

## SUSTAINABLE LIVING AND REDUCING WASTE

Approved by the Board of Trustees

February 5, 2009

*Bal Tashhit – Do Not Waste:* “Whoever breaks vessels, or tears garments, or destroys a building, or clogs a well, or does away with food in a destructive manner violates the negative mitzvah of *bal tashhit*.” Kiddushin 32a

**Question:** Should Congregation B'nai Israel adopt policies and practices for sustainable living, such as conserving energy, reducing waste, and reducing the use of toxic substances?

**Answer:** Yes. Sustainable living policies and practices are considered mitzvot within the Jewish tradition. Jewish texts are replete with commandments regarding the stewardship of human beings over the earth and all the things that live upon it. In Genesis 1:26, God says: “Let us make humanity in our image, after our likeness, and they shall rule over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the heavens and over the animals and over all the earth and over all the creeping things that creep upon the earth.” After creating Adam, the first man, “Adonai took the human, and placed the human in the Garden of Eden *to work it and to guard it*.” (Gen. 2:15) As it is written in Psalms 115: 16, “the heavens are heavens of Adonai, but the earth God gave to the children of humanity.” Jewish tradition therefore recognizes that we are responsible for the protection of God’s earthly creation and must not behave in a manner that destroys or degrades the sustainability of all forms of life now and for all future generations.

The positive commandment to guard and sustain the earth has also been understood to include the negative command of *bal tashhit* - do not destroy by wasting or misusing the things that make up Creation. (Kiddushin 32a.) Even when a city is under siege, we are told “not to destroy its trees by wielding an axe, for you may eat from them, but you shall not cut them down.” (Deut. 20:19.) An undeveloped open space or *migrash* should be left around all cities as an enhancement to the quality of life. (Vayikra 35:3.) Maimonides taught that “whoever breaks vessels, or tears garments, or demolishes a building, stops a spring, or wastes articles of food in a destructive manner is in violation of *bal tashhit*” (Mishneh Torah, 6 Laws 8-10.) Protection of the environment is the path of the righteous (hasidim) who love peace and seek connection to the goodness of Creation and Torah. The righteous are commanded to work to save the earth from wastefulness and destructiveness “with all their energy.” (Sefer HaChinuch, Parashat Shoftim, Mitzvah 529.)

In modern times, science has taught us that human behavior has degraded our environment and endangered our planet. Many Jewish organizations (including the Union of Reform Judaism (URJ), the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL), and Hazon (“Vision”) have developed policies and resources to encourage sustainable practices in congregations and homes. As a 1991 URJ resolution stated, “Each individual has an important role to play in the struggle to clean up the world. We must play our part to integrate personal initiative with local, regional and national efforts.” ..

Therefore, consistent with the teachings of the Jewish tradition and the principles established by Reform Judaism, Congregation B’nai Israel should implement and publicize policies and practices to reduce waste, to maximize recycling, to eliminate the use of toxic chemicals, and to support local and organic agriculture. These policies should be applicable to both congregational events and private events held on congregational premises. These practices will provide a framework to observe the mitzvot of sustaining Creation and being stewards of the earth.

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Upon the recommendation of the Religious Practices Committee