

DON'T LET THE FINANCIAL CRISIS ECLIPSE ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

Op Ed for the Philadelphia Jewish Voice

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All across the globe, businesses are going bankrupt and people are losing their jobs and being evicted from their homes in a financial meltdown that appears to be the worst since the Great Depression. We have a choice. We can stick our heads in the proverbial sand and ignore global climate change while trying to slap financial Band-Aids on our collapsing economy. Or we can acknowledge that the environment can not be pushed off until later. Just because we have one major problem to fix does not grant us permission to neglect a second, which is at least as important. We need to be creative and smart enough to focus on both our economy and our environment; our and our children's world depends upon it.

The statistics on climate change are uncontroversial. Ice caps are melting, sea levels are rising, and air and ocean temperatures around the world are increasing. Eleven of the past 12 years weigh in amongst the warmest of the past 150 years. But one aspect of this tragedy has remained neglected—the class component. The victims of climate change are overwhelmingly poor, and they have contributed the least to the problem.

One of the largest culprits is America, which consumes more energy than any other nation. If we take this as a challenge, it creates a tremendous educational opportunity. We could send the message to developing countries—the Chinas and the Indias of the world—that we take our role as a nation with an oil-eating disorder seriously and are taking great pains and enduring great expenses to conserve and to reduce carbon emissions. The countries that so idolize everything American on TV and the internet could learn a lesson in national responsibility from us. Instead we ducked out of the Kyoto Accords and are confronted by scientific consensus that carbon emissions must drop by 80 percent in the next 40 years, which makes Kyoto's request for a seven percent reduction sound modest.

As the rich pay for their extravagant lifestyles with clean air and water, the ravages of climate change hit the poor the hardest. Erratic temperatures hurt the most when you can't afford a home. And, to be honest, the costs of actually changing our energy usage will also fall most heavily on the poor. Estimates say that even reducing greenhouse gas emission by just 15 percent of 2005 levels will cost the poorest 20 percent of the U.S. population between \$750 and \$950 a year—which they obviously cannot afford.

Add one more concern, our reliance on oil also empowers some of the world's worst tyrants. Ahmadinejad's and Chavez's threats are only frightening if they have the billions of barrels of oil that we crave so desperately. What would Sudan look like if Al-Bashir had no oil?

Resolution involves simultaneously embracing two goals. We must put an end to our oil addiction, and we must do a better job of promoting and using cleaner fuels that don't harm the environment. Personal and institutional environmentalism are important, but they are not the real

challenge.. We need advocacy and laws with teeth. We also need to invest in and use renewable fuels like wind and solar power, geothermal heat, and nuclear power, if it can be used safely.

Part of this is thinking bigger. Let's convince our governments to fight the skepticism surrounding the financial viability of alternative energy sources with massive research that turns the theories into realities. An environmental scholar who was in my office recently suggested a 'Manhattan Project' for climate change. "This crisis is every bit as existential as World War II," he told me.

According to Jewish teachings , every good act brings with it another good act. If we confront the existential crisis head on, we might find answers to our financial troubles as well. There is a tremendous opportunity for governments to build new infrastructures that will grapple with environmental problems, and thus create millions of new green jobs. President-elect Barack Obama has already pledged 2.5 million new green jobs by 2011, so let's help him realize that goal, perhaps with help from the \$125 million authorized by the Energy Independence Act for green-collar job training.

Let's stop poking our heads in all the wrong places—off shore oil fields, tar sands, and coal mines. Instead, let's put our faith and our energy into disciplining ourselves better and listening to the new ideas of our brightest thinkers. Barack Obama encouraged us to dream, and we must buttress those dreams with faith and new leadership. We must hold our government officials' feet to the fire, if necessary, to make sure no other crisis or inertia distracts us from climate change.

According to the Jewish sages, God took Adam through the Garden of Eden and showed him the beautiful trees. "Everything that I created is for you," God said. "Make sure you don't corrupt it, because there is no one after you to fix it." As it was in Eden, so it is today.