

Social Justice, Climate Change and the Jewish call to Action

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Introduction

Social justice means 'that everyone's human rights are respected and protected [and] everyone has a fighting chance at the life they want. They aren't held back by things out of their control like systemic obstacles, or discrimination.'¹

As Jews who care about the plight of the natural world, the people and creatures who are suffering and will suffer, we have an opportunity to take action that could really make a difference.

Judaism teaches us to practice Tikkun Olam, and care for the world in any way we can and to practice gemilut hasadim, through which we care for others through acts of loving kindness.¹⁵

Judaism also instructs us "not to stand by idly when a human life is in danger"¹⁶. In fact, "The commandments regarding the preservation of life are so important in Judaism that they override all of the ritual observances that people think are the most important part of Judaism. Almost any commandment may be violated to save a life."¹⁷

Climate change and social justice are inextricably linked because climate change disproportionately affects those who are already subject to discrimination, including poor people, people of colour and those that do not have a voice for themselves such as future generations.

God gave Noah a 120 year warning before he sent the floods. Sadly, we do not have the luxury of time that Noah enjoyed, but the warnings are loud and clear and we do have a chance to prepare if we act now.

It is now widely understood that if we go above 1.5°C warming we risk setting off irreversible chain reactions beyond human control, which are predicted to have catastrophic impacts on our planet.²³

If global emissions of carbon dioxide are halved by 2030 and reach net zero by 2050, it gives us a roughly 50:50 chance of limiting warming to 1.5°C, according to the IPCC, so more urgent action is needed.¹⁹

Our mandate as Jews then is clear - when anyone, not least groups with less power and agency than us are suffering and dying, it is our duty to act to protect and help them.

We don't need to look far within the Jewish community to find precedents for this kind of action from Genesis (18:4-8), where Avraham troubles himself greatly to provide an extravagant meal for three wandering strangers, even though he has recently been circumcised²¹, to today where, for example, the New North London Synagogue runs a destitute asylum seekers drop in which supports over 450 asylum seekers and their children every month.

The Climate and Ecological Emergency Bill

The [Climate and Ecological Emergency Bill](#), is due for its second reading in parliament on 12th March 2021 and we are calling on the Jewish community to get behind supporting it.

Five of the Jewish, scientific and moral reasons for supporting the bill

1. Climate change is disproportionately affecting poorer people, women, and people of colour.

"If there shall be a destitute person among you... you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand against your destitute brother... Give him, you shall surely give him. And let your heart not feel bad when you give him, for in return for this matter, Hashem, your G-d, will bless you in all your deeds, and in everything to which your hands go out."

Parshas Re'eh: 15: 7-10²⁰

Malyuun from Somaliland and her family were affected by the devastating climate change driven droughts of 2016. She told Action Aid that most nights she had to listen to her children cry themselves to sleep from hunger. She lost 15 sheep due to the drought, and was barely managing to survive with five remaining sheep and two cows. She couldn't afford to take her children to the clinic, despite their frequent illnesses.³

Extreme patterns of weather - caused by rising global temperatures - are destroying livelihoods and displacing millions of communities from their homes, particularly in the global south which is predominantly populated by people of colour. An average of 26

million people flee their homes every year due to climate-related disasters. Of these displaced people, 80% are women. Poorer countries almost always have fewer resources and weaker infrastructure than richer ones, making them more vulnerable to the effects of climate change.²

2. Climate change is disproportionately affecting older people.

"Because in his great number of years he has seen and recognized a bit of the workings of Hashem and His wonders, and he is thus worthy of honor."
Sefer ha-Chinuch 257²⁰

The August 2003 heatwave killed 20,000 people across Europe including 2000 people in the UK. This was the hottest summer in 500 years in the western part of the continent.⁴

There is evidence to show that during the heatwave, mortality increased as age rose meaning that more older people died as a result of the heatwave than other age groups.^{22/24}

The Met Office warns that Summers as hot as 2003 could happen every other year by the year 2050 as a result of climate change due to human activities.⁵

People in residential or private homes less well adapted to extreme heat are more at risk. Having resources to adapt buildings and residences to ensure their safety from extreme weather will become an increasingly important factor in preserving life and quality of life in a warming planet.

3. Climate change is disproportionately affecting the rights of people with disabilities ⁷

"You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind."
Leviticus 19:14²⁸

People with disabilities are often among those most adversely affected in an emergency, sustaining disproportionately higher rates of morbidity and mortality, and at the same time are among those with the least access to emergency support.⁷

Aleksandra Kosanic, a geography researcher at the University of Konstanz who has cerebral palsy and is lead author of a letter to the journal Science entitled 'Climate concerns and the disabled community' explains:

"In devastating events like hurricanes, floods and cyclones, disabled people, because of limited mobility or impaired senses, might have difficulty evacuating. In a climate emergency disabled people may be more vulnerable to contracting infectious diseases because of underlying conditions, which often don't allow them to move and to independently access water and sanitation".⁸

For example, Hurricane Katrina was found to disproportionately impact 155,000 people with disabilities ranging from visual and physical impairments to learning disabilities.⁸

4. Climate change is disproportionately affecting those who cannot speak for themselves including animals and future generations.

"Speak up for those who cannot speak...speak up, judge righteously, champion the poor and the needy".

Proverbs 31:8

Animals

Judaism forbids 'tza'ar ba'alei chayim', the suffering of living creatures. Unnecessary cruelty to animals is strictly forbidden, and in many cases, animals are accorded the same sensitivity as human beings.¹⁸

Thousands of species have been lost due to human activity and the animal kingdom continues to suffer at our hand. Humanity has wiped out 60% of mammals, birds, fish and reptiles since 1970, which Mike Barrett, executive of WWF explains, "would be equivalent to emptying [humans from] North America, South America, Africa, Europe, China and Oceania".¹⁰

Climate change is impacting ecosystems at every level in a myriad of complex ways including [kangaroos hit by cars whilst seeking higher ground](#) away from rising floodwaters (11), [white-beaked dolphins](#) off the coast of Scotland facing local extinction due to warming waters which would devastate local ecosystems¹⁴ and kelp that provide essential nurseries for fish, protect coastlines against worsening storm surges, store vast amounts of carbon, and provide homes for species like sea otters at risk of being lost.¹¹

We are talking not just about species but whole ecosystem shifts, where [cloud forests](#) are at risk of becoming high altitude grasslands, coral reefs of becoming algal-dominated ecosystems, and Arctic sea ice – open ocean. These shifts will further devastate countless individual species; not least us humans who depend on them for our livelihood.¹⁴

Future Generations

We are tasked as Jews with stewardship of the earth on behalf of everything that comes after us and this includes future generations.¹⁵

Imagine the Pesach child who does not know how to ask as an unborn child due to soon come into your family. What questions do you ask on their behalf? What answers do you need to be able to reassure them that you asked all the questions you could, did everything within your power to pass the world onto them as a responsible steward of the earth?

5. Do not be fooled into thinking that wealth and privilege make us exempt from the impacts of the havoc we are wreaking on the planet. The climate and ecological catastrophe will soon be at your front door, if it is not already.

"Who is the wise person? The one who foresees the consequences."

Talmud, Tamid, 32a²⁷

Communities in the UK are being affected by increasingly unpredictable and extreme weather, for example the floods of February 2020 during which the UK saw extreme flooding, with the Met Office declaring that [it was the wettest February on record](#). Some regions received over 400% of their previously normal rainfall, and in East Yorkshire 78

homes and businesses experienced severe flooding, with some homes left almost completely underwater. In Wales, a month's worth of rain fell in 48 hours and the flooding of the River Wye was over half a metre bigger than anything seen for 110 years. The Environment Agency warned that people in the UK need to brace themselves for "more frequent periods of extreme weather like this" because of climate change.²⁵

Without immediate action, among the impacts we will be leaving to future generations are:

- By 2050, rising sea levels are projected to make land currently inhabited by more than 300 million people likely to flood at least once a year.
- On our current path, by 2050 it is estimated that there could be up to 200 million environmental migrants. Mass migration and famine are likely to take us towards civil unrest and ultimately war, raising the terrifying possibility of societal collapse.
- By the 2050s, 2 billion people will face 60 degree temperatures for more than a 10th of the year. In much of the world, masks are needed daily to protect your lungs from smog. The Northeast US now sees 25 major floods a year, up from one a year in 2020. 140 million people are displaced by food and water insecurity or extreme weather events.
- Scientists have warned that at 4°C of heating "It's difficult to see how we could accommodate eight billion people or even half of that. There will be a rich minority of people who survive with modern lifestyles, no doubt, but it will be a turbulent, conflict-ridden world." By 2100 we would have been heading towards a population of around 11.2 billion.
- In a 4C world, rising seas have rendered coastlines unrecognisable and Florida has largely disappeared. Coral reefs have largely vanished, taking with them a quarter of the world's fish habitats. Many insects have been consigned to history, causing massive crop failures due to lack of pollinators. Severe drought affects 40% of the planet. An area the size of Massachusetts burns in the US every year and Southern Spain and Portugal have become a desert, tipping millions into food and water insecurity.

As shocking and far fetched as the above predictions may sound, they are provided in the document [Emergency on Planet Earth – Overview & Key Facts](#), which was written, fact checked and endorsed by a large team of climate scientists and ecologists.

How the Climate and Ecological Emergency Bill can help

[The Climate and Ecological Emergency Bill](#) will set an emergency path for the UK to follow to prevent further progression of the climate and ecological emergency. It will see the creation of a Citizens' Assembly that will put forward recommendations, contributing to the work of both the UK Government and UK Parliament in delivering an essential climate and ecological emergency strategy.

This objectives of the Bill are to:

1. Ensure that the UK plays its fair and proper role in limiting global temperatures to 1.5°C by looking at the UK's national and international carbon footprint and reducing it.
2. Actively conserve the natural world by protecting and restoring the UK's ecosystems, mitigating the damage caused by our supply chains and accounting for our ecological footprint.

How can I help?

- Write to your MP and ask them to support the Climate and Ecological Emergency Bill.
- Join our child friendly 'MP letter writing' event online to get ideas and support with letter writing on Sunday 21st February 2021. You can register [here](#).
- Join us in encouraging Jewish leaders to include the climate emergency in their sermons and communications with their communities - feel free to share this document or any of the information in it, and contact us for more resources on xrjews@gmail.com.
- For a comprehensive fact checked document endorsed by many climate scientists and ecologists, and updated on a regular basis, please see: [Emergency on Planet Earth](#).

Contact details

Please contact us with any questions, thoughts, or to get involved: xrjews@gmail.com

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