

## **THE ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGE AND POVERTY: TACKLING THE TWO TOGETHER-BOTH JEWISH IMPERATIVES**

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*By Rabbi Steve Gutow, President, Jewish Council for Public Affairs*

Thanks for giving me the opportunity to speak with you about the environment and Judaism and America here at BZBI in Philadelphia.

I speak as a rabbi, as an American, and as a citizen of the world.....the question for us, for me is one of alarming gravity. Our need to look at the potential problems of a rapidly warming and crowded world is a first priority need. Now add the present downturn to that mix and we realize that what will create concerns for the lifestyles of those who have adequate money will destroy the lives of those who are poor.

This is not just any old financial downturn; All over the world it appears to be the worst since the great depression; the suffering already is great and will become greater. People are out of work; businesses are going bankrupt; and people are losing their homes. We have to deal with it. We can let this crisis do what it has done to many of us before, particularly the United States, and cause us to stick our heads in the proverbial sand regarding global climate change and decide to deal with the economy now and the environment later---the truth is that 'later' is now; we not only can but we must deal with both the crisis and the economy at the same time. We must provide answers and come up with a meaningful path to solution for both. We must be smarter than we think we are. We must be able to walk and chew gum at the same time. If we do not, our world and our children's world is in grave danger.

The changes in our climate are undeniable. In 2007, The United Nation's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) concluded that warming of the climate system is "unequivocal." Climate change has already led to observable increases in global average air and ocean temperatures, widespread melting of snow and ice, and rising sea levels. Eleven of the last twelve years (1995-2006) rank among the twelve warmest years in the instrumental record of global surface temperature since 1850. There is no time to wait. Our response to this crisis must take into consideration the predicament that those who have contributed the least to the problem stand to suffer the most from it, the poor. As things are going financially south in the world, more of us may fall into the category of poverty or near poverty than even now.

America uses more energy than any other nation in the world. Our unwillingness to set an example has created a presumption throughout the world that everyone should want to live like Americans. Between television and the internet everyone peers in on America's zest for living profligately. If, as seems to be the case, the rapidly growing economies of India and China create citizenries whose libidos for a good lifestyle cause their countries to consume energy in the same per capita amounts that we in the United States do, the world will be in the direst of straits. If the United States cannot get its act together in terms of conservation and reduction of use of fossil fuel-based energy, why in the world should we expect other nations to follow suit. Our unwillingness to sign the Kyoto Accords, which called for a 7% reduction below 1990 emissions

levels was a very short-sighted decision. Contrast that modest ask of Kyoto with what is now the scientific consensus, that the US must reduce our carbon emissions by 80% by the year 2050.

Then the special case of climate change and the poor---The ravages of climate change and the work we do to stop climate change will hit the poor the hardest. Although the local effect of climate change is determined by geography, topography and other physical characteristics, the poorest nations, communities and individuals, who have the least capacity to respond, are likely to be hardest hit. In the United States, even modest emissions reductions could place a significant burden on the poor. For example, reducing greenhouse gas emissions by only 15 percent from 2005 levels will impose an estimated \$750-\$950 a year in added costs on the poorest fifth of the population. That is a lot of one's financial resources when one is poor. The financial burden of these reductions will undoubtedly increase with a more aggressive program.

The poor live at the bare margins of survival and unless we have the decency to make up for the extreme burden on the poorer nations of the world, their suffering will be both our moral burden and potentially civilizational burden as they will understandably and perhaps even violently demand a chance to do eat, to be healthy, to educate their children, to maintain at least a minimal economic infrastructure. As the gospel of Matthew states so eloquently: The King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.'

Climate change and special concerns for the poor aside, our continued reliance on oil enhances the power of some of the world's worst tyrants. Threats of attack and volumes of insults from Achmadinejad's Iran and Chavez's Venezuela are only frightening if they have the economic leverage offered by their huge supplies of oil and our equally huge desires to use the oil. Al-Bashir of Sudan would not likely be able to carry out his policies of subjugation in Darfur if he did not have the leverage offered by his vast deposits of oil.

We must embrace two goals in tandem. We must decrease our use of energy, particularly carbon-based fuels that create greenhouse gases, and we must enhance the presence and use of cleaner fuels that do not destroy the environment. There is no question that every responsible citizen of the planet and particularly citizens of the United States must step up to the plate and, as the song says, change their evil ways.

We must break our oil addiction. Personal and institutional environmentalism are not enough. Advocacy matters. We must make certain that our people are aware of the danger. We must make it clear that not only is tomorrow at stake but today is in peril. We need to embrace 'advocacy' and pass laws with teeth--- laws that will institute increased café standards for automobiles, cap and trade laws and/or carbon tax legislation. We need to set legally enforceable mandates as to the use of fossil fuels and we must enforce those mandates.

We must also move towards the use of renewable fuels. Wind power, solar power, geothermal heat, and if it can be used safely, nuclear power, could quickly replace a significant portion of the oil that we currently use. Ethanol and other biofuels used in ways that do not cause increased hunger in our societies must also be considered.

Skeptics point to the financial difficulties in increasing the output from these energy sources as well as the small percentage of our energy currently derived from them as a way to dismiss their viability. We need to convince our governments to do the research necessary to make these sources viable realities. An environmental scholar was in my office just a couple of weeks ago. He asked: "Why not a Manhattan project for solar energy? We need to learn how and where we create a grid to distribute solar energy. He felt we would be able to bring down costs so that we could bring such a source up to scale. He said: 'This crisis is every bit as existential as World War II.'

We must use our skills as advocates to establish by democratic will mandatory regimes of 'use of alternative fuels' in homes and businesses and governments.

In this world financial crisis green jobs will be the nourishment to find resolution to both the economic crisis and climate change. If we look at the financial crisis and the economic debacle as an opportunity and, frankly, every crisis is an opportunity, we can use this crisis to insist that governments create millions of new jobs, green jobs, to ameliorate the huge job losses and to create these jobs to build new infrastructures that will take the environmental concerns of the planet into consideration. It is like getting 'two for the price of one.' President-elect Obama has pledged to create 2.5 million new green jobs by 2011. Let's do our part to help him make that happen. The recently passed Energy Independence Act also authorizes \$125 million in green-collar job training opportunities. That's enough money to train about 30,000 workers a year for jobs in emerging "green" sectors. Beneficiaries of this program will be trained to build wind farms and other renewable energy systems; install energy-saving products; and manufacture new clean energy technology. Of that, \$25 million would be directed to a new program to give low-income workers the skills they need to follow a pathway out of poverty into the emerging clean energy economy.

We must break new ground. The answer to the world's energy crisis will not be found in any static acceptance of the status quo. It will not be found if we continue to put our faith and our money in off shore oil fields, in tar sands or in coal mines. Rather it will be found in our commitment to greater discipline, greater investment in alternatives and efficiency, and a willingness to seek and accept the innovations and new ideas of our brightest thinkers and inventors.

The question for us is this: 'Are we going to dream or are we going to destroy the world before our children and grandchildren have a chance to enjoy it?' When we put our hearts and our financial resources into our dreams, we are pretty good at making our dreams come true. Air travel, email communication, the global web—who could have imagined these realities just a few years ago-- the appropriate question is: who can imagine 'reality' without them today?' Dreams require faith and leadership. I believe we are finding new leaders. I know Barack Obama has helped America and the world believe it can dream and it can hope again. All of us need to insist on leaders willing to lead in bold directions.

More important than that is faith itself. There was a time when we thought that 'the weather' was natural law outside the boundaries of human folly. Today, we know that is not the case. Human greed and human indifference are playing significant roles in the onslaught of global warming. Thank G-d-- Our faiths have much to offer.

We must choose our leaders well and we must hold their feet to the fire. We cannot allow another crisis or inertia or greed take precedence over the work we need to do on climate change. We must come up with a legislative and administrative agenda for our own nations and not take NO for an answer. We must make our citizens aware of the need to make and keep personal commitments. We must demand green jobs, less use of carbon fuel, more use of cleaner energy sources. We must take our heads out of the ground and we must see the light. We must seek the energy of faith to inspire us to stop this destruction.

Add Jewish explanations for both---use shemitta year as an example of both brought together under the subhead of poverty and the environment under a single value system. Use Tu B'shevat as another example. In the Jewish tradition the great sages used a method called 'midrash' or explanations to help us understand what is meant by the tradition. As we think of our children and their children. As we acknowledge and accept our responsibility to the future. Let's listen to the words of a beautiful and powerful midrash from Ecclesiastes.

*When the Holy One Blessed be the one created Adam, god took him and made him pass before all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to him: "See My works, how lovely and how excellent they are, and everything that I have created, for you I have created... Pay attention that you should not corrupt it, there is no-one to fix it after you".*

That is how it was in Eden. That is how it is today. This is our challenge and my ancestral teachers see it as a challenge directly from the source of all goodness in the world. Thank you.