
Laudato Si and the Sages: Reflections on Climate Justice

Dear Colleagues and Friends,

Shanah Tovah! As you prepare to welcome 5776, I invite you to connect with one of the most notable faith events of the year – Pope Francis’s visit to the United States just after Yom Kippur, during which he will speak about his encyclical on climate change and justice, *Laudato Si: On Care for our Common Home*. At this time of year, as we reflect on how we have treated our fellow human beings and how we might better live up to God’s expectations of us, we have a special opportunity to examine our relationship with all of God’s creation – and the Pope’s encyclical provides us with an excellent way to do just that.

To that end, I’ve selected a number of excerpts from the encyclical and paired them with Jewish sources ranging from the Tanakh, to midrashim, to Heschel, to rabbis of today. Here at Temple Hesed in Scranton, PA, I will be using this text study, “*Laudato Si* and the Sages: Reflections on Climate Justice,” on Yom Kippur afternoon, and we have invited the press and other faith communities as well. Please use it however it might work best for you: at High Holy Day Services, at a multi-faith gathering, at a social action weekend etc.

The texts are presented in two formats. The first is a more complete four-page selection, designed for in-depth or multi-session discussions; it can be studied in a larger group setting, in hevruta, in small groups or in some combination. The second is a single page of texts, meant to serve as a ready-made one-hour program. In both formats, I’ve included questions on each topic highlighted by the texts, as well as some summary questions. I’d love to hear how you’ve used it or if you have any questions – drop me an email at rabbidaniel@comcast.net.

I also hope this text study will inspire further action to combat climate change. (To help with this, some “next steps” are presented at the end of each discussion guide) I present it in my role as board president of Pennsylvania Interfaith Power & Light, one of 40 IP&L affiliates, each of which works with communities, organizations, and individuals of faith to address climate change as a moral issue. If you’d like to learn more about PA IP&L, please feel free to email me or our Executive Director, Rev. Alison Cornish, acornish@paipl.org. Lastly, I’d like to thank colleagues who reviewed this text study and made suggestions: Rabbi Malkah Binah Klein of Philly IP&L, Rabbi Larry Troster of Greenfaith, and Rabbi Arthur Waskow of the Shalom Center.

In Hesed,

Rabbi Daniel Swartz

Before becoming the spiritual leader of Temple Hesed, Rabbi Daniel Swartz was the coordinator of Greater Washington IP&L, executive director of the Children’s Environmental Health Network, Associate Director of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, and Congregational Relations Director for the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, where he was the lead author of *To Till and to Tend: a Guide to Jewish Environmental Study and Action*



1) Redefining Progress

There is a tendency to believe that every increase in power means “an increase of ‘progress’ itself”, an advance in “security, usefulness, welfare and vigour” as if reality, goodness and truth automatically flow from technological and economic power as such. The fact is that our immense technological development has not been accompanied by a development in human responsibility, values and conscience. ...But human beings are not completely autonomous. Our freedom fades when it is handed over to the blind forces of the unconscious, of immediate needs, of self-interest, and of violence. In this sense, we stand naked and exposed in the face of our ever-increasing power, lacking the wherewithal to control it. ... Put simply, it is a matter of redefining our notion of progress. A technological and economic development which does not leave in its wake a better world and an integrally higher quality of life cannot be considered progress. *Laudato Si*, ¶105, ¶194

2) Climate Justice

The human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation. In fact, the deterioration of the environment and of society affects the most vulnerable people on the planet: “Both everyday experience and scientific research show that the gravest effects of all attacks on the environment are suffered by the poorest”. For example, the depletion of fishing reserves especially hurts small fishing communities without the means to replace those resources; water pollution particularly affects the poor who cannot buy bottled water; and rises in the sea level mainly affect impoverished coastal populations who have nowhere else to go. ¶48

3) Global Inequity

The natural environment is a collective good, the patrimony of all humanity and the responsibility of everyone. If we make something our own, it is only to administer it for the good of all. If we do not, we burden our consciences with the weight of having denied the existence of others. That is why the New Zealand bishops asked what the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” means when “twenty percent of the world’s population consumes resources at a rate that robs the poor nations and future generations of what they need to survive”. ¶95

1) Technological civilization is the product of labor, of our exertion of power for the sake of gain, for the sake of producing goods. It begins when we, dissatisfied with what is available in nature, become engaged in a struggle with the forces of nature in order to enhance our safety and increase our comfort... How proud we often are of our victories in the war with nature, proud of the multitude of instruments we have succeeded in inventing, of the abundance of commodities we have been able to produce. Yet our victories have come to resemble defeats. ... To set apart one day a week for freedom, a day on which we would not use the instruments which have been so easily turned into weapons of destruction, a day on which we stop worshipping the idols of technical civilization, a day of armistice in the economic struggle with our fellow humans and the forces of nature – is there any institution that holds out a great hope for our progress than the Sabbath? *The Sabbath*, Abraham Joshua Heschel, pp. 27-28

2) The unity of justice and Earth-healing is also taught by our experience today: The worsening inequality of wealth, income, and political power has two direct impacts on the climate crisis. On the one hand, great Carbon Corporations not only make their enormous profits from wounding the Earth, but then use these profits to purchase elections and to fund fake science to prevent the public from acting to heal the wounds. On the other hand, the poor in America and around the globe are the first and the worst to suffer from the typhoons, floods, droughts, and diseases brought on by climate chaos. So we call for a new sense of eco-social justice – a *tikkun olam* that includes *tikkun tevel*, the healing of our planet. We urge those who have been focusing on social justice to address the climate crisis, and those who have been focusing on the climate crisis to address social justice.

-- From the “Rabbinic Letter on the Climate Crisis,” 2015

3A) Is it not enough for you to graze on choice grazing ground, but you must also trample with your feet what is left from your grazing? And is it not enough for you to drink clear water, but you must also muddy with your feet what is left? And must My flock graze on what your feet have trampled and drink what your feet have muddied? *Ezekiel 34:18-19*

3B) Woe to those who add house to house and join field to field, till there is room for none. *Isaiah 5:8*

4) Just Solutions

Some strategies for lowering pollutant gas emissions call for the internationalization of environmental costs, which would risk imposing on countries with fewer resources burdensome commitments to reducing emissions comparable to those of the more industrialized countries. Imposing such measures penalizes those countries most in need of development. A further injustice is perpetrated under the guise of protecting the environment. Here also, the poor end up paying the price. Furthermore, since the effects of climate change will be felt for a long time to come, even if stringent measures are taken now, some countries with scarce resources will require assistance in adapting to the effects already being produced, which affect their economies. In this context, there is a need for common and differentiated responsibilities. As the bishops of Bolivia have stated, “the countries which have benefited from a high degree of industrialization, at the cost of enormous emissions of greenhouse gases, have a greater responsibility for providing a solution to the problems they have caused.” ¶170

5) Solidarity and the Common Good

We require a new and universal solidarity. As the bishops of Southern Africa have stated: “Everyone’s talents and involvement are needed to redress the damage caused by human abuse of God’s creation”. All of us can cooperate as instruments of God for the care of creation, each according to his or her own culture, experience, involvements and talents. ¶14

6) Intergenerational Justice

Once we start to think about the kind of world we are leaving to future generations, we look at things differently; we realize that the world is a gift which we have freely received and must share with others. Since the world has been given to us, we can no longer view reality in a purely utilitarian way, in which efficiency and productivity are entirely geared to our individual benefit. Intergenerational solidarity is not optional, but rather a basic question of justice, since the world we have received also belongs to those who will follow us. “The environment is part of a logic of receptivity. It is on loan to each generation, which must then hand it on to the next”. ¶159

4) When they collect taxes from the people of the city in order to build a protective wall ... it is collected according to wealth (ability to pay) and only after it is divided up, they also collect from those closer to the wall, those closer paying more (because they are in greater danger if the wall should fall) And if there is a house close to the wall that does not have money and one far from the wall that does, do not collect from the close one, because it does not have anything. *Shulkhan Arukh, Hoshen Mishpat 163:3*

5) Some people were sitting in a ship. One of them took a drill and began to bore a hole in the ship under where he was sitting. His companions said, what are you sitting and doing? He said, what has it to do with you? I am boring a hole under my part of the ship. They said, but the water is coming in and sinking the ship under u – *Leviticus Rabbah 4:5*

6A) Once, while the sage, Honi, was walking along a road, he saw an old man planting a carob tree. Honi asked him: “How many years will it take for this tree to give forth its fruit?” The man answered that it would require 70 years. Honi asked: “Are you so healthy a man that you expect to live that length of time and eat its fruit?” The man answered: “I found a fruitful world because my ancestors planted it for me. So, too, will I plant for my children”. *Talmud Bavli, Ta’anit 23a*

6B) “The voice of your brother’s bloods cry out to me.” Why plural? Because he spilled his brother’s blood and that of all possible descendants. Rashi on *Genesis 4:10*



7) Our Connection to the Earth

“LAUDATO SI’, mi’ Signore” – “Praise be to you, my Lord”. In the words of this beautiful canticle, Saint Francis of Assisi reminds us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us. “Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs”. This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she “groans in travail” (Rom 8:22). We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth (cf. Gen 2:7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters. ¶1-2

8) God’s Love in Creation

Our insistence that each human being is an image of God should not make us overlook the fact that each creature has its own purpose. None is superfluous. The entire material universe speaks of God’s love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains – everything is, as it were, a caress of God. The history of our friendship with God is always linked to particular places which take on an intensely personal meaning; we all remember places, and revisiting those memories does us much good. Anyone who has grown up in the hills or used to sit by the spring to drink, or played outdoors in the neighbourhood square – going back to these places is a chance to recover something of their true selves. ¶84

9) Hope

Although the post-industrial period may well be remembered as one of the most irresponsible in history, nonetheless there is reason to hope that humanity at the dawn of the twenty-first century will be remembered for having generously shouldered its grave responsibilities. Human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good, and making a new start. ¶205, ¶71

7) We are composed of four substances: mineral, vegetable, anima and human, the categories of created things. In our pride we foolishly imagine that there is no kinship between us and the rest of the animal world, how much less with plants and minerals. To eradicate this foolish notion God gave us certain precepts, some concerning minerals, others vegetable, others animal, and others human. Above all we are bidden to be compassionate to all other human beings: “love thy neighbor as thyself.” Next in order come our relationships with the animals... for this reason, the Torah commands us to show pity to them, to send away the mother bird. In a descending scale come the precepts governing the plant world since they are further removed from us. We are forbidden to cut down fruit trees and the like. After this comes the soil and inert matter, which is further removed but still akin to us. Thus the lanc itself must be rested every seven years. To conclude, the Torah inculcates in us a sense of our modesty and lowliness, so that we should be ever cognizant of the fact that we are of the same stuff as the ass and mule, the cabbage and the pomegranate, and even the lifeless stone. Joseph ibn Kaspi *on Deuteronomy 22:6-7*

8A) One glorious chain of love, of giving and receiving, unites all creatures; none is by or for itself, but all things exist in continual reciprocal activity -- the one for the All; the All for the One. *Third Letter of Ben Uziel*, Samson Raphael Hirsch

8B) Master of the universe, grant me the ability to be alone; may it be my custom to go outdoors each day, among the trees and grasse among all growing things, there to be alone and enter into prayer. There may I express all that is in my heart, talking with God to whom I belong. And may all grasses, trees, and plants awake at my coming. Send the power of their life into my prayer, making whole my heart and my speech through the life and spirit of growing things, made whole by their transcendent Source. O that they would enter into my prayer! Then would I fully open my heart in prayer, supplication, and holy speech; then, O God, would I pour out the words of my heart before Your presence. Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, *Likutey Moharan Helek I*, 5:2

9) There is hope for a tree; if it is cut down it will renew itself; its shoots will not cease. If its roots are old in the earth and its stump dies in the ground, at the scent of water it will bud and produce branches like a sapling. *Job 14:7-9*

A prayer for our earth

All-powerful God,
You are present in the whole universe
And in the smallest of your creatures.
You embrace with your tenderness all that exists.
Pour out upon us the power of your love,
That we may protect life and beauty.
Fill us with peace, that we may live
As brothers and sisters, harming no one.
O God of the poor,
Help us to rescue the abandoned
And forgotten of this earth,
So precious in your eyes.
Bring healing to our lives,
That we may protect the world and not prey on it,
That we may sow beauty,
Not pollution and destruction.
Touch the hearts
Of those who look only for gain
At the expense of the poor and the earth.
Teach us to discover the worth of each thing,
To be filled with awe and contemplation,
To recognize that we are profoundly united
With every creature
As we journey towards your infinite light.
We thank you for being with us each day.
Encourage us, we pray, in our struggle
For justice, love and peace.
-- From the close of *Laudato Si*

Between the Fires

We are the generation that stands
between the fires:
Behind us the flame and smoke
that rose from Auschwitz and from Hiroshima;
From the burning forests of the Amazon,
From the hottest years of human history
that bring upon us
Melted ice fields, Flooded cities, Scorching droughts.
Before us the nightmare of a Flood of Fire,
The heat and smoke that could consume all Earth.

Here! We ourselves are coming
Before the great and terrible day
of smiting Earth —
For we ourselves shall turn the hearts
Of parents to their children
And the hearts of children to their parents
So that this day of smiting
Does not fall upon us.

It is our task to make from fire not an all-consuming blaze
But the light in which we see each other fully.
All of us different, All of us bearing
One Spark.
We light these fires to see more clearly
That the Earth and all who live as part of it
Are not for burning.
We light these fires to see more clearly
The rainbow in our many-colored faces.

Blessed is the One within the many.
Blessed are the many who make One.

*By Rabbi Arthur Waskow, drawing on traditional midrash
about the danger of a Flood of Fire, and on the passage from
Malachi 3:20-24*

Discussion Guide for Encyclical Text Study – “*Laudato Si* and the Sages: Reflections on Climate Justice”

Overview: The texts in “*Laudato Si* and the Sages: Reflections on Climate Justice” are designed to spark reflection and action addressing global climate change. We hope it will help people take a new look at the connections between climate and justice, human responsibility, our role in the world, and what this means to us as people of faith. While it is especially intended for use on Yom Kippur afternoon study session, it can easily be adapted for many other occasions in synagogues, elsewhere in the Jewish community, or in multi-faith settings.

The texts in the left column are drawn from passages in *Laudato Si: On Care for our Common Home*, the recent encyclical letter by Pope Francis. An encyclical letter is a high level written pronouncement issued in the name of a pope, second in authority only to an “Apostolic Constitution.” Every paragraph in *Laudato Si* is numbered – the paragraph numbers for these texts are indicated after each text. The paired texts in the right hand column are drawn from a wide variety of Jewish sources, ranging from Tanakh to a rabbinic letter written in response to the Pope’s encyclical.

To help set a reflective tone, you might begin with a song, niggun, or a reading such as this selection from *Laudato Si*:
Inner peace is closely related to care for ecology and for the common good because, lived out authentically, it is reflected in a balanced lifestyle together with a capacity for wonder which takes us to a deeper understanding of life. Nature is filled with words of love, but how can we listen to them amid constant noise, interminable and nerve-wracking distractions, or the cult of appearances? Many people today sense a profound imbalance which drives them to frenetic activity and makes them feel busy, in a constant hurry which in turn leads them to ride rough-shod over everything around them. This too affects how they treat the environment. ¶225

To close, the group might read one of the prayers on the fourth page and/or sing *Hashiveinu* or another appropriate song.

Discussion Questions:

Redefining Progress: How would you define progress? Is care for the environment part of your definition? What difference does a definition of progress make? Do you see technology as generally good, generally a source of problems, or is its value dependent on context? What lessons could Shabbat teach us about progress and the role of technology in our lives?

Climate Justice: Do these texts make you think differently about the connections between climate change and justice? Why or why not? What are some ways Jews might connect our traditional efforts to help the poor with work on climate change? Did you know that a letter in support of faith-based efforts to address climate change has been signed by over 400 rabbis? Did you know there is a similar letter that Muslim leaders have recently published? Why is climate justice a topic faith communities should address?

Global Inequality: What do you think about the statement from New Zealand bishops that 20% of the world’s population – which includes the U.S. – “robs the poor nations and future generations of what they need to survive”? What could be changed? In the text from Ezekiel, who is doing the trampling and who is “My flock”? Do you think this is still happening today?

Just Solutions: Some of the controversy about addressing climate change centers around who pays for the solution. What do you think about the idea of the Bolivian bishops that “countries which have benefited from ... enormous emissions of greenhouse gases have a greater responsibility for providing a solution”? Why do you think the *Shulkhan Arukh* text focuses on who can pay?



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fair? Who from the standpoint of climate change lives “close to the wall” today?

Solidarity and the Common Good: Do you think the climate is a “common good”? Why or why not? How should we treat common goods? Have you ever met anyone who “drilled under their own seat” and didn’t think of the consequence to others?

Intergenerational Justice: What do we owe to future generations? How much should policy decisions today weigh the consequences to our children and grandchildren? What gifts have you received from prior generations, and what would you personally like to make sure gets passed on? Why do you think Judaism emphasizes *l’dor va-dor* (from generation to generation)?

Our Connection to the Earth: Do you think of the earth as a sister or mother? Would it make a difference if you did? Do you feel the connection to animals, plants and even “lifeless stone” that ibn Kaspi writes about? What might make that connection stronger? What relevance might the commandment to let the land rest every 7 and 50 years (note: 5776 is considered to be a 50th year) have today? When you think of “the environment,” do you think of something separate from humans or connected to us?

God’s Love in Creation: Have you ever felt close to God while in a natural setting? Why or why not? Have you ever prayed outdoors? Was it any different? Why or why not?

Hope: Addressing problems like climate change can be overwhelming, depressing, and paralyzing. What “scent of water” helps you to stay hopeful? Does your faith play a role in keeping hope alive? What lessons from Jewish history give you hope?

Summary Questions: Which text has served as a shofar for you and woken you up? What actions have you taken or not taken that might call for Tshuvah (repentance, return). Which texts resonated most for you? What new understandings do you have?

Next Steps:

- ✧ Rabbis can sign onto the climate letter at: <https://theshalomcenter.org/civcrm/petition/sign?sid=17> Similar letters for other Jewish leaders may be available soon.
- ✧ Your congregation/organization can link up across faith traditions through Interfaith Power and Light, which has affiliates in most states. PA IP & L produced this document, and it’s hosting its annual conference in Philadelphia on October 25th. For more information on PA IP & L, go to <http://paipl.org> and for other states, go to <http://www.interfaithpowerandlight.org> Most IP & L affiliates have resources you can use in your community and many have speakers available.
- ✧ There are many additional resources in the Jewish community. Here’s a sample: <http://jewcology.org> <http://www.coejl.org>; <http://urj.org//green/index.cfm>; <https://theshalomcenter.org/treasury/43>; <http://www.rac.org/environment>; <http://www.greenfaith.org/religious-teachings/jewish-statements-on-the-environment> ; <http://hazon.org> ; <http://aytzim.org>
- ✧ The next attempt by governments around the world to address climate change will take place in Paris from November 30th-December 11th. (For more information on the Paris conference, go to: <http://www.cop21.gouv.fr/en/cop21-cmp11/what-cop21-cmp11>) Nations will strive for 50% reductions in carbon emissions by 2030 and a carbon-neutral economy by 2050. Congregations and individuals across the country are taking the “Paris Pledge,” to commit to meeting these goals in their own organization/home. To find out more about the Paris Pledge or to sign the pledge, go to: <http://www.parispledge.org>



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over 100 congregations and 2000 individuals have signed!



1) Our connection to the earth

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2) The unity of justice and Earth-healing is also taught by our experience today: The worsening inequality of wealth, income, and political power has two direct impacts on the climate crisis. On the one hand, great Carbon Corporations not only make their enormous profits from wounding the Earth, but then use these profits to purchase elections and to fund fake science to prevent the public from acting to heal the wounds. On the other hand, the poor in America and around the globe are the first and the worst to suffer from the typhoons, floods, droughts, and diseases brought on by climate chaos. So we call for a new sense of eco-social justice – a *Tikkun olam* that includes *Tikkun tevel*, the healing of our planet. We urge those who have been focusing on social justice to address the climate crisis, and those who have been focusing on the climate crisis to address social justice. -- From the “Rabbinic Letter on the Climate Crisis,” 2015

Discussion Questions

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Our Connection to the Earth: Do you think of the earth as a sister or mother? Would it make a difference if you did? Do you feel the connection to animals, plants and even “lifeless stone” that ibn Kaspi writes about? What might make that connection stronger? What relevance might the commandment to let the land rest every 7 and 50 years (note: 5776 is considered to be a 50th year) have today? When you think of “the environment,” do you think of something separate from humans or connected to us?

Climate Justice: Do these texts make you think differently about the connections between climate change and justice? Why or why not? What are some ways Jews might connect our traditional efforts to help the poor with work on climate change? Did you know that a letter in support of faith-based efforts to address climate change has been signed by over 400 rabbis? Did you know there is a similar letter that Muslim leaders have recently published? Why is climate justice a topic faith communities should address?

Summary Questions: Which text has served as a shofar for you and woken you up? What actions have you taken or not taken that might call for Tshuvah (repentance, return). Which texts resonated most for you? What new understandings do you have?

Next steps:

- ✧ Your congregation/organization can link up across faith traditions through Interfaith Power & Light, which has affiliates in most states. PA IP & L produced this document, and it’s hosting its annual conference in Philadelphia on October 25th. For more information on PA IP & L, go to <http://paipl.org> and for other states, go to <http://www.interfaithpowerandlight.org>. Congregations and individuals can also take the IP & L coordinated “Paris Pledge,” a pledge to reduce carbon emissions by 50% by 2030 and become carbon neutral by 2050. To find out more or sign up go to: <http://www.parispledge.org>
- ✧ There are many additional resources in the Jewish community. Here’s a sample: <http://jewcology.org> <http://www.coejl.org>; <http://urj.org/green/index.cfm>; <https://theshalomcenter.org/treasury/43>; <http://www.rac.org/environment>; <http://www.greenfaith.org/religious-teachings/jewish-statements-on-the-environment> ; <http://hazon.org> ; <http://aytzim.org>

