

"Climate Change: A Rabbi Speaks Out"  
Rabbi Warren G. Stone

An ancient Jewish midrash teaches that when God took Adam around the Garden of Eden and showed him its magnificence and splendor, God spoke to him saying, "If you destroy it, there is no one else besides you!"

Those words ring mightily today, for the very future of life as we know it is at stake. I fervently believe that climate change, with the destruction that it is wreaking on our fragile, sacred earth, has become the most profound religious issue of our times. Like Adam, we have been warned and cannot plead ignorance; like Adam, will we fail to heed God's words?

Who is responsible for responding to the challenge of global climate change? We tend to think that it is the scientist, the statesman and the environmentalist upon whom this responsibility lies. But climate change is an urgent moral and spiritual issue for all peoples of our world. We are witnessing its impact right now, and we can foresee the havoc it will wreak on the health and survival of further generations. The future will bring environmental refugees in numbers unknown in previous ages. As a result of climate change and habitat destruction, a myriad of species now faces a silent genocide.

As a Rabbi and religious leader, I am concerned about our common future, the quality of life for our families and the threatened species of our world, including our own. I join fellow religious leaders in that concern. But it is not enough to care about climate change, forest devastation and environmental threats to clean water, air and seas. It is incumbent upon every religious leader, religious institution and person of faith to serve as beacons to our communities, illustrating by our actions and example our spiritual commitment to our earth and its threatened and limited resources.

In a world where matters of faith seem so often and so tragically to divide us, there is no issue that aligns us more deeply than our shared dependence upon and sacred responsibility to this tiny planet, enfolded within its fragile atmosphere, spinning in the vastness of time and space. I experienced this shared conviction most profoundly, when in 1997, I served as the Jewish NGO representative at the United Nations climate talks in Kyoto, Japan. I met with Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist leaders from around the world. We spoke at Kyoto's largest Buddhist Temple, and all concurred that our human actions, our sins, have damaged the environment. Each speaking from the voice of his or her own authentic spiritual tradition, we affirmed our religious responsibility to act. Amidst Buddhist chanting, I blew the shofar, a ram's horn, the blast of sound that has been Judaism's ancient call to action since the days we wandered, searching for our way, in the desert.

I carried this profound experience back to my own country and my own community. Here, too, I found that faith traditions can readily unite on issues of climate change. Working for many years with the National Partnership on Religion and the Environment, I have joined interfaith leaders to lobby on Capitol Hill and to meet with White House staff. Political leaders are eager to hear our religious point of view. Statements by Catholic Bishops, Protestants leaders, Rabbis and Tribal Leaders have symbolic power and carry political weight. Formal resolutions affirmed by hundreds of thousands of persons of faith help embolden our legislators to act. This year, religious leaders stood with sympathetic legislators on the U.S. Capitol's steps, raising our voices to stop the drilling in the Arctic Wildlife refuge. The opportunity to be heard is greater than in previous decades, and we have a prophetic responsibility to seize it. Bold initiatives are needed -- and needed now -- to protect species, to create incentives for the development of alternative energies, to protect endangered coastal areas and to mitigate our dependence on fossil fuels.

Of course, our collective, interfaith efforts gather their strength from the work each of us does within our own particular communities. As chair of the Environmental Committee of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, I have joined with many committed colleagues to use our faith tradition to increase awareness and encourage action in response to climate change and other environmental challenges. We have passed national resolutions on climate change and energy policy and have established environmentally conscious guidelines for our myriad congregations around the country. For example, we recently celebrated Chanukah, the Jewish holiday of light, renewal and commemoration of bold action that honors one's faith; during the holiday, we mounted a very successful COEJL (Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life) national campaign -- "Let There Be (Renewable) Light! or How Many Jews Does it Take to Change a Light Bulb?" Thousands of congregations encouraged their members to install CPF bulbs in their synagogues and homes and to add to their holiday ritual a ceremony that calls this generation to environmental action, in response to the moral imperatives of our own times.

And finally, I believe that our religious voice must be strongest closest to home, manifest in how we daily live. The congregation I serve, Temple Emanuel of the Greater Washington area, has worked on greening its agenda for 18 years. We believe that local action by religious communities can have a national and international impact. The congregation I serve has installed solar panels on the roof for our eternal light, added wind power from a regional collective, made use of energy efficient zoning, lighting and office equipment and in our building phase made use of passive solar throughout the building. We planted a sustainable garden to meet our annual ritual needs, growing grapes, horseradish, and indoor olive and pomegranate trees. We regularly schedule environmental Shabbats and other opportunities for learning with our state representative and national leaders. We sell CPF bulbs and have information about climate change on

our coffee tables. We have become an EPA energy star community and one of the nation's first "zero carbon footprint" communities by supporting [Carbonfund.org](http://Carbonfund.org) and their alternative energy investments. Our web page [templeemanuelmd.org](http://templeemanuelmd.org) includes our Green Shalom action guide which is designed to educate and spur further community involvement and environmental action in our own homes and community. This community focus has borne fruit, with a good number of our young people choosing science, media, religion and public policy arenas that deal directly with environmental issues.

There is so much that each of us can and must do, within our own homes, congregations and communities, and beyond, as we work together, in common cause, to preserve and sanctify life. Religious communities have a crucial moral role in affirming the profound need to engage on the issue of climate change.

As Rabbi Tarphon of the second century reminds us: "It is not your duty to finish all the work, but neither are you are liberty to desist from it." May it be that years hence, our children and our children's children will look back with appreciation to this moment when we heeded one of the great moral imperatives of our time. May they know that we had the vision and the strength to fulfill our sacred obligation to preserve and protect the earth in all of its majesty, this garden with which we have been entrusted, for those who will follow.

*Bio:* Rabbi Warren Stone, rabbi of Temple Emanuel in the Washington metropolitan area in Kensington, Maryland since 1988.