

Greening Synagogues

by Lindsey Miller

Here, old becomes new: cypress planks from barns in upstate New York become bright, fragrant walls. Black walnut from trees felled by storms in Chicago parks become a striking *bima*. Familiar concrete cinderblocks become functional, polished floors. Rubble from local construction projects become retaining walls. Compacted sunflower-seed shells become sturdy cabinets.

Technically speaking, the Jewish Reconstructionist Congregation's (JRC) new environmentally sustainable synagogue in a north suburb of Chicago is not really new, though the building only opened in mid- February. About 96 percent of the materials from its old building - a 1950's cinderblock edifice located on the same plot of land in Evanston, Ill. - were ground up or melted and recycled into its new building. And the rest were primarily locally gathered or recycled, with the exception of the white Jerusalem stone that lines one side of the building. For this Israeli luxury, the congregation was willing to make one environmental concession in a building with very few concessions.

"This isn't a faddish, jumping-on-a-bandwagon kind of effort," says JRC Rabbi Brant Rosen from his small, window-lit office. Large, well-insulated windows and skylights are an important feature of eco-friendly buildings, as natural sunlight mitigates the need for energy-consuming artificial light. "For us, this is a way of really reclaiming an aspect of our tradition that is very sacred, very important, very central. And I think it's becoming that now more quickly for Jewish communities."

Indeed, the JRC is one of two synagogues in the United States - the other is the Reform congregation Beth David in San Luis Obispo, Calif. - that is pending official environmental certification by the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC). While a smattering of Jewish community buildings around the country, including university Hillels and museums, are USGBC Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certified, or are at least taking steps to make their buildings and organizations more environmentally sustainable, JRC and Beth David have gone the furthest. JRC was built in accordance with the highest-level LEED certification, Platinum, and Beth David is going for Silver, the third-highest level.

These two synagogues are part of a worldwide green trend that is fueled by threats of global warming and the widening recognition of the effect industrialization has had on the environment. Liore Milgrom-Elcott, climate change campaign coordinator for the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL), an organization that spearheads Jewish environmental projects and helps Jews make a connection between their religion and the environment, says this trend is slowly hitting Jewish institutional life - both

because of an impetus found in Jewish values and texts and a general feeling of responsibility for the well-being of the world.

"I have not met anyone who has said to me that this work isn't important," says Milgrom-Elcott. "It may not be the most important in their eyes, they may see issues of intermarriage or education or other things as their big issue...But no one has said to me that the environment isn't an important issue."

Yet funding for environmental initiatives remains relatively meager at the institutional level in comparison to the other causes that garner millions each year from Jewish funders. A recently released study from the Institute for Jewish and Community Research, an independent San Francisco-based think tank, reports that between 2001 and 2003, there was only one "mega-gift" of \$10 million or more given by a Jewish funder to a religious or secular environmental cause. This \$200 million gift amounted to roughly 4 percent of the 4.9 billion that Jewish individuals and foundations gave as gifts of \$10 million or more. The study found, instead, that Jewish funders gave the vast majority of their mega-gifts of \$10 million or more to arts and culture and private higher education, with both categories receiving 34 percent of contributions. Conversely, between 1995 and 2000, the "Mega-Gifts in American Philanthropy" study found that no Jewish philanthropists gave a mega-gift of over \$10 million to any environmental cause - Jewish or otherwise - while non-Jewish donors gave 3 percent of their mega-contributions to environmental causes.

"[Jewish] funders haven't fully picked up on this," Milgrom-Elcott says. "I hope that it's just a matter of time that the philanthropists who are primarily focused on putting their money in the Jewish-continuity movement realize that if we're behind on the environmental movement, it'll be too late." Too late, that is, for the world climate to improve.

The family foundation that moves independent of the pack is the Richard and Rhoda Goldman Fund, a San Francisco-based organization that gives most of its funding to environmental and Jewish causes. The fund established in 1990 what is considered the "Nobel Prize of Environmentalism," the Goldman Environmental Prize, which awards \$750,000 annually to six environmental pioneers from around the world. Last year, the Goldman Fund gave nearly \$16 million to environmental causes (\$890,000 to environmental causes in Israel) and about \$15 million to Jewish affairs, including Israel, says founder Richard Goldman.

"My late wife and I grew up with a deep appreciation for nature," Goldman says. "Then, as we began to understand the effects that the post-World War II population explosion would have on the environment, we became concerned and started to take an interest in environmental causes. But our fund does not focus on the environment alone. We contribute to a variety of Jewish organizations and causes, as well...My commitment to the environment has less to do with faith and more to do with a life-long appreciation for nature."

Admittedly, the JRC did not need to depend on Jewish philanthropies to fund its green synagogue. Eight years ago, before "global warming" and "climate change" became household phrases, the congregation began quietly raising money for its new environmentally sustainable building project. A consultant estimated they could only expect to raise around \$4.5 million from within the 470-family congregation to cover the \$10 million project, Rosen says. But they have raised \$6.5 million so far in small donations, including a \$105,000 contribution from the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation, and plan to raise the rest from within.

"There's no question, \$10 million is a lot of money," says Rosen. "But if we really want to ensure our future and our children's future and the future of the Reconstructionist community in Evanston, we need to invest in it...It was a statement of faith of the members of this community in this community about how much it means to them. It was their statement of faith in the future of this community and future generations to finance it."

Certainly environmental buildings may cost a lot to construct, but they cost substantially less to operate. JRC's state-of-the-art, computer-timed heating and cooling system, coupled with thick windows, ultra-low emission fluorescent lights that turn on and off upon entering or leaving a room, and a myriad of other green advances, including reusing materials from their old building and other buildings, make sure of that. In fact, Rosen estimates they will save 45 percent on annual heating and cooling costs alone. An environmentally sensitive lifestyle within the building, however, can be costly, as the congregation has had to rethink everything they buy, from all-natural cleaning supplies and recycled paper to recycled disposable plates or dishes and fair-trade, organic or local foods.

"It really means educating the rank and file of the congregation to make these choices," Rosen says. "It has to do with living sustainably in every way, not only in the building itself but encouraging our members to live green in their own homes as well. What does it mean that we live green in our synagogue and then go home to a gas-guzzling car, to a drafty old house, wasting energy...I think the consciousness-raising is occurring on many levels."

Paul Wolff, who was on the building committee at Beth David, had a similar experience with his congregation. Beth David was able to raise the \$4.2 million price tag on its new building from within the 270-family congregation and educate everyone on living sustainably in the process. Because the congregation is located on the temperate central coast of California, it has the added benefit of not needing a complete heating or cooling system, relying instead on a computer system to open and close the windows and regulate the room temperatures. It is well insulated, with thick concrete floors and walls and bales of hay in the colder walls that serve as heat and sound insulators. The south-facing wall, which gets most of the sunlight during the day, employs water tanks in its walls to store heat and cold and further regulate indoor temperatures. Its numerous windows, skylights

and solar-light tubes supply most of the building's light, and much of the other electricity, about 50 percent, comes from solar panels on the roofs.

All of these green-building and greenliving tactics are helping these synagogues and other Jewish environmental organizations follow Jewish teachings more completely, they say. They cite a host of textual supports from the Torah, including *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) and *bal tashchit* (prohibiting wasteful behavior) as evidence that environmentalism is, indeed, a Jewish issue.

Though the mega-gift Jewish funders have not yet warmed to the environmental Jewish ethic, individuals are jumping in to fund and to help - as are many organizations: the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, COEJL, Canfei Nesharim (an organization that focuses its environmental education efforts and programs specifically on the Orthodox community) and, to some extent, each of the branches of Judaism.

"Younger generations are already involved with [the environment] and I think it's at our own peril that we ignore this," says Shawn Zevitt, the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation director of outreach and tikkun olam. "A lot of younger or disenfranchised Jews are living out their [environmental] values, but not thinking there's any connection to Judaism or they couldn't find a place that's Jewish that would take it seriously. If you say this isn't an issue, I say you're ignoring tons of unaffiliated, non-synagogue affiliated Jews who are saying this is their issue."

The Reconstructionist movement, which has a constituency of about 105 synagogues around the country, is taking this idea to heart - Zevitt is working to get 100 percent participation in its green synagogues program, and he says if that doesn't translate to 105 green synagogues, it will at least educate most Reconstructionist Jews about the environment.

Tikkun olam, Zevitt says, was a core value of Reconstructionist Judaism from the start because it allowed Jews to see what was happening in the world around them, in addition to the events of their own community. Indeed, in 1990, the Reconstructionist Federation passed a resolution on the environment that made caring for it a top priority of the movement.

"Judaism doesn't exist in cyberspace," Zevitt says. "Judaism lives through us as Jewish people, to take seriously what the situation of the larger world is. I don't want to be part of building a Judaism that's going to be playing a violin while the air burns down. Where is the future of the Jewish people if we don't take this seriously? I think because many of our community members come in with these values to begin with - progressive social values - I'm not having a hard sell within our movement. But I don't want to assume that's the norm everywhere."

The Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, in addition to the United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism, partnered with COEJL in one of their Global Climate Change Campaigns, "A Light Among the Nations," which makes it easier for congregations and institutions to order and install energy-efficient compact fluorescent (CFL) bulbs. A few years ago, COEJL launched a Greening Synagogues program in New Jersey in conjunction with GreenFaith - an initiative that helps congregations of all faiths bring their places of worship up to sustainable standards. During the course of this program, eight synagogues pulled their energy consumption and operations up to top environmental standards, says COEJL organizer Milgrom-Elcott, and more have followed. She stresses that it is not necessary to build an entirely new house of worship, as JRC and Beth David did, to make a synagogue environmentally friendly - older buildings can also get LEED certification with some renovations.

"I feel the Jewish movement has been part of the movement of becoming more [environmentally] aware," says Milgrom- Elcott. "But it takes institutions time to fully accommodate because as individual passion changes , [changes] can be made quickly and, for better or worse, the structure that a synagogue functions in, there's a board, an executive director, the budget, and it takes a little more time to formally respond in a physical way."

The Rabbinical Council of America (RCA), the rabbinic authority of the Orthodox movement, has responded to the trend by passing two resolutions, one in 2006 and one in 2007, that support the Torah-based environmental movement, educating oneself on the environment and leading a sustainable life. The Union for Reform Judaism and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, the congregational arms of the Reform and Conservative movements respectively, have also passed several resolutions in support of the environment. The RCA's more recent resolution specifically supported Canfei Nesharim's efforts to educate mainly the Orthodox community with their environmental-themed weekly Torah commentary, special holiday programs and shabbatons.

"I started [Canfei Nesharim] a little over five years ago because I noticed that in the Orthodox community, there wasn't as much awareness of the environmental issues we're facing," says Executive Director Evonne Marzouk. "That's more so because no one has really reached the Orthodox community or put it in a framework that really made sense in the Orthodox community...We understood there was an environmental problem and we had learned sources and understood that the Torah had something to say on this, but we weren't really seeing that being learned in our communities."

Canfei Nesharim, which means "wings of eagles" in Hebrew, has also initiated campaigns to provide educational strategy on the environment to teachers, synagogues and Orthodox day schools. Still, as Marzouk and others lament, much more could be done to weave an environmental ethos into Jewish life.

"As many Jewish teachings say, we need to leave the world a more enriched and beautiful place than when we came. There's that wonderful story from the Talmud about

Honi the Circle Maker who's planting a carob tree," Zevitt says. "Someone comes up to him and says, 'Why are you planting that tree? These trees don't grow; you won't have fruit from this for decades.' And he said, 'I'm not planting it for me, I'm planting it for my grandchildren.' That alone is a profound rabbinic statement about what our Judaism should be for."