LSJS
London School
of Jewish Studies

LSJS Symposium on Climate Change and Halakha:

Report for the UK Jewish community

"Judaism is the systematic rejection of tragedy in the name of hope."

Rabbi Sacks zt"l

Background

On 20 November 2023 (7 Kislev 5784), just ahead of COP28, LSJS hosted a symposium entitled 'Climate Change and Halakha: Theory to practice'. In a communal first, the symposium brought together the worlds of Torah and science to hold a meaningful discussion on how to tackle climate change. This was inspired by Rabbi Sacks, who convened Orthodox thinkers to explore *halakhic* approaches to contemporary issues during his tenure as Principal at Jews' College (now LSJS). The symposium sought to encourage UK mainstream Orthodoxy to engage with the topic of climate change and explore how it might interact with *halakha*.

The symposium brought together over 40 rabbinical leaders and educators from all over the UK and from across the mainstream Orthodox community including the United Synagogue, Federation of Synagogues, S&P Sephardi community and the Rabbinic Training Academy. Together, they heard keynote lectures from Emily Farnworth of the Centre for Climate Engagement at Cambridge University, Rabbi Jeremy Wieder, Rosh Yeshiva at Yeshiva University, and Naomi Verber, Head of Environmental Policy at the United Synagogue. The symposium concluded with discussion amongst the attendees to reflect on the content of the session and what steps could be taken to raise communal awareness and make change.

Here is the report of the symposium, transcribed and edited by Ben Rothstein, which we hope will spark meaningful learning and practical action.

With thanks to our partners at the United Synagogue and its Dorot programme, the Senior Rabbi's Office of the S&P Sephardi Community and Rafi Addlestone, a fellow on the LSJS Rabbi Sacks Learning Fellowship 2022–23, who initiated and nurtured this project. LSJS is grateful for the generosity of a supporter who ensured that this report and the symposium was made possible.

LSJS in partnership with The United Synagogue, dorot thriving, for generations., the S&P HARDI community

Introduction to Climate Change

Emily Farnworth

Emily Farnworth is Director of the Centre for Climate Engagement at Hughes Hall, Cambridge University. She has over 25 years of experience working with businesses, governments and non-profit organisations to support the transition to a low-carbon economy and collaborate on solutions to tackle climate change.

Without human activity, the earth's atmosphere holds a natural balance of gases. The earth itself manages this balance through various natural systems. As radiation and energy from the sun enter the earth, plants grow and produce oxygen; the natural cycles of photosynthesis take in CO_2 and produce oxygen, in harmony with our natural producers of greenhouse gases such as volcanoes. The oceans also play a huge role in maintaining the delicate balance of the atmosphere. However, as human activity has increased, various practises are hampering the earth's natural ability to maintain a balanced ecosystem.

The burning of fossil fuels (such as coal, gas, oil) particularly in heavy-industry,[1] and the ongoing damage we are doing to the natural environment (cutting down trees, not caring for the soil) have disrupted this balance. Since the last ice age, our planet held a balance of different gases in atmosphere, maintained by the ecological cycle across land and sea, that has allowed the natural world to thrive. This persisted until the industrial revolution, the advent of which produced a massive increase in greenhouse gases. These gases have built up a 'blanket' around the earth, which traps heat and leads to steadily rising temperatures.

Scientists evidence the correlation between the release of greenhouse gases by human actions and the average temperature rise by extracting ice cores to examine temperature differences across history. Although there are natural fluctuations in the atmosphere, oceans and land mass, the burning of fossil fuels so rapidly, destruction of rainforests and over farming, has led to mass release of greenhouse gases, which is unmanageable by the natural system.[2]

We are already seeing disruption to natural systems - not only directly in extreme

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1 These form the harder to abate sectors, as fossil fuels are currently integral to production of steel – although Sweden are looking at using hydrogen for clean steel, and also developing concrete that absorbs CO2.

2 The process is as follows: The ice core is extracted, dated by carbon dating, then tiny pockets of air preserved in the ice crystals give CO2 levels. This method is agreed upon by 96% of scientists. More contentious areas are the 'tipping points', e.g. as the ice caps melt, and the freshwater enters the seas, decreasing salinity, thus changing currents, potentially altering, for example, the gulf stream. But this needs more study.

weather events like wildfires and flooding, but also through the rising heat affecting which diseases are prevalent. Areas of London and other parts of the UK are projected to be flooded by 2030. Climate change will render some areas of the world uninhabitable, due to temperature, availability of food and water. This in turn will lead to another set of problems, including mass migration towards more temperate climes. For more on climate science and the impacts of climate change, visit MIT's Climate Primer.

In 2015, the world came together to formulate a response through the Paris Agreement, an international commitment to hold the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2˚C above pre-industrial levels and pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5˚C above pre-industrial levels. The agreement sparked engagement on climate change across the system, from corporates and financial institutions, cities and states, education and healthcare providers, all seeking to achieve 'net zero' carbon emissions by 2030. This means reducing their carbon footprint as far as possible, and then investing in nature-based solutions (like tree planting) to tackle any residual emissions they can't eliminate. For more on climate solutions, visit Project Drawdown.

Climate change is creating a climate emergency that is becoming ever more urgent. We need everyone to play their part in accelerating the transition to a more sustainable future. This includes faith groups with broad influence, locally, nationally and internationally.

Climate Change and Halakha

Rabbi Jeremy Wieder

Rosh Yeshiva and Professor of Talmud at Yeshiva University. He was ordained by RIETS and holds a PhD in Judaic Studies from New York University. He is the scholar-in-residence at Congregation Kehillath Jeshurun in Manhattan.

The 'Jewish approach' to the issue of climate change need not appeal to the strictly codified *halakha*, as much as it does to common sense. It is difficult to root the contemporary issue of climate change in classical *halakha* – for obvious reasons – which poses a problem, as Judaism is often very legalistic. We are used to asking, 'Is X permitted or forbidden?' While that should be the first question asked, it should not be the only question. Thus although we will analyse climate change through a *halakhic* framework, the *halakha* is not the key issue at hand, as much as the fact that we cannot keep our heads buried in the sand over this issue.

First, we must address two misconceptions. The first is that 'the science doesn't agree'. The fact is that the overwhelming majority of scientists today agree that there is a climate crisis. When a rabbi must ascertain the facts of a case, he consults the experts, and if the experts disagree, the *halakha* is that he must follow *rov beki'in*, or the majority of experts. Thus, according to Jewish law, the reality is that there is indeed a climate emergency. The second is that many people point to the prohibition of *bal tashchit* [do not destroy], which originates from the prohibition to cut down a fruit tree during a siege, as the Torah's perspective of environmentalism. However, this is very limited in scope, as whenever there is a human need, we waive *bal tashchit*.

Instead, the framework here is tort law, specifically *nizkei shekheinim*, or what are called in America 'zoning laws'. These refer to actions I take on my property that will have an effect on your property. However, the major issue with assessing climate damage is its incremental nature. For example, I may ask: Is it permitted to drink Coca-Cola? Living a lifestyle of drinking those kinds of drinks to the extent that you damage your life is probably prohibited, but is the individual act forbidden? It is difficult to make that case legally, which is a problem in any legal system seeking to analyse individual actions with cumulative effects.

Halakha greatly limits the liability of tort law – damage caused must fall under one of four primary categories of damages in order for the perpetrator to be liable. Additionally, *halakha* requires one to be active in the damaging. Conversely, one who causes indirect damage (which climate change falls under) is not liable to pay. However, one may apply for injunctive relief from a court in such a case where one is causing another person indirect damage.

The *mishnayot* in the second chapter of Tractate *Bava Batra* outline cases of indirect damage where one may apply to a court for injunctive relief. These include, for example, setting up a threshing floor or a tannery within 25 cubits of a city. The reason is that the chaff from the threshing, or the smell from the tannery, will carry over to another's property, causing damage. These cases are the most analogous to contemporary pollution, and in these cases – whilst the damage is not direct and so the damager is not liable – one may apply to the court for injunctive relief. The court will then instruct the individual threshing or tanning to move the apparatus at least 25 cubits away from the city.

On a more basic level of the Jewish worldview on this matter, consider the comment of *chazal* on the sin of the generation of the flood. That generation was engaged in *chamas*, which is theft below the minimum threshold a court will enforce repayment. Everyone in that generation could rationalise away their theft as being of an insignificant amount, and yet it was sufficient to compel God to destroy the world.

Finally, much discourse revolves around the three 'R's of environmentalism; namely, Reduce, Reuse and Recycle. By far the least spoken about of the three 'R's is 'Reduce'. This is for pragmatic reasons, as it is difficult to convince many people to change their lifestyles. However, as religious Jews, this should be the first point we turn to. A major aspect of our religious personalities is *kedusha*, which is restraint from physical indulgences. This restraint is often spoken about in terms of sexual activity, however it is equally pertinent to consumerism and overindulgence of food and meat; restraint in this area will also bring about positive environmental changes.

Group discussion

After the keynote lectures, the symposium attendees gathered in small groups to reflect on lessons learned and next steps. Key points included:

Rabbinical leaders and educators are ready to engage:

Participants were grateful for an introduction to climate change and expressed a desire to dive more deeply into the science. There was a broad consensus that this issue is of critical importance for community leaders to understand and engage in. Whilst there was buy-in to the *halakhic* imperative to act, participants articulated a need for further support and education to build confidence on this agenda, in order to play an effective influencer role.

We need a framework to follow:

Participants expressed some frustration with the lack of hopeful vision and specific framework to guide action on the climate agenda for mainstream Orthodox communities. What is an appropriate carbon footprint for an individual or a community to adhere to? What are the implications of climate positive choices on daily religious life? These are questions that must be addressed going forward.

Inspiring community action:

Further, participants suggested that institutional bodies could look to further extend practical projects for climate action and be clear how success interacts with an overall ambition on carbon reduction. For example, reporting the benefits of a campaign to remove single-use-plastic from shul usage. Finally, there was enthusiasm for a Dorot rabbinic steering group to further explore the *halakhic* imperative to act and what that would practically manifest itself as.

Next steps

In closing the symposium, Naomi Verber shared an update on the United Synagogue Dorot programme and invited participants to engage themselves and their communities with its initiatives.

The United Synagogue's Dorot programme delivers community projects to tackle the climate crisis, offering resources, guidance and engagement opportunities for US communities. Current community action projects include tree-planting, reducing single waste plastic and communal investments.

The next step for Dorot is to directly engage in our communities, deploying rabbis and rebbetzins to engage congregants to consider their role in tackling the climate crisis. The objective this year is to build a rabbinic steering group to develop Torah-based environmental thought leadership and eco-projects to resonate with the community and influence positive change.

For further information, please contact Naomi Verber: **nverber@theus.org.uk.**

"When the Holy One, Blessed is He, created the first human, He took him and led him round all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to him: 'Look at My works, how beautiful and praiseworthy they are! And all that I have created, it was for you that I created it. Pay attention that you do not corrupt and destroy My world: if you corrupt it, there is no one to repair it after you.'"

Midrash Kohelet Rabbah 7:13

You can engage more deeply with this topic at the following links:

Does Jewish Law Demand a Response to Climate Change?

Rabbi Jeremy Wieder

Is This Our Last Chance? The Climate and the Jews

Rabbi Yonatan Neril

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