

WHY I BROKE THE LAW TO STOP THE CLIMATE CRISIS

Extinction Rebellion has never been far from the headlines over the past year as it has stepped up its campaign of civil disobedience over climate change. Now, it has its own Jewish chapter – XR Jews. **Shulamit Morris-Evans** tells us why she faced arrest to save the planet



On 28 December 2018, the day after returning from studying, drinking and dancing with thousands of fellow Jews at Limmud, the annual Jewish culture festival, I found myself sitting in the lobby of a London office block with one hand superglued to its entrance barriers.

Two women sat either side of me, similarly superglued. Through the building's glass front we could see other protesters and hear their chanting. We were there to protest against the actions of Global Coal Management (GCM), who were holding their AGM there that afternoon.

After a few hours, the AGM had been disrupted; the police had unglued our hands and arrested us. I was carried out of the lobby handcuffed, and driven, sirens blaring, to the police station. The police confiscated my bag – although I was

allowed to keep my Bible and prayer book – and locked me in a cell. Alone for 13 hours, I read, sang and prayed; working through the Friday night service, as I would have done at my synagogue.

The situation seemed unreal: I have a life-long aversion to rule-breaking (and until recently worked as a teacher). But I had decided that society was at a pitch of crisis so desperate that my action was a reasonable moral response. The crisis is, of course, climate change and the ecological emergency. A few months earlier, I would have viewed such action as well meaning, even ethically defensible, but excessive. I saw climate change as a threat whose effects would only be felt by future generations, who by then would have invented technologies to cleanse the atmosphere of excess carbon and supply their energy sustainably.

But at the back of my mind there was a niggling fear. The first time I felt genuinely afraid about climate change

was in 2017 when I read the article (later a book) *The Uninhabitable Earth*, by David Wallace-Wells. I told myself it must surely be sensationalist scaremongering. Then in 2018 a report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) said the world had 12 years to cut emissions by 45 percent below 2010 levels. This is the level that would give us a chance of remaining below the limit of a 1.5 degrees rise and spare us the worst ravages of climate breakdown. On our current trajectory, we will overstep this limit around 2040. I was aghast at the inertia keeping us locked into the habits of business as usual. The scientific warnings, the petitions, the marches, the lobbying – all had failed to stop the rise of carbon emissions.

So when I heard about a group called Extinction Rebellion (XR), I was already committed to its ideals. I remember the night I watched their video: 'Heading for Extinction and What to Do About It'. I asked myself: what was I going to do about it?

Extinction Rebellion is a grassroots, decentralised organisation, operating like a living organism. All participants have their own perspective and I see the movement as being underpinned by five tenets. The first is the scale and urgency of the threat to life on Earth. The second is that with so little time left, governments and big business need to take unprecedented action. Just 100 companies are responsible for 71 percent of emissions. The third is that the problem is not a lack of solutions but a dearth of political and economic will.

Fourthly, conventional, law-abiding methods have failed to make governments and corporations act in step with what scientists have been consistently saying for decades. The UK government scrapped support for onshore wind and solar subsidies, the green homes scheme and the green investment bank. It provides the highest fossil fuel subsidies of any country in Europe, has allowed fracking and supports Heathrow expansion.

Finally, XR believes that civil disobedience and peaceful direct action are our best hope of effecting change. If people are prepared to get arrested participating in acts of peaceful civil disobedience, it puts pressure on the government to tell the truth about the climate emergency and urgently switch to a zero carbon economy.

Moreover, climate change will not be linear. Yale Climate Connections has said: "Climate change is like a vicious circle." For example, when the Arctic ice melts, the darker water surface absorbs more heat than the white ice: the temperature rises so more ice melts. This has led to fears of abrupt climate change because tipping points could trigger cascades of such feedback loops. The IPCC has concluded that "without additional mitigation efforts... warming is likely to exceed 4 degrees C above pre-industrial levels by 2100." That is more than double the danger threshold of 1.5 degrees and would happen during the lifetime of today's children.

The consequences of global warming will be catastrophic: deforestation, habitat loss and soil erosion. Ocean acidification, caused by carbon dioxide dissolving in seawater, has already risen by 30 percent and could reach 150 percent by 2100. Many people depend on the seas for food, and the oceans produce 50-80 percent of the planet's oxygen. So the collapse of marine ecosystems would threaten land animals.

Meanwhile, as polar ice melts, sea levels will rise: projections for 2100 are between 60cm and 1.9m. The homes of millions of residents of cities like Miami, Shanghai and Rio de Janeiro will be submerged. With towns like Plymouth underwater, one in 10 people in the UK will be directly affected. More lives will be destroyed by the frequency of extreme weather events – flooding, hurricanes and wildfires. Desertification, droughts and flooding will lead to crop failure and mass starvation and encourage a dizzying



Protesters on London's Waterloo Bridge at the Extinction Rebellion protests on 16 April; Shulamit (left) glued to the entrance of an office building during demonstrations against GCM in December 2018

climb in migration. Global projections for 2050 – when I will be 55 – vary between 100 million and 1 billion people.

The bottom line is that the entire world's economy needs to reduce carbon emissions by 45 percent by 2030 and reach net zero carbon by 2050. It is only fair that industrialised countries reduce faster so that others have a chance to build infrastructure we already have in place. Hence Extinction Rebellion's demand that the UK reaches net zero carbon by 2025.

These are the reasons why I found myself superglued to a building last December. GCM's decision to construct a coalmine in Phulbari, Bangladesh is indefensible even without the environmental issue. The building of the mine will displace up to 230,000 people. To build new infrastructure for extracting coal, one of the dirtiest and most carbon-intensive forms of fossil fuel, is a murderous madness. When I was invited to protest against it, I could not refuse.

When I consider climate change, I also think of what human beings did to each other in the 20th century. War. Totalitarianism. Genocides. We in the Jewish community bear the burden of a history that makes us sensitive to such horrors.

My participation in XR has always felt like a Jewish act. There is a religious inclusivity in it that I have never noticed in any other campaign. At the first XR protest I went to there were campaigners, MPs and environmental writers, but also Christians, Muslims and Buddhists. As we sat in the road outside Parliament, I shared a Jewish song. We were all drawing on our traditions to add our voices to this cry for survival.

Judaism is not merely ritual and prayer, study and practice, culture and community. Its an ethical tradition which exhorts us to fulfil our moral responsibilities. 'Ba'al taschit' – do not destroy – we were told in my Jewish primary school. Our tradition gives us the 'shalosh regalim', the three festivals linked to the agricultural cycle. It gives us the idea of *shmita* – letting the land lie fallow every seven years. The Hebrew phrase 'tikkun olam' – repairing the world – has become

shorthand for Jewish social action.

And what of Jewish civil disobedience? There are biblical forerunners: Daniel, thrown to the lions for refusing to pray to idols, and Esther, risking her life by approaching the king uninvited. Non-violent direct action is also prevalent in modern Jewish practice: the Soviet Jewry movement; the 70s 'freedom seders' against racism and war; the Jewish Campaign for Trees in Vietnam; and Jewish involvement in union activity for better working conditions in the 1920s and 30s. One image that inspires me is of the Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel marching by the side of Martin Luther King at Selma.

A few months after my arrest I found other Jews who felt the same. We formed Extinction Rebellion Jews (XR Jews), joining a network of other XR faith groups. We decided to join the 'April rebellion' in London during the week before Pesach. The first day of action was heralded by blasts of the shofar. The XR Jews' tent on Parliament Square was adorned with placards quoting the mishnaic rabbi Hillel: 'If not now, when?' Over the next few days we occupied the roads around Parliament, sang Jewish songs, studied Torah and held a seder for 80 people. Over that week, several of my companions were arrested. Some face trial this autumn. My own trial will be on 22 October.

There are other stirrings of ecological awakening in the Jewish community. The group Shema is co-ordinating the efforts of the Jewish Vegetarian Society, the Commonwealth Jewish Council and Eco-Synagogue (which

assesses the environmental sustainability of synagogues). On 10 October, XR Jews will hold a sukkah-building event at Lambeth Bridge. All are invited. We are also asking everyone with a sukkah [shelter made of leaves and wood] to hang nutmeg, a West Indian spice, from its roof to represent the vulnerability of the tropics.

Our dream is that, by the spring festival of Tu B'Shvat in February 2020, our communal organisations will have declared a climate emergency and will be taking a lead in confronting the crisis. Action on climate change is not just a 'mitzvah' (good deed) – it is the most urgent act of *tikkun olam* that has ever been required of us. ■

"We occupied the roads around Parliament and understood these actions as an expression of our Judaism"

See: rebellion.earth. For XR Jews, see @xrjews, the WhatsApp group or email xrjews@gmail.com. Shulamit Morris-Evans is an au pair in Madrid.