Judaism Goes Green

Chicago Jewish Organizations Doing Their Part for the Environment

By Pauline Dubkin Yearwood
Managing Editor

From replacing conventional light bulbs with energy-saving ones to planting trees to save air-conditioning costs to using sustainable materials for building additions, many Chicago Jewish institutions are “going green.”

The steps they’re taking vary from institution to institution. They may be small ones, like encouraging parents of religious school students to turn off their cars while they’re waiting to pick their kids up. They may be big ones, like switching to renewable energy sources or obtaining LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification for an entire building.

The reasons for the increased awareness vary and overlap. Partly they reflect a new consciousness in the larger society, which is beginning to pay attention — many think belatedly — to scientists’ dire warnings about global climate change.

There’s also a desire within the Jewish community to reduce its impact on the earth, much of which comes from countries that are foes of Israel.

But almost every environmentally conscious Jew would agree that the push to conserve the earth is nothing new. In fact, it goes back as far as Judaism itself and is a Jewish imperative as important as any of the other, better-known ones.

Rabbi Herbert Bronstein, who is active with the Environmental Task Force of the Chicago Board of Rabbis and several other environmental groups, is among many who expound this position when he speaks on the issue. “The Torah tells us that Moses says, keep your covenant with G-d that you may live on this good earth,” Bronstein says. “We are merely sojourners on the earth. We don’t own it. It is G-d’s earth. The ancient rabbis said we are partners with G-d in the work of creation and we have to maintain this world.”

He quotes aparable in which G-d tells Adam, in effect, “Look, I worked very hard, I’m giving you a good earth. Take good care of it, don’t mess it up, because if you mess it up, there’s no way to take care of it after you.”

“There it is in a nutshell,” Bronstein says.

There are some who believe it’s too late — that humankind is already disregarded that warning and that the coming climate change will be so disastrous that humans may not survive.

Still, even these pessimists agree that it’s imperative to try.

Among Jewish organizations, the American Jewish Committee has taken a lead in environmental areas, going forward with a number of projects both nationally and locally. Among them are obtaining LEED certification for the organization’s national headquarters, linking 100 percent of the electricity used in all its offices across the United States to renewable energy sources, and offering employees financial incentives to purchase fuel-efficient vehicles such as hybrid cars.

Leaders of the organization first began thinking about the energy question in connection with the oil embargo of the ’70s, Ben Tressler, the AJC’s New York-based Green Project manager, said.

The embargo “made some powerful statements about America’s dependence on foreign oil, and the crisis was a serious threat to the safety of Israel and the American economy,” Tressler says. “Since the ’70s, our D.C. chapter has pushed for energy reform, and nothing has really happened. Fuel efficiency in cars has not changed significantly since the late ’80s, and we are still building coal-burning power plants. There are serious problems in our nation’s energy policy.”

After some AJC offices were seriously impacted by the events of Sept. 11, 2001 and by Hurricane Katrina, those catastrophes, along with the ongoing problems in the Middle East, “highlighted the vulnerability of our energy system,” Tressler says.

“The issue has come to the forefront of our agenda in the past five years and even more so in the last year,” he continues.

The organization’s flagship project, which is ongoing, is obtaining LEED certification for its nine-story headquarters building in midtown. That involves documenting “everything from the respiratory quality of our vacuums to the efficiency of our light bulbs and the toxicity of our cleaning chemicals,” Tressler says.

That process can’t be duplicated with the AJC’s Chicago office since, unlike in New York, the organization doesn’t own the building. But it is participating in the national organization’s push to buy renewable energy credits and launch a comprehensive recycling program, lighting reduction program and green cleaning and purchasing policies.

The national organization “is asking the board of every chapter to think green and lead by example,” for instance by board members using compact florescent lightbulbs, which use up to 75 percent less energy than standard bulbs and last up to 10 times longer, at home and at work, Todd Winer, director of public relations for the Chicago chapter, said. “We’re also looking into joining some local coalitions, for instance to push for increased use of hybrid cars for the Chicago fleet, that kind of thing,” he said.

Other initiatives involve recycling efforts aimed at keeping “e-waste” (office equipment such as computers, printers and fax machines) out of landfills; a lighting reduction program that eliminates unnecessary light fixtures; and a green cleaning policy that replaces traditional cleaning methods with less toxic, more eco-friendly alternatives.

In addition, the Chicago Chapter is becoming involved in a number of projects and activities. Jesse Greenberg, a domestic affairs associate for the Jewish Community Relations Council and the Jewish United Fund/Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago, said one of their top concerns was energy independence and renewable energy sources, “we started to research what we as a community is doing,” he says.

The committee decided to focus particularly on energy issues because “we’re funding (unrest in the region) by sending our petro dollars to the Middle East, and by burning more fossil fuel, we’re fueling climate change by emitting carbon dioxide.” Those two taken together produced “a moment of confluence,” Schonthal says.

Now the committee he heads is engaged in making other chapter members aware of the issues and is working on supporting a bill now in the Illinois senate that would require the state to adopt the standards of the California Clean Emissions Act for cars. If the board approves the effort, the AJC will work with other local organizations to support the measure.

The bill, which would require stricter standards for auto emissions such as exist in a number of other states, “would have a lot of potential positive implications,” Schonthal says. “This first move to support the emissions act will spur us to support other local initiatives along the same lines,” he adds.

Other Chicago organizations are also stepping up on environmental matters. Jesse Greenberg, a domestic affairs associate for the Jewish Community Relations Council and the Jewish United Fund/Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago, is that organization’s specialist on energy, and the environment — and it’s a big job.

“Our function is to energize the Jewish community so the community is actively involved in environmental issues — to make the case that the environment is inherently a Jewish issue,” he says. That task is made easier by “connecting environmental issues to the community’s concern for Israel — knowing that much of the world’s oil comes from Middle East regimes that are hostile to Israel and in many cases to the United States. Our purchasing energy from that region empowers those who are fueling some of the worst anti-Semitism against Israel and inciting much hatred against Jews.”

Greenberg’s job has several components — one important one is educational. He and others from the JCRC make themselves available to speak on environmental issues at congregations, teen groups, Jewish community centers and communal events and serve as a resource for synagogues and organizations that want to become more environmentally friendly but may not know how to start. One program, dubbed “A Light Unto the Nations,” makes compact florescent lightbulbs available to Jewish institutions.
Some national Jewish organizations make environmental issues their main focus. Among them: COELJ, or Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, was founded in 1993 and helps Jews make a connection between Judaism and the environment through educational efforts and by serving as the voice of the organized Jewish community on environmental issues in Washington, D.C. and around the country. For information: (212) 532-7436 or info@coelj.org.

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*Jewish Vegetarians of North America,* an educational and advocacy group, demonstrates how a vegetarian diet benefits the environment within a Jewish context. For information, contact Pres-Dir Rick Bronstein at (718) 761-5876 or rschw12345@ aol.com or visit jewishveg.com.

Shomei Adaham or "Guardians of Earth" in Hebrew was founded on Earth Day in 1990 to promote the connection between ecology and Jewish tradition through educational, religious practices, holiday celebrations, social events and activism. It is a partner organization with COELJ. For information, email shomei_adaham@yahoo.com.

The Chicago Board of Rabbis formed an environmental committee "to see what we could do to make a difference and have an impact," according to Rabbi Marlene Gordon of McHenry County Jewish Congregation in Crystal Lake. The plan is "to disseminate ideas on a local level," such as helping congregations switch their lighting to compact florescents. Another campaign, which Gordon light-heartedly calls "Do not park idling by your neighbor," urges congregants not to sit with their car engines idling — and polluting the atmosphere as well as using unnecessary energy — while they wait to pick up their children, sit in a fast food drive lane or wait for a train to pass.

Other congregations have embarked on tree-planting campaigns. "Trees planted strategically around the building cut down on air-conditioning costs," says Gordon. "Any tree planted anywhere makes things cooler." An offshoot of the Board of Rabbis committee is a group formed by the North Shore Fellowship of Rabbis under the leadership of its president, Rabbi David Oler of Congregation Beth Or in Deerfield. The task of the committee, composed of rabbis and congregants, is to "bring greater awareness of climate issues to our congregations, both as individuals and as institutions," Oler says. The group is working with the JRC’s Greenberg and is now primarily engaged in planning a community-wide event on Nov. 18. It will be a day of study and teaching about "how to be more protective of the environment," he says.

In halachah (Jewish law) a certain way of aspiring to holiness is taught. "We want to ask in concern for the environment," he says. Bronstein agrees, saying that Jews and Jewish institutions should care about the environment and that it "calls secondary reasons such as reducing dependence on Middle Eastern oil but "for the idea of the environment itself."

"The environment," he says, "would be a Jewish end itself."