Beyond Personal Virtue

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In April of 2001 Vice President Dick Cheney was quoted in an interview asserting that “Conservation may be a sign of personal virtue, but it is not a sufficient basis for a sound, comprehensive energy policy.” He was roundly excoriated by the environmental community for this view. Seven years later, in the midst of skyrocketing energy prices, increasing climate change, and global food shortages, most people in the U.S. continue to live as if the environmental crisis can be dealt with through acts of personal virtue confined to consumer choices.

On this issue most American Jews are no different from other Americans. We belong to the highest-consuming nation in the world, the least energy efficient, the largest producer of greenhouse gases; we are part of our society that consumes the most, and yet we act as if changing a light bulb, using our reusable bags from Whole Foods, planting trees in Israel as carbon offsets, and buying more organic food will solve the climate change crisis.

While many Jewish organizations have policy statements that call for significant environmental action, those same organizations up until now have failed to implement these policies. Over the past 18 months, the interfaith environmental organization GreenFaith has been touring the film An Inconvenient Truth. Following the viewing and discussion, the group gives out pledge cards with five, increasingly difficult actions — from changing light bulbs to buying a low-mileage car or hybrid. Though this and other groups are helping people see how to do things to make a difference, it is not enough.

Jewish environmentalists are stuck — for the most part — in an apologetic approach, which posits that religious traditions as such supply all the needed theological resources to address the environmental crisis. Although the first Jewish theological response to the crisis was written 40 years ago, yet the same biblical and rabbinic texts continue to be cited and discussed in our writing.

This lack of new theology reinforces the idea that environmental actions can remain a personal virtue. By emphasizing tikkun olam, Jewish environmentalism has not moved beyond a stewardship ethic that privileges human needs. And we have not seriously embraced the ethic of environmental justice that connects the degradation of the environment to racism and economic inequities. Jewish theologians and ethicists for the most part have not been part of the significant critique of modern capitalism and globalization that has been coming from process theology, liberation theology, and ecofeminism.
It is time for Jewish environmentalism to move beyond an apologetic theology and an ethic of personal virtue to become more engaged with the many creative ideas that have been emanating from religious and environmental movements. New Creation theology, which emphasizes the interconnection of all people and all life, must become the foundation of a far bolder Jewish ethical response. As the environmental crisis grows more serious, we must help people understand how our lifestyles affect the lives of millions of other people in this country and around the world, how our lives contribute to the extinction of thousands of species every year, and how we are literally consuming the earth.

British writer George Monbiot claims we must set a goal of 90 percent reduction; this will not be achieved by only changing light bulbs. Monbiot puts forward a moral choice: continue to live the way we do and have millions of people die in Ethiopia (from drought) and Bangladesh (from rising seas) or radically change.

Do we continue to resist or deny that choice because we project, as Monbiot points out, “the future as repeated instances of the present”? We all believe that we will not be affected; we will find a way to survive or that somehow something will save us. If we all change a light bulb, the Messiah will come. The midrash that Jewish environmentalists love to quote has God saying, “See to it that you do not spoil and destroy My world; for if you do, there will be no one else to repair it.” It is time to heed that call.

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