

Rabbi Laurie Zimmerman
Congregation Shaarei Shamayim
Rosh Hashanah Morning Service
September 30, 2019

Who Shall Live and Who Shall Die: Climate Change, F-35s, and Moving Past Grief

“When God began to create heaven and earth—the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water – God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness God called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, a first day” (Genesis 1:1-5).

The Torah continues through each day of creation. God creates order out of chaos, form and beauty, life and potential. God creates humanity. On this Rosh Hashanah we celebrate *hayom harat olam*, the day when the world was birthed into being.

This is our mythic story, the beginning of the Torah, the beginning of creation, the beginning of our Jewish year.

But destruction never falls far behind creation. Soon after God creates the world, we learn that God decides to destroy it with the tremendous flood. Creation and destruction are coupled together, uncomfortably, reminding us that our world dangles precariously between the two.

On this Rosh Hashanah, the time of celebrating creation, we too reflect on destruction. We watch ice melting, oceans warming, temperatures rising, forests burning, cities flooding. We watch our human impact cause extinction after extinction after extinction, cause the pollution of our water, land, and air, cause tremendous hurricanes and other extreme weather.

Our ancestors did not measure fossil fuel emissions. They did not calculate their carbon footprints. But the Torah describes harrowing tales of environmental catastrophe.

First, the flood: “God saw how wicked human beings had become...And God regretted that God had created humanity. God’s heart was saddened” (Genesis 6:5-6). God destroys the entire world, with the exception of Noah and his family, because of human corruption.

A second catastrophe unfolds only chapters later. We witness the devastation of Sodom and Gemorah: “God rained upon Sodom and Gemorah sulfurous fire...God annihilated those cities and the entire Plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities and the vegetation of the ground” (Genesis 19:24-25).

In this story as well, human beings were corrupt. Rabbinic tradition explains that the people of Sodom refused to let the poor and homeless live in their city, revoking a destitute person’s right to either public or private welfare. The Mishnah defines a Sodomite as one who says, “What’s mine is mine and what’s yours is yours” – and exempts himself from social responsibility (Avot 5:10).

We are bound to each other and we are bound to creation. When we detach ourselves, when we look out only for ourselves, destruction follows.

These Days of Awe are designed to help us grapple with life's precarious nature. They are designed to make us feel fragile and unstable. They remind us that our future is uncertain.

"On Rosh Hashanah it is inscribed,
And on Yom Kippur it is sealed.
How many shall pass away and how many shall be born,
Who shall live and who shall die,...
Who shall perish by water and who by fire." (Unetaneh Tokef prayer)

This Rosh Hashanah, let's heed tradition's call and embrace our vulnerability. Let's refrain from tuning out, from turning away, from recoiling from the enormity of it all. Let's immerse ourselves in discomfort, embrace the instability, and let the grief of our climate crisis wash through us.

The world's leading climate scientists teach us that our planet has warmed one degree Celsius in the last century and warn that we must hold the planet's warming to 1.5 degrees. To do so gives us enough time to adapt to a world still drastically affected by a warming earth, but livable nonetheless. To fail threatens entire ecosystems, populations, cultures, regions of the world – life as we know it. The Paris Agreement set a target of two degrees by the end of the century. Scientists contend that that half percentage difference is far too high. Last June our president declared the U.S. would withdraw from the agreement. If we do nothing, at our current trajectory we could reach a four-degree temperature increase.¹

We have a very short period of time to make extraordinary changes. If current trends continue, we will surpass 1.5 degrees by 2030, causing "severe, widespread, and irreversible" damage to our planet. Climate change means not only more weather extremes, but more disease, more hunger, more conflict and war.²

"On Rosh Hashanah it is inscribed,
And on Yom Kippur it is sealed.
How many shall pass away and how many shall be born,
Who shall live and who shall die,...
Who shall perish by water and who by fire."

We do not know who will live and who will die. We do not know who will drown in a flood and who will burn in a forest fire. But we can make some pretty good guesses. The world's poorest – the people who are the least responsible for the warming earth – will suffer the most. People who rely on agriculture and natural resources for their livelihoods. People who are marginalized and vulnerable. People who have so little.

Here in the United States, we have cumulatively contributed far more to the problem of excess carbon dioxide in the atmosphere than any other country, even though we account for only four percent of the global population. We have tremendous responsibility for the calamity unfolding before us.

We remember the sins of the people of Sodom: "What's mine is mine, what's yours is yours."

How long can we keep pretending that we are not all connected – to each other, and to the natural world?

How can we figure out a way to open our eyes, to refuse to tune out, to refuse to turn away, to refuse to recoil from the enormity of it all?

How do we put forth a different vision, one that boldly asserts that we are responsible for each other?

My daughter yells up the stairs. “Ima, turn off the lights. We have to save the polar bears!”

I wonder how to respond.

How do I tell her that we can all sit in the dark and it still won’t save the polar bears?

How do I tell her that individual actions like turning off the lights and recycling and taking shorter showers are all important and certainly have their place, but our checklists to “save the planet” are not enough to keep the earth from warming more than 1.5 degrees Celsius?

How do I tell her that since 1988 just 100 companies have been responsible for 71 percent of the world’s greenhouse gas emissions³, that in the name of profit they will defend their financial interests even if it means jeopardizing everyone else’s future?

How do I tell her that the only thing that could save us is massive collective action, joining together across ethnic, racial, and religious lines, joining together rich and poor, young and old, demanding that our policymakers act in the interests of the people they claim to represent?

The other day on our way to school we walked past a sign with a big ugly jet on it. Reading it my daughter asked, “What’s an F-35?” I didn’t know what was harder to explain – dying polar bears or stealth fighter jets.

“You know those really loud planes that fly over our house?” I began. “Those are called F-16s. They are fighter planes, and they take off from the airport. The U.S. Air Force is thinking about bringing a bunch of F-35s to Madison. These are different fighter planes. They will be four times as loud as the other planes. It’s going to be pretty awful for kids who live close to the airport.”

After I dropped my daughter off at school I ran into Chris Taylor, my state representative, who is one of Madison’s most outspoken elected officials on this issue. As we walked her dog around the block she described, neighborhood by neighborhood, how angry her constituents are. Our predominantly white, middle-class neighborhood will certainly be affected, but it’s low-income communities and people of color who will be the most impacted. People who live in subsidized housing. People who put their life savings into a \$200,000 house and can’t afford to move.

It will lead to significant and dangerous increases in noise, water, and air pollution. Children in ten schools near the airport will be continually exposed to dangerously high decibel levels.⁴

The promise is that these fighter planes will bring new jobs and economic benefits to Madison, even though the Air National Guard’s Environmental Impact Statement says the benefits will be negligible. What the F-35s will do is create environmental havoc. The Environmental Impact

Statement states that CO₂-like emissions will increase by 12,478 tons, the equivalent of adding an additional 2,438 passenger vehicles on our roads, driving 11,500 miles a year.⁵

As we talked, I realized that climate change is not only about the polar bears. It's also about the F-35s.

"On Rosh Hashanah it is inscribed,
And on Yom Kippur it is sealed.
How many shall pass away and how many shall be born,
Who shall live and who shall die,...
Who shall perish by water and who by fire."

It turns out that the estimated cost of the Pentagon's program to build, deploy, and maintain the F-35s is \$1.5 trillion.⁶ Imagine how many civilians around the world could be killed by these deadly planes. Imagine how that money could be used to slow global warming or to address the impacts of climate change.

This is just one project of the U.S. military. The military is considered the biggest energy consumer in the world. Since 2001 it has produced 1.2 billion metric tons of greenhouse-gas emissions, the equivalent to the annual emissions of 257 million passenger cars.⁷

I guess it's not that surprising. What is surprising is that my new progressive mayor, Satya Rhodes-Conway, cast the deciding vote to take up a weak, watered down resolution on the F-35s instead of the resolution that strongly opposed them.

What's also surprising is that my progressive U.S. senator, Tammy Baldwin, is working hard to bring these planes to Madison: "...I am pleased that the Air Force has recognized the tremendous strategic, geographic and economic capabilities that Truax offers," she wrote.⁸

I really did hope for better. I hoped that these progressives would serve the needs of all the people who live in Madison, that they would work diligently to decrease – not increase – noise, water, and air pollution. That they would have our best interests in mind.

If we are disappointed with our elected officials we can, and should, speak up and ask hard questions. This is one place where we do have a voice. It's certainly not the only place, though. We have many opportunities and methods to engage, insert ourselves, and live out our values even with issues as large and overwhelming as climate change.

But so often we don't.

What gets in my way of taking action, too often, is grief. Because if I really pay attention, it's hard not to sink into real, deep sadness. It's hard not to mourn for our futures, our children's futures, and our grandchildren's futures.

I think it's important to mourn. My dear friend, Rabbi Margaret Holub, has thought a great deal about grief and climate change. She writes, "Grief is a passage, not a destination...Grief can

break our hearts over and over...But sometimes we will at least be able to lift our heads up for a moment and take a breath before the wave crashes over us again...We have to allow our grief to flow through us.”

As I walk around my neighborhood and see the signs with the big, ugly jets on them, I’ve been trying to let my grief flow through me. Otherwise, my grief will get stuck inside me. I don’t want to be bitter. I don’t want to despair. It’s too hard to do the tiring work of making change from that place. I don’t want to lose sight of the joy, the passion, the community, and the creativity that can come with organizing for a more sustainable world.

I believe that this is what we need to create change: joy, passion, community, and creativity. Believing that resistance is reasonable and that change is possible takes courage. There is no promise of a happy ending. It is hard to be courageous alone. We need each other. We can give each other courage to raise our voices, to take bold action.

On this Rosh Hashanah, this day when the world was birthed into being, so full of possibility, I want to end with a speech by one of the most courageous people I have ever heard – Greta Thunberg, the 16 year-old Swedish activist who addressed the UN Climate Change Summit last week.⁹

My message is that we'll be watching you. This is all wrong. I shouldn't be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope. How dare you!

You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!

For more than 30 years, the science has been crystal clear. How dare you continue to look away and come here saying that you're doing enough, when the politics and solutions needed are still nowhere in sight.

You say you hear us and that you understand the urgency. But no matter how sad and angry I am, I do not want to believe that. Because if you really understood the situation and still kept on failing to act, then you would be evil. And that I refuse to believe...

You are failing us. But the young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you. And if you choose to fail us, I say: We will never forgive you.

We will not let you get away with this. Right here, right now is where we draw the line. The world is waking up. And change is coming, whether you like it or not...

L'shanah tovah.

Notes:

1. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (United Nations), "[Global Warming of 1.5°C](#)" 2018.
2. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (United Nations), "[2014 Synthesis Report](#)."
3. The Carbon Majors Database, "[CDP Carbon Majors Report 2017](#)."
4. Chane13000.com, "[Madison School Board, State Representative, and Retired Air Force Colonel Weigh in on F-35 Debate](#)," September 23, 2019.
5. [Draft United States Air Force F-35A Operational Beddown Air National Guard Environmental Impact Statement](#), p. WI-52, August, 2019.
6. *New York Times*, "[Next-Generation F-35 Fighter Jets Go to National Guard Unit](#)," September 19, 2019.
7. Watson Institute International and Public Affairs, Brown University, "[Costs of War](#)."
8. Senator Tammy Baldwin, [press release](#), December 21, 2017.
9. *PBS News Hour*, "[Greta Thunberg's Full Speech to World Leaders at UN Climate Action Summit](#)."