

Towards a Globally Sustainable Evolving Religious Civilization of the Jewish People

Rabbi Shawn Israel Zevit, JRF Director of Outreach and Tikkun Olam

“The Earth is the Eternal’s and all that it holds,
the world and its inhabitants.” Psalm 24:1

Our ancestors acclaimed the God
Whose handiwork they read
In the mysterious heavens above,
And in the varied scene of earth below,
In the orderly march of days and nights,
Lift your eyes, look up;
Who made these stars?...
God is the mystery of life,
Enkindling inert matter
With inner drive and purpose.

Mordecai M. Kaplan, Kol Haneshamah Machzor, pp. 68-70

Peace in the valley
How many times, how many times
Must we hear the rally!
Cries of thunder, shouts to heaven
Fall back with gravity
Pelting on the passerby
God asks not for reasons why
Just change our life
In the valley.

Shawn Israel Zevit, lyric from “In the Valley”, c-S. Zevit, 1991, 2007

Throughout the 2005-6 calendar year, we at JRF began collecting data in order to learn about the wide range of *tikkun olam* initiatives taking place in JRF congregations. Every congregation responding to our survey and the many JRF congregations that participated in the 2006-7 major climate change coalition we are members of, reported some form of active engagement in the area of environmental sustainability and greening synagogue initiatives.

Based on this, we focused this year’s *Omer* Learning Initiative on the theme of environmental, social, political, economic and spiritual sustainability. Over the seven weeks of teaching, congregations and individuals will have the opportunity to share with us the projects their congregations have been involved with, present background information related to the issue, and help us think about ways in which our communities might respond to the ecological challenges we face today.

Congregations were invited to organize internally and to apply to JRF's Department of Tikkun Olam to generate teachings on a given week of the Omer. Each week, the teachings are based on texts about sustainability and environmental concerns supplied by JRF, as well as of the community's own choice, weaving in their congregational and individual environmental practices. At the end of the seven weeks, a rich tapestry of resources, practices and teaching modules will have been generated and permanently available in the Tikkun Olam section of the JRF website.

Mordecai Kaplan argued that Jewish life must provide us with recipes for justice in the world when he wrote, "A theology which is not a plan of social action is merely a way of preaching and praying. It is a menu without the dinner." (Not So Random Thoughts)

If we are to have a viable future as a Jewish People, we need to build on Kaplan's formulation of Judaism as an evolving religious civilization to include a globally sustainable approach to living in faith community. A globally sustainable, evolving religious culture will also include interdependent and healthy economic, social, political, environmental and spiritual systems. For us as Jews, as non-Jewish partners and allies sharing a Jewish path, and as human beings on this planet, there may be no more important issue to engage in and face than the issue of global sustainability in the 21st century.

To achieve individual self-realization and the ongoing renewal of the Jewish people, includes personal health and well-being, spiritual practices, ritual, study, building mutually supportive relationships, as well as community organizing and balanced activism around environmental issues. I do not offer this idea as a nice altruistic teaching that we can get to if we have discretionary time. An eco-spiritual consciousness is one which we simply must embrace if we are to continue to exist in this world.

The interdependent ecosystem of the planet as a whole, or "Gaia" as James Lovelock phrased it in the 1960's, does not prefer one religion or political system over the other when it comes to climate change and global sustainability. From space, there are no borders. Everything changed when we beheld our precious blue planet when the Apollo astronauts aimed their camera at Earth. It is this image I hold in my heart and mind when I pray the Aleynu at the end of each service. "You are one, and Your Name is One" is not a call for some supernatural messianic future or the world as we would fantasize it to be, but a rallying call to quickly re-align our actions individually, communally, and internationally towards a sustainable future beginning this day!

One initiative we have been involved in this year, through our affiliation with the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL) and a growing partnership with The Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA), is a major national Jewish communal response to climate change and emerging environmental issues. These partnerships build on our own movement's resolution on the environment and our current commitment to address the global warming crisis. This is just the beginning of our collective work in raising consciousness and encouraging concrete action to have every JRF community be part of the tikkun of the planet across the sustainability spectrum.

The Torah states, "Justice, justice you shall pursue" (Deuteronomy 16:20). Our imperative is to pursue responses to the many areas of concern we face in North America. For us as Jews, social, economic, or environmental problems are not "inconvenient truths," but realities to be fully met

as part of our Jewish values of Spiritual Peoplehood in the broadest coalitions and the smallest local initiatives. Together we can pursue the Divine call to do what is just for *tikkun hanefesh* (healing the individual soul) and *tikkun olam* (healing the world). As we count the days of the Omer, I pray the teachings of this initiative inspire all of us to green not only our synagogues and havurot, but our lives.

Q. 1) If you imagine yourself at the end of the 7 weeks between Pesach and Shavuot, what action(s) do you most want to change in your personal lifestyle to include a sustainability consciousness? What about as a faith community?

Q. 2) How do the ideas above relate to your current spiritual and Jewish cultural life? How does your current personal and communal way of life impact the local and larger eco-systems of which you are a part?

For additional resources on the Omer Learning Initiative or Greening Synagogues, go to our environment page at <http://www4.jrf.org/climate>

Selected text from JRF's Resolution on the Environment, passed in the late 1980's:

For the full resolution see <http://www4.jrf.org/showres&rid=262>

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