



Religious Action Center
of Reform Judaism

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Rabbi David Saperstein Addresses Poverty and Climate Change at Senate Event

Saperstein: *"It is abundantly clear that immediate action must be taken to stabilize our climate."*

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Washington, D.C. May 21, 2008 – At a Senate Press Conference today with prominent clergy and religious officials and Senate leaders, Rabbi David Saperstein, Director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism spoke on behalf of the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL). COEJL represents 29 national Jewish organizations spanning the full spectrum of Jewish religious and communal life. Rabbi Saperstein strongly advocated in favor of the proposed Lieberman-Warner bill that will work to reduce America's carbon emissions 70% by 2050. His prepared text follows:

In a political season such as this, we are often – constantly it seems – reminded of what divides us. In this season, however – spring – we need only lift up our heads to be reminded of what unites us. Regardless of race, religion or creed, economic background, geography, or political party, we are united by our care for God's creation, for protecting this earth.

For too many years, climate science has been turned into a political game of risk assessment that too often allows us to shirk responsible action due to uncertainty. But today, with carbon dioxide exceeding 380 parts per million in the atmosphere, those once hypothetical risks are our reality. Twelve of the last thirteen years were among the warmest in recorded history. Every day toxic chemicals and greenhouse gasses seep into our atmosphere damaging bio-diversity and threatening sustainability for generations to come. It is abundantly clear that immediate action must be taken to stabilize our climate.

Severe droughts plague not only sub-Saharan Africa but America as well, with forest fires becoming more rampant on the West Coast and access to drinking water compromised in the Southeast. Farmers in too many regions are losing their crops because moisture is absorbed too quickly by warmer air, exacerbating world hunger and malnutrition. (Children born in Kenya during a drought year are 50% more likely to be malnourished!). Many of the world's poorest coastal nations have become more prone to flooding, and the risks their people face worsen daily, making only too clear the intimate relationship between climate change and poverty. While no single weather event can be attributed solely to climate change, we know too well from the havoc wreaked by Katrina and the cyclone in Burma that when flooding occurs it is the poorest in our own nation and across the globe who are unable to flee the impending disaster – a vivid portent of the vulnerability of the poor in the face of the degrading impact of global warming on our planet.

My friends, it is clear we must act now to avert future climate crises. My faith demands that I "till and tend" – preserve and guard – the physical world and every one of its living creatures whose care God has entrusted to us (Genesis 2: 15). Equally, Judaism requires me to "defend the poor and the orphan, do justice to the afflicted and needy" (Psalm 82: 3).

Senators Boxer, Lieberman and Warner have pursued justice in crafting America's Climate Security Act by working to address the inequities climate change will impose on the poor. They have established an International Climate Change Adaptation and National Security Fund, which promises to generate more than \$342 billion over the life of the bill to help developing countries adapt to climate change and avoid its destabilizing effects. It sets aside additional resources to

develop clean energy technology to export to these struggling nations so that they can leapfrog the technological mistakes made in our own country and reduce the effects of climate change in the first place. At home, the bill requires that utility companies provide rebates to defray the rising costs of electricity on the poor. The Act also creates a Climate Change Consumer Assistance Fund, which is explicitly intended to fuel a landmark tax policy to protect the least among us from rising energy costs as well as other increased expenses like rising food and fuel prices imposed by climate change legislation.

There is a *midrash* -- a rabbinic interpretive story composed many years -- told about Noah that I would like to share with you today:

When Noah came out of the ark, he opened his eyes and saw the whole world completely destroyed. He began crying for the world and said, "God, how could you have done this?" ... God replied, "Oh Noah, how different you are from the way Abraham ... will be. He will argue with me on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah when I tell him that I plan their destruction... But you, Noah, when I told you I would destroy the entire world, I lingered and delayed, so that you would speak on behalf of the world. But when you knew you would be safe in the ark, the evil of the world did not touch you. You thought of no one but your family. And now you complain?" Then Noah knew that he had sinned. (*Midrash Tanchuma, Parashat Noah*)

My friends, this ancient teaching rings too true today. We can see all the signs: we know droughts, flooding, ice melt, sea-level rise, and extreme weather will only get worse if we do nothing to reduce our carbon emissions. The ramifications of climate change are already afflicting least developed nations most harshly. Will we stand idly by while our neighbors abroad slowly bleed? Or will we do what Noah could not? Will we act now for the survival of our world?

Senators Lieberman and Warner, with the assistance of Chairwoman Boxer, have courageously offered us legislation that begins to address the disproportionate role America has played in polluting the earth and the vital role it has in addressing global warming. Passing the Lieberman-Warner bill is a critical first step in achieving environmental justice.

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The **Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism** is the Washington office of the **Union for Reform Judaism**, whose more than **900 congregations** across North America encompass **1.5 million Reform Jews**, and the **Central Conference of American Rabbis**, whose membership includes more than **1800 Reform rabbis**

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