

**FIGHT MERCURY POLICY – BY RABBI DANIEL SWARTZ /**  
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Mercury in retrograde — to those who follow astrology (I don't) it conjures scenes of chaos, trouble, and life going awry, all because of a distant planet appearing to go backwards in the sky. But, if acting Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Andrew Wheeler has his way, our whole country is about to go retrograde about mercury pollution. If we don't stop them, lives, especially the lives of children, will go far worse than awry.

Like lead, mercury, even in infinitesimal amounts, permanently can damage developing brains. Coal-fired power plants have been the major source of mercury, spewing it into the atmosphere, from where it rains down into rivers, lakes and the ocean. There, in the form of methylmercury, it can build up in the food chain. When pregnant women or young children eat mercury-tainted fish, the life-long brain damage begins.

That's why when mercury and air toxics standards were first finalized in December 2011, hundreds of faith leaders from a wide variety of religious backgrounds celebrated alongside parents, scientists, health care professionals and others. These standards have reduced mercury pollution from power plants by nearly 90 percent. Reducing this pollution could save up to 11,000 lives and prevent 130,000 asthma attacks each year.

So you can imagine the dismay when, on National Children's Health Day, Wheeler announced plans to unravel these important protections. Even groups that originally believed the mercury reduction plan was too ambitious — including the Edison Electric Institute, the National Rural Electrical Cooperative Association, and the American Electric Power Co. — publicly oppose the rollbacks. Who supports the rollbacks? A few coal barons, such as Wheeler's former boss, Bob Murray of Murray Energy.

My organization, the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, joining with the Evangelical Environmental Network and Creation Justice Ministries, which together span more than 40 Christian denominations, believes taking away these protections would be immoral, putting profits above people. This is the same situation the prophet Ezekiel protested against more than 26 centuries ago:

*“Is it not enough for you to graze on choice grazing ground, but you must also trample with your feet what is left from your grazing? And is it not enough for you to drink clear water, but you must also muddy with your feet what is left? And must My flock graze on what your feet have trampled and drink what your feet have muddied?”*

When in May 2011 the EPA held hearings, my normally shy daughter, Alana, then 11, said she wanted to testify with me. On our way home, she said, “Dad, we did a good thing today for kids, didn't we?” She's still right. Reducing mercury pollution isn't anti-business, it's just a good thing for kids. Join me in fighting to keep these standards intact.

*Editor's note: Rabbi Daniel Swartz is the spiritual leader of Temple Hesed of Scranton, Pennsylvania, and executive director of the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, a national nonprofit. The views expressed in this commentary are his own*