



RAC-CA High Holidays Sermon Campaign – Jewish Texts, Policy Backgrounder, and Sermon Themes

Overview

A Jewish Electoral Institute study from April 2022 surveyed 800 self-identified Jewish American voters and found that climate change is [one of the top three issues that most animate Jewish voters](#) (climate tied with voting rights and the third was the economy). Many URJ communities are experiencing the impacts of climate change, including wildfires, hurricanes, tropical storms, superstorms, and more. In August 2022, Congress and President Biden took a step towards addressing climate change through the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) which will begin the U.S. transition to a zero-emission economy by creating well-paid green jobs and funding environmental justice initiatives. The IRA is imperfect, though, as it will continue to allow increased fossil fuel extraction, especially impacting the health of Communities of Color who live near [these extractive industries](#). Even this step forward leaves us with much work to do.

As rabbis we are needed to address both the spiritual and communal impacts of the climate crisis and the opportunities for our communities to build resilience and take positive action together. Speaking about current and anticipated climate impacts is part of facing the new year with clarity and purpose. Given the seriousness of the situation, it is neither possible nor desirable to bring false comfort. Rather, it is time for facing realities, building communal resilience, and joining in bold action. We can take strength from the teaching that despite the greatness of the task, there are next steps right in front of us:

“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).

For all these reasons, the RAC and RAC-CA provide this resource for High Holiday Sermons, addressing climate change and environmental issues for 2022/5783.

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Sermon Theme 1: Waking Up to Catastrophe: Climate Change Is Here and a Vital Jewish Issue

[Lake Oroville, California](#)



Potential sermon messages on this theme include:

- Our people have a powerful history of not only surviving cataclysmic change but also remaking our lives and our Jewish practices to accompany us.
- It requires courage to turn proactively toward the realities of the climate crisis. We can build that courage together.
- Jewish rituals offer numerous moments and practices for slowing down, noticing both pain and beauty, and deepening our connections to nature and each other. For more on this theme, see *The Social Justice Commentary*, “Vayeitzei: Waking Up to Climate Change”, Rabbi Julie Saxe-Taller, pg. 41-46, CCAR Press.

Examples of current consequences of the changing climate:

Water shortages affect more than [3 billion](#) people worldwide. In the United States alone, [nearly half](#) the country is experiencing a drought after the hottest summer on record. 2021 summer temperatures exceeded temperatures during the Dust Bowl summer. This summer, Lake Mead—the country’s largest reservoir, formed by the Hoover Dam—recorded its lowest level since first filling in the 1930s, [200 feet below normal](#). The federal government has declared the first-ever shortages in the Colorado River, triggering [water cuts](#) through much of the seven-state water-sharing compact that has been in place for nearly a century.

Wildfires: Year-to-date acres burned for the US is [approximately 160% above the 10-year average](#), with over 90% of the total acres burned in Alaska, the Southwest, and Southern Areas. According to the National Wildland Fire Predictive Services, Southern California can “expect fires this fall to spread more rapidly, be more difficult to control and perhaps more critically, exhibit growth during conditions not normally associated with critical fire weather conditions. Recent years have seen fires spread rapidly, even during light winds or humid conditions.”

Rainfall intensifies as more evaporation leads to more moisture in the atmosphere. For example, we now know that the rainfall from Hurricane Harvey was 15 percent more intense and three times as likely to occur due to human-induced climate change. We also expect to see a higher frequency of Category 4 and 5 hurricanes as temperatures continue to rise. Scientists are confident that rising sea levels are leading to [higher storm surges and more floods](#). Around half of sea-level rise since 1900 comes from the expansion of warming oceans, triggered by human-caused global warming. The rest of the rise comes from [melting glaciers and ice sheets](#).

Sermon Theme 2: Climate Justice – Integrating Equity into Climate Solutions

Introduction: Climate change exacerbates existing gender, racial, economic and other inequalities. It also intersects with key issues such as housing and health care access. Around the globe, women have less access to resources such as land, credit, agricultural inputs, decision-making structures, and technology. Seventy percent of the 1.3 billion people living in poverty are women. In North America, climate impacts on lower income and majority People of Color communities are exacerbated by the health effects of disproportionate pollution in their neighborhoods and the structural imbalance of representation and influence in government that are needed to create solutions, to name just a few factors.

Potential sermon messages on this theme include:

- **Justice for All and Self-Interest are Intertwined** – many cultures tell the story of a person drilling a hole in their part of a boat, as if that hole would impact that person alone. Jewish lore tells this story in [Vayikra Rabbah 4:6](#). One example is the fight to stop drilling for oil and gas in California neighborhoods, where primarily (though not solely) lower income, majority Communities of Color are impacted by toxic emissions from the drilling. At the same time, global warming caused by the burning of fossil fuels adversely impacts all people, far beyond the borders of particular neighborhoods. The transition to a clean energy economy will be healthier for everyone.
- **Showing up as Jews:** Jewish values such as protecting our environment, access to health care, housing and other basic human rights add to the public discourse on the climate crisis. When we share wisdom, values, and culture from our tradition, we connect with other people of faith and strengthen the voice of the interfaith movement to address the crisis boldly. The story [The Rabbi and the Soapmaker](#) supports the message that our tradition is meant to be lived or “used” and not only to be a source of identity.

Examples:

- **Climate refugees are more likely to be women:** when displaced, women and girls are less able to access education, economic opportunities, and contraception. In Malawi and Mozambique in 2017, extreme floods and droughts caused dire poverty and food insecurity for many families, which put 1.5 million girls at risk of becoming child brides. UNICEF warned in 2015 that the total number of child brides across Africa could reach 310 million by 2050.
- **The practice of [redlining](#) labeled residents in Black neighborhoods as unsuitable borrowers,** locking Black families out of home ownership and entrenching racial wealth inequality and

residential segregation. Federal disinvestment from Black neighborhoods meant lower property values, making them more attractive to projects like highways and industrial sites that required cheap land. **Those same projects retain heat, contribute to poor air quality, and mean that the residents are experiencing some of the first and worst impacts of climate change.** All of these factors negatively impact residents' health. **Recent step forward: diesel air pollution is linked to asthma** and other health problems that cause students to miss school, particularly in Communities of Color and Tribal communities. **The new Bipartisan Infrastructure Law invests an unprecedented \$5 billion for low- and zero-emission school buses over the next five years.** These new, zero-emission and low-emission buses will not only reduce greenhouse gas emissions, but produce cleaner air for students, bus drivers, school staff working near the bus loading areas, and the communities that the buses drive through each day.

Further reading:

- [Understanding Why Climate Change Impacts Women More Than Men](#), *Global Citizen*, March 5, 2020.
- [During the two weeks of COP26, women will miss out on 2.5 million working days while fetching water](#), *EuroNews Green*, December 12, 2021.
- [Explainer: How gender inequality and climate change are interconnected](#), *UN Women*, February 28, 2022.
- [Even many decades later, redlined areas see higher levels of air pollution](#), *NPR*, March 10, 2022.
- [The next frontier in medicine: Doctors with climate training](#), *Grist*, March 24, 2022.
- [Past Racist "Redlining" Practices Increased Climate Burden on Minority Neighborhoods](#), *Scientific American*, January 21, 2020.

Sermon Theme 3: Climate Impacts on Young People and Their Mental Health

Introduction: Climate change is taking a [unique toll on the mental health of young people](#), including in our congregational communities. Young people are leading and involved in climate change activism, citing anxiety about their future on Earth.

Potential messages on this theme include:

- **Standing behind young leaders:** When children are born, we often cite the *midrash* that "Your children are good guarantors. For their sake I give the Torah" (Canticles Rabbah, 1:4). If it is the next generation that makes us worthy to inherit the Torah, adults must back youth leadership AND take responsibility for leading toward a sustainable future for them.
- **Responding to the Climate Crisis is an Essential Part of Parenting/Caring for the Next Generation:** In our time, teaching, learning together and participating with young people in addressing climate issues is akin to making sure our children know how to swim, as the Talmud teaches: "And some say [that a father is] also [obligated] to teach [his son] to swim in a river. [The Gemara asks:] What is the reason [for this]? It is [necessary for] his life, [i.e., this is potentially a lifesaving skill]. *Kiddushin* 30b.

Further reading:

- [The impacts of climate change put almost every child at risk](#), *UNICEF*.
- [Young Activists Denounce Climate Plans as 'Betrayal'](#), *Human Rights Watch*, November 8, 2021.
- [Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: a global survey](#), *The Lancet*, December 2021.

Sermon Theme 4: Teshuva with Indigenous People and Land as Part of Addressing the Climate Crisis

Introduction: In the U.S., we are all living on stolen land. This issue is often spoken of in the past tense, as if there were nothing to be done about it, but the theft of land and the erasure of Indigenous history are ongoing. Native peoples continue to fight for their land and sacred sites, and there are real opportunities for healing and collective *teshuva*. Native peoples have lived on Turtle Island (North America) for thousands of years, since before the dawn of the Industrial Age in which a new, extractive relationship with nature led to the environmental crisis we now face. Repairing this relationship must also include repairing our relationships with Native peoples and following Native leadership, particularly in climate movements. **You do not need to be an expert to open up this topic. We encourage you to tell your own stories (see Rabbi Lisa Delson's sermon starter below), invite Indigenous leaders to speak during or after the holidays, and connect with local Native organizations.**

Ethics of Mineral Mining on Sacred Land: Making the transition to a renewable energy economy requires critical minerals such as copper, aluminum, and nickel. Such minerals can be acquired through domestic mining or international trade, but the lands that we think of as US land also encompass ancestral Native lands and sacred sites, and their rights to these sites are a value that we also uphold, especially given the history of desecration of Jewish sacred sites. **The 150-year-old Mining Law of 1872 still governs U.S. domestic mining**, giving holders of valid mine claims an unfettered right to mine; **as a result, Indigenous peoples' lands and resources will suffer status quo American colonialist treatment until the 1872 law is reformed.** While we may need these minerals to fuel a renewable energy economy, standing as allies with Native people will mean also advocating for their rights to the land. Learning about this is part of being allies.

One example: Oak Flat (Indigenous name: Chí'chil Bítadagoteel), sixty miles east of Phoenix, Arizona, is a site sacred to the Apache, Zuni, Yavapai, O'odham, and Hopi peoples. **Mining under it will create a crater two miles wide and 1,000 feet deep - as deep as two Washington Monuments stacked on top of each other – akin to a crater beneath the Second Temple in Jerusalem.** It is the site of Indigenous coming-of-age ceremonies for some Indigenous young people. A 2014 federal defense spending bill included a last-minute provision to transfer the land to a mining company that wants to extract copper from the area, which will desecrate the sacred site. In addition, mining Oak Flat would spread toxic waste across thousands of acres of public land. **If the 1872 Mining Act is not reformed the U.S. government cannot refuse the company's right to extract, and the Indigenous peoples who worship in Oak Flat will lose their sacred space forever.**

Environmental Injustice: Under the Mining Law, mining interests are permitted to mine taxpayer-owned minerals without paying royalties, unlike other extractive industries. But when a mining company leaves behind an environmental mess, taxpayers bear the burden and nearby residents suffer serious health hazards (such as polluted drinking water) without any recourse for assistance.

- **Sermon Starter:**
 - Growing up in Dublin, Ohio, every summer we would go down to a park on the banks of the Scioto River where there was a statue of a Wyandot Native leader. We would climb the limestone bricks and bask at the beauty of the park and the river below. Never once did I learn or think about the fact that I grew up on stolen land, sacred and holy to another people. We should have talked about it then. We can do something about it now (Rabbi Lisa Delson). *You are welcome to start with Rabbi Delson's story and then share your own.*
- **Further reading:**
 - [The minerals used by clean-energy technologies](#), *Volts*, January 21, 2022.
 - [Facts about the 1872 Mining Law](#), EarthWorks
 - [Oak Flat: A place of prayer faces obliteration by a copper mine](#), *Arizona Central*, August 18, 2021.
 - [This land is sacred to the Apache, and they are fighting to save it](#), *The Washington Post*, April 12, 2021.
 - [This 150-Year-Old Mining Law Hurts Taxpayers and the Environment](#), *The New York Times*, July 28, 2022

Selected Jewish Sources relevant to the Climate Crisis

There are an unlimited number of Jewish sources related to nature, ecological practices, ethics, and more. Here are just a few that might support your messages:

- **High Holiday Liturgy:**
 - [Grand Aleinu for the Burning West by Janice Steinberg](#) - a drash could be built around this poem/prayer, and/or it can accompany the Aleinu.
 - Maimonides on the *shofar's* call: "Wake up you sleepers from your sleep and you slumberers from your slumber. Search your deeds and return in penitence" (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot T'shuvah* 3:4). In what ways are we still sleeping or shutting our eyes to the crisis of global warming?
- **On climate justice/equality:** "You shall not wrong or oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not ill-treat any widow or orphan" (Exodus 22:20-21).
 - **Rashi:** "That is also the law regarding any person, but Scripture is speaking of the vulnerability of women and children and therefore mentions these in particular, as it is a frequent occurrence for people to afflict them" (here, Rashi is quoting *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael* 22:21).
- **On interconnectedness:**
 - "A farmer was clearing stones from his field and throwing them onto a public thoroughfare. A pious one rebuked him saying, 'Worthless one! Why are you clearing

stones from land which is not yours and depositing them onto property which is yours?' The farmer scoffed at him for this strange reversal of the facts. In the course of time, the farmer had to sell his field, and as he was walking on the public road, he fell on those same stones he had thoughtlessly deposited there. He then understood the truth of the pious one's words: the damage he had wrought in the public domain was ultimately damage to his own property and well-being" (Talmud Baba Kama 50b). Paraphrased by Jonathan Helfand in "The Earth is the Lord's: Judaism and Environmental Ethics".

- According to a Kabbalistic interpretation: "There was only one tree...its trunk was the Tree of Life...its fruit bore the knowledge of good and evil. At times, it was called the Tree of Life after its trunk; at others, the Tree of Knowledge after its fruit" (*Sefer Ma'aseh Adonai Bereshit* 15 (for explanation of the source see [Ma'aseh Books - The 1901 Jewish Encyclopedia - \(studylight.org\)](#)).
 - [Melila Hellner-Eshed](#) explains: the tree was a kind of Rorschach test. Depending on how one looked at it, it was either a life-giving tree or a tree with fruit that could serve our wants, desires, and needs. Or as Rabbi Tamar Elad Applebaum explains: we were meant to appreciate the Tree in the middle of the Garden for its life-giving force, not as something to exploit. (from Rabbi Suzanne Singer citing Melila Hellner-Eshed's recent teaching).
- **On air quality and the breath of life:** "AND GOD BREATHED INTO THE NOSTRILS OF ADAM THE BREATH OF LIFE, AND ADAM BECAME A LIVING BEING," (Genesis 2:7). At the most basic physical level, clean air is essential for health of all living beings. On a spiritual level, or the level of our very essence as living beings, some commentaries on this verse highlight that the breath that gives us our life each moment comes from the Divine.
 - Nachmanides: AND GOD BREATHED INTO THE NOSTRILS OF ADAM THE BREATH OF LIFE. [...] the verse says that God breathed into the human's nostrils the breath of life in order to inform us that the soul did not come to humanity from the elements... Rather, it was the spirit of the Great G-d: *out of God's mouth comes knowledge and discernment (Proverbs 2:6)*. For one who breathes into the nostrils of another person gives into them something from their own soul.
 - Sforno: **ויפח באפיו נשמת חיים**, God personally blew a soul of life into the human, a life force which had been readied to absorb what was previously called **צלם אלוקים**, "the image of God." This has been attested to in Job 32:8, **ונשמת שדי תבינם**, "by means of the breath of the attribute of Shaddai You endowed them with understanding." At any rate, **ויהי האדם לנפש חיה**, the human had remained a living creature (similar to the animals) until You equipped the human with a divine-like *tzelem* and *demut*.
- **On Stewardship of the Earth:**
 - "When the Holy One created the first humans, God led Adam and Eve around all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to them: 'Look at My works, how beautiful and praiseworthy they are! And all that I have created, it was for you that I created it. Pay attention that you do not corrupt and destroy My world: if you corrupt it, there is no one to repair it after you,'" (*Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 7:13).
 - The story of Honi the Circle Maker who plants a tree for future generations – there is much more about his behavior that is thought provoking and exemplary as well, including his care for people and even his shoes his clothing to prevent waste. See [Taanit.23a.1-23b.15 \(sefaria.org\)](#)

- **On Taking Responsibility:**
 - [Sforno's commentary on Numbers 13:2](#) connects taking responsibility rather than blaming others with the ability to do teshuvah: , שלח לך אנשים [YOU should choose the scouts.] do not allow the selection of these men to be made by the people themselves! We know from [Deuteronomy 1,22](#) that the initiative of sending out spies came from the people and that Moses was put under pressure to do this. God was cautioning Moses that by allowing the people to select the spies themselves, that if they chose unsuitable candidates and they came back with a faulty report, the people would blame God for what was wrong with the country instead of the inadequate ability of the spies to correctly evaluate what they had seen. Once the blame would be laid at God's doorstep it would be impossible to do teshuvah.
 - [Or HaChaim on Deuteronomy.11.26.3-4](#) encourages each of us to understand our potential to grow and achieve great things: "Moses had something else in mind when he said , ראה אנכי , 'look at me!' Maimonides explains in his treatise *Hilchot Teshuvah* chapter 5 that every person has the potential to become the equal of Moses. This is precisely what Moses meant. He said: 'Take a good look at me! Everything that I have accomplished you are able to accomplish for yourselves!' Whenever a person aspires to serve the Lord he is not to look at people who have been under-achievers compared to himself and to use such a comparison in order to pat himself on the back on his relative accomplishment, but he is to train his sights on those who have achieved more than he himself and use this as a challenge to set his spiritual sights ever higher."