

BREAKING OUR "OIL ADDICTION"

Article in American Jewish Congress' *Congress Monthly*
By Rabbi Steve Gutow, President, Jewish Council for Public Affairs

From the mounting crisis in Iran to genocide in Darfur, and from the “Inconvenient Truth” of global climate change to the devastating truth of hurricane Katrina, it is becoming increasingly apparent that our energy policy is about a lot more than the price of gas.

People can 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.

The Jewish tradition is not silent when it comes to protecting what has come to us from G-d and not wasting anything. The Bible insists that the earth is the Lord’s and that one cannot destroy trees when attacking a city. The rabbis expanded this concept under a Talmudic principle called *bal tashchit*, saying that we should not waste anything at all. Yet the Jewish community has been quite passive in the face of the energy crisis that is plaguing both our country and Israel. Finally now, the Jewish community is waking up and understanding the need for a comprehensive energy policy. We recognize the environmental concerns. We need clean air and fresh water, not just for ourselves but also for our children and grandchildren. 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 impact of our energy policies. Having come to the understanding of just how tightly these issues are intertwined, Jewish organizations across the nation are beginning to place energy policy at the very top of their communal advocacy agenda. They recognize that energy independence must be our goal.

To move meaningfully toward energy independence, we need to look at this problem in a holistic manner. First, and most importantly, we must use less oil. Breaking our “oil addiction” will require us to 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 and hybrid cars can have a real impact on our energy footprint.

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. Critics point to the 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. Those concerns are not road blocks for a community that has faced what we have faced. Rather they 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.

Coal remains a valuable American resource and we need to invest in ways that will allow us to maximize this important domestic power source while minimizing both the negative local impacts often caused by coal mining and the global impact of carbon emissions from coal fired power plants. Mountain top removal and strip mining have devastated many of our rural communities and the carbon emissions from older power plants that lack the most modern technologies continue to pump unnecessarily huge quantities of carbon into our atmosphere. While some will argue with the effectiveness of current “clean coal” technology, there is no doubt that America will continue to rely on this abundant natural resource and, as such, we must do everything we can to ensure that the mining and burning of coal is done in the most efficient and least harmful way possible.

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. The job of Jewish community leaders is to support this future and make it clear to our community, our friends and neighbors, and our elected officials that energy independence must be a national priority.

We should strive for the silver bullet answer while we work to reduce every barrel of oil imported, every ton of carbon emitted, and every dollar pumped overseas.

There is one place we can move towards immediately and that is to actively support an innovative piece of legislation called the United States-Israel Energy Cooperation Act. The state of Israel shares our goal of energy independence and is also working to find advanced technological solutions to increase conservation and develop new sources of energy. Working with our close ally on these issues can only benefit both countries.

Israeli scientists are at the forefront of developing a range of cutting-edge technologies. These scientists have created wind towers that harness the previously untapped resources of vertical air movement and generate more power with a dramatically smaller footprint than traditional windmills. They've also found a way to use the methane gas released from municipal dumps to power public buses on the streets of Tel Aviv. Perhaps most excitingly, Israeli scientists are developing a solar powered system that would use salt water to generate energy and clean fresh water. These and many other promising technologies would benefit from a cooperative effort with American leaders in this field and would ultimately act as a catalyst to more focus on the crucial issue of energy independence.

The United States-Israel Energy Cooperation Act facilitates increased cooperation towards energy independence by providing research and development grants for joint ventures between private sector and academic researchers in both the United States and Israel. These funds can be allocated to support research and development in the fields of energy efficiency, energy conservation and renewable fuels.

We are in a battle for survival. Our world, our 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 is not a luxury for those who just want to see a 'better world.' It is a necessity if we are to save this place we hold so dear. 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?