

Reducing Our Individual and Collective Carbon Footprint

Consider including in your New Year's resolution a pledge to reduce your carbon footprint. Our incoming Administration has made a promise to help us move collectively in this direction as well. How much energy are we each producing? How can we reduce our energy use and why is this important to us as Americans and as American Jews in particular?

According to a 2007 report by the InterAcademy Council, which represents national scientific bodies from around the world, "the amount of energy needed to keep a human being alive varies between 2000 and 3000 kilocalories per day." By contrast, the average per capita energy consumption in the US is approximately 350 billion joules per year, or 230,000 kilocalories per day. This means that the average American consumes enough energy to meet the biological needs of 100 people, while the average person in other developed countries uses the energy required to sustain approximately 50 people. By comparison, China and India currently consume approximately 9-30 times less energy per person than the US. Meanwhile, worldwide consumption of energy has nearly doubled between 1971 and 2004.

Why is this bad? This is bad because most of our energy comes from petrochemicals which produce greenhouse gases, including carbon dioxide. CO₂ stays in our atmosphere for thousands of years. CO₂ is one of several manmade greenhouse gases that is causing the composition of our atmosphere to change and to trap heat. It is analogous to the earth putting on a blanket, and keeping it on even though it's much too hot for a blanket. Scientists the world over believe that humans are causing the earth's average temperature to increase at an unnatural pace, and that we are reaching a point where man made increases in temperatures are beginning to wreck havoc with our natural world, causing climate change, sea level rise, and species loss.

For Jews, the environmental crisis is also a religious challenge. As heirs to a tradition of stewardship that goes back to Genesis and that teaches us to be partners in the ongoing work of Creation, we cannot accept the escalating destruction of our environment and its effect on human health and livelihood. The Torah and the Talmud say that Jews are not allowed to destroy or waste anything. Unfortunately, this fundamental rabbinic mandate of "not destroying anything," known rabbinically as "bal taschkit," is not well known. In Psalms the Lord says that the Earth "is the Lord's and everything that is in it." Tzaar baalei chai, protecting animals is another important mitzvah. Through heedless consumption of the planet's resources, our society destroys the habitats of countless species. The Torah also advocates taking responsibility for one's actions, providing many examples to illustrate the importance of accountability. Such personal responsibility should logically extend to considering the ramifications of living in a consumer society that is slowly destroying our natural resources.

What can you do to reduce your carbon footprint? Consider letting the Jewish National Fund and TBR help you do this. Look for a new "Widget" on our website in the coming weeks. This is the JNF GoNeutral symbol. You will be able to click on this link and go to the JNF's carbon calculator. The calculator will give you the opportunity to figure out your carbon footprint, and offer you ideas for reducing it. It will also allow you to buy "offsets." If you are flying to Israel, which uses a lot of energy, you can "offset" this flight by purchasing carbon credits from JNF. The credits will help fund JNF environmental programs that halt desertification, boost water supplies through reservoirs and waste water reclamation, grow crops efficiently in the desert. Your offsets can also be used to plant trees in Israel. In addition, 20% of your purchase will come back to Beth Rishon for our use on environmental initiatives or our support for Israel.

In this New Year, be hopeful and helpful. Let's be part of the solution. As the world figures out how to reduce its collective carbon footprint, each of us needs to begin doing the same at home.

Sources: Hot Flat and Crowded, Thomas Freedman, 2008, "Lighting the Way", InterAcademy Council 2007; COEJL program pages.