

## “G-d Is Still Speaking”

The Pope’s Encyclical and the Jewish Responsibility Towards Climate Change

Or How Religion Can Change the World

By Rabbi Michael Z. Cahana

Rosh Hashanah 5776

A Rabbi. A Pope. The United Church of Christ. As so often happens in my line of work, this sounds like the set-up for a joke. But it was real and it was beautiful. And I was reminded, as so often I am, that while there is much that divides us, there is more that unites us. Now, more than ever, our world needs that unity.

Over the summer, I was invited to be the guest preacher at the Parkrose Community UCC church in North Portland. Their pastor, Don Frueh, was on sabbatical and lay leaders of the congregation organized a series of speakers for every Sunday he was away. I was invited to fill one of those preaching opportunities.

Perhaps you are not so familiar with the United Church of Christ. I wasn’t. As they describe it, the UCC is “a church of firsts, a church of extravagant welcome. . .<sup>1</sup>”

They were the first historically white denomination to ordain an African-American, the first to ordain a woman, the first to ordain an openly gay man, and the first Christian church to affirm the right of same-gender couples to marry. They were in the forefront of the anti-slavery movement and the Civil Rights movement.

Sounds a lot like Reform Judaism.

A primary creed of the UCC Movement is summed up in the slogan that was prominently displayed around the Parkrose church, and on the slide show they used for the service and my sermon: “God is Still Speaking” it said. This sounds much like our Reform Movement’s philosophical concept of “Ongoing Revelation” – part of what differentiates us from Orthodox Judaism. It is the idea that G-d’s voice can be heard for us today, calling us to action. “Ongoing revelation” is reliance not just on traditional interpretation but on modern understandings as

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ucc.org/about>

being Divinely inspired. “God is Still Speaking” reminds us that we have to pay attention, to listen to G-d’s voice and to act in ways that help create a vision of a G-d infused world.

So I chose to talk about the pope.

It escaped no one’s notice, because I pointed it out, the irony that a Reform rabbi would come to a liberal church to talk about the traditional world-wide leader of the Catholics. I am old enough to remember a time when Catholics still talked about Jews being “in error”, where the accusation of “deicide” – laying the blame for the crucifixion on Jews – was still prevalent. Painful to recall how centuries of rejection defined the Catholic-Jewish relationship.

In just a few weeks, here in our sanctuary, the Catholic and Jewish community of Portland will gather to celebrate the Vatican’s 1965 publication of *Nostra Aetate*<sup>2</sup> (Latin for: “In our Time”). Our Rabbi Emeritus Emanuel Rose and Mary Jo Tully, Chancellor of the Archdiocese of Portland, will be the keynote speakers. *Nostra Aetate*, promulgated 50 years ago next month, laid the groundwork for the modern relationship between Catholics and other religions, most notably the Jews. But things didn’t change instantly and the relationship has been sometimes tense, although here in Portland especially, there is much to celebrate. Still, even recently, many of us found ourselves on the opposite side of the Marriage Equality issue and abortion rights reflected in the defunding of Planned Parenthood.

But on a mid-July Sunday, this Rabbi went to that UCC Church to praise the Catholic Pope.

About a month earlier, His Holiness Pope Francis had released a revolutionary encyclical “*LAUDATO SI’* – (‘Praise to You’) - On Care For Our Common Home.”<sup>3</sup> This remarkable document speaks of the human responsibility towards the care of planet Earth. It speaks directly and dramatically about the reality of climate change. Cutting through the empty rhetoric of deniers, Pope Frances pleads for all of humanity to come together and tackle this problem.

By the way, among those who deny that Climate Change is real, or that it is human caused, or that human beings can do anything about it; is virtually every GOP Candidate for President<sup>4</sup>. Donald Trump has even gone so far as to tweet that “The concept of global warming was

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<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nostra\\_aetate](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nostra_aetate)

<sup>3</sup> Full text: [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html) Note that the number in brackets at the end of each quote is the paragraph number from the document.

<sup>4</sup> “Where The 2016 Republican Candidates Stand On Climate Change” CBS News, September 1, 2015 <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/where-the-2016-republican-candidates-stand-on-climate-change/>

created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive.” The Pope may have something to say about that. For myself, I am just happy to have put Donald Trump and Pope Francis into the same paragraph. Thus endith my political commentary.

In that UCC Church, on that day, with the words “God is Still Speaking” projected over us, I noted how the Pope’s encyclical echoed classic Jewish texts. I spoke of the Psalms of King David: *לְיְהוָה הָאָרֶץ וּמְלוֹאָתָהּ תִּבְּל וַיֵּשְׁבֵי בָהּ:* - “*The earth is the Lord’s, and all that fills it; the world, and those who dwell in it*” (Ps 24:1) and the rabbinic interpretation of it teaching that we humans are the caretakers of G-d’s world, not owners to use it as we please. We are charged with the Divine mission to maintain the world for all. I spoke of the Talmudic and later Medieval rabbis who reminded us that every living species has a right to exist and has a purpose in G-d’s world. As the midrash teaches:

Humankind was not created until the sixth day so that if pride should govern, it could be said: “even the tiniest flea preceded you in creation...”<sup>5</sup>

Judaism, I told them, teaches the arrogant skyscraper building, moon surface walking, iPhone using human being to be humble in the face of the flea. So, how is that working out for you?

And I taught them my favorite midrash on the subject of human stewardship of G-d’s creation, reaching back to the Torah’s Adam:

When the Holy One, blessed be G-d, created the first man, G-d took him and led him round all the trees of the Garden of Eden, and said to him, “Behold My works, how beautiful and commendable they are! All that I have created, for your sake I created it. Pay heed that you do not corrupt and destroy My universe; for if you corrupt it there is no one to repair it after you.”

“How are we doing on that divine commandment?” I asked the church.

Thousands of years ago, our Jewish ancestors taught that we have a moral responsibility towards the care of our world. Human-made environmental disasters have been our inheritance. They have culminated now, today, in our generation and the ones to follow, in the most dangerous environmental disaster of all: global climate change. The so-called “Sixth Extinction” of species destroying the diversity of life at an alarming rate. The last “Great Extinction” is the one that wiped out the dinosaurs 65 million years ago. Of these five cataclysmic events, this is the only one not caused by natural disasters but by the agency of one global species on all others. Remember the flea? Remember G-d’s midrashic injunction: “Pay heed that you do not corrupt and destroy My universe”?

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<sup>5</sup> Leviticus Rabbah 14:1; Tosefta Sanhedrin. 8:4 (5th C. CE?)

I titled my talk “The Earth is the Lord’s. And She’s Not Happy.”

Judaism has been teaching us that we have a responsibility. Science has been teaching us the magnitude of the problem. And still, far too little has been done.

So why, I asked rhetorically, is the Pope’s Encyclical so important?

When confronted with the reality of Global Climate change, we generally have 3 questions:

1. Is it really human-caused?
2. How is it going to affect me?
3. What can I possibly do about it?

*LAUDATO SI’ - ON CARE FOR OUR COMMON HOME* comes to teach that these are the wrong questions. Pope Francis, in his classic humble way, has turned it into a religious teaching, a moral responsibility. And this is where religion can play a vital role in the conversation.

“Is it really Human caused?” we ask. It is the wrong question. Stop beating each other up and being paralyzed from action. Like a doctor performing triage, look first at the patient. The world is bleeding.

“*LAUDATO SI’, mi’ Signore* – Praise be to you, my Lord” Pope Francis quotes in the very opening of his document and notes:

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.

This sister now cries out to us . . . 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.

Nothing in this world is indifferent to us. [1-2]

This is not about a projected dark future. Climate change is affecting real people and challenging their ways of life right now. Pacific Island nations such as the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Tokelau, Tuvalu and Kiribati are among the first, feeling the effects of rising sea water and lowered freshwater supplies. According to a United Nations

Development Programme Report<sup>6</sup> more than 100 million people are at risk. Noting that since 1870 the average sea level has risen 20 centimeters, and the rate of change has accelerated, threatening to swamp populous, low-lying areas in Bangladesh, as well as island nations in the Pacific, UNDP Regional Director for Asia and the Pacific said:

There is no Plan B for Planet Earth, and for the people of the Pacific, that message is loud and clear as their very existence is threatened.

Don't get caught up in the never-ending debates about "if, why and how." Look around you; see the earth "burdened and laid waste," "abandoned and maltreated." See the never-ending droughts and the wildfires that follow. See the increasingly fierce storms and the havoc they produce. See the receding shorelines and the displacement that has already begun in island communities. We are not a part from this world, we are a part of it. We are dust of the earth and what happens to the earth happens to us.

And our second question, "how will this affect me?" is similarly abandoned. This is not a personal problem, it is a global one. This is not a financial problem, it is a moral one:

Climate change is a global problem with grave implications. . . Its worst impact will probably be felt by developing countries in coming decades. Many of the poor live in areas particularly affected by phenomena related to warming, and their means of subsistence are largely dependent on natural reserves and ecosystemic services. . . They have no other financial activities or resources which can enable them to adapt to climate change or to face natural disasters, and their access to social services and protection is very limited. . . There has been a tragic rise in the number of migrants seeking to flee from the growing poverty caused by environmental degradation. . . Sadly, there is widespread indifference to such suffering, which is even now taking place throughout our world. Our lack of response to these tragedies involving our brothers and sisters points to the loss of that sense of responsibility for our fellow men and women upon which all civil society is founded. [25]

Look not only to the harm done to animals and plants, the Pope is saying. Look to the human costs; the lives disrupted and destroyed. The worst effects being borne by those least able to bear them. Climate change is a moral issue.

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<sup>6</sup> UNDP, 3 Nov. 2011 - 2011 Human Development Report: Pacific Islands' progress jeopardized by inequalities and environmental threats

<http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/presscenter/pressreleases/2011/11/03/2011-human-development-report-pacific-islands-progress-jeopardized-by-inequalities-and-environmental-threats/>

And lastly, our most common response: “What can I possibly do about it?” is again exposed as the wrong question. We are easily overwhelmed by the enormity of the task, and putting up a solar panel – important as it is – is not going to have that much impact. But again, the encyclical changes the question. Not “What can I possibly do?” but “What can WE do together?”

I urgently appeal, then, for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all. . . We require a new and universal solidarity. . . 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]

So this is why a rabbi goes to a UCC church to talk about a pope. Because it is not one individual, or even one community that will provide the answer. His Holiness is not proposing a technical solution, but a moral one. A unification of humanity, of cultures, of skills and imagination. Each of us doing our part as individuals and dedicating our societies to plans for sustainability. It requires us collectively moving away from economies of destruction. There should be a price to pay for carbon pollution. There should be a price to pay for wanton destruction or wasteful practices. Even if some can afford it, the world cannot.

Next week, during Yom Kippur, His Holiness Pope Francis will be visiting the United States. The day after our most sacred holy day, a day of reflection and change, the Pope will be addressing a joint session of Congress. His message, I imagine, will one of unity and hope. The leader of some billion Catholics world-wide will remind us far fewer Jews that the humility we learned on Yom Kippur can unite us with people of other faiths. Together we can literally change the world.

Some people ask about the purpose of religion. Why do we need the ceremony, ritual, and especially the G-d talk. I believe that religion, whether Catholic, UCC, Muslim, Buddhist or Jewish – and all the many I’ve not mentioned – I believe that religion teaches us arrogant, skyscraper building human beings to be grateful. To be humble. To think of ourselves as connected, not just to those we know and love, but to all of humanity. Not everyone preaches the message and not everyone hears it. But if we listen carefully, we recognize that even the greatest problems facing humanity – including Global Climate Change – can and should be faced together, as humans, divinely inspired with strengths and abilities given to no other being on this planet. Together we can take care of this planet, our only home, our common home. Our mother, our sister; the support for all of us.

When the Pope speaks, listen. When the call comes, heed it. When we choose leaders, demand it. When there are those who say there is nothing we can do, we have to show them there is everything we can do. If we do it together.

Behold My works, how beautiful and commendable they are! All that I have created, for your sake I created it. Pay heed that you do not corrupt and destroy My universe; for if you corrupt it there is no one to repair it after you.

Listen. G-d is still speaking.