

What's Jewish About Clean Energy?

By Lisa Garfinkle

"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." Midrash Ecclesiastes

Apple recently announced plans to build its own solar plant to power much of its California operation. Tesla, manufacturer of electric cars, is also manufacturing batteries to allow solar and wind energy customers to store excess energy for times when the sun is not shining or the wind is not blowing. The Department of Defense, perceiving clean energy to be a national security issue, has a target of 25% energy from renewable sources by 2025. The development of clean energy alternatives, power sources that do not add greenhouse gases to the Earth's atmosphere, is of growing importance to government and business alike.

But should the clean energy revolution be of special interest to the Jewish community?

Temple Israel's Rabbi Noam Raucher says yes, noting that Jews have an obligation to take care of this world "as stewards of Creation, obligated to preserve the earth for future generations."

And in fact, leadership organizations from every major branch of Judaism, from the Union for Reform Judaism, to the United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism, to the Rabbinical Council of America, an organization of Orthodox rabbis, have issued statements and resolutions recognizing that the obligation to preserve the earth is deeply rooted in Torah and Jewish tradition. The concept is often tied to *bal taschit*, the commandment in the Torah to avoid wasteful consumption, which can be interpreted to require energy conservation and reliance on energy sources that minimize negative environmental impacts.

Motivated by their Jewish values and, in part, by the new Shalom Park Environmental Initiative, Rabbi Judy Schindler of Temple Beth El and her husband, Chip Wallach, recently installed solar panels on their home. Says Rabbi Schindler, "When I learned about the possibility of Shalom Park receiving a generous environmental grant from ClearPath to reduce our carbon footprint and expand our conversations and education on environmental issues, I began to talk about it at home with my family. Before I knew it, my husband had met with a solar company and we decided to take the leap. If you asked Chip why we installed solar panels, he'd say it was because 'I got green.' What an amazing gift."

While solar panels will reduce their energy bills by an estimated average of \$1109 per year, Rabbi Schindler says the deciding factor for her was the environmental impact. An app allows the family to track their energy savings daily, and in the first month their system generated enough energy to operate a TV for 199 days or to operate 5.28 computers for one year. Because solar energy is "clean" energy, over the 25-year life of the system, the Schindler-Wallach family expects to eliminate 171 tons of carbon dioxide from their

carbon footprint, the equivalent of 17,442 gallons of gasoline.

When asked if she has any tips for families considering solar, Rabbi Schindler says, "It is worth the call to a solar company to inquire about the feasibility for your home. At the current time, for a home like ours, it will take seven years to pay off if you can take full advantage of the tax credits." These tax credits include a 30% federal Solar Investment Tax Credit and 35% NC state tax credit for the cost of residential solar installations. The credits are set to expire at the end of 2015 (NC credit) and 2016 (federal credit), absent action by the state legislature and Congress.

Families for whom solar is not an option can still take action to reduce their household's carbon footprint. There are online resources that can help. At clearpath.org, for example, families can calculate the savings in dollars and greenhouse gases of energy-saving changes, many of which can be implemented at little

or no cost. Terrapass.com allows households to calculate their carbon footprints and purchase "carbon offsets" to mitigate their impact on the environment.

The Shalom Park Environmental Initiative will enable members of the Shalom Park community to explore the Jewish connection to issues such as clean energy and sustainable living. Rabbi Schindler expresses the hope that it will "inspire other families, as it did my family, not only to learn more about the Jewish values of protecting our environment but to bring voice to those values through their words and actions." For more information about the initiative and how you can get involved, contact Lisa Garfinkle, Project Manager at environmental@shalomcharlotte.org. ✨

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