

Environmental Ethics and Spiritual Consciousness

Richard Schwartz

Biography: Dr. Richard H. Schwartz is Professor Emeritus of Mathematics at the College of Staten Island, and author of *Judaism and Vegetarianism*, *Judaism and Global Survival*, and *Mathematics and Global Survival*. He speaks and writes scholarly articles frequently on environmental and health issues.



Environmental Ethics and Spiritual Consciousness

Richard Schwartz

When God created the world, He was able to say, “It is very good” (Gen. 1:31). Everything was in harmony as God had planned, the waters were clean, and the air was pure. But what must God think about the world today?

What must God think when the rain He provided to nourish our crops is often acid rain, due to the many chemicals emitted into the air by industries and automobiles; when the ozone layer He provided to separate the heavens from the earth to protect all life on earth from the sun’s radiation is being depleted; when the abundance of species of plants and animals that He created are becoming extinct at such an alarming rate in tropical rain forests and other threatened habitats, before we have even been able to study and catalog many of them; when the abundant fertile soil He provided is quickly being eroded; when the climatic conditions that He designed to meet our needs are threatened by global warming?

CURRENT ENVIRONMENTAL THREATS

Current environmental threats bring to mind the biblical ten plagues that appear in the Torah portions that are read in synagogues in the weeks before the ecological holiday of *Tu Bi-Shevat*:

- When we consider the threats to our land, waters, and air due to pesticides and other chemical pollutants, resource scarcities, acid rain, threats to our climate, etc., we can easily enumerate ten modern “plagues.”
- The Egyptians were subjected to one plague at a time, while the modern plagues threaten us all at once.

· The Jews in Goshen were spared most of the biblical plagues, while every person on earth is imperiled by the modern plagues.

· Instead of an ancient Pharaoh’s heart being hardened, our hearts today have been hardened by the greed, materialism, and waste that are at the root of current environmental threats.

· God provided the biblical plagues to free the Israelites, while today we must apply God’s teachings in order to save ourselves and our precious but endangered planet from modern plagues.

A *midrash* aptly summarizes the situation today. It states that when God created the world, He took the first human being, Adam, to see the wonders of creation and He said to Adam, “Do not corrupt or destroy this world. For if you do, there will be nobody after you to restore it” (*Eccles. Rabbah* 7:28). Throughout history, people may have wondered what this *midrash* meant, but it is very relevant today.

There is a need for major changes if the world is to avoid increasingly severe environmental threats. In 1992, over 1,670 scientists, including 104 Nobel laureates — a majority of the living recipients of the Prizes in the sciences — signed a “World Scientists’ Warning To Humanity.” Their introduction states:

Human beings and the natural world are on a collision course. Human activities inflict harsh and often irreversible damage on the environment and on critical resources. If not checked, many of our current practices put at serious risk the future that we wish for human

society and the plant and animal kingdoms, and may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know.

Their warning: “A great change in our stewardship of the earth and the life on it is required, if vast human misery is to be avoided and our global home on this planet is not to be irretrievably mutilated.”

Global climate change may be the most critical problem the world will face in the next few decades. There is a growing scientific consensus that we are already experiencing the effects of global warming, and that human actions are playing a significant role. Global average temperatures have increased about one degree Fahrenheit since 1900. This doesn't sound like much, but it is causing major changes in our weather patterns. The warmest decade in recorded history was the 1990s. The ten warmest years on record have all occurred since 1983, with seven of them since 1990. The global temperature in 1998 was the warmest in recorded history.

In the year 2000, in its Third Assessment Report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a U.N.-sponsored group of leading climate scientists from over 100 nations estimated that by 2100, the average world temperature could rise between 2.5 and 10.4 degrees Fahrenheit. The IPCC report, which runs to over 1,000 pages, was written by 123 lead authors from many countries, drawing on 516 contributing experts, and is one of the most comprehensive studies produced on global warming. Hence, the conclusions of the report represent an unprecedented consensus among hundreds of climate scientists from all over the world. This makes their summary statement that “Projected climate changes during the 21st century have the potential to lead to future large-scale and possible irreversible changes in Earth systems,” with “continental and global consequences,” especially ominous.

In 1999, seven environmental groups, including the Union of Concerned Scientists, produced a world map showing 89 “Global Warming Early Warning Signs.” The groups conclude, “the earth is heating up.” Their ten categories of “early warning signs” include: heat waves and periods of unusually warm weather, spreading disease, the earlier arrival of spring, sea level rise and coastal flooding, coral reef bleaching, melting of glaciers,

Arctic and Antarctic warming, severe storms, and droughts and fires.

JEWISH TEACHINGS ON THE ENVIRONMENT

Judaism has very strong teachings on responding to environmental problems. Perhaps most important is, “The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof.” (Ps. 24:1) The Jewish tradition teaches us that we are to be co-workers and partners with God in preserving the earth. One of the big problems facing the world today is the frequent and unfortunate clash between Jewish environmental values on one hand and the realities of the world. Certainly, the world doesn't put the idea of the Earth as the Lord's first, but rather, emphasizes what is most profitable.

Since “the earth is the Lord's,” the Torah mandates *bal tashbit*: that we are not to waste or unnecessarily destroy anything of value (Deut. 20:19,20). God has given us enough for our needs. We are, of course, to use things properly, but this is not generally the case today. The United States, with less than 5% of the world's people, uses at least a quarter of the world's resources, causes about a quarter of the global warming, and produces a third to a half of the industrial pollution.

APPLYING JEWISH VALUES

I will briefly relate Jewish values to two issues, consistent with Rabbi Saul Berman's statement in his keynote talk earlier, about introducing *qedushah* (holiness) in all aspects of our lives. One is a broad, general public policy issue, energy policies. The second is a very personal issue, related to our diets.

As long ago as the 1970s, energy expert Amory Lovins argued that there were two primary approaches to obtaining adequate energy: the “hard” path and the “soft” path. The hard path assumes that we need to obtain energy from coal, oil, uranium, and synthetic sources to continue our historic increase in energy use and that, in fact, such increased energy consumption is necessary for our country to prosper. Advocates of the soft energy path assert that energy efficiency and conservation are the primary answers to current problems, and that renewable energy sources based on sun, wind, flowing water, and biomass should be used to provide much of our energy, without the dangers associated with hard

energy fuels.

What criteria should Jews use to select a proper energy path? They should include such Jewish values as *bal tashbit*, “the earth is the Lord’s,” the sanctity of human life, concern for the needs and circumstances of future generations, the dignity of labor, and proper use of the cycles of sun, water, and wind which God has provided for us. Let us consider future energy choices in light of each of these considerations:

***BAL TASHBIT:** Consistent with the Torah mandate not to waste or unnecessarily destroy anything of value, supporters of the soft energy path advocate a strong reliance on conservation.

The United States is extremely wasteful of energy. With about 4.5% of the world’s people, we are responsible for about 24% of its energy use (the highest per capita consumption in the world). Europe and Japan use about half the energy relative to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as the United States. Yet European and Japanese people have comfortable standards of living. Partly because of wasteful energy use, United States electrical energy demand doubled about every ten years for much of the twentieth century. Energy made available through conservation is cheaper, safer, more reliable, less polluting, and more job-creating than energy obtained from any other source. Several studies have shown that we can continue to grow economically and to maintain, even improve, our way of life while reducing our use of energy.

“THE EARTH IS THE LORD’S AND THE FULLNESS THEREOF”

Soft energy methods based on renewable resources and conservation have relatively minor impacts on the environment. The hard energy path, on the other hand, contributes to many threats to already fragile ecosystems:

*** THE SANCTITY OF HUMAN LIFE:** Soft energy methods involve minimal or no danger to human life. The hard energy path, in contrast, endangers life in several ways. Among other things, underground coal mining is still the most dangerous job, despite numerous health and safety advances in the last ten years; and air pollution from fossil-fuel power plants causes disease and death.

***CONSIDERATION FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS:** Judaism teaches us to consider the effects of our actions on future generations. A Talmudic sage posed the question “Who is the wise person?” His response: “The person who foresees the future consequences of his or her actions.”

Soft energy methods do not endanger future generations. Conservation is actually an investment in the future, since saved energy and resources can help meet the needs of future generations. Use of renewable sources such as sun, wind, and water avoids future scarcities, which could result in inflation and conflicts.

*** THE DIGNITY OF LABOR:** Unlike many ancient societies, such as those of Greece and Rome, in which manual labor was done by slaves, Judaism recognizes the dignity of creative labor. Work is considered a character-developing process that gives an individual self-respect and respect from others.

Many soft energy methods are labor-intensive. Jobs are created through such endeavors as weatherization of homes to make them more energy efficient, recycling of products, and construction of equipment for the production and distribution of renewable energy. By contrast, hard energy paths are generally capital intensive. They require sophisticated, expensive equipment, but relatively few workers.

*** PROPER USE OF GOD’S CYCLES OF SUN, WIND, AND WATER:** A major cause of pollution and resource shortages in recent years is our inattention to God’s cycles of sun, wind, and water. According to energy expert Denis Hayes, the U.S. could reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 80% in our lifetime by converting to the most efficient technologies currently available, and switching as much as practical to solar energy, wind power, bio-fuels, and other renewable sources of energy. Hence, in partnership with good conservation practices, the second major element of the soft energy path is use of sun, wind, and water, as well as renewable fuels.

There are many “hidden” benefits of renewable energy sources: they are generally pollution-free, undepletable, dependable, abundant, decentralized, safe, job-creating, and inflation-resistant.

In summary, our nation and the world can best be

served by an energy policy based on Jewish values embodied in the acronym CARE (Conservation and Renewable Energy). Such a policy would involve turning away from sources of energy that have become environmentally destructive and extremely costly; adopting simpler technology instead of reliance on inefficient central electrical generating plants; decreasing dependence on large energy companies and foreign governments, which can cut off supplies or sharply raise prices. This could help create a simpler, healthier world, with more conservation of energy and resources; a safer world, with less competition for scarce fuels and other commodities; a more stable economy; less unemployment; and more money available for education, health, housing, transportation, nutrition, and social services. For all these profoundly Jewish reasons, the Jewish community must take a leading role in advocating energy policies that will help usher in this safer, saner future.

The other issue I wanted to briefly discuss is dietary connections to the environment and other issues. There is a widely accepted aspect of modern life that contradicts many Jewish teachings and harms people, communities, and the planet — the mass production and widespread consumption of meat. High meat consumption and the ways in which meat is produced today conflict with Judaism in at least six important areas:

1. While Judaism mandates that people should be very careful about preserving their health and their lives, numerous scientific studies have linked animal-based diets directly to heart disease, stroke, many forms of cancer, and other chronic degenerative diseases.
2. While Judaism forbids *tsa'ar ba'alei hayyim*, inflicting unnecessary pain on animals, most farm animals — including those raised for kosher consumers — are raised on “factory farms” where they live in cramped, confined spaces, and are often drugged, mutilated, and denied fresh air, sunlight, exercise, and any enjoyment of life, before they are slaughtered and eaten.
3. While Judaism teaches that “the Earth is the Lord’s” (Ps. 24:1) and that we are to be God’s partners and co-workers in preserving the world, modern intensive livestock agriculture contributes substantially to soil erosion and depletion, air and water pollution, overuse of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, the destruction of tropical rain forests and other habitats, global warming, and

other environmental damage. While recent increased concern about global warming is very welcome, the many connections between typical American (and other Western) diets and global warming have generally been overlooked. Current modern intensive livestock agriculture and the consumption of meat contribute greatly to the four major gases associated with the greenhouse effect: carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxides, and chlorofluorocarbons.

The burning of tropical forests releases tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere and eliminates the ability of these trees to absorb carbon dioxide. Also, the highly mechanized agricultural sector uses an enormous amount of fossil fuel to produce pesticides, chemical fertilizer, and other agricultural resources, and this also contributes to carbon dioxide emissions. Cattle emit methane as part of their digestive process, as do termites who feast on the charred remains of trees that were burned to create grazing land and land to grow feed crops for farmed animals. The large amounts of petrochemical fertilizers used to produce feed crops create significant quantities of nitrous oxides. Likewise, the increased refrigeration necessary to prevent animal products from spoiling adds chlorofluorocarbons to the atmosphere.

4. While Judaism mandates *bal tashbit*,— not wasting or unnecessarily destroying anything of value, and not using more than is needed to accomplish a purpose— animal agriculture requires the wasteful use of food, land, water, energy, and other resources.
5. While Judaism stresses that we are to assist the poor and share our bread with hungry people, over 70% of the grain grown in the United States is fed to animals destined for slaughter (it takes about 9 pounds of grain to produce one pound of edible beef), while an estimated 20 million people worldwide die because of hunger and its effects each year.
6. While Judaism stresses that we must seek and pursue peace and that violence results from unjust conditions, animal-centered diets, by wasting valuable resources, help to perpetuate the widespread hunger and poverty that eventually lead to instability and war.

In view of these important Jewish mandates to preserve human health, attend to the welfare of animals, protect

the environment, conserve resources, help feed hungry people, and pursue peace, contrasted with the harm that animal-centered diets do in each of these areas, I believe that committed Jews (and others) should sharply reduce or eliminate their consumption of animal products.

One could say “*dayyeinu* (it would be enough)” after any of the arguments above, because each one constitutes by itself a serious conflict between Jewish values and current practice that should impel Jews to seriously consider a plant-based diet. Combined, they make an urgent and compelling case for the Jewish community to address these issues.

This conference should be the beginning of applying Jewish values and teachings current environmental threats. Former Vice-President Al Gore stated in his book, *Earth in the Balance*, “The saving of the global environment should be the central organizing principle for civilization today.” In everything we do, we should consider the effects on the environment. As Jews with “the courage to be modern and Orthodox,” I believe that we should make *tiquin olam* (the mandate to heal and repair the world) a central organizing principle for moving the world from its present perilous path to a more sustainable one.

SOURCES FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

Bernstein, Ellen, editor. *Ecology and the Jewish Spirit: Where Nature and the Spirit Meet*. Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1998. A wide variety of Jewish perspectives on environmental issues.

Rose, Aubrey (editor). *Judaism and Ecology*. New York/London: Cassell, 1992. Collection of very readable essays on environmental issues from Jewish perspectives.

Schwartz, Richard H. *Judaism and Vegetarianism*. New York: Lantern, 2001. Argues that Jewish mandates to show compassion to animals, preserve health, help feed the hungry, preserve the earth, conserve resources, and pursue peace point to vegetarianism as the ideal diet.

Schwartz, Richard H. *Judaism and Global Survival*. New York: Lantern, 2002. Applies Jewish teachings to many current critical issues, including hunger, ecological threats, global climate change, rapid population growth, and energy.

Waskow, Arthur I. (ed.). *Torah of the Earth: Exploring 4,000 Years of Ecology in Jewish Thought*. Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights, 2000 (two volumes). Wide variety of essays on various environmental issues.

VALUABLE WEBSITES:

**Adam Teva V'Din*: The Israel Union for Environmental Defense at <http://www.iued.org/il>

*Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL) at <http://www.coejl.org>

*Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel at <http://www.spni.org.il>

*Judaism and Vegetarianism at <http://www.jewishveg.com>