



# Paris, the Pope, and the Planet

## OPENING THE DOOR TO 1.5° AND A CARBON MARKET

by Rabbi Judy Weiss

I'm a rabbi, climate activist, and grandmother, and the way I mix these identities seems constantly to surprise my friends.

In 2014 they asked: "Why go to the New York climate march just three days before Rosh Hashanah? One march won't change anything!" My answer: "Participating in a large climate march with thousands of other people will change *me*, and rededicate me for a new year of more intensive climate activism."

The next year they asked: "Why go to Washington to see the Pope on Yom Kippur? Don't you know that Paris' climate summit in December is the place to be?" My answer: "Pope Francis is what I need on Yom Kippur to fight the sins of discouragement, apathy, and cynicism. As for Paris, if that summit failed to reach an accord after I made a big carbon-intensive trip — oh, the despair!"

So on the morning of September 23, I was just a couple blocks from the White House participating in an outdoor, creative Yom Kippur service. In the background, we heard speeches by the president and the pope. Music, roaring crowds, security helicopters, and city police sirens added to our prayers and Torah reading. I couldn't make out Obama's words, but when

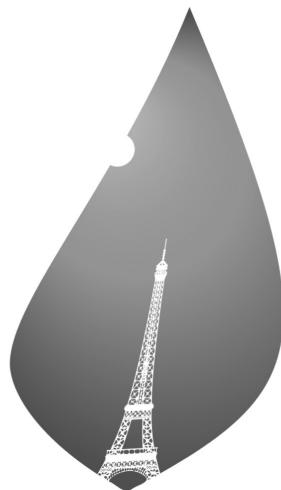
I read them later, I realized that he had perfectly encapsulated those Yom Kippur prayers that urge us to feel connected to our communities as one united, treasured people, able together to chase away self-satisfaction and improve the world. Obama said to Francis:

*You are shaking us out of complacency. All of us may, at times, experience discomfort when we contemplate the distance*

*between how we lead our daily lives and what we know to be true . . . But I believe such discomfort is a blessing, for it points to something better. You shake our conscience from slumber; you . . . give us confidence that we can come together in humility and service, and pursue a world that is more loving, more just, and more free. Here at home and around the world, may our generation heed your call to "never remain on the sidelines of this march of living hope."*

Later that day, I sat on the mall with thousands of people, watching a live telecast of Francis leading Mass a few miles away at the largest Roman Catholic Church in the U.S. The Lincoln Memorial was behind me, the Washington Monument to my right, the Capitol ahead. Despite fasting, I felt no hunger, thirst, headache, or fatigue. Holding my *kittel* [the white burial shroud worn on Yom Kippur] over my head, I shielded myself from the hot sun and felt joy as Francis' gorgeous homily silenced my internal fear that we're going to fail. Francis ordered hope to arise:

*Something deep within us invites us to rejoice and tells us not to settle for pleasures that always keep us comfortable . . . Our daily routine can often lead us*



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*to a kind of glum apathy which gradually becomes a habit, with a fatal consequence: our hearts grow numb . . . The spirit of the world tells us to be like everyone else, to settle for what comes easy. Faced with this human way of thinking, "we must regain the conviction that we need one another, that we have a shared responsibility for others and for the world" [a quote from St. Francis of Assisi, the pope's namesake].*

## ***The accord included agreement to aim to limit increases in average global temperature to 1.5° Centigrade.***

Climate activism can be full of distress over the late hour and the suffering our inaction is already causing. But Francis reframed activism as joy, a chance to wake from apathy and re-joyce — because we can “regain the conviction,” said his encyclical, “that we need one another, that we have a shared responsibility for others and the world, and that being good and decent are worth it.” Whether we fail or not, there is joy in being good to the world and decent to other people.

**N**evertheless, as the time for the Paris conference of 196 nations approached, I was disheartened to read that conference organizers had announced that carbon pricing would not be on the agenda. Citizens’ Climate Lobby, for which I volunteer, has as its main focus the creation of a U.S. carbon fee, to be paid by fossil-fuel producers, with the revenue distributed to the public. This would cut emissions efficiently and equitably while protecting the public from price increases. I feared that the exclusion of carbon pricing was a sign that the

Paris meeting would fail to reach any agreement.

Leading Republican politicians had dismissed the conference in advance while denying anthropogenic climate change and seeking to undermine President Obama’s authority on the world stage. In October and November, twenty-seven U.S. states had filed suits against the EPA’s Clean Power Plan. Representative Lamar Smith (R-

TX) had attacked a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration climate study in what seemed like an effort to distract the media and the public as the Paris summit approached.

Then came the terrible terrorist attacks in Paris, just two weeks before the conference.

To my surprise, however, an accord was reached and included agreement to aim to limit increases in average global temperature to 1.5°C — in contrast with the business-as-usual arc of emissions that, according to scientific opinion, would cause temperatures to warm 4° or 5°C by 2100. The language that emerged from Paris represented a significant advance.

Unfortunately, the INDCs (Intended Nationally Determined Contributions) for cutting emissions that nations submitted would only curtail warming from our current probable path of 5° to 3+°, not 1.5°. Still, despite that gap — and despite ISIS’s terrorism, and Republicans’ efforts to stymie climate action — 196 of the world’s nations accepted 1.5° as what we need to be thinking and talking about.

I’ve heard Dr. James Hansen, probably the world’s most famous climate scientist, denounce setting 2°C as a goal. Hansen, who retired from his post with NASA in 2013 to spend more time educating the public about the urgent need for action, is an advisor to Citizens’ Climate Lobby. He argues that there is simply no time for nations to procrastinate, that the time to stop emitting carbon *entirely* is now!

It’s good for him to push. In truth, there is no research at all suggesting that a 2°C increase in global temperature would be safe. Most climate scientists it a boundary between dangerous and extremely dangerous. The figure arose as a threshold because of a 1977 economics paper by William D. Nordhaus, who used it as a rough estimate to start a discussion about climate change and the world economy. Recent climate science suggests that 2° will likely lead to terrible global changes.

Low-lying, island, and less-developed nations have therefore been calling for a 1.5° target instead of 2°, only to be rebuffed by wealthier nations. The fact that 1.5° is now part of an international accord reassures me that most of the world is in agreement with science and sanity — and that justice will one day be visited upon the scoundrels who have disrupted public discussion of climate change with deceitful denials and perverted lies. To me as a fiercely protective mother and grandmother, 1.5° means that my kids, and I hope everyone’s kids, stand a chance of living in a climate-stabilized world. We just have to keep repeating it, like a mantra or a prayer: 1.5°. Speech, after all, can have performative power.

**I**n the U.S., most climate action is happening at regional, state, and local levels. Regions are studying how to adapt to sea-level rise and help farmers adapt to changing weather, and are forming cap-and-trade

systems and more efficient electrical grids. States are encouraging the adoption of renewables and studying carbon taxes. Cities are fostering energy efficiencies, adapting urban planning, and updating building codes to protect against flooding. Five hundred cities, including a hundred in the U.S., held their own version of the summit in Paris, and most pledged their own emissions reductions programs.

Ten Democratic U.S. senators also went to Paris to affirm support for the summit, but not one Republican senator or representative. Congressional Republicans did agree to extend solar and wind credits as part of their year-end budget negotiations, but these are much less useful than a national carbon-pricing program, which would incentivize the entire nation to cut emissions. Dr. Hansen insists that all that is really needed for a successful climate campaign is for the U.S. and China to establish carbon pricing. China already has a program in the works, but Congress failed to enact one even when the Democrats were in control.

**C**itizens' Climate Lobby's mission is to empower citizens to create the political will for a liveable planet. Citizens are trained to meet with members of Congress, write letters and opinion articles for newspapers, and lobby editors to endorse carbon fees. The organization has more than three hundred chapters and works with constituents in every Congressional district.

In closed-door meetings, we are detecting changes in Congressional thinking. In June 2014 (when 7 percent of Congressional offices still dismissed the scientific consensus), the biggest concern we heard regarded China's huge emissions. By June 2015 (with less than 4 percent disbelieving), we were being asked specific questions about border adjustments for carbon

fees and about the exact mechanics that we envision for distributing dividends to the public. In other words, members of Congress now focus on how to design an effective emissions policy.

Will they enact legislation? When more citizens work hard to generate enough political will, we'll see Congress passing laws. I recently had my five hundredth letter published on the subject. My letters draw on memories of camping vacations, or hiking to Grinnell Glacier; I quote Pope Francis or rabbinic teachings; I connect to readers based on shared values of protecting our families and taking responsibility for our lives and our citizenship.

There's an old Jewish tradition of putting coins in a *pushke* box before lighting *shabbat* candles. These days, I urge Jews I know to continue that tradition by making donations to climate-change organizations on Friday afternoons, or to update the custom by sending an advocacy letter to an elected official every Friday. This can become a ritual that develops your commitment, optimism, and effectiveness. If you share your letters on social media, you also educate and inspire your friends. Maybe they'll adopt your Friday afternoon letter-writing custom.

Elected officials listen to paid lobbyists, in part, because they hear from them regularly. If they heard from constituents just as regularly, they would heed us because their jobs depend on our votes.

**A**s Obama enters his last year in office, newspapers are obsessing over his legacy. Perhaps this should inspire us to ask ourselves what our personal climate legacy is to be. What will we say in ten or twenty years when our children or grandchildren ask us what we did when we found out about climate change?

It's worth identifying a "carbon

legacy" for yourself, a commitment to cutting your carbon footprint and advocating for climate legislation. Make your legacy "smart": Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Time-bound. Discuss your ideas with family and friends. Tape a list, picture, or other reminder to your mirror so that every morning you'll be reminded to pursue your smart legacy.

"Our parent's generation did not know that their energy use would harm future generations and other life on the planet," Dr. Hansen has said. "If we do not change our course, we can only pretend that we did not know."

**T**here was a wonderful interactive portion to the Yom Kippur services I attended on the Washington mall. We were asked to walk through our little prayer area in random directions until Rabbi Mordecai Liebling, one of the prayer leaders, told us to stop. Then, without speaking, we were to greet the person in front of us. Liebling described us all as people with generous hearts who care for the world; with clever hands for carrying signs, making posters, or writing letters; with perceptive eyes that see a need and study the issue. As I listened, I came to appreciate the many phenomenal people who give their time and talents to minimize the risks that climate change presents — and suddenly I realized that Liebling was not just talking about all those people I was greeting, he was also talking about me.

I think he was talking about you too. If you haven't already, please become active in the U.S. climate movement. **JC**

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