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of environmental justice that connects the degradation of the environment to racism and economic inequities. Jewish theologians and ethicists for the most part have not been part of the significant critique of modern capitalism and globalization that has been coming from process theology, liberation theology, and ecofeminism.

It is time for Jewish environmentalism to move beyond an apologetic theology and an ethic of personal virtue to become more engaged with the many creative ideas that have been emanating from religious and environmental movements. New Creation theology, which emphasizes the interconnection of all people and all life, must become the foundation of a far bolder Jewish ethical response. As the environmental crisis grows more serious, we must help people understand how our lifestyles affect the lives of millions of other people in this country and around the world, how our lives contribute to the extinction of

thousands of species every year, and how we are literally consuming the earth.

British writer George Monbiot claims we must set a goal of 90 percent reduction; this will not be achieved by only changing light bulbs. Monbiot puts forward a moral choice: continue to live the way we do and have millions of people die in Ethiopia (from drought) and Bangladesh (from rising seas) or radically change.

Do we continue to resist or deny that choice because we project, as Monbiot points out, “the future as repeated instances of the present”? We all believe that we will not be affected; we will find a way to survive or that somehow something will save us. If we all change a light bulb, the Messiah will come. The *midrash* that Jewish environmentalists love to quote has God saying, “See to it that you do not spoil and destroy My world; for if you do, there will be no one else to repair it.” It is time to heed that call. 

Insignificance and Responsibility: Rethinking Jewish Environmentalism

Nigel Savage

We are powerless to prevent the global scorching that will ensue in the next 20 years: it is a consequence of carbon already in the atmosphere. We are powerless to prevent the extinction of species that have already passed the point of no return. Great swathes of the world have been devastated by pollution and over-industrialization. The world’s oil represents, as Thom Hartmann once put it, “a billion years of ancient sunlight,” and we will use up those resources within another generation or two.

Against these harsh facts we can merely acknowledge that what is done is done. And those of us who believe that the Jewish people can or could or should make a difference must reckon with a further level of insignificance. We, who were one percent of the world’s people a century ago, are today barely two-tenths of a percent of the world’s population. If every Jew in the world traded an SUV for a Prius and never boarded an airplane again, it would not halt, much less reverse, global scorching. Putting a solar-powered *ner tamid* in a synagogue is by itself a pinprick upon our planet. It is inconsequential, and we owe it to our own intellectual integrity to acknowledge this fact.

Why then do we do anything? Why is

there a Jewish environmental movement? Why are Jewish institutions starting to green themselves? And in a professionalized community that respects evaluation, outcomes, and metrics, what are our ultimate goals?

We must begin by acknowledging that a considerable part of our present behavioral shift is rooted in embarrassment. We’re realizing that placing a plastic bottle into the world’s oceans for a century or more is a ludicrous price to pay for the five minutes it takes us to drink the bottle’s contents. We have grown up with behaviors that are morally indefensible. They are entrenched by custom, but they wither in the face of clear thought. So we are slowly becoming embarrassed by our own behavior, and we are effecting change as self-realization dawns. This is not a bad reason to change one’s behavior — I think it’s probably quite a good one — but it’s important to acknowledge what’s happening because we rarely seem to own up to this sort of thing.

After embarrassment, the next step is the desire to feel we’re doing something useful. Just as smoking became socially unacceptable, so now our institutions use recycled paper, we print on both sides, we reduce our disposables or switch to ones that are compostable. Yet if

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we add up the aggregate impact of all these activities they turn out to be fairly marginal. Even if adopted not just by every Jew but by everyone alive today, those activities wouldn't halt our deeply dangerous experiment in climate change from spiraling out of control.

This is why we need larger and clearer goals. We need to integrate education, action, and advocacy. And it's why we need a clearer strategy for what we're trying to do. If we are serious about being *or l'goyim* (a light unto the nations), our goal must be a healthy and sustainable world for all its inhabitants. It means acting to slow the damage and then steadily working to ameliorate it.


The role of education, and the work of nonprofits and faith communities, is to touch people's lives so that we act differently as citizens and consumers. But education is only the first step: action and advocacy are vital. When a government introduces a \$50 fee to drive an SUV into Central London — a fee that will take effect later this year — they do so when a sufficient critical mass of public support endorses such a decision. When Wal-Mart or any other major business goes "green" in serious ways, they do so because they believe that competitive advantages will ensue, that a growing number of consumers want carbon-labeled products so that they can monitor and reduce their individual carbon output.

This is how Jewish education relates to broad issues. We need to steadily change what and how we consume, to connect this to Jewish tradition, and to place this within a larger series of goals. That's why we ought to set the goal of reducing our carbon output by 80 percent, as a people, by 2030. That's why we must lead the change effort in the U.S. and must support

the work of environmental organizations in Israel. We must green our institutions and integrate this process with serious Jewish learning. We should address in particular food systems, transportation, and climate change: these three areas connect personal behavior, Jewish tradition, and the largest issues we face today.

Although irreversible damage has been done, changes we begin today will do good in the long run. Being Jewish is about having a time horizon that transcends the lifetime of an individual. Jews settled Palestine a century ago so that a State of Israel that they would never know might come to fruition. Honi Hama-agel famously planted a carob tree so that his heirs might enjoy its fruit. The seeds of a strategy for serious environmental change are the seeds we need to plant today.

Three key things we should be doing

- All Jewish organizations should create a health and sustainability commission. The goals should be to green the institution, to reduce our carbon footprints by 80 percent in the next 20 years, and to integrate this process with the organization's broader mission.
- We need to build a much stronger Jewish environmental movement, with a strategy for grassroots organizing, a clear framework for coordinating advocacy work nationally, and stronger relationships with the Israeli environmental movement and other faith-based environmental movements in the U.S.
- "Learning leads to doing." This is a key Jewish understanding. We need to learn where our food comes from, where our waste goes, and how Jewish tradition connects to key contemporary issues. The more serious the learning, the more profound will be the impact. 



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