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JEWISH ENVIRONMENTALISM

A Renewable Light Unto the Nations

Yosef Israel Abramowitz

The convenient truth about the Jewish people is that when we put our minds and capital to work, we can make miracles happen. There is no more noble cause than saving humanity itself, ensuring that God's covenant not to wipe out the planet with rising waters will be — in some small measure — because of our actions.

Saving the earth itself from global warming, and the billions of people and animals on it, is not just environmentalism. It is global survival. Of the trillions of cosmic opportunities for life to flourish, this third rock from the sun may be the only expression, the only experiment, to grace the universe with the possibility of collective moral choice.

Watching Al Gore's movie with Arab and Jewish students at the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies, on the kibbutz where I live, put into context this challenge. Are Arabs and Jews going to keep fighting on the deck of the sinking Titanic? Or will a greater vision for humanity transcend immediate conflicts?

As Jews, we must transform ourselves from the misunderstood Light Unto the Nations, as Isaiah beckoned, to a Renewable Light Unto the Nations. Our first fundamental challenge is to ensure that the Jewish state, which is home to seven million people, becomes carbon neutral. Unfortunately, the government's stated goal is for only 10 percent of Israel's energy by 2020 to be generated by renewables, primarily solar. This is unacceptable. The European Union, most of whose member countries have half the sunshine of Israel, has set a goal of 20 percent renewables by 2020.

If Israel sets a goal of 40 percent renewables by 2020, it would capture the imagination of our youth, entrepreneurs, scientists, philanthropists, and financiers. It would cast Israel not only as a responsible nation but also as a shining example of what can be accomplished by coordinated global action.

There is plenty of sunshine and land in the Negev and Arava deserts to power this revolution. We need, though, the political will of world Jewry. Linking UJC and Keren Hayesod allocations to Israel's compliance with at least a 20 percent renewables goal would send a powerful message to Israel's leadership, as well as to the next generation of Jews. Such linkage should be accompanied by a World Jewish Action Plan that offers Jews and Jewish institutions worldwide carbon offset opportunities.

Imagine that each year on Tu B'shvat, Jewish families and institutions calculate their carbon footprint and then invest in efforts in the Jewish state to offset that footprint. For example, planting trees in Israel has long been a global Jewish effort. And although forests breathe in the carbon dioxide, which is a powerful carbon offset activity, the majority of trees planted up until now are pine trees, which throw off acidic needles. After a century, the pine forests essentially poison their own roots and die. Future plantings should emphasize Mediterranean Oak and other trees that will work better with the Israeli ecosystems.

Every synagogue, JCC, school, and institution should figure out its footprint, put solar panels on its own roof — with great new naming opportunities — and also set aside funds to invest in Israeli renewable science centers or companies. Furthermore, Partnership 2000 communities (created between Israeli and world Jewish communities) could adopt mirror strategies. When the solar panels are named in Boston, a similar array can be named in Haifa, Boston's sister city. Jewish buildings worldwide and Israeli homes and buildings should adopt green building codes, for which they can have the privilege of hanging on their doorpost a green mezuzah that certifies to the world that the building complies with best environmental practices.

Israel must renounce nuclear power as an option and challenge others in the region to do the same. The Middle East must become a nuclear-energy-free zone. We live in an age of accurate long-range missiles and of daring terrorism. The planet, and especially the Middle East, does not need any radioactive power targets. Nuclear energy is the power of war; solar energy is the power of peace. By taking the nuclear energy option off Israel's table, Israel can offer her neighbors a regional solar energy solution. When raised with a minister of one of Israel's neighbors, he responded: If you help us make solar energy more economical than nuclear[energy], we will give up our nuclear energy exploration program. For the sake of Israel's immediate security, it is time for global Jewish political muscle to be flexed to promote solar and other renewables throughout Israel and the Middle East.

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Israel, as a public face of world Jewry and Jewish values, must not only declare herself a responsible member of the world community when it comes to greenhouse gas emissions but also provide leadership on this front. It is notable that major accomplishments in this field — such as plans for electric cars and Israeli-built solar thermal plants in California — so far have come only from private industry. The truth is that today there is no commercial solar energy in the Jewish state. And the plans for renewables in Israel do not reflect the aspirations or potential of the Jewish people. What would Isaiah say?



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Yosef Israel Abramowitz serves as president of Global Sun Partners and the Arava Power Company. He currently lives on Kibbutz Ketura with his wife and five children. Yossi is executive editor of Sh'ma . He blogs daily at Peoplehood.org and can be reached at Yosef@AravaPower.com.

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