

## Global Warming: Not Cool

**Barbara Lerman-Golomb**

### **What exactly is global warming?**

Carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases warm the surface of the planet naturally by trapping the sun's heat in the atmosphere. This "natural" greenhouse effect is good because it keeps the earth about 60°F (33°C) warmer than it would otherwise be, and it's what keeps our planet livable. However, too much of these heat trapping gases in our atmosphere is a bad thing. Burning fossil fuels (oil, natural gas and coal) to generate energy has dramatically increased the amount of gases and temperatures are rising.

NASA (The United States National Aeronautics and Space Administration) reports that in recent years we have been experiencing the warmest years on record. The Earth has heated by about one degree over the past century. Greenhouse gas emissions are projected to increase average temperatures by 2.5-10.4°F (1.3-5.8°C) in this century.

### **What's the problem?**

According to the United Nations Development Program, Canadians have the second largest carbon footprint per capita of all nationalities after the United States, and it would require nine planets if everyone on Earth had the same footprint. Our lifestyles and activities magnify the problem because of the excessive amount of energy we need to run our electricity; heat and cool our homes, synagogues, schools, and institutions; and to fuel our cars. Since trees absorb carbon dioxide, major deforestation or the cutting down and loss of large areas of forest cover is contributing to the problem as well.

The heating of the Earth's temperature is resulting in changes in our climate. That's why global warming is more accurately called global climate change. The warming intensifies hurricanes and causes sea levels to rise through two main actions: the expansion of sea water as the oceans warm, and the melting of ice over land. For this reason many coastal areas are experiencing flooding. Meanwhile drier climates are facing drought. People living in these areas are being displaced, losing their land and their homes. People are suffering in other ways as well. The warming affect is enabling the spread of infectious diseases such as malaria; the number of people affected by heat related problems is rising, and the excess of greenhouse gases is producing pollution leading to respiratory illnesses like asthma. You might be surprised to learn that air pollution related health problems in Israel cause more deaths in a year than terrorism and traffic related deaths combined.

### **Why is global warming a Jewish issue?**

The majority of people being impacted most severely are those who can't help themselves: indigenous peoples, the poor, the sick, the elderly, and children. In Judaism we honor *pikuach nefesh*, the obligation to preserve life. Reducing our dependence on fossil fuels is the right thing to do. Our Jewish tradition and values teach us to be responsible caretakers of Creation, to pursue justice for all people, and to leave our awesome and miraculous world unharmed for future generations. *L' dor v' dor* We need to consider this when we make choices about how to produce and use energy.

### **What actions can we take to help stop global warming?**

There are many ways we can conserve energy and stop contributing to the problem of global warming. Conserving or not wasting is not new to Judaism. *Bal tashchit*, the prohibition against wasting originally referred to the cutting down or needless destruction of fruit trees even in a time of war. From this law, the Rabbis came up with general ethics about conservation. They argued that if you weren't supposed to cut down fruit trees during the destructive time of war, then certainly during times of peace, you shouldn't carelessly destroy natural resources too. Even conserving energy is not new to Judaism. According to the Babylonian Talmud, one who uses an oil lamp inefficiently by putting a cover over it, consumes fuel wastefully which is against the *bal tashchit* prohibition.

You can begin by taking various actions today to “green” your home, synagogue, and school. Create a healthier environment in and outside of your building. Plan to have an energy professional conduct an energy audit to see what measures you can take to conserve. Some changes may include installing Energy Star appliances, adjusting your thermostat and hot water heater, choosing renewable energy such as solar and wind power or even putting a solar panel on the roof or installing a solar *ner tamid* (eternal light)! Or, start simple--switch to compact fluorescent light (CFL) bulbs which use 75% less energy than regular bulbs. If every Canadian household changed to at least one CFL, it would be equal to taking 150 thousand cars off the road. “How Many Jews Does it Take to Change a Light Bulb?” It takes all of us!

Here are some more things you can do: carpool, walk or ride your bike and turn things off. Switch off the lights in unoccupied rooms and turn off electrical appliances like your computer when they aren't in use. Don't forget to unplug your cell phone and I-Pod chargers when they're no longer charging. Reduce, reuse, recycle, take shorter showers, purchase reusable food containers, and carry reusable bags. (Consider that the average family accumulates 60 non-biodegradable, oil-based bags in only four trips to the grocery store.) Carry reusable water bottles, eat local and organic foods, plant a tree, and write to legislators to let them know you care about this issue and you want them to enact bills that promote conservation and clean energy. Think of ways of integrating care for the environment into your Shabbat ritual like having a “lo-watt Shabbat” or making at least one meal a non-meat meal. Try to live in a more sustainable way by reducing your carbon footprint. Go to [carbonfund.org](http://carbonfund.org) to learn more.

Global warming is an urgent and serious problem. We can sometimes feel overwhelmed by trying to solve it. So, start simple, but start! It can be as easy as changing a light bulb. Each one of us can make a difference by the everyday choices and actions we take. That's why second-century sage Rabbi Tarfon teaches in *Pirke Avot* that while it is not your obligation to complete the task of repairing the world, you should at least try to do your part.

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