



## Leading Jewish Voices on the Environment

01.12.2020 | Jonathan Keren-Black\*

*Even though there are various 'Chief Rabbis' (and not one but two in Israel!), the Jewish community does not operate with a hierarchy and a pope, as does the Catholic church. Whilst, for historical reasons of Empire, the current Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis, based in London, is styled 'Chief Rabbi of Great Britain and the Commonwealth', he is in reality only the Chief Rabbi of the orthodox community, and only part of it at that! We are a pretty anarchic bunch, and therefore I have chosen to present this article outlining a Jewish stand on the environment as a taste of positions and statements which I hope will give a flavour of Jewish leadership on this crucial issue of the survival of society as we know it.*

Without intending to sound arrogant, this will include a small contribution of my own, since I am one of those in the Australian Jewish community speaking out as strongly and regularly as I can to draw attention to the issues to a community that often seems to consider other concerns to be more pressing (and this one to be too 'political!'). I was involved in establishing JECO, the Jewish Ecological Coalition, back in 2003, a tiny Melbourne based organisation that may finally be starting to have more impact after its merger with the new Jewish Climate Network, itself a result of growing awareness within the community of the urgency of the threat facing us all.

I should also add that I know of no single leader or document to which I could point, of equivalent weight, authority or import to Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'*. Furthermore, Judaism puts the stress on action more than words, and in compiling this article, that is strikingly clear again and again. Finally, it is important to point out that there are many Jews and many Israelis working in and sometimes very influential in the field, who do not consider themselves to be motivated by a religious obligation so much as a moral one.

So I'd like to start with two of these, based here in Australia. Eytan Lenko was recently named by Michael Gunner, Chief Minister of the Northern Territory, as one of the best brains in Australia when he announced Lenko's appointment to the new Northern Territory Reconstruction Committee. Eytan is a technology entrepreneur, a clean-energy transition advocate and is currently the interim chief executive of influential Melbourne University-based climate think-tank Beyond Zero Emissions. He wrote in the Australian in January 2020 seeking large-scale mobilisation of our resources to deal with climate:

As large parts of Australia burn and smoke chokes our major cities, for many Australians the bushfire crisis is becoming our Pearl Harbor moment.

The 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor marked the moment American citizens stopped seeing World War II as a distant threat and it became clear that not being involved was not enough to keep Americans safe. It hit home that, whether they previously believed it or not, the US was facing an existential threat that was coming for them.

Climate change is not a war between civilisations but it is a war for civilisation. However, for the past two decades, successive Australian governments and most of the public have regarded climate change as an abstract and lower-order priority.

The devastation of lives, communities, animals and our economy caused by the climate-driven fires have now shown that climate change threatens our security and way of life. Summer in Australia will never be the same again.[\[1\]](#)

Pablo Brait also worked at BZE, but has now moved on to another important Melbourne centre for climate action, Market Forces. Market Forces believes that the banks, superannuation funds and governments that have custody of our money should use it to protect, not damage, our environment, and they expose the institutions that are financing environmentally destructive projects, and help Australians hold these institutions accountable, for example by raising pertinent questions at their AGMs. He writes:

In 2007 I realised that climate change was the most important long-term issue humanity faced and I dived head-first into activism. But even before that, inspired by my grandfather's experiences as a holocaust survivor and the life he led afterwards, I had been involved in many social justice and environmental campaigns, and sought to live morally as an individual.

When I found out that my bank and super fund were using my money to fund activities that worsen climate change, this was a blow at two levels. First of all, there was the issue of my personal finances contributing to a problem I was working to solve. Secondly it became very clear just how unaccountable our financial institutions were. We hand over our money to these corporations and they do what they like with it, without input from us. And when I started asking questions about where my money was invested I got the typical spin and obfuscation rather than straight answers. This was despite it being MY money![\[2\]](#)

In Israel too, we have significant leadership and development under way. Some 30 years ago, Kibbutz Lotan set out to become an environmental centre and educational resource for Eilat, and is now part of a dynamic cluster of organisations including the Arava Institute in the area spearheading environmental awareness, training and regional co-operation. One individual to highlight in Israel is Rabbi Yonatan Neril, who works with Canfei N'sharim (Eagle's Wings) and Jewcology, and also offers hands-on experiences through Jewish Eco Seminars. He describes Shabbat as an environmental gift, writing:

Shabbat offers great potential to reduce consumption and thereby benefit the natural world. The act of shutting off a computer or car for a day contains environmental meaning far beyond the energy saved from not using these devices for one day. The deeper significance of the act centres on the reorientation that can occur from outward focus to inward focus, from reading from screens and Blackberries to reading from scrolls and books, from communicating via technology to communicating face to face.[\[3\]](#)

This reminds us what we are currently missing out on as we sit, communicate and even run our services through computer screens to protect our physical wellbeing!

Environmental responsibility is not new. About 1300 years ago, the author of the Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah demonstrated remarkable prescience which chills me every time I read it:

In the same hour that the Holy Blessed One created the first human being, God guided the person before all the trees in the Garden of Eden and said: See My works, how fine and excellent they are! Everything I have created, I created for you. Think about this carefully so that you do not corrupt and devastate My world: for if you corrupt it there is no one to repair it after you. (7:13)

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks has taken a strong position on environmental protection, highlighting the positions of the sages and statutes before us. He points to Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch in the nineteenth century,

who gave the most forcible interpretation of biblical law. The statutes relating to environmental protection, he said, represent the principle that 'the same regard which you show to [humanity] you must also demonstrate to every lower creature, to the earth which bears and sustains all, and to the world of plants and animals.' They are a kind of social justice applied to the natural world: 'They ask you to regard all living things as God's property. Destroy none; abuse none; waste nothing; employ all things wisely ... Look upon all creatures as servants in the household of creation.' (S. R. Hirsch, *The Nineteen Letters*, Letter 11).[\[4\]](#)

As politicians and dignitaries converged to agree on what became the Paris accord in 2015, Orthodox Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis released the following brief statement:

World leaders convene in Paris this week to agree a global response to Climate Change. The challenge before them is unprecedented in scale and of the greatest consequence. The planet is experiencing a long-term warming trend, with the 2011-2015 period projected to be the warmest on record; this due in part to the injurious actions of mankind. Many nations and major corporations are making admirable pledges to scale back greenhouse gas emissions and advance the use of sustainable forms of energy. These are vitally important steps in safeguarding our collective future. Our planet is a beautiful web of ecosystems, weather patterns and natural resources upon which we depend.

With the freedom to sample the fruits of God's creation comes the responsibility to protect and steward, not abuse, our environment. I pray that the efforts of those participating will be blessed with the far-sighted wisdom to agree outcomes that reflect what is, undeniably, in all of our best interests.[\[5\]](#)

At the end of 2019, the World Union for Progressive Judaism adopted the following resolution:

[W]e reassert that the modern Jewish concern for climate justice and the environment (in which many Progressive Jews across the globe are already engaged) is not only an authentic reading of our ancient sources but also urgent and essential, and that all our individual and organisational members should be urged to 'act and to learn' about the unfolding climate crisis. These commitments are ones that are essential to pass from generation to generation; as we aspire to pass on this world in good condition to those generations we will never know.[\[6\]](#)

It then continued to offer a list of practical steps both for individuals and congregations to undertake to help move towards these commitments.

In the US, Rabbi Michael Lerner has been one of the outspoken leaders, both through his own powerful writing and the *Tikun* magazine and foundation that he established many years ago. The website has a very impressive Environmental section with over 300 expert articles.[\[7\]](#)

Rabbi Lerner has been arguing for many years for a 'New Bottom Line' for businesses, effectively meaning they could only continue to operate (and make profit for their owners or shareholders) if they had an environmental operating charter. In US terms he proposes "ESRA—Environmental and Social Responsibility Amendment to the U.S. Constitution":

The ESRA would require public funding of all state and national elections and ban all other sources of money in elections, not just from corporations but also from any person; it would require all the big corporations (incomes over \$50 million a year) which are based in the US or based elsewhere but sell their goods or services in the US (including on the Internet), to get a new corporate charter once every five years, which they could only get by proving a satisfactory history of social and environmental behaviour to a jury of ordinary citizens, who would receive information from people around the world who have been impacted by the

operations of that corporation.[\[8\]](#)

Rabbi Arthur Waskow, founder and director of The Shalom Center, and a well-known activist, has been publishing on Jewish environmental responsibilities since the 1980s. He authored a petition signed by 500 Rabbis and titled “Elijah’s Covenant Between the Generations to Heal Our Endangered Earth”. The petition calls for a social transformation. This

is the fruit that can grow only from the roots of spiritual wisdom. We come back to the Ruach HaKodesh, the Holy Spirit, the Interbreath. In planetary terms, that Interbreath is the interchange of Oxygen and CO<sub>2</sub> that keeps animals and plants alive. It is precisely that Interbreath that is now in crisis, as the over-manufacture of CO<sub>2</sub> by burning fossil fuels overwhelms the ability of plants to transmute the CO<sub>2</sub> to oxygen – and thus heats, scorches, burns our common home.

Our sacred task requires affirming not only the biological ecosystem but also a cultural/ social ecosystem, the modern word for how the diverse Images of God become One. Jews, Indigenous Nations, Christians, Muslims, Unitarians, Buddhists, Hindus, and many others –each community must bring their own unique wisdom to join, in the Name of the ONE Who is the Interbreathing Spirit of all life, whose universal Breathing is the “nameless name,” the “still small voice” that supports and suffuses all the many diverse Names of God in many cultures and communities. That Interbreathing Spirit supports and suffuses all life on Planet Earth.[\[9\]](#)

Words are a starting point but not enough on their own. Like many before him, Rabbi Waskow also ‘puts prayer into practice’ and was arrested at the “Friday Fire Drill” climate protests in Washington, D.C. last October, alongside Jane Fonda and a number of rabbis.

In the UK, my colleague Jonathan Wittenberg is active in the field and on 20 May 2020 he wrote: ‘I believe we’ve relearnt how much we love the world. We need to translate that into caring.’[\[10\]](#) My mentor Rabbi Jeffrey Newman has also been working for more than twenty years on this issue. He participated in Extinction Rebellion’s action in September 2019 in central London, where he sat on the middle of the road and refused to move. At the age of 77, he made the news and headlines, complete with the Sukkot symbols of lulav and etrog, by being carried away by four policemen. ‘We are in a period of enormous, catastrophic breakdown, and if it takes an arrest to try to find ways of helping to galvanise public opinion, then it is certainly worth being arrested.’[\[11\]](#)

On 15 May this year I participated in an on-line interfaith service as part of the Student Climate Strike, explaining that in the Jewish tradition, we have used the ram’s horn to sound the alarm and wake ourselves from our slumbers, and then blowing it across the land for exactly that purpose. The following is an extract from what I said in that service:

The current predicament reminds me of the story of the frog. Apparently if you drop a frog in boiling water, it jumps straight out by reflex to live another day. But if you put it in cold water and then heat it to boiling, it stays, adjusting to the slow change, until it dies.

Coronavirus has come on us so quickly that our governments have responded very rapidly, throwing unimaginable amounts of money around to try to keep us alive, and business as normal as possible, or at least with the hope that it will return to normal service as soon as possible.

By comparison, the climate has been heating, relatively slowly but certainly significantly, and I have been speaking about the unfolding dangers for over thirty years. But, like the frog in the warming pot, people have barely responded, and governments, who invariably seem to be as

short-term in their thinking as the next election, have failed to act. Perhaps I should have started blowing the shofar sooner!

But in my faith and in others, we believe we are not only here to look after ourselves. Two thousand years ago, Hillel, from whom Jesus learnt a few things, said 'Im ayn ani li, mi li – if I don't look after myself, who will look after me – but if I only look after myself, what am I?

Hillel had one more thought to add to these: 'If not now, when?' If we don't move quickly, it will be too late. So let us mark today, the middle day of May, as the turning point, when, led by the enthusiasm and skill of students and young people who have most to gain and most to lose, we shouldered the moral responsibility to protect our world and ALL its people and animals.

I do indeed hope – and believe – that humanity has reached a turning point. After the horrors and unprecedented scale of the bushfires earlier in the year, we booked a family weekend away in Lake's Entrance to offer some support to the community reeling after the drop in tourism. That turned out to be the very weekend that the threat of COVID-19 translated into social distancing regulations – we ate at restaurants where the adjacent tables were left empty – and as we left, they closed behind us, perhaps in some case permanently.

Since then we have barely driven and certainly not flown anywhere. Skies around the world are clearing, animals are returning. Our busy lives have been calmed. We are all consuming less, spending less, cooking and hopefully communicating more. We are learning to use the technology available to us for spending time with friends and family overseas, for study groups and services, for business meetings.

There are positives to come out of this dreadful and challenging pandemic. I pray that indeed a re-evaluation of our impact and dependence on the environment at all levels will show that, from now on, we will address this threat with all the seriousness, with all the investment, that we have given to COVID-19.

Keyn y'hi ratzon – may it be so!

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**GESHER**

גשר Bridge

The official journal of The Council of Christians and Jews (Victoria) Inc. | 0014-4009 | JULY 2020



Religion & Ecology in a time of crisis



The above article comes from:

**GESHER**

Religion & Ecology in a time of crises

**Vol 6 No 1 | JULY 2020**

[content](#) (pdf)

"Geshher" is the official journal of  
"[The Council of Christians and Jews](#)" (Victoria/Australia)

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[1] Eytan Lenko, "This tragic bushfire crisis is our Pearl Harbor moment", The Australian, January 14, 2020

[2] Pablo Breit, "Is your money funding climate change?", The Well, July 27, 2016. <http://www.atthewell.com.au/article/is-your-money-funding-climate-change>

[3] Yonatan Neril, "Shabbat and environmental awareness", My Jewish Learning. <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/shabbat-and-environmental-awareness/>

[4] Jonathan Sacks, "Environmental Responsibility (Shoftim 5775)", Covenant and Conversation: Family Edition, 17 August 2015. <https://rabbisacks.org/environmental-responsibility-shoftim-5775>

[5] Office of the Chief Rabbi, "The Chief Rabbi's statement on the COP21 Climate Change conference", 30 November 2015. [chiefrabbi.org/the-chief-rabbis-statement-on-cop21-climate-change-conference](http://chiefrabbi.org/the-chief-rabbis-statement-on-cop21-climate-change-conference)

[6] Adopted at World Union for Progressive Judaism International Assembly 11 December, 2019 – Chicago, USA

[7] See: <https://www.tikkun.org/category/ecological-transformation/environment>

[8] Michael Lerner, "A new bottom line".

[https://www.workableworld.org/uploads/4/7/5/0/47500125/rabbi\\_michael\\_lerner\\_a\\_political\\_and\\_psychological\\_strategy\\_to\\_achieve\\_a\\_workable\\_world.pdf](https://www.workableworld.org/uploads/4/7/5/0/47500125/rabbi_michael_lerner_a_political_and_psychological_strategy_to_achieve_a_workable_world.pdf)

[9] Arthur Waskow, "Elijah's Covenant - New Rabbinic Statement on the Climate Crisis", The Shalom Centre, 1st February 2020. <https://theshalomcenter.org/content/elijahs-covenant-new-rabbinic-statement-climate-crisis>

[10] Jonathan Wittenberg, "A light footprint", Heart and Mind, 19 May 2020. <http://jonathanwittenberg.org/category/environment/>

[11] 15 October 2019. You can see a video of his statement and arrest on Youtube here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HZggpNijm7E>

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Source: GESHER, Vol 6 No 1 , July 2020; reprint with kind permission.