

My Jewish Journey to Climate Change Activism

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It was a bitter cold February day in Washington, DC and I was all bundled up.... tethered with plastic handcuffs to 47 other environmental leaders from across the country to the White House gates. One-by-one, we were arrested. We were doing civil disobedience to dissuade the White House from approving a new dirty oil pipeline scheduled to be built from Canada to the US—promising a major escalation in climate change if allowed to go through. It was 2013 and we were protesting President Obama ... I know you are thinking- what was a nice Jewish girl like me doing getting arrested at the White House demanding more action on climate change?

I was born in the mid-1950s, raised in a semi-orthodox, kosher home in Baltimore, Maryland, the 2nd of 4 children, 3rd generation Americans, during the post-WWII, baby boom era. As Jews, we were deeply shaped by the Holocaust and the recent formation of the state of Israel. And as Americans, we were strongly informed by the culture of plenty that promised unlimited opportunity as well as unlimited consumption from seemingly unlimited resources.

Every Friday evening, we had a traditional erev Shabbat dinner with our paternal grandparents at their humble apartment. Every Saturday morning, we walked to our small liberal orthodox shul, a few blocks from our home, for Shabbat services, where women sat separately from men, and where my bat mitzvah consisted of an oneg after services, as I was not allowed on the bimah! But I deeply loved the music, community spirit and sermonizing that seeped into my soul. And during High Holidays, fundraising in support of planting trees in Israel, inspired my imagination.

I also attended private Jewish school, but I found the limited curriculum—essentially Hebrew, math, Torah and English—very frustrating because I was excluded from many of its rituals and because I wanted to literally learn about the birds and the bees and the plants and the trees.

Our parents imbued in my siblings and me a strong sense of social justice. My father was a clothing salesman with his customers primarily middle class blacks, many of whom were family friends. Our mother took us, even as small children, to protests in Washington, DC against the Vietnam War and in support of civil rights—for African Americans and Soviet Jewry. My first political memory was the assassination of President Kennedy – in part because my 7th birthday party had been cancelled... But watching my parents cry in front of our black and white TV, shocked by the new sense of reality that permeated our country, left a deep impression.

That period also saw a budding women’s rights movement. In the spring of 5th grade, I came home from school to find my mother preparing a ham on the fleishik cutting board, as my father and older brother objected. But my mother, who had just completed the book, *A Feminine Mystique*, by Betty Friedan, had decided to stop keeping kosher and showed who was in charge. Despite the protests, we all sat down to eat. We never had ham in the house again but we were forever changed, at least I was by her example.

Despite our strong commitment to Israel, especially after the Six Day War (when I was sure I’d go to Israel and join the Army!), we stopped going to private Jewish school. I was enrolled in public school where I was thrilled to be able to study biology for the first time.

The assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy along with growing civil unrest and the growing environmental movement just a couple years later, also had a profound

influence on me. By 7th grade, I knew what I wanted to do with my life: bring the Russians and Americans together through our common love of nature.

Fast forward: After college- where I studied ecology and a bit of Russian!- I came to California doing butterfly field research and became involved in environmental and social justice activism. I eventually found a new Jewish home at Congregation Sha'ar Zahav in San Francisco- where, in 1993, I joined the shul's first group trip to Israel—which was also the first openly gay and lesbian trip to Israel from anywhere in the world. Finding a community where I could be myself as a lesbian allowed me to reconnect with my Jewish roots and sense of belonging. I became a board member and co-chaired their capital campaign to successfully build their new synagogue on Dolores St.

Shortly after, I became Executive Director of Point Blue Conservation Science (founded as Point Reyes Bird Observatory). By the mid-2000's, we were observing the impacts of climate change on birds, marine mammals and other wildlife, from the Farallones to Antarctica. In the spring of 2006, I urged my Rabbi at the time, Camille Angel, to have our congregation start acting on climate change. "Get solar panels, change the light bulbs, talk about it from the pulpit," I told her. I talked her ear off and finally, she got me off her back by asking me to give the Yom Kippur sermon that fall --on Judaism and climate change. I first said no way! I was no expert on climate change and definitely not on Judaism. But she convinced me. I spent every free moment for the next 5 months learning everything I could about climate change as well as about Jewish environmental writings and beliefs. Giving that sermon stirred something deep inside me- bringing together my passion for healing the Earth and my love of Judaism.

A couple weeks later, former Vice President Al Gore announced that he would start training people to give presentations of an “Inconvenient Truth.” I was honored to have been invited to attend his 2nd training in Nashville, Tennessee but as I told his staff, I wanted to focus on nature and climate change. And for the next decade, that is exactly what I did, playing a major role in moving the conservation community to prioritize climate change in every aspect of their work.

This past year, after 20 years at the helm of Point Blue, I stepped down to take time off and to find my final full time job—to work 100% on climate change. I am thrilled to now head The Climate Center based out of Santa Rosa, working on a statewide campaign to rapidly enact the policies the science demands for us to return to a safe climate —aggressive climate action to slash greenhouse gas pollution very soon and to remove warming emissions that we’ve already dumped into the atmosphere.

In many ways, this period in my life is akin to Rosh Hashana, starting a new cycle of rebirth and opportunity for Tikkun Olam. Rosh Hashana, the anniversary of the creation of the world, our world, our planet, and as Carl Sagan said—the pale blue dot on which “everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives.” The only place in the universe that sustains life that we know of. Judaism demands that we do everything possible to preserve it. The sages teach us that to save one life is to save the entire world. The immediate and present danger of climate change presents a challenge to save our own lives and literally save the entire world. What could be more compelling? I would go to the White House again – and will do whatever I can to reverse the climate crisis and to repair the earth—tikkun olam. I invite you will join me...for us, for our children and our children’s children. L’dor v’dor. Shana Tova.