

Clerical activism, public safety, climate change

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Picture this: a female Reform rabbi, wearing a kippah and tallit and strumming a guitar, leads a prayer and music service of a dozen local religious leaders — including other Jews, Baptists, Buddhists, Episcopalians and Unitarians — at a pipeline construction site, blocking work for hours until the police arrest them.

This was the scene Wednesday, when Shoshana Friedman, assistant rabbi for engagement at Temple Sinai in Brookline, organized and led this act of nonviolent civil disobedience in protest of construction of the West Roxbury Lateral Pipeline.

Some members of the Jewish community question the appropriateness of such direct action on the part of our clergy; others oppose it; still others support it; and some are even inspired to action. Suffice to say, the plethora of congregations locally allows for a range of Jewish clerical activism, from preaching from the bimah, to signing or writing letters, to marching in demonstrations.

We would like to weigh in on the validity of the causes that Rabbi Friedman and her group, Clergy Climate Action chose to embrace, public safety and global climate change.

Spectra Energy is currently constructing the West Roxbury Lateral Pipeline to carry fracked gas from shale deposits in Pennsylvania. Its route takes it through residential neighborhoods, under a soccer field and alongside a quarry where there is active blasting.

The pipeline will have 750 pounds of pressure per square inch, twice the pressure of the pipeline that exploded in San Bruno, Calif. in 2010, killing eight people, creating a wall of fire 1,000 feet high and setting off a shock wave equivalent to a magnitude 1.1 earthquake, as measured by the United States Geological Survey.

The pipeline's potential environmental damage concerns the methane that natural gas releases into the atmosphere. In our region, there are thousands of unfixated gas leaks. While natural gas has a lower carbon footprint than oil or coal at the point of burning, unburned methane is 86 times more potent a greenhouse gas than CO₂.

Recent academic studies suggest leak rates at wells and in pipelines make fracked gas worse for the climate than oil or coal over its lifecycle. A high-pressure gas pipeline, raising the operating pressure in the local distribution pipes, will increase the amount of leaking gas in the Boston area and further contribute to climate change.

Rabbi Friedman credits Jewish values like *chesed* (loving-kindness) and protecting life for her inspiration. We commend her for her dedication to the causes of public safety and climate change.