

**PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT AND
CREATING AN ENERGY POLICY FOR A SAFE
AND SECURE WORLD-OUR JOB**

Speech given at The Jewish Coalition of the North Shore, Chicago, IL
By Rabbi Steve Gutow, President, Jewish Council for Public Affairs

It is nice to be here in Chicago-home of one of the most committed and powerful Jewish communities in the world and I am honored to be a part of your efforts to grapple with one of the grave issues of our time---the threat of global warming destroying our planet and the concomitant and insidious reality of an energy policy needing significant revision. I read yesterday's headlines in the New York Times. The United Nations panel of scientists are in the process of issuing a final report indicating that the problems are greater than we imagined---that the need to act is now---that the threats of rising temperatures and rising sea levels may be upon us much sooner than we imagined.

Our Bible, our *Tanakh*, provides great answers. We can sit with our heads in the ground like the Egyptians during the time of Moses or we can react like the people of Nineveh did when Jonah came to warn them. For the sake of the world I hope we are Nineveh not the Pharaoh.

I applaud you today for taking these concerns on---for not sitting back passively or near passively --for wanting to step up to the plate and make a difference. I know your town a bit—I work with Jay Tcath and Michael Kotzen, Steve Nasatir, Midge Pearlman Shafton, Lisa Kahn and many others. I am particularly moved by Jesse Greenberg who was stolen away from the JCPA by you and whom I admire and like greatly---plus, when he asked me to come---who can say NO to Jesse?

Most Shabbatot—if I am at home on the Upper West Side of Manhattan—I sit in a private garden below my building... It is called the Lotus Garden but, from its beauty (lush and green and lovely), it could be the Garden of Eden. Just off the street, open only to members except on certain days when the doors are thrown open to the general public--I had thought of it as too elite for me until they told me that I could join the garden and get a key for what I recall was \$10.00 for two years--\$10.00 in two years --that is a bargain even for a populist like me. I must

admit yesterday, on Shabbat, the weather was cold and not inviting and I only contemplated going to the garden...still, the fact of the garden makes me wonder—"Is this what it is coming to?"

Will we have private gardens soon to protect what little we have left of our G-d-given world? Only people with money will experience nature? That sounds stark, I know, but when we look at the world today—stark seems to be the only way to view the situation.

From the mounting crisis in Iran to genocide in Darfur, and from Nobel prize winner, Al Gore's, "Inconvenient Truth" of global climate change to the devastating truth of hurricane Katrina, it is becoming increasingly apparent that our energy and environmental policies are about a lot more than the price of gas.

The visions of polar ice caps melting, of shorelines gradually moving inland, of eco-systems becoming radically different so that our crop production will be vastly changed and diminished even the idea that there will be private gardens so that those with means can enjoy nature are no longer the stuff of horror movies but rather are events about to happen, more certainly after the results of the UN report, if we do not pull ourselves together and ask ourselves—what are we doing here and what are we not doing? How best we look at ourselves and do what we must!

The entire country has another worry and that is the power of energy in the hands of tyrants and nations that are not civilized or responsible. I understand that you here are part of a coalition called the Jewish Environmental Coalition of the North Shore to deal with these concerns. I hope you grow and grow in the days and years ahead because as Jews we pay special attention to both the dangers to the environment and to the problematic nature of oil power in the hands of the wrong people. We need to pay particular attention because of Israel's vulnerability to enemy-nations whose power is derived from money received from the sale of oil. We cannot idly stand by as if we do not know the stakes to our country, to Israel, and to the world.

Carbon emissions are destroying the climate of the earth of our children and grandchildren and continuing to support a world dependent on tyrants like Ahmadinejad, Hugo Chavez, and al-Bashir is not acceptable. Neither of these---climate change or energy policies are realities in which Jews can relax safely.

People do disagree about whether our ever-growing need for oil played a role in the Iraq war, but there is no disagreement that Iran is both emboldened and empowered by the 132.46 billion barrels of oil that it happens to be sitting on. In Darfur 400,000 people have been killed and 2.5 million displaced. It is clear that Chinese interest in Sudanese oil fields has been a major factor keeping the UN from taking stronger action against the Sudanese government.

A synthesis of energy independence and protection of the environment must be our goal. We must set our sights on doing what we can to move the world both personally and globally in that direction. 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. Unfortunately, the situation looks bleak because India and China, flexing their economic muscles, are increasing their oil demands significantly and the United States has taken few measures to lessen ours.

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?

I know there are a lot of rabbis in the room and I know you know that 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. My understanding is that there is going to be some text studies today. All of you, please attend. Our texts are rich. 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 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.*” If the earth belongs to G-d we best be careful as to what we do to it. In a religious tradition in which mitzvot, action in the world, are the basic fabric of our 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 and would transgress the fundamental nature of Judaism. Yet the Jewish community has been far more passive than we should in the face of this challenge that is plaguing both our country, Israel and the world we hold dear.

Finally now, we are waking up and understanding the need for a comprehensive energy policy. We recognize the environmental concerns. We see that global warming is a truth that needs a response. We need a stable climate, clean air and fresh water, not just for ourselves but also for our children and grandchildren. There is Talmudic story about Choni, a traveling circlemaker, who encountered a man planting a carob tree. Knowing the man would not likely live the seventy years necessary to enjoy the fruits of that tree, Choni asked him why he was doing the planting. The man said that when he arrived on Earth there were plenty of carob trees for him to eat from. He wanted to make sure that his children would also have such benefits as they walked through life.

To move meaningfully toward environmental protection and energy independence, the journey is simple. There are two paths to the whole and we need to travel both of them at the same time. We must use less oil and we must find new and clean sources of energy.

First, and most importantly, we must use less oil. Breaking our “oil addiction” will require us to reduce our bloated energy consumption. When we are at our best, 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 and hybrid cars can have a real impact on our energy footprint.

What kind of electric light bulbs do you use in your home—do you use CFL bulbs? (*raise your hands*) Do you take care to have cloth napkins and reusable cups and plates? (*hands*) Has your synagogue undertaken to green itself so that energy use is diminished and clean? (*hands*) Have the Jewish institutions in this town moved towards a greener environment? Or have you not? (*hands*) Much of what we do in this arena is known only to you, your family and to G-d, so you

decide. When you go home and you can determine how to best live your life in trying to make this world all it can be.

Unfortunately, we cannot solve the problem just by taking care of our own lives and institutions, we must also pass laws that will institute increased CAFÉ or 'corporate average fuel economy' standards for our vehicles; we must consider the ideas of placing a tax on carbon emissions or creating 'cap and trade' limitations for carbon use. These concerns must be at the front of our communal and civic agenda.

Then comes the second part of the journey, the other side of the energy equation. We must commit to fighting for 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.

Critics point to the difficulties in increasing the output from these energy sources, specifically the costs of solar power. They also note the small percentage of our energy currently derived from them as a way to dismiss their viability. Those concerns are not road blocks for a community that has faced what we have faced. We have faced a lot tougher problems. These are challenges. Those of us who look at the bigger picture of our energy policy understand that each percentage point of energy derived from these cleaner alternative sources of power represents billions of barrels of oil imported and burned, tons of carbon dioxide emissions released into our atmosphere, and millions of dollars sent overseas. What is also clear to us is that many of these dollars end up in the coffers of nations who do not share our fundamental commitment to freedom and are often openly hostile to both the United States and Israel.

All of our resources, from oil and coal, to wind, sun and tidal power, must be harnessed in the most cost effective, environmentally sensitive and energy efficient manner that we can conceive. The answer to America's - and 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 Appalachian 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. Those who are bold enough to envision a different kind of future will blaze our path to energy independence and a sustainable future.

Last summer I was at a conference in Jerusalem at which President Shimon Peres was a major participant. The day the conference began the front page headline in the Jerusalem Post blared out that Israel would be affected horrifically by global warming (the coastline moving eastward to the center of the country; crop production diminished tragically). President Peres responded saying that this was of gravest concern to Israel. The job of Jewish community leaders is to do what you are doing to support efforts to solve this problem this future and make it clear to our community, our friends and neighbors, and our elected officials that stopping global warming and energy independence must be an international priority.

There may not be an easy answer. There hardly ever is. We 21st century folks like to think there is a quick and magical response to everything. If there is, we should use it but I do not think we will encounter an obvious panacea for success. We should strive for the silver bullet---of course—but in the mean time, we need to work step by step to reduce every barrel of oil imported, every ton of carbon emitted, and every dollar pumped overseas.

I am glad you are here. You are in the vanguard of a Jewish community and a nation that is waking itself up. We have a long involvement in international affairs and we now see the how energy policy drives so many of the conflicts that concern us. The Jewish community has also begun to discuss the positive and negative economic and spiritual impact of our environmental policies. Some Jewish organizations across the nation are beginning to place these concerns at the very top of their agendas.

The JCPA, with its 125 JCRCs and 14 national organizations, and COEJL, the Coalition for the Environment and Jewish Life, a division of the JCPA, have striven to make global warming and energy conservation deeply felt concerns of our community.

Our Compact Fluorescent Lightbulb project, implemented last Chanukah by over 500 synagogues around America in which 50,000 inefficient old light bulbs were replaced by CFL bulbs, had a great impact. I hear about the program wherever I speak. How many here were aware of the program? (*please raise your hands*) There were general news articles all over the country.

We are now working with our colleagues at the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism to launch Conservation Conversations: A program to invite elected officials into synagogues and other Jewish institutions in order to discuss climate with their constituents. Hopefully, many of you here will join our efforts. How many here will invite someone to schul?

Also, the American Jewish Committee has made energy policy one of its top legislative policy priorities, and they're not just talking about it, they've put their money where their policy is. In June of 2006 AJC began offering its employees across the United States an incentive to purchase or lease fuel-efficient, environmentally-friendly vehicles. Employees who qualify receive bonus payments of up to \$2,500.

The American Jewish Congress has not been silent as it has been the lead horse in trying to pass the US-Israel Energy Cooperation Act so that both countries can use the best of the other in trying to fashion a safer and more beneficial energy policy.

Recently, we at the JCPA have organized a community sign on letter in support of the energy legislation being considered in the U.S House of Representatives. Close to 200 Jewish organizations around the country have already signed on to increasing efficiency standards for appliances, to creating a "smart" energy grid to bolster the reliability and efficiency of our electricity supply, to creating good green jobs that will help move our economy in the 21st century, and to implementing a renewable electricity standard that will have 15% of our electrical power come from clean renewable sources. This house-passed bill now awaits conference with the Senate passed version which included an increase in CAFÉ (corporate average fuel economy) standards. (Raising CAFE standards is absolutely critical to addressing both energy security and global warming. The current Senate Energy package (S.1419) offers modest improvements in CAFE standards, calling for a combined car and truck fuel economy of 35 mpg by 2020 with a 4 percent increase thereafter. The Bond-Levin amendment weakens these levels, proposing fuel economy standards of 36 mpg by 2022 for cars and 30 mpg by 2025 for trucks. By contrast, the standards in the current energy bill would save 2.5 million barrels of oil per day by 2025 (more than we import from the Persian Gulf), save consumers \$26 billion a year at the pump by 2020 and take concrete steps to fight global climate change.)

By taking the best of both bills, Congress can send the President a package that will enhance our national security, protect our precious, environment, and grow our economy. Right now the

debate between Harry Reid and Nancy Pelosi is taking place. There may or may not be legislation this year but we will try. We are working to get the strongest possible legislation out of the conference and signed by President Bush.

Still, we are at the beginning. Here on the North Shore you are stepping forward. I recently spoke to the Boston JCRC about their joining a statewide interfaith coalition. They did join. I watched them vote. From here today, you can decide to build JECNS, to create interfaith efforts (after all---everyone is affected). We are doing what we can—not enough—but what we can nationally. Our challenge here and across America is clear. What specific acts shall we undertake? Who is going to do the work? Who is going to make the difference? Who will make sure that there is a world for our kids, that the seas do not overrun our coasts, that the poor and the rich all have access to beautiful gardens like the Lotus Garden below my building? Al Gore has done our hearts good with his work and his receiving of the Nobel Prize. Gore's honor is our challenge.

Jews have a moral obligation to move the world in a more just direction. We learned that in Genesis, in B'raeshit, just a few weeks ago in parshat Vayera when G-d explained to Abraham that our role on Earth is to do what is *tzedakah u-mishpat*—what is just and right. Our question to ourselves has to be---do we, as Jews, as Americans and as citizens of the world, have the wisdom and the will to move the world forward, in fact fast-forward regarding an issue that can destroy all we have had a role in creating.

In Deuteronomy it is stated quite clearly. It says about life in general and global warming is certainly about life itself: Deuteronomy says: *The answer is not too baffling; it is not beyond our reach. It is not in the heavens nor beyond the sea that we need to ask "Who will do it for us?" It is close to us. G-d says: "I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life—so that you and your children may live."* If we choose LIFE---we have much to do. Try to bring more people to the work, improve your own lives and institutions, and find ways to join with others in the area, in the state, in the country to reduce greenhouse emissions. Discipline, innovation, and investment will not wait for the next century. They are required right now. Midrash Kohelet Rabbah reads: *"Pay attention not to ruin and destroy My world, for if you do, there will be no one to fix it after you"*. Are we paying attention?

Let us leave this synagogue tonight and step by step, act by act, day by day, do all we can both personally in our individual lives and in the public arena to make sure that this world of ours and this civilization which we have helped create survives and prospers.

Thank you!!