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What would Noah do?

By Jane Ulman, Contributing Editor

On a ferociously cold evening in November 1978, Rabbi Everett Gendler climbed atop the icy roof of Temple Emanuel in Lowell, Mass., and installed solar panels to fuel the synagogue's *ner tamid* (eternal light).

"We plugged it almost directly into the sun," said Gendler, who rejoiced that the *ner tamid* was no longer dependent on the finite and politically questionable energy resources of the Middle East.

Gendler's conversion of that eternal light marks the first known action to green a synagogue, making it more spiritually and ecologically sustainable, and Gendler himself, now Temple Emanuel's rabbi emeritus, has been hailed as the father of Jewish environmentalism.

Since 1978, and especially after the 1992 U.N. Conference on Environment and Development -- known as the Earth Summit -- the responsibility to go green has taken root in the behaviors of a large number of American Jews and holds a prominent place on the social action agendas of many American synagogues.

This consciousness gave rise in 1993 to the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL), which continues to provide a Jewish response to mounting environmental crises. And it has motivated synagogues and Jewish organizations nationwide to mobilize efforts to educate their members and take action on such issues as energy conservation, climate change, biological diversity and pollution.

But now, since the May 2006 release of former Vice President Al Gore's documentary, "An Inconvenient Truth," and its warning that we have only 10 years to avert cataclysmic planetary destruction brought on by global warming, the mandate to go green has reached fever-pitch, catapulting environmentalism to the top of the Jewish agenda and, for many, equating its threat with that posed by international terrorism.

"This is not just about planting trees anymore," said Rabbi Joshua Levine Grater of Pasadena Jewish Temple and Center. "This is a life change, and this is an earth change. This is what we must do to save ourselves."

In Southern California's Jewish community, the reaction to Gore's potentially apocalyptic vision has resulted in a perfect storm of environmental awareness and activism. It has also created a new common vocabulary that includes such concepts as carbon footprint and carbon offset.

At the Board of Rabbis of Southern California, social action committee co-chairs Levine Grater and Rabbi Ron Stern of Stephen S. Wise Temple, both galvanized by Gore's documentary, have created a Green Congregations Best Practices Initiative in conjunction with the Coalition for the Environment and Jewish Life of Southern California (CoejISC). Their goal is to educate, motivate and serve as a central resource for the many new and re-energized disparate greening activities under way in Southern California's synagogues.

The first Green Congregations Summit took place at Stephen S. Wise Temple last Oct. 2, with 45

rabbis and lay leaders representing 30 Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist synagogues from as far away as Riverside and Irvine. It was an opportunity to share environmental ideas, programming and success stories for both neophyte and experienced Green Teams.

But its goals are even grander.

"We want to cast our net as wide as we can and reach out beyond the scope of the congregation," Stern told the group, expressing the hope that synagogue members will carry these ideas and behavior changes to their homes and workplaces. The next Summit is scheduled for Feb. 5.

At Temple Emanuel in Beverly Hills, lay leader Richard Siegel, husband of Senior Rabbi Laura Geller, has mounted an ambitious Greening the Synagogue campaign. He was initially inspired by Gore's film and was later invited to attend a three-day training session in January 2007 at The Climate Project in Nashville, Tenn., where he learned about how to communicate awareness of the climate crisis.

Siegel and his Greening the Synagogue Committee aim to reduce the carbon footprint of the synagogue itself and of all 850-member households by 20 percent. To accomplish this, the committee is asking each household to sign a Green Pledge and to calculate their carbon footprint, meaning the amount of carbon dioxide family members release into the atmosphere by engaging in such energy-dependent activities as driving a car or turning on a light.

Using an online calculator provided by such organizations as the Empowerment Institute or the Jewish National Fund (JNF), family members input information that includes their automobiles' make and model, number of miles driven annually, monthly electric bill and gallons of garbage tossed out weekly.

The computer program then analyzes the information -- for example, the average American car produces one pound of carbon dioxide for every mile driven -- and computes the footprint. For an average American household, that translates to about 55,000 pounds of carbon dioxide emitted annually.

It is that excessive buildup of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere resulting from human activities that many scientists claim is responsible for global warming.

In her Rosh Hashanah sermon kicking off the Greening the Synagogue campaign, Geller stressed that the environment is not a political or partisan cause. "It is a religious issue, a moral issue, a Jewish issue, and that's why we need to focus on it," she said.

Siegel, however, describes the congregation's reaction as "bifurcated."

"On the one hand, everyone is incredibly supportive. On the other, only 100 pledges have been signed," he said. While he had hoped to have all the pledges and carbon footprint totals submitted by Chanukah, he has extended the deadline, planning to announce the results on Earth Day, April 22.

Siegel said he didn't anticipate such a disconnect between people's consciousness and their actions. To CoeJISC's board president, Lee Wallach, it's the actions that count.

"People need to make a real commitment that leads to some discomfort in order to make a difference," said Wallach, who co-founded CoeJISC, an independent affiliate of the national organization, in 1999. He differentiates between what he calls "eco-chic" and what is real, definable, measurable action.

CoeJISC began its own Green Sanctuaries program in 2001, with 16 participating synagogues. It

expanded in 2005 to include the 65 synagogues that are part of the Pacific Southwest Region of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism.

The idea is to provide a unified approach and to help keep synagogues from duplicating each other's efforts since, according to Pacific Southwest Region executive director Joel Baker, "Everybody's tripping over each other to get it done."

To coordinate efforts further, Wallach, who is working with the Board of Rabbis' Green Congregations Best Practices Initiative, also convened a CoejISC Kitchen Cabinet last spring, composed of representatives from the Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist movements as well as organizations including Jewish Big Brothers Big Sisters and the American Jewish Committee.

Wallach said Kitchen Cabinet members will begin in January to develop a list of resources, to be available online and in book format, to assist synagogues and organizations in everything from how to form a Green Team to how to benefit from bulk purchases of environmentally friendly services and supplies.

In the meantime, an abundance of environmental activities are taking place in Southern California's synagogues and Jewish institutions. A few examples:

At University Synagogue in Brentwood, facilities coordinator Bonnie Kebre is working to establish a permanent Green Committee. Meanwhile, the synagogue has added paper to its list of recyclable items, has removed most toxic cleaning products and is looking into buying drought-resistant plants.

Additionally, a major remodel is in the works. Already 4,000 square feet have been demolished and construction on a 9,300-square-foot remodel, with a definite green component including lots of natural light and up to 50 percent recycled materials, is slated to begin in the spring, according to the temple's Executive Director Hal Daum.

At The Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles, each of the 350 Federation employees has had his or her own paper-recycling basket for the past month. Additionally, each of the 40 departments has its own large recycling bin, according to Federation spokesperson Deborah Dragin. The Federation also provides filtered tap water on each floor and carpooling incentives.

At Sinai Temple, the Green Team, created 18 months ago, has passed out about 400 ceramic mugs to all Sinai Temple staff. It also sells "Go Green" travel mugs to congregants. Additionally, the Green Team has worked with the Sinai Akiba Academy caterer to begin in January to serve student lunches in biodegradable clamshells, instead of Styrofoam containers.

And last Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish National Fund kicked off its Go Neutral campaign for individuals or organizations that want to reduce their carbon footprint by planting trees. That means they will be balancing out the carbon dioxide they are creating by investing in trees that will soak it up, with each tree absorbing about one ton of carbon dioxide over its lifetime of approximately 70 years.

CoejISC's Wallach is opposed to buying carbon offsets, as he believes they don't result in people changing their behaviors. But Temple Emanuel's Siegel views them as a practical way to zero out energy expenditures that can't otherwise be reduced, such as air travel. And, in fact, the Union of Reform Judaism, at its 2007 Biennial in San Diego in December, offset staff travel as well as energy used in the Convention Center by purchasing trees in Israel through JNF's Go Neutral program and by investing in renewable energy and energy efficiency projects promoted by the nonprofit organization CarbonFund.

Wallach believes that the number one priority for a synagogue or organization is to build a strong Green Team. But even that isn't always a sure key to success.

Two years ago, during Sukkot, Temple B'nai David-Judea launched an initiative for the synagogue's almost 300 families to take their carbon footprint and then reduce the community's total footprint by 20 percent.

The results, according to the synagogue's Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky, were "a mixed story." While Kanefsky feels the undertaking successfully raised consciousness, it proved difficult logistically and practically to follow through on.

The environment, however, remains high on Temple B'nai David-Judea's social action agenda. During Chanukah, the synagogue passed out more than 100 energy-saving compact fluorescent light bulbs to congregants. And this Tu B'Shvat the congregation is orchestrating a community tree planting for private home's parkways, between the curb and the sidewalk.

Still, Kanefsky explains, it is difficult to move forward on the green initiative when the world is so full of hard issues, such as Israel and Darfur. "The challenge is to try to identify a realistic number of issues and do something meaningful concerning each one during the year," he said.

Concern for the environment is placed higher on the agenda for Temple B'nai David-Judea than for most Orthodox synagogues.

According to Rabbi Daniel Korobkin, director of community and synagogue outreach for the Orthodox Union West Coast, "traditionally, Orthodoxy takes a more inward look at what issues the Orthodox community needs to address, such as at-risk teens who are moving away from religion or the tuition crisis for private schools." If the Orthodox community doesn't tackle these issues, no one else will, Korobkin said.

Still, at Yavneh Hebrew Academy, where Korobkin also serves as Rosh Kehillah, or spiritual head, solar panels have been constructed on the gymnasium roof, reducing the building's energy bill by about 50 percent. And on Tu B'Shvat, Yavneh is coordinating a tree planting with the city of Los Angeles and the Third Street School, Yavneh's public school neighbor.

Korobkin believes it's only a matter of time before greening becomes a higher priority for the greater Modern Orthodox community.

But one item that seems to be overlooked on everyone's environmental agenda is the role of vegetarianism in reducing global warming and other environmental threats.

"The world is not only trying to feed 6.6 billion people, but also over 50 billion animals that are raised for slaughter," said Richard Schwartz, president of Jewish Vegetarians of North America (JVNA).

To make this point, as well as to demonstrate how Jewish values can help heal the environmentally impaired world, JVNA produced the one-hour documentary, "A Sacred Duty," which premiered internationally at the Orthodox Union's Israel Center on Nov. 12, and which is available free to religious, cultural and environmental organizations.

The film cites a report titled, "Livestock's Long Shadow" -- released by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations in November 2006 -- that revealed, according to Schwartz, that animal-based agriculture emits more greenhouse gasses in carbon dioxide equivalents than all the world's cars, trucks and other forms of transportation.

Still, some do not believe that global warming is a reality, let alone a man-made phenomenon,

though the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report released in November 2007 states: "Warming of the climate system is unequivocal, as is now evident from observations of increases in global average air and ocean temperatures, widespread melting of snow and ice, and rising global average sea level."

Temple Emanuel member Robert Schwartz is one of those skeptical of global warming. He calls it "this pseudo-religion for the secular community" and worries that it will have disastrous consequences for some of the planet's least fortunate citizens who will be unable to pull themselves out of a subsistence economy without traditional energy resources.

He also believes global warming has been so politicized that it can no longer be handled in a truly scientific manner. As an example, he cites NASA's mathematical error of claiming 1998 the warmest year on record when it was actually 1934, and 2006 as the third warmest when it was 1921. NASA corrected the errors.

Still, Schwartz applauds Temple Emanuel's environmental efforts. "I am totally and passionately committed to saving energy and all un-renewable and even renewable resources," he said.

Others in the Jewish community wonder how much of a difference we can really make by diligently toting our reusable bags to the grocery store, installing compact fluorescent lightbulbs in our homes and turning off our computers at night. Will these actions even make a dent when, according to a Dec. 16, 2007, article in The New York Times, China is building coal-burning plants at the rate of one a week? Are these efforts merely a nice thing to do?

"We think this is what we should be doing," Board of Rabbis Executive Vice President Mark Diamond told the participants at the October Green Congregations Best Practices Summit.

He quoted a midrash on creation (Midrash Rabba 3:1) that he believes best explains the Jews' responsibility to the earth:

"When God created the first human beings, God led them around the Garden of Eden and said: 'Look at My works! See how beautiful they are, how excellent. For your sake I created them all. Take care not to spoil or destroy My world, for if you do, there will no one to repair it after you.'"



Follow the 10-year journey of the construction and completion of Congregation Beth David's new eco-friendly synagogue in San Luis Obispo

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One couple's attempt to become less energy dependent

By Jane Ulman, Contributing Editor

Last summer, Bonnie and Marc Gottlieb calculated their carbon footprint, measuring the impact on the earth's environment of such activities as driving their car, turning on their furnace and tossing out their trash. They discovered that they emitted about 56,000 pounds of carbon dioxide annually into the atmosphere.

"That's on the low side of being good," Marc Gottlieb said, with the average American household weighing in at 54,600 pounds of carbon dioxide per year, according to the Empowerment Institute, a consulting and training organization specializing in effecting behavior change.

Still, there was not much more the Beverly Hills empty nesters could do to reduce their carbon dioxide output, which, for them, essentially consists of electricity usage for their 2,600-square-foot home, automobile use and air travel.

The couple, who were inspired to become more environmentally vigilant by the release of Al Gore's documentary on global warming, "An Inconvenient Truth," and who are members of Temple Emanuel's Greening the Synagogue Committee, had already replaced their home's incandescent lightbulbs with energy saving CFLs, or compact fluorescent bulbs.

"We make a more concerted effort to turn things off, like lights and computers. And we try to run our errands together," Gottlieb said.

But beyond purchasing solar panels, which has been deferred because of the expense and long payback time, and purchasing hybrid cars, which the Gottliebs will consider when they're ready for new automobiles, there's not much else they can do. And air travel is likely to increase rather than decrease, as they'll be making frequent trips to Phoenix beginning in February, when their first grandchild is born.

Still, the Gottliebs believe they are way ahead of the curve in terms of environmental awareness.

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