

ENVIRONMENTAL GUEST VIEWPOINT

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

The energy crisis looms larger and larger in the minds of the American people and when coupled with the ominous reality of global warming, there is little doubt that this country must engage in the pursuit of solutions to both problems. The good thing is that the solution to both concerns requires the same shifting of policies, the same courageous actions, and the same discipline.

The Jewish community, which has a particular horse in this race because of Israel's vulnerability to enemy-nations whose power is derived from money received from the sale of oil, cannot idly stand by as if it does not have a role to play. Carbon emissions that are destroying the earth of our children and grandchildren and a world dependent on tyrants like Ahmadinejad, Hugo Chavez, and al-Bashir are not realities in which Jews can relax safely. In one edition of the New York Times last month there were three articles on global warming: one on its pervasive impact on the desertification of Africa and central Asia; a Nicholas Kristof column on crop failures and starvation caused by climate change induced-drought in Burundi; and one on the destruction it is wreaking on the road, railway, water and sewage infrastructure in Alaska. That is a lot of global warming warnings for a single day.

The questions of what to do, how to do it, and when to do it occupy the minds of some in the organized community but not nearly enough. Recently I sat with a group of fifteen Democratic senators in Washington and presented on concerns within the Jewish community about energy and the environment. There were leaders from perhaps eighteen Jewish organizations; David Harris of the American Jewish Committee presented on Israel; and Howard Kohr of AIPAC presented on Iran. The senators clearly saw energy and the environment as one of the paramount concerns of the day and the responsible question is this: Is the community paying enough attention to these issues?

The tradition is hardly silent and while it may not favor this specific policy or that specific policy, it is clearly committed to the idea that the Jewish community has a stake in this debate. Deuteronomy forbids destroying fruit-bearing trees when attacking a city. The verses actually ask the question: "Are the trees of the field human to withdraw before you into the besieged city?" Trees are not able to act in their own self-defense and need even more protection than humans need. The Torah and the Talmud say that Jews are not allowed to destroy or waste anything. Unfortunately, this very fundamental rabbinic mandate of 'not destroying anything' known rabbinically as '*bal taschkit*' is not on the tip of every Jewish tongue but it should be. In Psalms the Lord says: "...*the Earth is the Lord's and everything that is in it.*" In a religious tradition in which action in the world is the basic fabric of its theology and the most important proof of faith in G-d, to be silent and not act flies in the face of this incumbent debacle would transgress the fundamental nature of Judaism.

There is much to do if we will look at the problem in a holistic manner. On one side of the equation we can use less oil. We must reduce our bloated energy consumption. Discipline is a major strength of the Jewish tradition. Watching what we use and trying to use less is a first step. The use of new and innovative technologies such as energy efficient appliances, cars with enhanced 'café' standards, particularly hybrid cars, can have a real impact on our energy footprint. We can open our minds to the possibility of new innovative concepts and techniques such as a carbon tax, or a cap and trade regime for companies engaged in carbon emissions, or even the capturing and storing of carbon dioxide in the ground. These ideas are being discussed and debated and our community should become engaged in the conversation.

The other side of the energy equation requires a commitment to increased production of power from existing renewable sources. Wind power, solar power, and geothermal heat could quickly replace a significant portion of the oil that we currently use. Ethanol and other biofuels are also primed to play a larger and larger role in our domestic energy production. Investments in the use of these fuels are investments that this country must make.

There may or may not be a silver bullet but we cannot stand away from the fray. We are in a battle for survival. Our physical world, our immediate and future security, even the air we breathe are at stake. We are a people who understand the need to engage. We well know what happens when we do not. Energy conservation and reducing greenhouse emissions are not luxuries for those who just want to see a 'better world.' They are necessities if we are to save this place we hold so dear. After all, the Earth is really not ours. It is the Lord's and we should not waste or destroy it. Discipline, innovation, and investment will not wait for the next decade or even the next year. They are required right now. Buckminster Fuller, a sage even if not a Talmudic one, stated: "If the success or failure of this planet, and of human beings, depended on how I am and what I do, how would I be? What would I do?" It is our call.