

The Green Menorah Covenant of Kehilla Community Synagogue

Approved by the Kehilla Board of Trustees on 4/29/14

Prelude

We, the members of Kehilla Community Synagogue, stand on the shoulders of concerned environmental activists who have loved and worked for the health and well-being of the earth and her inhabitants. We are grateful for this vitally important work, especially the work to reverse climate change, which is carried out by countless activists, educators, spiritual leaders and community members of all ethnic backgrounds, including many in the Jewish communities. Together with the Shalom Center, we see as our purpose bringing the Green Menorah Covenant's vision of combating climate crisis to Kehilla and other Jewish communities and to augment worldwide efforts to combat climate crisis. Ecological healing will require not only the efforts of individual people, households and institutions, but collective action and mass movement to change national and international policies and practices.

In the legend of the Great Flood found in the book of Genesis, we are told that God said to Noah and to his sons:

"I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock, and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth. I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth."

The story of the flood provided a powerful sense of security for our ancestors, by teaching that God would never destroy the earth. But we no longer live with this certainty. The ancient authors could not have known that a time would come when human beings would themselves become godlike and powerful, with the ability to annihilate life on earth.

Whether climate change is catastrophic or survivable depends entirely on our behavior. If we continue on our present path, it is likely that global warming will accelerate and spin out of control with devastating consequences for future generations.^[1] Weather will be more extreme, sea levels will rise and flooding worldwide will likely take on biblical proportions. We can, however, choose a different path.

The imperative to care for the earth has been articulated by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, chief founder of the Jewish Renewal movement. "If the Ba'al Shem Tov were living today, he would be concerned about the future of our earth. He taught that God so loved the world that She gave herself to it and became the Earth. Therefore, we must love and care for the earth because She is an embodiment of the Divine."

Whether we understand our belief as a belief in God or Spirit or Life itself, we recognize the truth of what Reb Zalman expresses, that the earth is holy, and that we human beings are a special part of the earth in that our planet can only see herself through human eyes. Thus, we have the potential to be the global consciousness of our living planet. Every individual has the capacity to be a conscious cell and every human group can be a contributing organ of this vast living being. As Reb Zalman writes, “Now we have a choice: we can act like cancer cells, rogue cells sowing the seeds of the organism’s destruction, or we can become Gaia’s most flexible digits for healing herself where she hurts. . . (Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, *Jewish With Feeling*, pp. 179-180)

The Green Menorah Covenant, Kehilla revision

The Green Menorah is both a tree of branches and a Tree of Light, as the Torah describes the Temple Menorah (Exodus 25: 31-39). It is the vision of Rabbi Arthur Waskow of The Shalom Center of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, that the Green Menorah symbolizes a covenant among Jewish communities and congregations to renew the miracle of Chanukah in our own generation. Whether one views the meaning of Chanukah as one day’s oil miraculously meeting eight days’ needs, or a story of human beings facing impossible odds, triumphing and thereby ensuring the survival of the Jewish people, the symbolism is clear. We must do our part to increase the efficiency of our own fuel use and ensure the survival of all people. Rabbi Burt Jacobson and the rest of the Green Menorah Covenant Committee organized to join in this covenant to heal our planet and save our human race from the climate crisis of global scorching.

Rabbi Waskow teaches that the deepest symbolism of the Green Menorah is Zechariah’s vision of the two olive trees right next to the Temple Menorah, feeding oil directly into it. The Menorah is therefore the intertwining of a tree in a tiny forest as well as the human artifact of the rededicated temple. This cyborg symbol unites Adamah and Adam (earth and human earthling) through a Menorah that is itself patterned after both trees and a rededicated Temple, is intended to remind us of our special covenant and connection with the earth and all life, and our sacred obligation of Tikkun Olam.

There are three aspects of the Covenant:

- hands-on action by congregations and congregants to reduce our own CO2 and methane emissions
- infusing our celebrations of Jewish festivals, life-cycle events, prayers, and education with eco-consciousness
- advocacy for change in public policy

Just as the Menorah in the Holy Temple was rooted in the image of a tree, its branches and buds, so we need to renew the sense that our earth calls on us to light the Planetary Menorah by reducing our use of fossil fuels.

The SEVEN BRANCHES of the Green Menorah are paths that will lead to reduced oil and fossil fuel consumption, reduced CO2 and methane emissions and a healthier planet. The SEVEN BRANCHES symbolize earthy actions in our own congregations and households. The SEVEN LIGHTS in the Green Menorah symbolize seven actions to light up change in public policy beyond our own homes. To save our planet from the ravages of climate crisis and global scorching, The Shalom Center urges seven specific directions of PERSONAL & POLICY change at all governmental levels, corporate and labor-union decisions, and household / congregational action.

The Green Menorah Covenant Committee understands that there are many ways to achieve these goals. With Rabbi Waskow's permission, we have revised the original words of the Covenant to better reflect all of Kehilla's values of environmental health and social, economic and environmental justice. (To see the original Green Menorah Covenant, please go to <http://www.shalomctr.org/node/1276>).

We hope you will view this revised Covenant as a natural extension of, and in keeping with Kehilla's commitment to Tikkun Olam. These actions and policy changes are suggestions to be considered in the context of one's own life circumstances and activism. They are not intended to cause financial or health hardships, or guilt. Nor are they intended to supplant other Tikkun Olam commitments. We value all of our members' Tikkun Olam actions regardless of whether they are addressed in the Covenant's branches. What we do ask of our members, is to commit to taking action to prevent further climate change. No one will be able to reasonably take all of these actions and some of us will only have the time, ability and resources to take a few of them. Nonetheless, we must consider how we can incorporate some of the Covenant's suggested actions into our lives and to act to combat climate change in a manner that supports our health and well-being, as well as the health of the planet. More broadly, we also support other effective actions to promote climate justice [2] and help combat climate change that are consistent with Kehilla's values. Given the limited time we have to prevent the worst impacts of climate change, timely political actions for large scale changes are particularly important. Further, we support actions to help people adapt to climate change. The impact of climate change is especially devastating for many low income communities and communities of color, so we support strengthening these communities' resilience to climate change. [3]

Consistent with our Jewish and humanistic values, we propose actions and policy positions that support win-win environmental solutions, good for planet and people. We must work to reduce fossil fuel use and otherwise prevent further climate change in a way that safeguards the health and well-being of all residents of this planet, in keeping with all of Kehilla's values.

Kehilla has already taken steps to green our synagogue and educate our members about environmental actions we can take as individuals. In the greater community, Kehilla has been a strong advocate for green public policies, including leading Oakland Community Organizations' interfaith effort to bring green jobs to Oakland. Now it is time to take our efforts to the next level.

Here are the SEVEN BRANCHES of the Green Menorah Covenant and suggested actions:

1. Making carbon pay the real costs of its effect on climate:

Personal change: Giving tzedakah ("charitable" contributions) that supports sustainable-energy activism to offset personal fossil fuel use.

Public policy:

- requiring energy producers to pay for the carbon emissions their products will cause, through a carbon fee and dividend. [4]
- promoting an equitable and just international climate agreement which requires countries that produce most of the carbon pollution to make drastic reductions of carbon without offset loopholes. [5]

2. Paying for low-carbon energy sources:

Personal and congregational change:

- pursuing green energy.
- Move Our Money/Protect Our Planet (MOM/POP) – move investments, bank accounts, and other financial holdings away from companies and venues that support fossil-fuel production to companies, community banks, credit unions, and projects that encourage renewable energy sources and/or address the needs of communities most vulnerable to damage from the climate crisis.

Public policy:

- Ending subsidies to such carbon-producing sources of energy as coal, oil, and corn-based ethanol;
- Constantly increasing subsidies for safer non-carbon-emitting sources of energy such as wind and solar; and
- Adopting community choice energy programs with local renewable power. [6]

3. Buildings:

Personal and congregational change: Greening our own new homes and institutions, and retrogreening our present buildings. This should be done in a manner that reduces carbon consumption while ensuring healthy indoor environmental quality. For households, buying energy-conserving appliances (when new appliances are needed)

Public policy:

- Enacting strong building-code regulations for new buildings and for retro-greening old ones. This should be done in a manner that reduces carbon consumption while ensuring healthy indoor environmental quality.

- Providing for subsidies for low-income families to weatherize their homes at little or no cost.

4. Transportation:

Personal and congregational change: As households and congregations, carpooling, walking, biking or taking public transit.

Public policy:

- Strictly limiting emissions from autos and airplanes;
- Raising subsidies to bicycle and pedestrian improvements and environmentally-friendly forms of public transit and paratransit; and
- Holding long-distance meetings by teleconference, and promoting and providing incentives for telecommuting, overall.

5. Land use:

Personal change:

- Avoiding factory-farmed meat and dairy [7];
- Choosing more locally and sustainably grown foods; and
- When looking for a new home, considering urban-style high-density living; (whether in actual cities or in suburbs).

Public policy:

- Promoting sustainable, affordable low-carbon food systems, such as local organic farms and community gardens;
- Subsidizing and investing in walkable cities including urban recreation and workplaces instead of sprawl and low-density housing. Transit oriented developments should include affordable housing with renter protections;
- Leaving tar sands oil in the ground [8]; and
- Preventing deforestation.

6. Wisdom-creation:

Personal and congregational change: In Jewish life, infusing festivals (particularly Hanukkah), lifecycle markers (especially intergenerational markers like bar/bat mitzvah), prayer, and Torah-study with concern for the earth and climate.

Public policy:

- Subsidizing scientific climate-crisis analysis;
- Subsidizing more research into improved energy efficiency;
- Promoting climate-centered educational projects throughout school years from pre-K through graduate school; and
- Providing support for art, literature, music, dance, film, games, etc. that address the climate crisis.

7. Shabbat and restful time:

Personal and congregational change: In our individual and congregational practice, strongly encouraging—even more than before—setting aside restful time and making minimal use of carbon-emitting energy for the time of Shabbat itself, as a wise and sacred Jewish practice.

Public policy: requiring sufficient paid leave for family leave, sick leave, holidays, vacations, and neighborhood-centered celebrations.

We would welcome any suggestions or input on this work in progress. Feel free to contact us at GMCC [at] kehillasynagogue [dot] org.

[1] See Makiko Sato & James Hansen, “Updating the Climate Science: What Path is the Real World Following?” Columbia University, <http://www.columbia.edu/~mhs119/> (accessed September 17, 2012).

[2] See Climate Justice Now, “CJ in the USA: Root-cause remedies, rights, reparations and representation,” <http://www.climate-justice-now.org/cj-in-the-usa-root-cause-remedies-rights-reparations-and-representation/>

[3] See <http://www.baylocalize.org>

[4] See <http://www.millionlettermarch.org>

[5] See <http://www.foe.org/projects/climate-and-energy/climate-negotiations>

[6] See <http://www.localcleanenergy.org>

[7] See <http://www.ewg.org/meateatersguide/>

[8] See <http://www.350.org>

Further Reading:

Union of Concerned Scientists’ webpage on global warming:
http://www.ucsusa.org/global_warming/

Friends of the Earth’s webpage on climate and energy:
<http://www.foe.org/projects/climate-and-energy>

350.org: <http://350.org>

Million Letter March: <http://www.millionlettermarch.org>

Ecology Center's webpage with climate change resources:

<http://ecologycenter.org/factsheets/>

Organizing Cools the Planet: Tools and Reflections to Navigate the Climate

Crisis:<http://organizingcoolstheplanet.wordpress.com>

Climate Justice in the US: Root-cause remedies, rights, reparations and representation:

<http://www.climate-justice-now.org/cj-in-the-usa-root-cause-remedies-rights-reparations-and-representation>

Bali Principles of Climate Justice by the International Climate Justice Network:

<http://www.corpwatch.org/article.php?id=3748>