

# **Building an Environmentally Sensitive Religious Community**

[View PDF](#)



Rabbi Fox is Rabbi of Kehilat Kesher: The Community Synagogue of Tenafly and Englewood, New Jersey. This article appears in issue 2 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

## Building an Environmentally Sensitive Religious Community

Inspiring a culture change in the Jewish community or even in a single synagogue is never an easy task. In order for the Orthodox community to assimilate the values of the environmental movement, there will need to be a paradigm shift in the way that people think. That change in attitude will likely take a generation.

Allow me to first outline three macro challenges that we face in broader Orthodox community. After that I will talk about the challenges from the perspective of a single Orthodox shul – Kehilat Kesher: The Community Synagogue of Tenafly and Englewood. Once we have an idea of what we are trying to overcome, I will share a few strategies that can work in a congregational setting. I will conclude with a vision for a “green” future that must be embraced by every faith community if we want to change the world in which we live.

### **I. Challenges that the “green” movements faces in the broader Orthodox community:**

The first hurdle that we have to overcome is making this an Orthodox issue. The reality is that the liberal Jewish community started the ball rolling and we are following them. For the Orthodox community, that is always a scary reality. We have to be able to get over our fears that bringing in

great ideas from other denominations, or faiths, is dangerous. The Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life ([www.COEJL.org](http://www.COEJL.org)), a pioneer in this field, has been articulating a vision of environmental stewardship in the language of the liberal Jewish Community. Canfei Nesharim ([www.CanfeiNesharim.org](http://www.CanfeiNesharim.org)) has been translating this into traditional language and has shown tremendous leadership within the Orthodox community. Their website is filled with helpful source material, essays and *shiurim*.

A second challenge, no doubt related to the first, is that there are no lines in the *Shulchan Aruch* or *teshuvot* that we can point to and say, “See, you must do this because of that!” The Jewish conceptual basis grows from *aggadic* texts, values and broad concepts. Many people are working on this and trying to produce a literature grounded in *Halakha* that can be the basis for future action. Some of the most obvious *halakhik* concepts that can be mined are: *ba'al tashchit* (wanton destruction – see Rambam, Laws of King and War 6:8,10, Sefer Hachinuch #529 and Seforno on Deuteronomy 20:19), *tza'ar ba'alei chayyim* (causing animals needless pain – see: Exodus 23:5, Shabbat 128b, Bava Metzia 32b, Rambam, Hilkhos Rotzeach 13:1, Shulkhan Arukh, Choshen Mishpat 272:9 and the limitation of Rema Even ha-Ezer 5:14)) and *harchakat nezikin* (moving certain damaging industries out of the city center – see Bava Batra 22b, Rambam, Hilkhos Shechanim 11:5, Shulkhan Arukh, Choshen Mishpat 155:41).

Finally, many of the issues that we are dealing with are still emerging from the world of research. While there are studies that show, for example, that household cleaning products contribute to cancer growth, there are also studies that contradict these findings. The Orthodox rabbinic community has to cultivate relationships with experts in the field of environmental science so that we can have a more complete picture of the issues at hand. Just as we seek the counsel of doctors in issues of medical ethics we must find people who are leaders in their field and ‘make for ourselves a teacher.’

## **II. Challenges within the congregational setting**

When addressing these issues on the synagogue level there are a few additional hurdles. First, the question of economics. The reality of congregational life is that every dollar spent has to be justified. When spending communal money nothing less should be accepted. People have to imbibe the notion that spending money, time and volunteers on projects like recycling makes a difference. Even when it might be the law on the city, people have to be inspired to take the extra step and separate all the

different materials.

Second, shuls need strong leadership in this arena. Since there are very few working models of what a 'green' shul should look like, this requires creative people who have an understanding of what is possible within the confines of daily shul life.

Most shuls operate on a status quo model. Much of what we do has been and has worked well for several generations. Therefore, anytime a shul is asked to do something different, justification is necessary. In order to affect a paradigm shift in the operations of the shul the rabbis and lay leadership must be educated and inspired themselves so they can educate and inspire the broader community.

### **III. Affecting a culture change - one shul at a time**

Allow me to attempt to lay out a systematic approach as to how one can go about greening a shul.

**Step 1: Cleaning Materials.** This is an area in which there can be a serious change made and for very little money or effort. Though above I mentioned that there are conflicting studies on the impact of house hold cleaners, I tend to be strict on matters of potential life and death (*pikuach nefesh*). At this point, green cleaning supplies, when bought whole sale are not more expensive than the standard toxic cleaner on the market. What could be more important than displaying sensitivity to those people who clean the shul? In addition, the youngest members of the synagogue, who crawl on the floor and breathe in these toxins, are certainly a high priority for most synagogues.

**Step 2: Lights.** Changing to high efficiency lighting and CFL bulbs is typically something simple to sell. Though there are associated up front costs, the payback over the life of the bulb is visible on the energy bill. This is something that can be done in a very public way, perhaps even associated with Hannukah.

**Step 3: Recycling.** The reality of most Orthodox shuls is that we just don't take this seriously, even when it is the law. The only way for this to work is to make sure that there are recycling bins for paper, metal and glass in as many places as possible. They have to be prominently displayed with creative signs as well as reminders through out the building. If there is janitorial staff they must be trained.

This is the first area in which there are potential conflicts with *halacha*. If we are going to take recycling seriously, we have to look carefully at what we choose to bury as *shemos* and what we recycle. Also, when we make copies or sheets to hand out, there is no reason to print God's name so that all paper being produced by the shul should be able to be recycled.

**Step 4: Energy Conservation.** There are three areas where this can be most effective: water, power usage and power sources. Water can be managed with low flow faucets and toilets as well as lowering the temperature on the hot water heater to 110. Grey water can be re-used from within the building for irrigation and toilet flushing.

In order to maximize power usage a power audit is necessary. Most audits will save money for the institution very quickly. Placing thermostats on seven day timers and using timers for lights is good both for Shabbat as well as the environment. Many power companies will now allow you to purchase power from renewable sources like windmills. It is generally more cost effective to purchase this power from someone who is producing it on a larger scale than to generate power with on sight generators like solar panels.

**Step 5: Construction.** This is the area that can be the most impactful. The key to constructing an energy efficient building is hiring the right architect and contractors. Most major architectural firms have the infrastructure to provide LEED (The Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design green building rating system was established by the U.S. Green Building Council in 1998) certification at only a minimal cost to the client. For a synagogue to accomplish this there must be a strong desire on the part of the community, as there are associated costs. However, the statement that it makes to the wider community is extremely important. When places of worship of any kind display the courage of their conviction it send a message to members of the wider community of what can be done.

These five steps – cleaning material, lighting, recycling, energy conservation and construction – are meant to be a model of how to move a community along the path of lowering their environmental footprint. There may be additional steps to add along the way, but if you are walking this path, then you are moving in the right direction.

#### **IV. Looking forward to a “greener” future**

We are living in a society that is changing at an alarming rate. Moore’s law tells us that the processing speed of the computer doubles every eighteen months to two years. Population growth has been exponential. The industrial revolution and the age of technology has elevated mankind in some parts of the world to unprecedented heights. Global climate change is a reality that we are, for the first time in human history, able to impact. And so we, the religious community, must ask ourselves what that impact should be?

We could choose the path of least resistance and continue the process of displaying our *dominion over the earth* (Genesis 1:26). Alternatively, we could seek to embrace the command to *work and guard her* (Genesis 2:15). It is my sincere hope and prayer that the Orthodox Jewish Community is able to show leadership in reclaiming the mandate of chapter two of Genesis. Through our actions we can teach the world what it means to live the ethics of the garden of Eden.