

THE ENVIRONMENT AND JUDAISM AND AMERICA

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Thanks for giving me the opportunity to speak with you about the environment and Judaism and America here in Scranton at the Institute on Religion and Public Policy.

I speak as a rabbi, as an American, and as a citizen of the world.....the question for us, for me is one of alarming gravity. Our need to look at the potential problems of a rapidly warming and crowded world is a first priority need. Now add the present downturn to that mix and we realize that what will create concerns for the lifestyles of those who have adequate money will destroy the lives of those who are poor.

This is not just any old financial downturn; All over the world it appears to be the worst since the great depression; the suffering already is great and will become greater. People are out of work; businesses are going bankrupt; and people are losing their homes. We have to deal with it. We can let this crisis do what it has done to many of us, particularly the United States, and cause us to stick our heads in the proverbial sand regarding global climate change and decide to deal with the economy now and the environment later---the truth is that 'later' is now; we not only can but we must deal with both the crisis and the economy at the same time. The fall into poverty and the environmental destruction of the world are walking hand-in-hand, each contributing to the other. We must provide answers and come up with a meaningful path to solution for both. We must be smarter than we think we are. We must be able to walk and chew gum at the same time. If we do not, our world and our children's world is in grave danger.

1.What are the problems? What is the American contribution?

The changes in our climate are undeniable. Those who continue to question the reality of climate change as a product of human folly are either greedy and unwilling to look that devil in the eye, ignorant, irrational or some combination of the three. In 2007, The United Nation's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) concluded that warming of the climate system is "unequivocal." Climate change has already led to observable increases in global average air and ocean temperatures, widespread melting of snow and ice, and rising sea levels. Eleven of the last twelve years (1995-2006) rank among the twelve warmest years in the instrumental record of global surface temperature since 1850. There is no time to wait. Our response to this crisis must take into consideration the predicament that those who have contributed the least to the problem stand to suffer the most from it, the poor. As things are going financially more of us may fall into the category of poverty or near poverty than even now.

America uses more energy than any other nation in the world. Our failure to set an example has created a presumption throughout the world that everyone should want to live like Americans. Between television and the internet everyone peers in on America's zest for living profligately. If, as seems to be the case, the rapidly growing economies of India and China create citizenries whose libidos for a good lifestyle cause their countries to consume energy in the same per capita amounts that we in the United States do, the world will be in the direst of straits. If the United

States cannot get its act together in terms of conservation and reduction of use of fossil fuel-based energy, why in the world should we expect other nations to follow suit. Our unwillingness to sign the Kyoto Accords which called for a _____% reduction in the use of carbon fuels by the year _____ was a very dangerous decision that serves as a bad and greedy example by, what is at least for now, the most powerful nation in the world.

The saddest truth is that with or without climate change repair the poor suffer the very most. Although the local effect of climate change is determined by geography, topography and other physical characteristics, the poorest nations, communities and individuals, who have the least capacity to respond, are likely to be hardest hit. In the United States, climate related events and even modest emissions reductions could place a significant burden on the poor. For example, reducing greenhouse gas emissions by only 15 percent from 2005 levels will impose an estimated \$750-\$950 a year in added costs on the poorest fifth of the population. That is a lot of one's financial resources when one is poor. Scientists have called for reductions of 80% in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 to avoid the most severe effects of climate change. The financial burden of these reductions will undoubtedly increase with a more aggressive program.

Less developed countries will have the least capacity to cope with the devastating impacts of extreme weather events, rise in sea level, drought, disruption of water and food supplies, impacts on health, and the destruction of natural resources. As a result, the poor will not only be put at greatest risk by the physical impacts of natural disasters and climate change, they could also bear a disproportionately greater economic burden from any program to address climate change.

For example, yields from rain-fed agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa could be reduced by up to 50% by 2020. Elsewhere, increased flooding will cause outbreaks of diseases such as malaria and cholera. Changes in precipitation patterns, subterranean aquifers, and the disappearance of glaciers will impact the entire biosphere, affecting water availability for human consumption, agriculture and energy generation globally and in the United States. Development NGOs estimate that it will cost upwards of \$50 billion annually to adapt to these conditions. The poor live at the bare margins of survival and unless we have the decency to make up for the extreme burden on the poorer nations of the world, their suffering will be both our moral burden and potentially civilizational burden as they will understandably and perhaps even violently demand a chance to do eat, to be healthy, to educate their children, to maintain at least a minimal economic infrastructure. The poor suffer in the world as it is. Witness Katrina and the Tsunami. To not deal with the additional burdens of the poor as we implement climate change efforts may be the stupidest failure most of us in the more-developed world will ever endure.

Climate change and its special concern for the poor aside, we also need to lessen our use our use of oil because of our continued reliance on oil because its use enhances the power of some of the world's worst tyrants. Threats of attack and volumes of insults from Achmadinejad's Iran and Chavez's Venezuela are only meaningful as long as they have the economic leverage offered by their huge supplies of oil and our equally huge desires to use the oil. I could minimize the effect of climate change on wildlife and plant life and will for the sake of time but the rapid changes in the ecological balance of the earth and its atmosphere have been devastating to the survival of certain species of flora and fauna.

So, for the sake of the planet and its prosperous people and countries, for the sake of democracy and for the sake of particular parts of the ecological framework of the planet, we best be ready to move and to move swiftly. For the sake of the poor of the world we need to make sure that as we move, we do so in a way that does not destroy their very existence. As the gospel of Matthew states so eloquently: The King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.'

2. What we must do?

A synthesis of energy independence and protection of the environment must be our goal. In pursuit of both of these goals, we must set our sights on doing what we can to move the world both personally and globally in that direction. We must decrease our use of energy, particularly carbon-based fuels that create greenhouse gases, and we must enhance the presence and use of cleaner fuels that do not destroy the environment. There is no question that every citizen of the planet and particularly citizens of the United States must step up to the plate and, as the song says, change their evil ways. Any failure to do just that takes the notion of ethical responsibility to a new low.

We can kid ourselves and many do and think that the real effort must be a personal effort but a personal effort is only a very small part of the solution. Transforming an economy that makes voracious use of oil and other fossil fuels as well as changing our voluminous consuming habits both must be part of solution and, as I just said, both require personal discipline as well as a commitment to passionate advocacy. Between the two advocacy has primacy. Nothing is more important than rolling up our sleeves, learning to speak truth to our power centers, to our economic cultural engines, and to fight inertia and reticence in society legislatively and governmentally with as much commitment as it will take to fight that kind of inertia and passive acceptance of the status quo in ourselves. Training advocates for environmental issues must be high on our agendas.

Most of us live in societies in which the complicated the nature of our democracies make it very hard for solutions to be imposed upon the whole of the populace. Sometimes I have a fleeting wish, particularly regarding this environmental crisis that we could change our method of governance and impose solutions from a deus-ex-machina-like perch but fortunately that is not the way we work and the thought leaves me as soon as it enters my mind. However, we can pass legislation, sign treaties, and create legislatively imposed conservation regimes that will make a difference. After all, if everyone decides to live in a highly structured regime, that is democracy at its best. That is democracy speaking out for the nation supporting the common good. That is 'change' we can believe in. How do we do this?

First, and most importantly, let's use less oil. Breaking our "oil addiction" will require us to reduce our bloated energy consumption. Discipline is a major strength of most of our religious traditions. Watching what we use and trying to use less is a first step. The use of new and innovative technologies such as energy efficient appliances and attention to not leaving appliances on in the first place can have a real impact on our energy footprint. What kind of electric light bulbs do you use in your home? Do you take care to have cloth napkins and reusable cups and plates?

How often do we throw trash on the ground and not in a receptacle; do we forget to recycle or do we recycle at all--

How many of you are parts of churches, temples, and mosques, and synagogues and other institutions that have undertaken to green themselves in some meaningful way? How many here today will move this agenda forward?(please raise your hands?)

But as I said earlier, personal and institutional environmentalism are not enough. We need to do more. We must make certain that the people of the world are aware of the danger. In every way we can we must make it clear that not only is tomorrow at stake but today is in peril. We need to embrace 'advocacy' and pass laws with teeth--- laws that will institute increased café standards for automobiles, cap and trade laws and/or carbon tax legislation to stop the egregious course the world is embracing. We need to set legally enforceable mandates as to the use of fossil fuels and we must enforce those mandates. We must not be passive, accepting of inertia or greed. We must rise up and rise up now.

Work on the other side of the energy equation is equally imperative. We must make a commitment to increased production of power from existing renewable sources. Wind power, solar power, geothermal heat, and if it can be used safely, nuclear power, could quickly replace a significant portion of the oil that we currently use. Ethanol and other biofuels used in ways that do not cause increased hunger in our societies must also be considered. Critics point to the financial difficulties in increasing the output from these energy sources as well as the small percentage of our energy currently derived from them as a way to dismiss their viability. We need to force our governments, and my government has a special responsibility in this, to do the research necessary to make these sources viable realities. An environmental scholar was in my office just a couple of weeks ago. He asked: "Why not a Manhattan project for solar energy? Where and how do we create a grid to use solar energy? How quickly would we be able to bring down costs so that we could bring such a source up to scale? He said: 'This crisis is every bit as existential as World War II.'

Within our own homes and businesses we must exponentially increase our efforts to use alternative fuels. Solar panels and hybrid cars are paths we must explore. Truthfully, 'no cars at all' is a path that would make a difference. Bicycles use little energy. I am a born Texan and in Texas we love our cars. Even in that giant state we must learn to use fuels we have thus far only tinkered with. T. Boone Pickens, a rabid capitalist, conservative, oil billionaire is staking his financial and personal wherewithal on the potential of windpower as an alternative to fossil fuels. We can give it a look.

We must use our skills as advocates in America and around the world to establish by democratic will mandatory regimes of 'use of alternative fuels' in homes and businesses and governments. In this world financial crisis green jobs will be the nourishment to find resolution to both. If we look at the financial crisis and the economic debacle as an opportunity and, frankly, every crisis is an opportunity, we can use this crisis to insist that governments create millions of new jobs, green jobs, to ameliorate the huge job losses and to create these jobs to build new infrastructures that will take the environmental concerns of the planet into consideration. It is like getting 'two for the price of one.' President-elect Obama has pledged to create _____million new green jobs. Let's do our part to help him make that happen.

All of our resources, from oil and coal, to wind, sun and tidal power, must be harnessed in the most cost effective, environmentally sensitive and energy efficient manner that we can conceive. The answer to the world's energy crisis will not be found in any static acceptance of the status quo. It will not be found if we continue to put our faith and our money in off shore oil fields, in tar sands or in coal mines. Rather it will be found in our commitment to greater discipline, greater investment in alternatives and efficiency, and a willingness to seek and accept the innovations and new ideas of our brightest thinkers and inventors. Those who are bold enough to envision a different kind of future will blaze our path to energy independence, environmental safety and a sustainable future.

There may not be an easy answer. Twenty-first century people who live in first world nations, particularly this one, often want simple pathways. It is not clear that there is some panacea for success. We should strive for the silver bullet (after all, why not?) while we work each day-step by step-act by act- to reduce every barrel of oil we use and every ton of carbon emitted. These are our challenges. Those of us who look at the bigger picture of our energy policy understand that each percentage point of energy derived from these cleaner alternative sources of power represents billions of barrels of oil imported and burned, tons of carbon dioxide emissions released into our atmosphere.

The question for us is this: 'Are we going to dream or are we going to destroy the world before our children and grandchildren have a chance to enjoy it?' When we on this planet put our hearts and our financial resources into our dreams, we are pretty good at making our dreams come true. Air travel, email communication, the global web—who could have imagined these realities just a few years before the appropriate question is: who can imagine 'reality' without them today?' Dreams require faith and leadership. I believe we are finding new leaders. I know Barack Obama has helped the world and the states believe it can dream and it can hope again.

More important than that is faith itself. Thank G-d! Our faiths have much to offer. The Jewish tradition is not silent when it comes to protecting what has come to us from G-d and not wasting anything. In Psalms and in Deuteronomy the Bible states that the earth is the Lord's. We are entrusted with it to till and to tend it. We are not given the right to destroy it at our whim. G-d made us a deal. We will have a rich life here if we have the courage to keep up our part of the deal. Judaism has a particularly compelling concept that started in Deuteronomy and grew stronger in the Talmud. Deuteronomy says that one cannot even destroy trees when attacking a city. The rabbis expanded this concept under a Talmudic principle called *bal tashchit* or 'do not waste, saying that we should not waste anything at all. After all, if we cannot destroy a tree, how can we destroy human beings, how can we destroy wildlife, how can we destroy the poor?

We must choose our leaders well and we must hold their feet to the fire. We cannot allow another crisis or inertia or greed take precedence over the work we need to do on climate change. We must come up with a legislative and administrative agenda for our own nations and not take NO for an answer. We must make our citizens aware of the need to make and keep personal commitments. We must demand green jobs, less use of carbon fuel, more use of cleaner energy sources. We must take our heads out of the ground and we must see the light.

In my tradition the great sages used a method called '*midrash*' or explanations to help us understand what is meant by the tradition. As we think of our children and their children. As we

acknowledge and accept our responsibility to the future. Let's listen to the words of a beautiful and powerful midrash from Ecclesiastes.

When the Holy One Blessed be the one created Adam, god took him and made him pass before all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to him: "See My works, how lovely and how excellent they are, and everything that I have created, for you I have created... Pay attention that you should not corrupt it, there is no-one to fix it after you".

That is how it was in Eden. That is how it is today. This is our challenge and my ancestral teachers see it as a challenge directly from the source of all goodness in the world. Thank you.