



Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life
Protecting Creation, Generation to Generation

GLOBAL WARMING: A Jewish Response

**See to it that you do not destroy my world,
for there is no one to repair it after you.**
Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13

In response to the scientific consensus that human-caused warming of Earth's atmosphere threatens to cause extreme hardship to millions of people around the world and widespread ecological disruption and species extinction:

- COEJL calls upon Congress and the Administration to move toward the creation of a clean and sustainable energy system for the US that will significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions and diminish US reliance on imported oil.
- COEJL calls upon Jewish institutions and leaders to raise public awareness of the moral and social justice implications of climate change.
- COEJL calls upon members of the Jewish community, and all other Americans, to institute energy efficiency technologies and practices into private homes and communal facilities and to consider the environment and public health effects of economic decisions, including the purchase of vehicles and appliances and the choice of energy companies.
- COEJL calls upon the business community to provide leadership in efforts to address global warming.

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BACKGROUND

Since the 1970s, the organized Jewish community has unanimously and consistently supported federal policies and programs to reduce US consumption of fossil fuels. Reliance on fossil fuels compromises our national security by creating dependence upon oil-producing nations, causes and exacerbates illness for millions of our citizens, and degrades our environment. In addition to these historic reasons for supporting reduced use of fossil fuels, today the Jewish community recognizes the world-wide scientific consensus that fossil fuel emissions are significantly contributing to global warming – and that such warming poses grave risks to humankind and the environment. The vast majority of scientists and policy experts agree that if dramatic action is not taken soon, it is very likely that human well-being, global geo-political stability, and the viability of whole ecosystems will be gravely affected by global climate change in the 21st century.

Global warming is largely attributable to the burning of fossil fuels. Industrialized nations, though only one-fifth of the world's population, are responsible for approximately four-fifths of global carbon emissions. The US has the highest per capita use of energy in the world, using twice as much energy per unit of GNP as its economic equals, such as European countries and Japan. With less than 5 percent of the world's population, the US is responsible for almost 25 percent of the global carbon emissions. Developing nations, which are expected to emit the majority of global carbon emissions by 2020, are looking to the industrialized world to demonstrate its commitment to reducing its own carbon emissions, which are dramatically higher per capita than the developing world, before making commitments to cap their own emissions. The leadership demonstrated by the United States is critical to successful efforts to reduce industrial nation and cap developing nation emissions sufficiently to stabilize the climate.

While the world's wealthy nations are most responsible for climate change, communities and nations which are poor, agriculturally marginal, and without adequate medical systems will be most severely impacted. Subsistence farmers are most vulnerable to changing rainfall patterns that may make their land infertile. Slum-dwellers in

coastal areas or in floodplains are least able to relocate to avoid chronic flooding. Undeveloped areas are least able to prevent the spread of infectious disease.

The actions taken by industrialized nations to reduce carbon emissions and the choices made by developing nations regarding electricity generation and transportation in the next few years will affect generations to come. Unfortunately, little progress has been made in recent years to curb US reliance on fossil fuels and reduce US greenhouse gas emissions – which continue to rise. In 1999, the average fuel economy of all new passenger vehicles was at its lowest point since 1980, while fuel consumption was at its highest. American vehicle manufacturers lag in bringing new auto technologies to market. And US dependence on foreign oil has grown steadily.

Fortunately, there is a growing consensus among a remarkable cross-section of elected officials, scientists, businesspeople, and religious leaders that we must aggressively address global warming, and that we can do so in a manner that benefits public health, the economy, and the human spirit. Development of environmentally friendly technologies and products will create US jobs, enhance US competitiveness in the global economy, and demonstrate US leadership in the global community. Reduced use of fossil fuels will improve air quality and save lives. And mobilizing broad public participation in the historic effort to create a clean energy economy will build social solidarity and renew the human spirit.

Together, humankind has a solemn obligation to do whatever we can both to prevent harm to current and future generations and to preserve the integrity of the creation with which we have been entrusted. Not to do so when we have the technological capacity – as we do in the case of non-fossil fuel energy and transportation technologies – would be an unforgivable abdication of our responsibility. Together, the people of the world can, and must, use our God-given gifts to meet the needs of all who currently dwell on this planet without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

PRINCIPLES FOR ACTION

The Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life believes that the following principles should serve as the foundation for the development of agreements and policies to address climate change:

- **Responsibilities to Future Generations.** Humankind has a solemn obligation to improve the world for future generations. Minimizing climate change requires us to learn how to live within the ecological limits of the earth so that we will not compromise the ecological or economic security of those who come after us.
- **Integrity of Creation.** Humankind has a solemn obligation to protect the integrity of ecological systems so that their diverse constituent species, including humans, can thrive.
- **Equitable Distribution of Responsibility.** Nations' responsibility for reducing greenhouse gas emissions should correlate to their contribution to the problem. The United States has built an economy highly

dependent upon fossil fuel use that has affected the entire globe and must therefore reduce greenhouse gas emissions in a manner which accounts for its share of the problem.

- **Protection of the Vulnerable.** The requirements and implementations procedures to address climate change must protect those most vulnerable to climate change: poor people, those living in coastal areas, and those who rely on subsistence agriculture.
- **Energy independence.** In recent years, the US has become increasingly dependent on foreign oil supplies, with important implications for US foreign policy, economic dislocation, and trade deficits. Aggressive measures to wean the US economy from its reliance on fossil fuels will contribute substantially to a secure energy policy.

WE MUST TAKE ACTION TO PREVENT THE POSSIBLE HARMS OF GLOBAL WARMING

Some have said that we should not take measures to address global warming before we are certain that harm will befall humankind. There are many threats to human life that are neither certain nor imminent, and climate change falls into this category.

The Bible provides some instruction for such a case. Deuteronomy 22:8 tells us that, "When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet [a fence] for your roof, so that you do not bring blood-guilt on your house if anyone should fall from it." Rabbi Moses Maimonides, perhaps the greatest Jewish sage, taught that we must take action to protect others from any object of potential danger, by which it is likely that a person could be fatally injured, including building a fence on an unprotected roof. In the Mishneh Torah, his great commentary on the Bible, he wrote that a person (not just the owner) must remove a possible danger that could cause fatal harm to another, even, in the case of the parapet, when the danger is not imminent or certain.

So too with climate change. We must take action to prevent possible danger. It is simply wrong for us to live today in a manner that may well endanger future generations...

We stand before choices that will affect generations to come – biblical choices, between life and death, between blessing and curse. Shall energy be a safe, clean, sustainable blessing? Or shall our consumption of energy be a curse, causing harm, and even death, to people and other creatures far into the future?

Excerpted from testimony of Mark X. Jacobs, COEJL's executive director, to the Subcommittee on Transportation and Related Agencies, Committee on Appropriations of the House of Representatives on February 10, 2000. The testimony was in favor of allowing the Department of Transportation to study an increase in fuel economy standards.

PUBLIC POLICY PRIORITIES TO ADDRESS GLOBAL WARMING

Strong action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions is consistent with a number of long-standing public policy priorities of the organized Jewish community, including: improving air quality, increasing mass transit, development of non-polluting alternative energy sources, energy efficiency and energy conservation. COEJL urges the Congress and Administration to:

- negotiate and ratify binding international agreements, including the Kyoto Protocol, to minimize climate change by committing the US, other industrialized countries, and developing nations to reducing their current and projected emissions sufficiently to stabilize atmospheric carbon concentrations at a level that will not result in widespread human and/or ecological harm
- increase Corporate Average Fuel Economy Standards (CAFE) for all vehicles, and eliminate the loophole that enables “sport utility vehicles” from conforming to the same standards as cars

- appropriate foreign aid to developing nations to control carbon emissions
- appropriate funds and create incentives to effect the rapid adoption of clean and renewable energy sources and technologies, including solar, wind, fuel cell, and natural gas, and the phasing out of reliance on fossil fuel technologies
- adopt policies that use pricing – including the taxation of pollution – to lower demand for fossil fuels, encourage the development of non-polluting energy sources, and raise revenue for public projects, such as mass transit, that would lower carbon emissions
- create programs to help those who live in the United States whose economic security would be jeopardized by changes in energy policy, including assistance to poor people to compensate for increased expenses for electricity, fuel, and transportation and retraining and economic transition assistance for coal miners and other affected workers.

All positions articulated in this document were developed through the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, which serves as the consensus-building body for 13 national and 122 local Jewish public affairs agencies. Contributors to this publication: Mark X. Jacobs, Rabbi Daniel Swartz, Rabbi Larry Troster.

COEJL Participating Organizations

American Jewish Committee, American Jewish Congress, B'nai B'rith International, Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education, Hadassah, Hillel, Jewish Community Centers Association, Jewish Council for Public Affairs, Jewish Labor Committee, Jewish National Fund, Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, Jewish War Veterans, National Council of Jewish Women, Na'amat USA, New Israel Fund, The Rabbinical Assembly, Reconstructionist Rabbinical Assembly, Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, The Shalom Center/ALEPH: The Alliance for Jewish Renewal, Union of American Hebrew Congregations, Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, US-Israel Environment Council of the American-Israel Friendship League, Women's American ORT, Women of Reform Judaism, Women's League for Conservative Judaism.

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