

## The Challenges of Communicating the Environmental Message

### Or How Not to Alienate Your Audience

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For several years in the 90's I worked as the outreach director at the Jewish Federation in Philadelphia. Our primary mission was reaching unaffiliated Jews and our primary challenge was overcoming peoples' negative preconceptions about Judaism. You all know how hard this work is. Similarly when we are trying to convey an environmental message we have to contend with peoples biases and preconceptions.

Professional environmentalists understand that all of their good intentions and programs of action for the earth will be for naught if they can not communicate effectively with their audiences. Even if the content of a message could resonate, if we use a word that touches a nerve, or if our audience has no context by which to understand the message, or if our attitude or body language is offputting, then our audience may not hear us. There can be a vast gulf between communicator and communicatee. Environmental communication is such a serious issue that today it is a professional field all its own replete with scholarly literature and professional conferences.

Today I'm going to share with you some of the challenges I encountered in my work, anticipating that you may face similar ones, and then I'll look at more general challenges and opportunities of communicating a religious environmental message.

### **Know your audience**

I founded Shomrei Adamah in 1988 in response to #1. the environmental crisis—which I saw as the defining crisis of our generation and #2. the absence of any national Jewish organization whose mission was care for the earth. Since Jews were widely recognized as

ardent advocates of social justice, donating impressive amounts of communal dollars, intellectual capital and volunteer energy into *tikkun olam*, I couldn't understand why the Jewish community was not taking a leadership role in addressing environmental issues—certainly a legitimate dimension of "repair of the world."

I met with hundreds of Jewish leaders: heads of seminaries and communal organizations, and philanthropists. My conversations with people would yield one of two reactions: one was: "welcome home, long lost friend;" we are so glad you have chosen to express your love and concerns for nature through Judaism—how can we help you? The other was; "you've come to the wrong place; we are not interested in your ideas; Nature is for the goyim and the pagans. Worshipping trees is idolatry."

I was never a tree worhipper or even a tree-hugger. And while I have nothing against pagans, I was never drawn to pagan ideas or pagan communities. My God was the God of all creation.

No matter how deeply Jewish I thought my message, and no matter how much evidence I had to substantiate it, there were always Jews who saw me as a tree-hugger or pagan—the Other. And to these Jews, concern for nature was simply not Jewish. While there were enough Jews who enthusiastically supported my work that I didn't need to worry about converting those who did not, I was always curious about the roots of this Jewish revulsion towards paganism. If I ever wanted to reach the broadest audience of Jews, I would need to be able to address their critique—perhaps their anxieties. . . I would need to understand why a Jewish organization dedicated to care for the natural world was so threatening or repellant, and I would need to show compassion for their concerns. Only then might I have some chance of reaching them.

I knew of course of the long standing fear of the pagan in ancient Judaism: Our God is jealous and demands our singular attention. The Bible rails against worshippers of *asherah*, the Canaanite female deity represented by carved trees—"Do not plant an Asherah or any kind of tree structure beside the altar of the lord your God. . (Deut 16:21)

And do not set up a pillar for yourselves, which the Lord your God hates." (16.22) This was true tree worship.

But this threat is over 2000 years old; the circumstances today are entirely different and Judaism is more secure in itself; why would paganism still be threatening?

About 10 years ago I read a book that helped me understand the occasional anti-environmental sentiment and the association with paganism that I heard expressed in the Jewish community. The book was *The Zookeeper's Wife* by Diane Ackerman.

It was well known to some, but not to me, that Nazis, many of whom were neo-pagans, were great lovers of nature: They were "ardent animal lovers and environmentalists" committed to the humane care and protection of their forests and their animals. They were fascinated with rare and endangered species, particularly bisons, the ancient inhabitants of the land of Germany, and spent fortunes developing wildlife sanctuaries for them. Ackerman wrote, "under the Third Reich animals became, noble, mythic, almost angelic. . ." Espousing their blood and soil religion, the Nazis worshipped Germany's pure soil out of which sprang the pure Aryan race. One campaign slogan asserted: *Ask the Trees; they will tell you how to become national socialists.*

One line in Ackerman's book still nauseates me. Referring to Joseph Mengele's medical experimentation on Jewish children in which he injected them with lethal germs, performed sex change operations, and surgically removed organs and limbs, she wrote,

"Although Mengele's [Concentration camp] subjects could be operated on without any painkillers at all, a remarkable example of Nazi zoophilia is that a leading biologist was once punished for not giving worms enough anaesthesia during an experiment."

This sentence takes my breath away.

Given Hitler's eco-fascism, it becomes understandable that some Jews may be negatively triggered by anything that hints at "extreme" nature-love. The point of my story is that we need to be sensitive to our audience. We have no idea where they may be coming from and what associations we might re-activate. With any people who were suspicious of my work, I would need to devote energy to building individual relationships before I could engage them in my cause.

### **Problems with ISMS**

Even, the very terms **environmentalism** and "**environmentalist**" can pose communication barriers to a variety of audiences.

A few years ago I was invited in as a guest speaker to teach two classes in a *Judaism and environment* course at a woman's college, and decided that it would be worthwhile to begin by posing the question—do you consider yourself an environmentalist? a Jewish environmentalist? What do these words mean to you? Several students responded they were not environmentalists because they did not see themselves active enough in environmental affairs to warrant that title. Another said that "environmentalist" was one identity that resonated for him, along with others—that identity was like a tapestry composed of many threads and "environmentalist" was one of those threads.

But one student, perhaps the most observant Jew in the class, had a strong, hostile reaction to *even* being asked the question. " No, she said emphatically: I am not an environmentalist—I

do not wear your uniform, I do not eat your foods. I do not share your interests." In other words, you are all the same and I am not like you! Don't categorize me—don't put me in a box! While none of the students actually identified as environmentalists, and I myself have struggled with this label, this particular student assumed all of us were environmentalists—we were all in this class on Judaism and environment after all—and she didn't want to be lumped together with us. The label threatened her identity and she felt desperate to protect her turf. I understood that her strong reaction came in part from her negative experiences of a liberal college where all too often students feel constrained by identity politics. And I understood that she was trying to protect Judaism, which she saw as good and whole in and of itself. Attaching the word/concept "environmental" to it would just cheapen it.

To some, the word "environmentalist" creates an *us-them* dichotomy: According to certain people who identify as environmentalists, environmentalists are those who care about the earth and its future, while everyone else doesn't. Who gets to define the terms of the game? In some situations the word "environmentalist" can take on a sanctimonious aura and be divisive, not unifying.

This class was actually thrilling, as we got to explore the students' identities and their beliefs. I recognized that opening up this conversation was a critical first step in building community: it allowed the students to cite their grievances first and diminished the possibility that some would withdraw from the conversation; it created a space in which everyone could express their initial impressions, biases and assumptions, and see that there are a multitude of ways of thinking about environment.

### **Problems with Abstractions**

As I worked on this piece I came across a set of principles for communicating the

environmental message, developed a thinktank at Columbia. Their materials state: *Framing can be a subtle art—even the choice of a single word can make the difference between winning and alienating an audience.* We've already noted this with the word *environmentalism*, but there are other reasons that the word "environment" can be problematic.

"Environment" is the most common word used to communicate the problems of our natural world today. The word "environment," which is fitting when used in the technical terms of environmental studies, environmental science, and environmental journalism, may be less helpful if we are trying to cultivate an emotional response in people. The word "environment" is a generalization: literally it means surroundings. As a generalization—it reduces all the magnificent dimensions of nature together into one abstract concept. It does not convey the beauty, warmth, depth, color, texture, smell, movement, or life-force of the actual elements of nature like streams, mountains, soil and thunderstorms. It does not evoke a sense of place. As an abstraction, the term "environment" tends to distance us from reality. It draws us away from the concrete world into an intellectual realm, increasing our separation from earth and sky and weather, rather than connecting us, which is exactly the problem we have had ever since Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden. If we're trying to create intimacy and caring, the use of the word "environment" may work at cross purposes to our intentions.

Like environment, the word climate, too, is an abstraction—it feels remote and distant compared to wind and rain and humidity and drought which we actually feel.

Moreover, since much of the time the weather feels normal enough—and since we live mostly indoors, insulated from weather, we don't have a regular experience of the climate changing. And for those of us living in the northeast, where the winters have actually been colder for the past couple of years, the language of "global warming" has its own set of challenges.

## Good Land

So how might we talk about environmental concerns and climate to our congregants?

The first step is to frame ecology in a way that is consistent and integrated with Jewish life and values. People feel better, are more positive and more likely to sustain their behaviors when their goals are framed in a way that feels natural to them. Environmental communication professionals tell us to speak the language of our target audience—to contextualize the message in a way that they will hear it.

I have often wondered if the word "land" might better capture the Jewish imagination when it comes to conveying environmental messages. The Hebrew word *eretz*—which can mean either land or earth—is cited over a thousand times in the Bible. It's a value concept that we pay all too little attention to, perhaps because we're so alienated from land—living citified lives, mostly in-doors; or perhaps because we think of land in terms of "real estate" or "territory" or the land of Israel. Because the word "land" is so politicized, we may avoid it sub-consciously. But if we can understand the ecological, spiritual and universal dimensions of the word "land," then the Bible can offer us profound language by which to communicate a deep ecological message.

For me, one of the most visual, vivid and heart-breaking texts of the whole Bible speaks to the idea of land as God's most precious gift to the people.

"For the Lord is bringing you into "a good land: A Land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths springing forth in valleys and hills, A Land of wheat and barley and vines and fig trees and pomegranates, A Land of olive trees and honey, A Land wherein you shall eat bread without scarceness; You shall not lack anything in it; A Land whose stones are iron and out of whose hills you may dig brass. And you shall eat and be satisfied, and bless the Lord your

God for the Good Land which is being given to you." (Deuteronomy 8:7-11 )

I love this text because you can actually feel the fertility and lushness and exuberance of the land. The passage conveys the sense that land meant everything to the ancient Israelites. The land is ultimate security. The land enables life. For, as Wendell Berry, the great farmer-poet wrote, "If you have no land, you have nothing; no food, no shelter, no warmth, no freedom, no life. . . . People who have been landless know that land is invaluable. . . Whatever the market may say, the worth of the land is what it always was; it is worth what food, clothing, shelter and freedom are worth; it is worth what life is worth. " (The Agrarian Standard)

Sixty years ago, Aldo Leopold, a forester by training and one of the patriarchs of the American environmental movement, appropriated the word "land" to frame ecology and our relationship to nature and environment. For Leopold, land was alive; he described land as an "organism, a community of life which includes soil, water, plants and animals". . . and us. He said we need to expand the boundaries of the human community to include land; the land is a community to which we belong, not the property that we possess. "We abuse land," he wrote, "because we regard it as a commodity. When we see land as our community, we may start to use it with love and respect." (Foreword to A Sand County Almanac (1949), ASCA viii.)

One of Leopold's great contributions to environmental thought was his call for a "land ethic"—an ethical system that would guide our proper behavior, our responsibilities, towards the earth. While Leopold could never discern a land ethic in the Bible—the Bible doesn't tabulate a list of environmental commandments—I suggest that the Bible does hold an implicit land ethic that is even more profound than Leopold's.

To begin with, as in Leopold's conception, land in the Bible is never a commodity. The land is never an "it" or a thing to be bought and sold. "The land must not be sold in perpetuity," wrote the Levitical author. (Lev 25:23). The land is a gift and that gift is conditional. Land in the Bible is conceived of as the intermediary between God and people. The land is not an independent entity. The intimate connection—the interdependence—between God, people and land is a recurrent trope in the Bible and perhaps is most explicitly expressed in Deuteronomy; we acknowledge this connection everytime we recite the second paragraph of the Sh'ma. In these verses, rain fits into Leopold's concept of the landed community.

Here's an abbreviated version of the Sh'ma's 2nd paragraph (Deut 11:13-17):

"If you diligently hearken to My commandments. . . to love the Lord your God and to serve Him. . . : I will give the rain of your **land** in its due season, the early rain and the late rain, and you shall gather your grain, your wine and your oil. I will give grass in your **fields** for your cattle, and you shall eat and be satisfied. Be careful, . . . if you turn away and worship alien gods. . . the Lord's anger will be inflamed against you, and He will stop up the heavens so there be no rain, and the **earth** will not yield its produce; and you will swiftly perish from the **good land** that God is giving you."

Many people have found this passage disturbing, seeing it as a rigid, unloving system of reward and punishment. So vexed was a whole generation of Reform and Reconstructionist rabbis that they excise the 2nd paragraph of the *Sh'ma* from their siddurim. Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan construed the second paragraph as "meterological Judaism."

In my poetic imagination, this passage is reminiscent of the water cycle—water is always in motion, traveling in a grand round from heaven to earth and back again: it falls from the clouds in the sky onto the land and the seas, is drunk up and assimilated by plants and

animals, and then evaporated or transpired back up to the clouds. The cycle continues as a kind of positive feedback loop. Similarly, when all of us on earth keep God's commandments, loving God alone and treating neighbors justly, the energy of our goodness acts as an elevating agent, stimulating God; God stimulates the clouds; the clouds release the rains on time; the rains water the thirsty land and its creatures; the people recognize the rain as God's blessing and respond in gratitude and goodness; the goodness stimulates God to release the rains, and the cycle of life is perpetuated. But if we deny God and treat our fellow creatures badly, we break the cycle of life, and lose our connection to the heavens. Without our goodness to stimulate God, the rains never fall; the land dries up, and all the people perish.

I have always understood these verses and the dozens like them to be offering a succinct lesson in the way the world works and the interconnectedness of everything. And for me, herein lies the Bible's profound land ethic. The land thrives when we learn to love God, and conduct ourselves honorably with regard to others. And the land suffers when we are prideful and abandon God, thinking and behaving with only ourselves in mind. This is our responsibility to the land. We must overcome what seems to be the root of all of our problems—our stiff-neckedness—in order to stay planted in the land. (Deut 9:6) Otherwise, we will be uprooted from the land, separated, and left to wither. If we are to inherit the **good** land, the biblical land ethic demands our **goodness**.

The Bible here is speaking to the integrity of the land; the land has its own life to live; *it* has its own divine purpose to fulfill. God, people and land are indelibly intertwined in a living ecosystem and the actions of one affects the others. This is one of the immutable patterns God inscribed in our universe.

Contrary to popular thought then, the land is thin-skinned. This land upon which we walk, and regard as solid, immovable and impermeable, is so sensitive that it can barely tolerate a

negative intention. The land is so sensitive that it needs a Shabbat so that it can rest and replenish and purify itself every seven years. (Lev 25:4).

The biblical story of the people and the land swings like a pendulum from security to insecurity, from connection to separation, from abundance to desolation, from life to death. In the Bible, the threat of being cut off from the land looms over the horizon, just as it does today in our ecologically challenged world. Displacement from one's land means loss of all security and hope, and displacement is the ultimate threat of climate change. Already indigenous people from around the world have been expelled from their lands, their birthplaces, their parents homes. It's only a matter of time before we experience the most severe consequences of climate change ourselves in our own communities.

Climate change is not going away. Since we will be dealing with its repercussions throughout our lifetimes, we must find ways of talking about it that are engaging and meaningful; we need powerful metaphoric language and imagery. One of our tradition's greatest strengths is its words. This one word "land" is so textured, that I have spent a good portion of my time here peeling it open. Perhaps its meaning is even more profound today than it was when it was written. The power of our sacred text is that its language doesn't grow old, even though we have been reading its words over and over, and have been doing so for 2000 years.

When all of society's forces seem to be conspiring to flatten the world into monocultures—agricultural monocultures, suburban monocultures, and even cultural monocultures, we need textured language—we need words that can speak to us in nuanced way.

While the language of the biblical land ethic is extreme, it reflects an ecological reality that we have been slow to notice or accept. Our situation becomes more bearable knowing that our

ancestors dealt with their own extreme threats and uncertainties. How did they manage? There's something consoling, instructive and hopeful, knowing that the Bible has seen it all. Someone was there before us. We are not alone.

### **Climate Change as a Wicked Problem**

So far we've been addressing the problems and opportunities of language.

There are many other challenges related to communicating environmental concerns and climate change, in particular, that you might experience and I'd like address these in the last part of my talk.

- You may feel inadequate leading a discussion about environment, because you fear you don't know enough.
- You may not be convinced that individuals can actually do anything to make a difference.
- You may not want to make further demands on an already over-burdened congregation.
- You may not know what constitutes significant or meaningful action.
- You may not want to bring up the conversation of climate change without giving people a concrete plan.
- You don't want to frustrate or anger your congregants, which is how people often react when they are tired of hearing about a problem with no obvious solution.
- Climate change can be overwhelming and frightening: You don't want to cause your congregants undue pain and despair.

All of these concerns are real and understandable.

One reason that environmental problems and specifically global warming is so difficult to approach is because it's what Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber described as a "Wicked problem." Wicked problems are societal problems that lack simplistic or straightforward

planning responses. According to Rittel and Webber:

- Wicked problems are hard to define – different stakeholders have different views of what the problem is and what the responses should be.
- Wicked problems have many interdependencies and are multi-causal
- Wicked problems exist in complex systems that exhibit unpredictable behaviors
- Wicked problems are often not stable – our understanding of the problem is constantly evolving
- Wicked problems usually have no clear solution – there is no one right or wrong response, although some responses may be better than others.
- Wicked problems are more socially complex than technically complex, and that is overwhelming
- Wicked problems do not fall within the jurisdiction of any one organization – they cross boundaries
- Wicked problems involve changing behavior – with all the difficulties that poses
- Some wicked problems are characterised by chronic policy failure – they have become intractable, despite numerous attempts at solutions.

The important thing about wicked problems and specifically global warming is that there are infinite ways of dealing with it. Advocacy is one way. . . and there are entrepreneurial, agricultural, educational, technological, governmental, psychological, legal, scientific, cultural, and religious ways; there are transportation-related, arts-related, Israel-related, and investment-related ways. Pretty much, whatever one's interest, there's an angle on environment and climate change. For as Aldo Leopold said, land is "everything," and as the Bible teaches; land is our greatest security; God and the land are the source of our life.

So what do we do as religious leaders?

I believe that we need to increase our knowledge and experience of the natural world; the more we find some connection to nature, the land, the earth, the climate, the more we will engage in the conversation, such that an understanding of the natural world can become integral to Jewish life—not a forced addition.

Framing environment as a special issue, separate from other issues, or from life generally—and Jewish life in particular—is not viable. According to communication scholars, people have a finite pool of worry, a finite capacity for the number of issues they can attend to at any given time, and people tend to pay more attention to near term threats than long term concerns. Scholars have also found that too much worrying can result in emotional numbing, where we glaze over or tune out when we are presented with environmental problems--Who here has experienced this?

That's why a holistic approach dedicated to resiliency of our communities may be a more strategic way of approaching climate change. Consider how you strengthen the body when you're sick. In addition to taking medicine to deal with the acute crisis, you also eat the right foods, get appropriate rest or exercise, minimize stress levels, and generally fortify all of your systems. Similarly we need to think about fortifying the communities where we live. It is not hard to engage people in environmental concerns through their love of their own place: a mountain, a river, an inner city farm, a solar field, something close to home, in which they can participate, help nurture and feel pride, while building local resources and community. There are hundreds of opportunities to engage in restoration and re-creation projects like gardening, farming, seed saving, citizen forestry projects, bird counts, weather watching, river-monitoring, urban design and re-development projects and land-use programs. All of these activities have the side effect of helping to stabilize the climate. Whatever builds community and connects us to the creation, increases hope and contributes to the health of our land and earth.

You may not want to jump into anything immediately and that's understandable; we all need to find our own ways. Prayer is another one of our resources. We have daily opportunities to connect with the creation and our Creator in prayer, and our prayer practice can help us remember the earth, if we make this our intention. Prayer can also help us to live with uncertainty and ambiguities in the age of climactic unknowns. Prayer can be our place of solace, a place to feel held as we sit with our questions and wait for answers.

My hope is that, as rabbis, we can cultivate the soil of our communities, so that multitudes of possibilities can emerge, so members and potential members who love the earth will find their voice and support for their endeavors in synagogues and can attract shul friends to their activities. And so that children of synagogues will grow up enthusiastic to pursue careers in sustainability, in repair of the earth, and so that congregants will dedicate a significant portion of their volunteer efforts, tzedakah money and philanthropy to environmental causes.

We have no idea what might crop up when we begin to take seriously the idea that the land is our security, and that creation is God's first and ongoing revelation. We need to remember that we are creatures, born of the Creator and that our greatest resource is our own creativity. We are, in the words of Brian Swimme "creativity in the form of a human." We must nurture the conditions that allow our inherent creativity and the creativity of the Earth to unfurl and blossom.

Finally I believe the world needs what the religious world has to offer. We can offer language, hope, solace, organizing skills, intellectual and creative capital, and the deepest knowledge of the meaning, pleasure and power of tikkun olam.