



**THE BLOG** 09/22/2014 08:30 pm ET | Updated Nov 22, 2014

# Climate Change Will Be the Number One Issue in the 2034 Midterm Elections



By Marty Kaplan



ASSOCIATED PRESS

On the day after the Sept. 23 UN Climate Change Summit in New York, sunset will bring the High Holidays to Jews around the world.

On that night, I wonder whether the words of the *Unetanneh Tokef*, the troubling prayer at the heart of the Days of Awe, will resonate with news from the summit and the march preceding it about global efforts to rescue our planet.

*On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed.*

*How many will pass and how many will be created?*

*Who will live and who will die?*

*Who in their time, and who not their time?*

*Who by fire and who by water?*

*Who by sword and who by beast?*

*Who by hunger and who by thirst?*

*Who by earthquake and who by drowning?*

*Who by strangling and who by stoning?  
Who will rest and who will wander?  
Who will be safe and who will be torn?  
Who will be calm and who will be tormented?  
Who will become poor and who will get rich?  
Who will be made humble and who will be raised up?*

For my fellow congregants, in the wake of a week of speechmaking about fossil fuels and greenhouse gases, when they come to “drowning,” will it mean floods and rising sea levels in their minds? Will “thirst” mean drought? Will “wander” mean climate refugees? Will “not in their time” mean the extinction we risk inflicting on posterity? Is that the sentence now being written and sealed?

As I look around my congregation, as we speak the prayer in unison, I know that other thoughts, not about the planet, will also come to mind — that “strangling” will call up images of unspeakable barbarity that have assaulted us; that “stoning” will put many in mind of the sanctioned evil being visited on women around the world; that “poor” and “rich” will remind us of rampant inequality; that “earthquake,” in at least some parts of the country, will pierce if only for a moment the veil of denial; that “tormented,” for some, will bring thoughts of Robin Williams.

I also know that the “but” — the hairpin turn this prayer makes after its inventory of life’s unbearable, inevitable jeopardies — will put many people off balance:

*But teshuvah and tefillah and tzedakah avert the severe decree.*

Every word of the Jewish liturgy is the tip of an iceberg of commentary. *Teshuvah* has inspired volumes about returning, repentance, reconciliation; *tefillah*, about prayer, gratitude, awe; *tzedakah*, about generosity, righteousness, justice. No matter how those words are translated and interpreted, what they have in common in this prayer is that they trigger the “but.” If we embrace them, they promise a stay of execution, a turn of fate, a better path than the one we’re on. Will that work for climate change?

“If the world keeps burning fossil fuels at the current rate,” scientist Michael E. Mann wrote in *Scientific American* this year, “it will cross a threshold into environmental ruin by 2036.”

It’s easy to imagine that when it’s five minutes to environmental midnight, in the 2034 midterm elections, climate change will be the nation’s number one voting issue. Unfortunately, it’s also easy to imagine that by the time that happens, neither *teshuvah* nor *tefillah* nor *tzedakah* will be able to avert the severe decree of science. At a certain point, we will discover ourselves unable to outlaw or repent or pray away the carbon dioxide and methane blanketing the planet. If that time comes, no change of mind or heart or law will be able to derail our rendez-vous with catastrophe.

Yet in the 2014 midterm elections, while there’s still time to reset our course to resilience, climate change is not a top worry, does not promise to drive turnout, will not inspire a wave election.

I hope I’m wrong about that. I hope that billionaire Tom Steyer has seen state-by-state numbers suggesting that NextGen Climate, his super PAC, can mobilize enough environmental voters to defeat Senate Republican candidates Scott Brown in New Hampshire, Joni Ernst in Iowa, Cory Gardner in Colorado and Terry Lynn Land in Michigan — and potentially save the Senate majority from falling into the hands of science-deniers. I hope the money that NextGen puts into ads, field operations and get-out-the-vote efforts to beat Republican gubernatorial candidates Tom Corbett in Pennsylvania, Paul LePage in Maine and Rick Scott in Florida will rally citizens of those states to rescue them from environmental ruin.

But the national polls I’ve seen tell a different story. In January, the Pew Research Center found that the priority the American public puts on dealing with global warming puts it 19th out of 20 issues tested. (Climate change ranked so low that in April,

when Pew looked for the top issues in the midterms, they didn't even include it in the survey.) When Gallup polled Americans' level of worry about national problems in March, climate change came in 14th out of 15. A majority of the country said they worried a "great deal" about the economy, federal spending and healthcare, and 49 percent said unemployment, but only 24 percent said that about climate change, putting it behind hunger and homelessness, crime and violence, terrorist attacks in the U.S., drug use and illegal immigration. More than half of those surveyed — a majority of Americans — said they worried about climate change only "a little" or "not at all."

I can understand why that is. Part of it is the limitless resources that the energy industry has been spending on propaganda, much of it laundered by phony think tanks and amplified by partisan media. Part of it is simply human: The scarier a thought is, the less we want to think it. The same facts that capture our attention make us despair and feel helpless. That's why UN summit planners have been saying they plan to spend scant time on the apocalypse and focus instead on innovation and opportunity. That's why hopeful children are the faces in *2036*, the short video that the Norman Lear Center has made for climate week, and not images of planetary devastation.

Is the prospect of solving problems and giving kids a better future a more powerful motivator than fear? ISIS is banking that terror will hold onto the world's attention like nothing else. It will be righteous of us to degrade and ultimately destroy their capacity for doing evil. When it comes to climate change, much better than repenting because the end is nigh is rejoicing because hope is at hand.

*This is a crosspost of my column in the Jewish Journal, where you can reach me if you'd like at [martyk@jewishjournal.com](mailto:martyk@jewishjournal.com).*

*This post is part of a month-long series produced by The Huffington Post in conjunction with a variety of events being held in September recognizing the threats posed by climate change. Those events include the UN's Climate Summit 2014 (to be held Sept. 23, 2014, at UN headquarters in New York) and Climate Week NYC (Sept. 22-28, 2014, throughout New York City). To see all the posts in the series, read [here](#).*

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