

Rabbinical Assembly Position on the Environment *Updated July 23rd, 2008*

Background

- Scientists at the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change have concluded that the earth's temperatures have been warming up at an abnormal rate since the middle of the nineteenth century.
- This warming has been attributed to the increased emissions of carbon dioxide into the environment called the greenhouse effect.
- Global warming has been proven to be inextricably linked to human production of carbon dioxide.
- Global warming will cause radical changes in the earth's weather patterns, surface temperature and sea levels, potentially causing massive disruptions in human civilization including millions of environmental refugees, violent conflict over resources, species extinction, reduction of agricultural output and increase in infectious diseases.
- The US has the highest per capita use of energy in the world. With less than 5% of the world's population the US is responsible for 25 percent of the world's carbon emissions.
- Developing nations are expected to emit the majority of the world's carbon emission by 2020.
- The world's wealthy nations are most responsible for climate change yet communities and nations that are poor, agriculturally marginal, and without adequate medical systems will be most severely impacted

Jewish Tradition

The Jewish tradition mandates an obligation to save and preserve life (called in Jewish legal sources: *pikuah nefesh*) based on an interpretation of Leviticus 18:5, "You shall keep My laws and My rules, by the pursuit of which man shall live: I am the Lord (See Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 74a)." Jewish law forbids us from knowingly harming ourselves (Leviticus 19:28). In the Jewish tradition, the public good overrides individual desires. *Pikuah nefesh* demands that we consider the impact of our actions towards the environment, not only in the short term but also in the long term. This concept is further elucidated in Deuteronomy where we are commanded to teach our children. Jews are also bound by the concept of *Tikkun 'olam* or perfecting of the world. This concept obligates Jews to assist in bettering the environment around us.

Since 1991 the Rabbinical Assembly has endorsed over 14 resolutions on various aspects of the environment. These include: the conservation of energy and recycling, support for the Endangered Species Act, clean air standards, the relationship between global poverty and environmental degradation, global warming, environmental justice, the environment and human health, and energy and the security of the United States and Israel. These resolutions reflect the long standing support by the RA for action to protect the environment. More recently, the RA has focused on supporting policies and actions that members of the RA can take to support the greening of institutions to help prevent climate change. (See Appended 2007 Resolution on the Environment.) This year the RA looks to pass a resolution encouraging members to adopt The Green Covenant: A Jewish Pledge Toward Carbon Neutrality. This covenant calls for institutions to assess their carbon footprint, and devise an energy conservation plan with the use of renewable energy, and/or carbon offsets with a goal of reducing carbon emissions. It also calls for supporting the education and advocacy of the Carbon Footprint in RA member communities, support for the Solar Ner Tamid Project (www.fjmc.org), and encouragement of reforestation through tree planting in the US and in Israel, and encouraging socially responsible investing, and continued policy support of institutional adoption of green policies.

This does not, however, exhaust the RA involvement with the environment. The RA was one of the founding sponsoring organizations of the Coalition On the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL) in 1993 and continued

to be a supporter of COEJL. There has been a representative of the RA on the COEJL board of directors since its inception and COEJL has worked with the RA to develop many of the resolutions mentioned above. COEJL has also specifically produced resources for the RA and has had the RA involved in its various projects and campaigns.

Action

- Urge your senators to support the America's Climate Security Act (ACSA) introduced by Senators Joseph I. Lieberman (ID-CT) and John W. Warner (R-VA), is the core bill of a new federal program that Congress should pass to avert catastrophic global climate change while enhancing America's energy security. The bill would reduce the dangerously high level of current greenhouse gas pollution by scaling back emissions to year 2000 levels by 2010 and below 1990 levels by 2020 and below the 2005 level in 2050. Unused emissions credits can be bought and sold, creating a business-friendly design that will have a positive effect on the environment, and encourage American industry to be more innovative and cost effective, leading to further economic growth.
- Urge your congressmen and senators to continue their support for the Endangered Species Act. It is the cornerstone of the United States' efforts to protect the plants and wildlife that God created to share this green earth with us. We must preserve the critical habitats that make up the breeding and feeding grounds essential for the continued survival of these and so many other endangered species. Therefore, we must resist the efforts of special interests to push Congress to weaken the essential safety net provided by the Endangered Species Act.
- Reducing greenhouse gas emissions will also help address another crucial issue for America —energy independence. America needs to reduce its reliance on oil through the rapid adoption of clean and renewable energy sources and new technologies. This bill will help us reach this goal.
- Write to your congressional representatives to increase funding for alternative energy power research.
- Write your senators and representatives to pass legislation encouraging companies to develop alternative energy power resources.
- Increase Corporate Average Fuel Economy Standards (CAFÉ) for all vehicles, and eliminate the loophole that enables “sport utility vehicles” from conforming to the same standards as cars.
- Urge the United States government to observe and agree to the Kyoto Protocol on climate change;
- Participate in the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL), Program "Conservation Conversations: Invite your Elected Official to Synagogue." This initiative is aimed at engaging elected officials in dialogue around the issue of climate change; this initiative encourages congregations, schools and other institutions to invite U.S. senators and representatives, governors, state legislators, mayors, and others to their synagogues, schools or other institutions to participate in meaningful conversations about solutions to this environmental crisis.
- Urge your congressmen to support The United States Israel Energy Cooperation Act (HR 5342) which would establish a grant program to fund joint ventures between American and Israeli businesses, academic institutions and non-profit agencies with the goal promoting the development of clean alternative fuels and more energy efficient technologies. This initiative offers great benefits to both the United States and Israel. It would bolster the national security of both nations, strengthen the economy of both nations, and improve the environment of the U.S., Israel, and the rest of our planet. This legislation will build on the long history of American/Israeli innovation and cooperation by funding the joint research and development of new and environmentally friendly energy technologies which will help move both nations toward their goal of energy independence.