

OUR TU B'SHEVAT RESPONSIBILITY

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By Rabbi Steve Gutow, Jewish Council for Public Affairs and Rabbi David Saperstein, the Religious Action Center

WASHINGTON (JTA) — As the holiday of Tu b'Shevat approaches, congregations and families prepare to look at the natural world with wonder and celebrate the abundance of earth's incredible resources. At many of our celebrations, we will read from Ecclesiastes 1:4: *"One generation goes, another comes, but the earth remains the same forever."*

Yet our generation is learning that this promise may not be ensured. The earth is changing before us, and the resources we enjoy today — abundant food, a stable climate, and clean, breathable air — may not be here forever.

This Tu b'Shevat, which falls on Jan. 30, brings an awesome responsibility: We must act to save the very creation that we celebrate — the planet that is ours in trust.

Tu b'Shevat, which began as a minor holiday marked by a festive meal, has grown into the modern Jewish Earth Day, linking traditional celebration with our growing sense of environmental responsibility. As we connect our tradition to these modern challenges, we deepen our sense of personal responsibility, planting trees and reminding ourselves that it's a mitzvah to reduce, reuse and recycle. Jews have long taught that every act counts and each decision matters.

But we must also step beyond. As citizens of the nation that sets the tone for the world's environmental standards, American Jews have a special duty. It is a Jewish imperative to raise our voices for what we believe is right and just: legislation that will effectively address the environmental crises of our generation.

This Tu b'Shevat, we have the opportunity to move beyond individual and communal celebratory activities to raise our voices in addressing broader challenges to our environment. To truly mark the holiday and meet its intent, we must do more than plant trees or attend a seder — we must commit to advocacy on the policies that affect environmental integrity. And the place to start is the United States Congress.

Scientists, economists and religious leaders agree on the need for comprehensive climate and energy legislation. We need laws that include science-based targets placing a strong cap on carbon emissions and have stringent short- and long-term goals. This is the only way to limit both the current global temperature rise and future environmental degradation.

We need laws that will create the bedrock for America's transition from polluting fossil fuels to clean, renewable energy sources. It's simply not enough to tell citizens and corporations to pollute less. We must provide them with viable alternatives, and that will require a national legislative framework.

We need meaningful measures to minimize the impact of climate change and new energy policies on low-income communities and vulnerable populations in America and around the world, including sufficient funding for international adaptation programs that help communities confront the effects of climate change — drought, flooding, changing agricultural patterns — that some are already seeing. Industrial changes of this magnitude will have an enormous impact on the lives and livelihoods of millions of people. We must see to it that in our efforts to save the planet, we do not harm the people who live on it. In the aftershock of Haiti, we see vividly the horrifying damage of neglecting infrastructure among the poorest of the poor.

Some argue that Congress needs more time to consider environmental legislation, insisting that we cannot rush such an important task. Yet time is the one thing that we, and the planet, do not have. As ice caps melt and oceans rise, island nations and entire species are becoming endangered even faster than predicted.

The United States exerted essential leadership at the United Nations climate conference in Copenhagen, and it is time for our nation to follow that lead with legislation. We must call on our elected representatives and the administration to pass comprehensive energy and climate legislation for a healthier environment — and for the cause of human survival.

In Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah, we learn that the Creator led Adam around the Garden of Eden saying, “Look at My works. See how beautiful they are, how excellent. See to it that you do not spoil or destroy My world — for if you do, there will be no one to repair it after you.”

On Tu b'Shevat, it is our moral and spiritual duty as part of our celebration to call on our lawmakers to join us in the task of tikkun olam, repairing our broken world. The seasons are turning, and time is not on our side.

(Rabbi Steve Gutow and Rabbi David Saperstein are board members of the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life.)