive changes. Finally, use your mouth to speak up and become an advocate."

Canfei Nesharim has numerous Jewish educational resources about connecting *Sukkot* to water conservation for both children and adults: canfeinesharim.org/sukkot

Rav Kohenet Jill Hammer suggests that Jewish communities can incorporate the **Climate Ribbon Project** (<https://www.ritualwell.org/blog/altered-harvest-sukkot-and-climate-change>) into their *sukkot* decorations:

"The *sukkah* ... which reminds us that we are fragile beings, part of the natural world, can also remind us of our responsibility and commitment to change our ways. This year, decorate your *sukkah* in solidarity with the Climate Ribbon project. If you have the custom of building a *sukkah*, you can tie ribbons to its walls or roof. You can ask all who enter your *sukkah* to write on one of the ribbons something that they love, something they don't want to lose, or are already losing, to climate chaos. Others in the *sukkah* can read the ribbon aloud ... Make the Climate Ribbon ritual part of your mealtimes and ritual moments in the *sukkah* ... encourage guests to take a ribbon, tie

it around their wrists, and go home with it, symbolically promising to work to protect the things we all love about our planet. Together, we will weave a protective sukkah around our world, and make it a place of abundant harvest once again.”

In an **ELI Talk**, Sam Novey makes the Jewish case for always voting in every election:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zyCjBSeuFnk>

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.

Climate in the Pulpits / on the Bimah / in the Minbar is a collaboration between Faith Alliance for Climate Solutions, Interfaith Power & Light (DC.MD.NoVA), and Virginia Interfaith Power & Light.

Find more resources at IPLdmv.org/ClimatePulpitResources.