

HUMAN RIGHTS AND CLIMATE CHANGE

I. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Article 25, section 1

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

Article 28

Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.

discussion questions

1. How might climate change infringe upon these rights?
2. Each word of a document like the Declaration is carefully crafted. What words or phrases leap out at you in the context of climate change? What do you learn from these key words?

II. Climate Change and Famine: From the UN World Food Program

Climate change is making climate disasters, such as floods and droughts, more frequent and intense, land and water more scarce and difficult to access, and increases in agricultural productivity even harder to achieve.

These impacts are increasing the risk of hunger and the breakdown of food systems. Without considerable efforts made to improve people's climate resilience, it has been estimated that the risk of hunger and malnutrition could increase by up to 20 percent by 2050.

(<https://www.wfp.org/climate-change>)

III. Famine in Egypt: Two Approaches

One of the consequences of climate change will be widespread famine and climate-based migration. Jacob and his sons may be read as just such refugees. The Torah seems to tell the story of how Egypt's government, led by Joseph, responded to the famine twice. While the second can be read as filling in details for the first, we can also take them as two different versions of the story. Compare these two versions:

A. Genesis 41: 53-57

⁵³ The seven years of abundance that the land of Egypt enjoyed came to an end,⁵⁴ and the seven years of famine set in, just as Joseph had foretold. There was famine in all lands, but throughout the land of Egypt there was bread.

⁵⁵ And when all the land of Egypt felt the hunger, the people cried out to Pharaoh for bread; and Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, "Go to Joseph; whatever he tells you, you shall do." —⁵⁶ Accordingly, when the famine became severe in the land of Egypt, Joseph laid open all that was within, and rationed out grain to the Egyptians. The famine, however, spread over the whole world.⁵⁷ So all the world came to Joseph in Egypt to procure rations, for the famine had become severe throughout the world. (Translation: NJPS)

(נג) וַתְּכַלֶּינָה שְׁבַע שָׁנֵי הַשְּׂבָע אֲשֶׁר הָיָה בְּאֶרֶץ
מִצְרַיִם: (נד) וַתַּחֲלִינָה שְׁבַע שָׁנֵי הָרָעָב לְבוֹא
כָּאֲשֶׁר אָמַר יוֹסֵף וַיְהִי רָעָב בְּכָל־הָאֲרָצוֹת וּבְכָל־
אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם הָיָה לֶחֶם:

(נה) וַתִּרְעַב כָּל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וַיִּצְעַק הָעָם אֶל־
פַּרְעֹה לֵלֶחֶם וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה לְכָל־מִצְרַיִם לְכוּ
אֶל־יוֹסֵף אֲשֶׁר־יֹאמַר לָכֶם תַּעֲשׂוּ: (נו) וַהֲרָעַב
הָיָה עַל כָּל־פְּנֵי הָאֲרֶץ וַיִּפְתַּח יוֹסֵף אֶת־כָּל־
אֲשֶׁר בָּהֶם וַיִּשְׁבֵּר לְמִצְרַיִם וַיַּחֲזֹק הָרָעָב בְּאֶרֶץ
מִצְרַיִם: (נז) וְכָל־הָאֲרֶץ בָּאוּ מִצְרַיִמָּה לְשִׁבֵּר
אֶל־יוֹסֵף כִּי־חָזַק הָרָעָב בְּכָל־הָאֲרֶץ:



B. Genesis 47:13-26

¹³ Now there was no bread in all the world, for the famine was very severe; both the land of Egypt and the land of Canaan languished because of the famine. ¹⁴ Joseph gathered in all the money that was to be found in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, as payment for the rations that were being procured, and Joseph brought the money into Pharaoh's palace.

¹⁵ And when the money gave out in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, all the Egyptians came to Joseph and said, "Give us bread, lest we die before your very eyes; for the money is gone!" ¹⁶ And Joseph said, "Bring your livestock, and I will sell to you against your livestock, if the money is gone." ¹⁷ So they brought their livestock to Joseph, and Joseph gave them bread in exchange for the horses, for the stocks of sheep and cattle, and the asses; thus he provided them with bread that year in exchange for all their livestock.

¹⁸ And when that year was ended, they came to him the next year and said to him, "We cannot hide from my lord that, with all the money and animal stocks consigned to my lord, nothing is left at my lord's disposal save our persons and our farmland. ¹⁹ Let us not perish before your eyes, both we and our land. Take us and our land in exchange for bread, and we with our land will be serfs to Pharaoh; provide the seed, that we may live and not die, and that the land may not become a waste." ²⁰ So Joseph gained possession of all the farm land of Egypt for Pharaoh, every Egyptian having sold his field because the famine was too much for them; thus the land passed over to Pharaoh.

²¹ And he removed the population town by town, from one end of Egypt's border to the other. ²² Only the land of the priests he did not take over, for the priests had an allotment from Pharaoh, and they lived off the allotment which Pharaoh had made to them; therefore they did not sell their land. ²³ Then Joseph said to the people, "Whereas I have this day acquired you and your land for Pharaoh, here is seed for you to sow the land. ²⁴ And when harvest comes, you shall give one-fifth to Pharaoh, and four-fifths shall be yours as seed for the fields and as food for you and those in your households, and as nourishment for your children."

²⁵ And they said, "You have saved our lives! We are grateful to my lord, and we shall be serfs to Pharaoh." ²⁶ And Joseph made it into a land law in Egypt, which is still valid, that a fifth should be Pharaoh's; only the land of the priests did not become Pharaoh's. (Translation: NJPS)

(יג) ולחם אין בכל־הארץ כִּי־כבד הרעב מאד ותלה ארץ מצרים וארץ כנען מפני הרעב: (יד) וילקט יוסף את־כל־הכסף הנמצא בארץ־מצרים ובארץ כנען בשבֹר אשר־הם שֹׁבְרִים ויבא יוסף את־הכסף בֵּיתָה פְּרָעָה:

(טו) ויתם הכסף מארץ מצרים ומארץ כנען ויבאו כל־מצרים אל־יוסף לאמר הבה־לנו לחם ולמה נמות נגדך כי אפס כסף: (טז) ויאמר יוסף הבו מקניכם ואתנה לכם במקניכם אם־אפס כסף: (יז) ויביאו את־מקניהם אל־יוסף ויתן להם יוסף לחם בסוסים ובמקנה הצאן ובמקנה הבקר ובחמרים וינהלם בלחם בכל־מקניהם בשנה ההוא:

(יח) ותתם השנה ההוא ויבאו אליו בשנה השנית ויאמרו לו לא־נכחד מאדני כי אם־תם הכסף ומקנה הבהמה אל־אדני לא נשאר לפני אדני בלתי אם־גויֹתנו ואדמתנו: (יט) למה נמות לעיניך גם־אנחנו גם אדמתנו קנה־אתנו ואת־אדמתנו בלחם ונהיה אנחנו ואדמתנו עֲבָדִים לפרעה ותזרע ונחיה ולא נמות והאדמה לא תשם: (כ) ויכן יוסף את־כל־אדמת מצרים לפרעה כי־מכרו מצרים איש שדהו כִּי־חזק עליהם הרעב ותהי הארץ לפרעה:

(כא) ואת־העם העביר אתו לערים מקצה גבול־מצרים ועד־קצהו: (כב) רק אדמת הכהנים לא קנה כי חק לכהנים מאת פרעה ואכלו את־חלקם אשר נתן להם פרעה על־כן לא מכרו את־אדמתם: (כג) ויאמר יוסף אל־העם הן קניתי אתכם היום ואת־אדמתכם לפרעה הא־לכם זרע וזרעתם את־האדמה: (כד) והיה בתבואת ונתתם חמישית לפרעה וארבע הידה יהיה לכם לזרע השדה ולאכלכם ולאשר בבתיכם ולאכל לטפכם:

(כה) ויאמרו החיתנו נמצא־חן בעיני אדני והיינו עֲבָדִים לפרעה: (כו) וישם אתה יוסף לחק עַד־היום הזה על־אדמת מצרים לפרעה לחמש רק אדמת הכהנים לְבָדִים לא היתה לפרעה:

discussion questions

1. How would you describe the government's actions in each version?
2. What are the moral implications of each version?

IV. Famine in Canaan: A Counter-Example

The Book of Ruth is another story of response to famine, in which an Israelite family become climate refugees. When Ruth and Naomi return to Canaan, they encounter another Israelite man of great power—Boaz. Compare Boaz’s behavior below, to Joseph’s in Egypt.

Ruth Chapter 2

⁸ Boaz said to Ruth, “Listen to me, daughter. Don’t go to glean in another field. Don’t go elsewhere, but stay here close to my girls. ⁹ Keep your eyes on the field they are reaping, and follow them. I have ordered the men not to molest you. And when you are thirsty, go to the jars and drink some of [the water] that the men have drawn.” [...]

¹⁴ At mealtime, Boaz said to her, “Come over here and partake of the meal, and dip your morsel in the vinegar.” So she sat down beside the reapers. He handed her roasted grain, and she ate her fill and had some left over. ¹⁵ When she got up again to glean, Boaz gave orders to his workers, “You are not only to let her glean among the sheaves, without interference, ¹⁶ but you must also pull some [stalks] out of the heaps and leave them for her to glean, and not scold her.” (Translation: NJPS)

(ח) וַיֹּאמֶר בְּעֹז אֶלְרוֹת הַלֹּא שְׁמַעַת בְּתִי אֶל-
תִּלְכִי לִלְקֹט בְּשָׂדֵה אַחֵר וְגַם לֹא תַעֲבוּרִי מִזֶּה
וְכֹה תִדְבְּקִין עִם-נְעוּרָתִי: (ט) עֵינֶיךָ בְּשָׂדֵה אֲשֶׁר-
יִקְצְרוּן וְהִלַּכְתְּ אַחֲרֵיהֶן הַלֹּא צִוִּיתִי אֶת-הַנְּעָרִים
לְבַלְתִּי נִגְעוֹךָ וְצָמְתָ וְהִלַּכְתְּ אֶל-הַכְּלָיִם וְשָׁתִית
מֵאֲשֶׁר יִשְׁאֲבוּן הַנְּעָרִים...:

(יד) וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ בְּעֹז לֶעֶת הָאֶכֶל גְּשִׁי הַלֶּם
וְאֶכְלָת מִן-הַלֶּחֶם וְטִבַּלְתְּ פִתְךָ בַחֲמִץ וְתִשְׁבַּב
מִצֵּד הַקּוֹצִרִים וַיַּצְבֹּט-לָהּ קָלִי וְתֹאכַל וְתִשְׁבַּע
וְתִתֵּר: (טו) וְתִקַּם לִלְקֹט וַיֵּצֵאוּ בְּעֹז אֶת-נְעָרָיו
לֵאמֹר גַּם בֵּין הָעֹמְרִים תִּלְקֹט וְלֹא תְכַלִּימוּהָ:
(טז) וְגַם שֶׁל־תִּשְׁלוּ לָהּ מִן-הַצְּבֹתִים וְעֲזַבְתֶּם
וְלִקְטָהּ וְלֹא תִגְעֲרוּבָהּ:

discussion questions

1. How would you describe Boaz’s treatment of Ruth? How is it different from Joseph’s behavior in either version of the Genesis story?
2. Does it matter that Joseph was acting on a national scale and Boaz in his own field?
3. Which of these three biblical examples seems most like the course the world is currently on for how we handle our food supply? Which would you like to see global leaders emulate?

V. From the Bible to Today

Midrash Breshit Rabbah 25:3

Ten famines came into the world: One in the days of Adam...one in the days of Lamech...one in the days of Abraham...one in the days of Isaac...one in the days of Jacob [and Joseph]...one during the reign of the Judges [Ruth and Naomi's famine]...one in the days of David...and one in the days of Elijah...

One in the days of Elisha, as is said, "There was a great famine in Samaria" (2 Kings 6:25), and this is the one that comes and goes in the world. And one in the future, as it says, "Not a famine of bread and not a thirst for water, but to hear the word of God" (Amos 8:11). (Translation: T'ruah)

עשרה שני רעבון באו לעולם, אחד בימי אדם הראשון שנאמר (בראשית ג) ארורה האדמה בעבורך, ואחד בימי למך, שנאמר (בראשית ה) מן האדמה אשר אררה ה', ואחד בימי אברהם, (בראשית כו) ויהי רעב בארץ, ואחד בימי יצחק שנאמר ויהי רעב בארץ מלבד הרעב הראשון, ואחד בימי יעקב שנאמר (בראשית מה) כי זה שנתים הרעב, ואחד בימי שפוט השופטים שנאמר (רות א) ויהי בימי שפוט השופטים ויהי רעב בארץ, ואחד בימי דוד שנאמר (שמואל ב כא) ויהי רעב בימי דוד ג' שנים, ואחד בימי אליהו שנאמר (מלכים א יז) חי ה' אלהי ישראל אשר עמדתי לפניו אם יהיה השנים האלה טל ומטר כי אם לפי דברי,

וא' בימי אלישע שנאמר (מלכים ב ו) ויהי רעב גדול בשומרון שהוא מתגלגל ובא לעולם, ואחד לעתיד לבא שנאמר (עמוס ח) לא רעב ללחם ולא צמא למים כי אם לשמוע את דבר ה'.

Breshit Rabbah is one of the oldest exegetical midrashim we have, dating to the 4th or 5th century CE.

discussion questions

1. What perspective does this rabbinic text lend to the place of famine in the world?
2. What do you think the verse from Amos means in the midrash's context? How and why is the future famine different from all prior famines?
3. What does the Amos verse say to you about the role of religion in responding to today's climate crisis?
4. How is the struggle for human rights a way in which we strive to "hear the word of God"?

VI. Concluding with Prayer

We turn our study and conversation into fuel for prayer, which itself becomes the fodder of future reflection.

A. “A Prayer For Our Earth,” from the Encyclical Letter “Laudato Si” of Pope Francis

All-powerful God, you are present in the whole universe
and in the smallest of your creatures.

You embrace with your tenderness all that exists.

Pour out upon us the power of your love,
that we may protect life and beauty.

Fill us with peace, that we may live
as brothers and sisters, harming no one.

O God of the poor,
help us to rescue the abandoned and forgotten of this earth,
so precious in your eyes.

Bring healing to our lives,
that we may protect the world and not prey on it,

that we may sow beauty, not pollution and destruction.

Touch the hearts

of those who look only for gain

at the expense of the poor and the earth.

Teach us to discover the worth of each thing,

to be filled with awe and contemplation,

to recognize that we are profoundly united

with every creature

as we journey towards your infinite light.

We thank you for being with us each day.

Encourage us, we pray, in our struggle

for justice, love and peace.

B. First paragraph of *Birkat Hamazon*, the blessing after a meal

Blessed are You, ETERNAL, divine ruler of time and space,
who feeds the whole world in Your goodness, grace, love,
and mercy. You give bread to every creature, for your love is
everlasting. (Ps. 136:25) And in Your great goodness we have
never lacked, nor shall we ever lack food forever, for the sake
of Your great name, for You are God who feeds and sustains
all. You are good to all and prepare food for all Your creatures
that You created. Blessed are you ETERNAL, who feeds all.
(Translation: T’ruah)

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, הַזֶּן אֶת
הָעוֹלָם כֻּלּוֹ בְּטוֹבוֹ בְּחֵן בְּחֶסֶד וּבְרַחֲמִים. הוּא
נוֹתֵן לֶחֶם לְכָל בֶּשֶׂר כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֶסֶד. וּבְטוֹבוֹ
הַגָּדוֹל תָּמִיד לֹא חָסַר לָנוּ וְאֵל יַחֲסַר לָנוּ מִזֶּן
לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד, בְּעֵבֹר שְׁמוֹ הַגָּדוֹל, כִּי הוּא אֵל זֶן
וּמְפַרֵּן לְכָל, וּמְטִיב לְכָל וּמְכִין מִזֶּן לְכָל
בְּרִיּוֹתָיו אֲשֶׁר בָּרָא. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' הַזֶּן אֶת הַכֹּל.

discussion questions

1. What parts of the Pope’s prayer resonate most with you? Why?
2. We often sing *birkat hamazon* automatically, without stopping to think about its meaning much. When examining it as a text, what new aspects of it become apparent to you?
3. In this day and age, how do you understand the assertion in *birkat hamazon* that God feeds all creation?
4. If you were to write your own prayer about climate change and human rights, inspired in part by today’s discussion, what would it say?