

CAJE encourages you to make reprints of articles and share them with your colleagues and lay leadership. All we ask is that you tell them that these articles originally appeared in *Jewish Education News*, published by CAJE, and that articles on this and other topics, curriculum, and information about CAJE can be found online at www.caje.org.

Sustaining the quest for Sustainability: The role of Spiritual Teaching and Practice in Jewish Environmental Education

By Jonathan P. Slater

We seem to have reached a “tipping point.” Nearly forty years after the first Earth Day, the work of the Sierra Club, Greenpeace, and the National Resources Defense Council (among others) is finally paying off. Two years after the blockbuster appearance of Al Gore’s “An Inconvenient Truth,” it appears as if the long winter of denial in Washington may be coming to an end. The run-up in the cost of oil has created market forces to further develop and deploy alternative energy sources. It seems as if everything we do or use is now subject to evaluation in terms of its impact on the environment, its contribution to reversing climate change. We could do this... .

Yet, the *New York Times* reported on a phenomenon that seems to be tracking this environmental success: “green noise’ — static caused by urgent, sometimes vexing or even contradictory information played at too high a volume for too long.”¹ Good hearted, well-intentioned people, committed to doing their part to minimize their impact on the environment, report a sense of “information overload on the environment — from friends, advice columns, news media, even government-issued reports. Much of the advice is conflicting.”²

A consequence, as reported in the *Times*, has been a paradoxical diminution of engagement in environment-friendly practices, even among those who report that they are committed to those issues. “A study by the Shelton Group, an advertising agency and market research company based in Knoxville, TN, that focuses on environmental products, showed that consumers surveyed in 2007 were between 22 and 55 percent less likely to buy a wide range of green products than in 2006.”³

The Importance of the Commandments

It is important to continue to invest in education and to promote adoption of environmentally sound practices. One approach is to show how Jewish law or practice support or mandate environmentally sustainable practices. For some people, this knowledge will be inspiring and may change their behavior. For others, it will confirm what they already have committed to doing, and so will add Jewish language to their green commitment. This approach reflects a key principle of classical Judaism. Human beings are fundamentally good, and innately wish to do the best for all beings, to be kind and compassionate and just. Yet they are also subject to the pushes and pulls of

their bodies' needs, easily distracted by base desires, and deflected from the good by fear and greed. To help people do what they truly wish, to be as good as they can be, the *Torah* offers instructions: the commandments. Following the commandments supports our better intentions and helps to constrain and redirect our more base instincts.

The *Torah* also grounds the commandments in the covenant between God and Israel. When we fulfill the commandments, we also align ourselves with the divine will. We recognize that God's intention was for our good, as well, and see in the commandments an expression of God's love. It is this that led the sages to teach "Greater merit accrues to one who is commanded and fulfills the command, than one who fulfills it yet is not commanded."⁴

This may be a helpful model when thinking about how to encourage people to act in environmentally sustainable ways. Knowing that there are rules, and that the rules are not only important but also are for our good, may generate commitment to significant behavioral change. But the commitment is still based on an external rule. There is a risk that over time, other factors – changed circumstances, conflict with other desires or concerns, failure to feel the benefit personally – may undermine the power of the "commandment." This will be true, perhaps even more so, when the behavior has been adopted simply as a good thing to do, and not as a rule. Lacking even the force of external authority, other factors may supersede this behavior, the rule will be broken or ignored, and we will not have succeeded in bringing about sustained sustainable action.

Shifting Consciousness

The possibility that even knowing the rules and valuing them may not successfully change people's behavior over the long term echoes the statistics cited above and the phenomenon of "green noise." This suggests that we must also learn what is required to maintain attention and to support the long-term, incremental changes in lifestyle that will truly make life on earth sustainable. We need to not only change peoples' behavior, we also need to shift consciousness. And we need to help people make good choices in the face of confusion, fatigue and discomfort. This is truly where Jewish spiritual teachings and spiritual practices can play a significant role.

R. Menachem Mendel of Kotzk recognized this problem with regard to the traditional commandments, both in terms of the one who is commanded and acts, and the one who does so naturally:

So that you do not follow your heart and eyes in your lustful urge"
(*Numbers* 15:39). The phrase "do not follow your heart" applies to the one who behaves appropriately, yet whose upright behavior is not the product of effort or intention. Rather, it is the product of his nature and habit. Indeed, to this sort of behavior we can apply the phrase: "I will follow my own willful heart" (*Deuteronomy* 29:18).

All action, everything we do for the good, must ultimately emerge from effort and intentional exertion. To this we can apply the verse: “Know that for all such things God will call you to account” (*Ecclesiastes* 11:9). In this instance, “know” refers to that which we discern to be true in our own minds and that we acquire as a practice through effort and intentional exertion, even experiencing discomfort as we do so. We “know” when we inquire into our behavior, to know what to do.⁵

Action that emerges out of habit, or even out of one’s own good nature, is not connected directly or immediately to intention. Even if we initially choose to do something good – to recycle, to bike to work, to seasonally adjust the thermostat – over time, that good behavior becomes unexamined habit. We come to take it for granted that having undertaken this behavior, we automatically continue to do the good and right thing forever. Yet we cannot trust habit to examine itself. So, for instance, once we are no longer paying attention, we do not notice when we have stopped riding our bike. We have allowed our image of ourselves as “bike-riders” to obscure the fact that we have stopped. Moreover, we continue to see ourselves as bike-riders because we value all of the good reasons we stopped (e.g., “after all, my schedule has changed”; “I can’t carry everything on the bike”; “the weather has been bad”). Our good intention becomes habit, our attention wanes, and we do not see when we are no longer aligned with our original intention.

The Kotzker teaches us that we need to understand religious practice as that which is meant to keep us attentive and engaged in our decision-making all of the time. It cannot be simply a set of rules or commandments that become habitual – even when beneficial. As soon as we stop connecting our hearts and minds to our behavior, we cease to connect to the reason for our behavior. As soon as we take our probity for granted, we risk slipping away from the intention that first moved us to do the right thing.

But what about the problem with which we began – “green noise”? Even if we are paying careful attention to what we do and why we do it, how can we keep from becoming dispirited when it is so difficult to know what to do? How can we prevent ourselves from losing, or disconnecting from, our desire to live sustainably when there is always something new, something more, something different to do or to know?

The Baal Shem Tov offers us an answer:

[As you set out to serve God,] do not be overly punctilious in all you do. [To do so] is but a contrivance of the *yetzer* [*hara*] to make you apprehensive that you may not have fulfilled your obligation, in order to make you feel depressed. Depression, in turn, is an immense obstacle to the service of the Creator, blessed be He.

Even if you did commit a sin [Heaven forbid], do not be overly depressed lest this stop your worship. Do feel saddened by the sin; but then rejoice in the Creator, blessed be He, because you fully repented and resolved never to repeat your folly.

Even if you are certain that you did not fulfill some obligation, because of a variety of obstacles, do not feel depressed. Bear in mind that the Creator, blessed be He, “searches the hearts and minds” (*Psalms* 7:10). He knows that you wish to do the best but were unable to do so. Thus strengthen yourself to rejoice in the Creator, blessed be He.

It is written, “There is a time to act for God, they voided Your Torah” (*Psalms* 119:126). This implies that the performance of a *mitzvah* may sometimes entail an intimation of sin. In that case, do not pay attention to the *yetzer hara* who seeks to prevent you from performing the *mitzvah*. Respond to the *yetzer [hara]*: “My sole intent with that *mitzvah* is but to bring gratification to the Creator, blessed be He.” With the help of God, the *yetzer hara* will then depart from you. Nevertheless, you must carefully determine in your mind whether or not to perform that *mitzvah*!⁶

The *Times* article cited above reports the results of “focus groups to investigate the psychological barriers to taking action for the sake of the environment. The activist groups ‘believe that, surely, if I just gave them one more reason why they should do it, then they would. But the fact is, people are not motivated by more facts. That can just reinforce their feeling of helplessness’.”⁷ That helplessness, the frustration and confusion, sound very much like the “depression” caused by the wily *yetzer hara*, our confused minds. We strive to do the best we can, to do the least harm while living a functional, reasonable lifestyle. Yet sometimes we make mistakes: we waste, we throw things away, we are inefficient. Our response to this “sin” could be depression, helplessness, fatigue, and dissolution.

The Baal Shem Tov, however, tells us that this response is incorrect; it is not what we – or God, or our truest desire – really want. Our original intention was honest, and even now, as we witness our failure, that intention remains whole and essentially unblemished. Were we to give up on our effort to live in alignment with sustainability, we would betray ourselves. The sadness, despair and lassitude that would come of giving up will be much greater, and more self-defeating, than the momentary frustration and sadness in this moment.

Living in Line with our Intentions

God wants us to try, over and over again, to live in line with our true intentions. Indeed, it could be argued that the surfacing of our sadness when we become aware of having made a mistake, or acknowledge a “sin,” is actually a prompt from our higher selves, from God’s love, to pay attention. Now, even the moment of our “sin” or mistake or confusion, is the moment in which we can renew our intention. We can feel fully how deeply we desire a world in which all beings can live healthy lives, with sufficient food and water, clean air and education. We know that our sadness in this moment is not really about our own “failure,” but is a reflection of our care and concern for this planet. It is when we pause in the moment of awareness to recognize that we have not failed,

but have been awakened again to our true intention, that we are able to recommit to that intention. We are energized by our mistake to live consistently with our values. We engage in that work that the Kotzker would have us do, so that we are not acting out of habit, blindly and thoughtlessly. This is when we become mindful, and connect intention to action for the sake of all beings.

If the education that we offer to our fellow Jews (and others) is truly to create and sustain the efforts necessary for an environmentally sustainable world, it must attend to matters of the heart. We must mine our tradition for those texts and teachings and practices that will help us all to become mindful in our lives, able to wake up over and over to the truth of the moment, and free to connect our deepest intention to our capacity to act. In this way, the Judaism we teach will not only help us to know the commandments, but how to live them with whole, and holy, hearts.

Endnotes:

1. *New York Times*, Sunday Styles section, 6/15/08.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. *Kiddushin* 31a
5. *Siach Sarfei Kodesh, Shelach*; cited in *Iturei Torah*, vol. 5, pg 93.
6. Schochet, Jacob Immanuel, translator and editor. *Tzava'at HaRiVaSh: The Testimony of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov*. Kfar Chabad, Israel: Kehot Publishing, 1998; #46, pg. 39ff.
7. *New York Times*, Op. Cit.

Rabbi Jonathan P. Slater is Co-Director of Programs of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality (www.ijs-online.org), and a teacher of mindfulness meditation at the JCC in Manhattan.