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Blue White and Green? Towards a Jewish Environmental Ethic

by Andrea Cohen-Kiener

Environmentalism is a very widely embraced idea in the abstract. It is ludicrous to be against the environment, which is, after all, our life support system and home. But environmentalism *in the specific* is an unwieldy group of issues, strung together by one's subjective perspective on the role of humanity in creation.

From Genesis forward, most Jewish thinkers teach that humans play a unique role in creation, something like God's on-site administrative assistant. Humans have a memo from the Boss and permission to use the "supplies" for our purposes. Genesis records our mandate to fill up creation and subdue it and take dominion. Modern Hebrew for the verb כָּבַשׁ (subdue) would be *pave it!* Modern commentator Rabbi Arthur Waskow¹ would say – "Mission Accomplished! We *did* fill up creation!" And Rabbi Alan Ulman reads the problematic: "dominate" (יָרַד) as "get down into it."² These two creative men go head on against the predominant biblical obstacle to a Jewish environmental ethic. And the bulk of the Jewish tradition supports them in this approach.

Torah and *mesorah* offer specific counter-balances to unlimited human dominion of resources. The oft-cited commandments to bury one's offal³ and refrain from destroying fruit trees⁴ -- even in the midst of the destructive rampages of war -- are expanded by thinkers such as Maimonides to prohibit any form of waste, destruction and over-consumption. Indeed, the laws of *Shabbat*, *tzedakah* and *kashrut* inherently put forward a restraining of human appetites, which is so central to an environmental ethic.

Consider the scope of human development on earth and the threat we pose to climate stability and water resources, among others. One wonders if we need to frame questions that would have been hard to imagine a generation ago. As writer Bill McKibben⁵ teaches, God said to Job "I made the breakers my limit to the sea: "You may come this far and no more. Here your surging waves will stop."⁶ But in our time we see that we do effect the boundary of the sea. Our collective impact challenges the very design of creation. The threats of Leviticus 26 are eerily prescient. Turning our hearts from Godliness will result in crop failures, rampant disease, sulfur rain, infertility, and, finally, eating the flesh of our children. Today we do not literally eat the flesh of our children, but we certainly do consume resources that reduce the promise of abundance for our children. We eat the resources that are rightfully theirs.

Our responsibilities as Jewish educators are many. It is our job to transmit the *mesorah* in a meaningful and applied way. It is our job to train the character of our students so that they can become living homes of *Torah*. And it is our job to help our students

become earth stewards so that we can collectively “Choose Life!” and watch our children grow on the land with the simple blessings of corn, oil and fruit of the vine.⁷

We cannot finish this effort, but each of us has a part. If we do not train our youth to see and respond to impending environmental collapses, we fail to engage them in the defining issue of our time. We teach them, by our example, that denial is an effective strategy and that Judaism offers nothing in the face of real life challenges. The Jewish community is behind some Protestant groups in its collective responsiveness to this challenge. There are specific obstacles to Jewish action. However, each obstacle is also an opportunity, if we dare take it, to reframe our perspective and re-energize our community.

Obstacles and Opportunities

Obstacle 1#: Our generation (secular and Jewish) has replaced the enduring values of patriotism, security, and success with unbridled consumerism.

Opportunity 1#: To name the various human appetites with proper regard for each of them.

The Jewish tradition presents a layered understanding of the human psyche. Physical appetites are easy enough to identify; we are less articulate in general about emotional and spiritual needs. But every imaginable emotional state is described in the Psalms and the *siddur*. While Hasidism and the *Mussar* tradition offer us specific information about working with emotions, most of us were not taught and do not practice our emotional self-awareness in a Jewish context. It's something we bring to support groups and therapy more than the morning *minyán*. But how else can we observe commandments to love God and neighbor, to refrain from jealous actions, to greet each day with gratitude?

We are taught about despair and hope by watching the dusk and the morning light. God's shielding presence is like the shelter of a shade tree. The heavens rejoice and the hills dance. Finding trust, inspiration and security in our environment is a thrust of the Jewish tradition.

Emotional hungers are hardly named at all in our daily environments. This is a basic imbalance in our culture. Rabbi Abraham Kook said that the endless noise outside our windows is the sound of people whirling and racing, completely out of balance with our souls.⁸ Trying to meet our need for meaning and connection with things is a recipe for psychological and environmental disrepair. There could be nothing more healing in our times than a deep reassessment of what truly makes us healthy, happy and safe.

Obstacle 2#: The Jewish People have a unique role to play in world history.

Opportunity 2#: The Jewish people have a worthy and unique perspective to bring to bear as we work organically together with others to solve shared problems.

Two years ago, the Coalition on the Environment in Jewish Life (COEJL) initiated a campaign to sell low-wattage compact fluorescent light bulbs. They called this campaign "A Light Unto the Nations" – a catchy title and an excellent idea. The problem was this: The campaign started a decade after a fully interfaith coalition (Interfaith Power and Light) had begun to work on this issue in two dozen states. When this was pointed out to the COEJL leadership, they gamely changed the name of the campaign to "A Light Among The Nations." Our need to present our Jewish uniqueness may actually hinder our role in effective coalitions.

Earth is the ultimate common ground. The coalitions of faith that are coalescing to avert climate change are unprecedented in their breadth. In my three decades of community organizing, I have never been part of a group that included Lubavitch Jews, Evangelicals, and Muslims – until now. And that is what it takes. Each of us from our diverse perspectives has to decide if our denominational God is the God of the cosmos. Can we collectively set aside our sense of uniqueness to value what is shared with people whose faith language is so different from our own? Meetings of mind and heart across diverse perspectives will create channels of effective advocacy; the form and the content of our environmental problem solving must be inclusive.

Obstacle #3: We are in exile.

Opportunity #3: The earth is the Lord's.

Exile after exile removed us from any sense of connection to any place. We seem to feel that we must wait for the end of history, the Messianic Time, to reclaim the holiness of earth under our feet. We seem to feel disloyal, to our history and our future, if we love the land we are in -- if that land is not *Eretz Yisrael*.

It is not a Jewish value to feel disconnected from the earth. Because of this little recognized reverberation of our exiles, it is a pleasure for me to bring to your attention the work of my very special friend Elisheva Kaufman Rogosa and her organization, The Heritage Wheat Conservancy, www.growseed.org. (An article by Elisheva Rogosa also appears in the second part of the CAJE *Jewish Education News* online journal focusing on Eco-Judaism.) Elisheva has found the seeds that sustained our ancestors in Egypt and Canaan and is working to restore them in our time. Eli has partner-growers in Maine, South Dakota, Israel, and the West Bank – Jews, Christians, and Moslems. One *Shavuot*, I walked with Elisheva on part of a pilgrimage she made from her farm in the West Bank to the Old City of Jerusalem, bearing in her arms the barley sheaves she had harvested. Last year, we made *matzah* together from heritage wheat seeds in a wood-fired oven in Connecticut. These reclamations are simple and profound yet practically unique. It is thrilling to imagine Jewish communities farming together, grinding wheat and baking breads. What a reclaiming of Jewish practice is possible in this deep and simple vision.

New Religious Partnerships

I am the director of Connecticut's Interfaith Power and Light affiliate, The Interreligious Eco-Justice Network (IREJN). Our national Interfaith Power and Light (IPL) network has been active for over a decade and has affiliates in 26 states. I offer here some practical ways to organize efforts with faith communities, culled from our experience in Connecticut.

IREJN has four interrelated mission areas: Celebration and Worship, Practical Action, Education, and Dialogic Advocacy.

Celebration and Worship: We offer trans-denominational liturgical resources. Religious language must be familiar in order to be powerful. An interfaith movement is not mush. Each tradition brings a unique and necessary strand, yet interfaith worship requires liturgy that calls on God or Creator in very inclusive ways. Our file cabinet is multi-denominational.

Education: Our concept of education is very wide. We have taken priests on an eagle watch. We have brought youth groups into the rafters to check for insulation. We have take-home lesson plans for families who want to reduce their carbon footprint at home. We also offer sermons and lesson plans for specific religious traditions.

Dialogue and Advocacy: The small and practical steps we take to be good stewards of creation are necessary and insufficient. The challenges of climate change (air pollution, water pollution, mountain top removal) are systemic. Sustained attention to infrastructure must be addressed at a federal policy level. IPL's do not advocate one emissions standard or one candidate or one carbon reduction goal. We advocate a policy dialogue that is inclusive and transparent. We want sustainability and common good to be values in the debate. We want to move beyond tug-of-war politics to a problem-solving mentality. We feel that faith communities have the experience and motivation to create a good dialogic environment for policy action.

Practical Action: The basic unit for an IPL is a congregation. We strive to engage teams of people within a congregation for effective work at that level. As our congregational teams grow, we try to create groups of congregations which can work together at a municipal level, and so on. The IPL's collectively lobby and testify at the national level.

In our congregational work, we find that we often are bringing together people who may not speak together usually. Our conservation classes often attract educators, board members, and activist types – who do not usually attend the same meetings! In trying to answer practical questions, we find that we are introducing congregants to people who have not had speaking opportunities in synagogues before: transportation planners, public officials, engineers, green architects, and utility executives.

In Connecticut, we have partnered with an energy educator to offer "This Old House of Worship" (The first class of "This Old Shul" is in formation as of this writing!). This 15-

hour energy stewardship class empowers teams from five or six communities to assess any opportunities for energy savings in their building. We have offered this class eight times in three years, reaching 64 congregations (<http://ctipl.org/thisoldhouseipl.htm>). Through our partnerships with state utilities and our on-line store (www.shopipl.com), the IPL movement has distributed tens of thousands of light bulbs and thousands of dollars worth of weatherization supplies. We have connected congregation to state and federal programs that help them finance or offset the costs of energy upgrades www.dsireusa.org.

Collectively, IPL's have encouraged tens of thousands of congregants and almost a thousand congregations to support clean renewable energy resources through voluntary utility programs. To access IPL partners in your state, go to www.theregenerationproject.org/State.

When I went to rabbinical school, I did not learn about my carbon footprint. I did not study south-facing opportunities for solar arrays. I did not know what "carbon cap and trade" meant. I did not know the difference between a Methodist and a Presbyterian. And now I am a knowledgeable lay person in these subjects. To be an effective leader in these times requires new learning and new partnerships. I welcome this new information and I relish the new partnerships. This is what it takes to be effective together.

When I meet a new colleague – an engineer or a minister or a utility official -- there is a moment when we both say; "I'm so glad I found you!" A spark is released in this moment. Energy is shared; there is a sigh of relief and a surge of empowerment. This is the closet I know to our Jewish vision of releasing the sparks embedded in creation.

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Endnotes:

1. Waskow, Arthur. *The Ark and the Word that Heals Us From the Flood; Commentary on Parshat Noah*. www.shalomctr.org/node/269
2. From an oral teaching at Yachad Community High School - 1996
3. *Deuteronomy* 25 :3-14
4. *Deuteronomy* 20:19.
5. *Job* 38:11.
6. *Leviticus* 26:15-29
7. *Deuteronomy* 7:12
8. Kook, Abraham Isaac. "In Search of the True Self" in *Orot HaKodesh*. Jerusalem: Mosad HaRav Kook edition, 1990. Volume 3, chapter 97, p. 140.