

## **A Jewish Response to Climate Change**

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 is wreaking 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 for see 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. 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 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 could readily unite on issues of climate change. Working for many years with the National Partnership on

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 at 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.

#### **Brief Bio: Rabbi Warren Stone**

*Rabbi Warren Stone, rabbi of Temple Emanuel Past President of the Washington Board of Rabbis. Rabbi Stone is known nationally for his leadership on Religion and the Environment. He is the founding and current chair of the Central Conference of American Rabbis' Committee on the Environment. He serves as Co chair of the Religious Campaign for Forest Conservation and the Religious Coalition on Creation Care. In 1997, Rabbi Stone represented many national Jewish organizations as the sole Jewish United Nations delegate at the UN Conference on Climate Change in Kyoto, Japan where he blew the Shofar and led a number of interfaith programs and prayer vigils. He has led delegations on environmental issues to the Congress and White House and co-chaired a press conference on the Arctic Wildlife Refuge in the U.S. Senate with Senator Joseph Lieberman. Rabbi Stone was invited and opened a session of the U.S. Congress in 1998. He has served on many boards including the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, the National Environmental Trust Religious Advisory Board, the Washington Board of Rabbis, ARZA/ World Union, the Washington Interfaith Conference and the United Nations Association. Rabbi Stone has had articles published in the Washington Jewish Week, Reform Judaism Magazine, Central Conference of American Rabbis Journal and has given numerous interview for national and international journals. Rabbi Stone is currently rabbi of Temple Emanuel in the Greater Washington, D.C. area in Kensington, Maryland.*