

Greta Thunberg's prophetic speech at the UN Climate Action Summit

The young activist's words were designed to disturb us and make us see ourselves as we are.

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Greta Thunberg in 2018. Photo by [Anders Hellberg](#), licensed under Creative Commons.

Speaking at the United Nations Climate Action Summit last month, 16-year-old activist Greta Thunberg made no attempt to ingratiate herself with world leaders. Like a biblical prophet, she was angry and her indictment of those in power was withering: “People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth.”

Like a true prophet, Thunberg offered no false hope. Summarizing climate science in a few sentences, she warned that even cutting world carbon emissions in half in ten years—the most ambitious proposal on the global agenda—has only a 50 percent chance of keeping temperature rise below 1.5 degrees Celsius. “Fifty percent may be acceptable to you. But those numbers do not include tipping points, most feedback loops, additional warming hidden by toxic air pollution or the aspects of

equity and climate justice. They also rely on my generation sucking hundreds of billions of tons of your CO2 out of the air with technologies that barely exist. So a 50 percent risk is simply not acceptable to us—we who have to live with the consequences.”

Thunberg’s words were designed to disturb us, shake us out of the illusion that someone else will fix the problem, and make us see ourselves as we are.

Some choose to mock the prophet and her passion—it’s a way to avoid having to take the message seriously. And even those who affirm her message may end up returning to their ordinary lives with no idea how to respond to the demands.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel described biblical prophecy as “the voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor.” In this case, the plundered poor includes the earth itself, as well as those who are already suffering from the effects of climate change. Even armed with the divine voice, the prophet has the enormous task of trying to “stop a mighty stream with mere words.” How helpless she must feel in that situation.

The prophet speaks words that are almost unbearably extreme, but she also tells us what, deep down, we already know. The science is not in doubt. The forecast models are grim. We either rise to the challenge of rescuing the planet or live with irrevocable consequences.

If we already know what the prophet is telling us, what then is the purpose of the prophet’s speech? It is to break through our hard hearts. “The prophet’s word,” Heschel says, “is a scream in the night. While the world is at ease and asleep, the prophet feels the blast from heaven.”

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “A prophet’s speech.”