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It's Not Easy Being Green

Without a central organization, can Atlanta's Jewish environmentalist movement take root?

Vivi Abrams / The Jewish Times

Blue herons, geese and buffle-head ducks populate the pond behind the Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta's Zaban Park campus. Nearby, a garden over a field gone fallow boasts ready-to-be-planted vegetable beds and six walls in the shape of a Magen David.

It's not just the latest in garden design, although designers Josh Eisenberg and Daron Joffe might disagree. It's also one sign of a national Jewish environmental movement that is pulling in Atlanta rabbis, writers, doctors, students and community movers and shakers.

What these Atlantans have in common is a parchment thread binding them to the earth — a directive from the Torah to protect the environment.

What they don't have is a central organization to coordinate their activities and plans, say many who are involved in the environmental movement.

"There's all these pieces, kind of a mosaic so to speak. Yet, as far as getting Jewish environmental issues in Atlanta, somebody's got to bring them all together," said Joffe. "There's just not dialogue right now."

So Joffe and others are trying to start a chapter of the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL), the Jewish arm of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment. The lobbying group was formed in 1993 to give religious organizations clout in Washington on

issues such as energy conservation and public health.

The Atlanta COEJL chapter would join Mosaic, the Jewish outdoor club; the Faith and the Environment luncheon series; and the Georgia Interfaith Climate Change Network in the growing list of Atlanta organizations that use the Jewish value of tikkun olam — repairing the world — as a starting point for environmental work.

Atlanta Jewish environmentalists hope that after a series of false starts, COEJL will be the group to focus their energy.

Joffe, who just returned from the National COEJL convention in California, is putting together an Earth Day event at Camp Isidore Alterman on April 28 that will be a kickoff for COEJL.

The so-called "green Jewish" movement is diverse as it is expanding, gathering engineers, doctors, students, writers and clergy.

One of Atlanta's leading Jewish environmentalists, Rabbi Brett Isserow of The Temple, says he grew up loving nature.

"It's totally an intrinsic way that I see the world," said the South African-born rabbi, who is also a gardener and a vegan.

While he was in rabbinical school, Isserow said he began noticing and studying the connections between Judaism and nature. That study continues today: In August, Isserow was one of five rabbis to explore Alaska on a COEJL-sponsored tour and teach about the Jewish aspects of Alaskan environmentalism.

The sanctity of creation underlies all Jewish thought on the environment, says Isserow. Jewish festivals follow the cycles of the land, and throughout the Talmud and Mishnah, rabbis stress the importance of tending the earth.

"The bottom line for me that informs everything is that we really are responsible for whatever our actions bring about," Isserow said.

The gist of what God tells Adam in Genesis, he explains, is: "I'm giving you this world to live in, you can rule it but you have to take responsibility for it."

As part of that responsibility, Isserow gives nature-themed sermons at The Temple and lunch lectures dealing with faith and the environment. He and other volunteers also have sent out Tu B'Shevat information to synagogues and organizations, and are compiling lists of social action

chairs from synagogues to form a network of potential helpers.

But, says Isserow, "we ought to be doing a hell of a lot more."

Organizing in Atlanta

Since the summer of 2000, Isserow has been working on starting a COEJL affiliate in Atlanta. In August 2000, National COEJL head Mark Jacobs gave a talk here at which several people expressed interest in forming an affiliate. With the guidance of the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta's Community Relations Council, they formed a steering committee and named Isserow as co-chair.

But after four meetings, the group ran out of steam in the spring of 2001, said Ben Schulte, tikkun olam chairman at Congregation Bet Haverim in Decatur.

Stacey Garlin, a learning specialist at the Davis Academy, became a co-chair of the revamped steering committee last fall, but she too has run into problems finding a fiscal sponsor to get the chapter off the ground.

COEJL requires at least three local organizations to sign on as sponsors. The Atlanta group has that in the Atlanta Rabbinic Association, the Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta and Mosaic. But the chapter still needs an organization to take fiscal responsibility — mainly accounting — and legal liability.

Margo Dix, director of the federation's community relations council, said the broad range of the council's work — especially the need to focus on Israel in recent months — may have been partly to blame for the delay in getting COEJL up and running.

"I would have preferred that it not have some down time, but that is one of the consequences of a busy agenda," she said.

Some activists in the community think the federation may be overlooking resources that are already available. Dix said several synagogues have offered to be fiscal sponsors of COEJL, but the group has never put a synagogue in that position before.

"If all else doesn't work out, maybe we'll do that as an alternative," she said. "We're trying to make a match between our community and the strict COEJL guidelines."

Garlin says such an affiliation could become a political issue.

"If you do it with a Reform synagogue, the Conservative synagogues scream," she said, and vice-versa. Instead, she would like to see a non-denominational organization take the initiative.

Dr. Howard Frumkin, an environmental health researcher at Emory University and Bet Haverim member, said many people at his synagogue "would like to get a [COEJL] chapter going." In fact, some Bet Haverim members are so frustrated by the red tape involved in starting a chapter that they are starting to circumvent COEJL and plan their own events.

But Joffe, who started a COEJL affiliate in Madison, Wis., several years ago, said it doesn't have to be so complicated.

"It always seemed a lot more casual to me," he said.

A growing movement

If Atlanta starts a COEJL affiliate it would be the 15th chapter since the first one formed five years ago and the only one in the Southeast.

Stefanie Zelkind, national field director for COEJL, says the Atlanta initiative stands out because several prospective members are environmental professionals and not heavily involved in the Jewish community.

"I think there's a certain resonance [in COEJL] that people are not necessarily finding in secular environmental work," said Zelkind.

COEJL has also found a good response working with children over the last five years, she said. "There's lots of education going on in Hebrew schools and summer camps around Jewish nature programming."

For example, since Zelkind began working for COEJL three-and-a-half years ago, the number of teachers asking for environmental program materials to use with their students has tripled, she said. The number of books about ecological Judaism has also increased in recent years, says Lewis Regenstein, an Atlanta author who has written a number of books on Judaism and the environment.

Regenstein, who is the director of the Interfaith Council for the Protection of Animals and Nature, an affiliate of the Humane Society, emphasizes the Bible's message of conservation and kindness to

animals in his writings.

"Of all the religions of the world, Judaism probably is the one Western religion that contains the most strict and conscientious laws and teachings to protect the environment, teach people a reverence for nature and kindness to animals," said Regenstein, who has been a vegetarian for 30 years.

And Rabbi Arthur Waskow, director of the Shalom Center in Philadelphia and the author of "Trees, Earth and Torah: A Tu B'Shevat Anthology," published in 1999, says Jews are in a better position than ever before to affect environmental issues.

"The American Jewish community is increasingly able to draw on its own sense of Jewish wisdom and at the same time not be isolated from American politics," he said. "The United States has one of the deepest footprints on the world in terms of its ecological impact of any human society ever . . . [and] the Jewish community has a serious chunk of political clout in that society."

On campus

Young Jewish adults are some of the most active environmentalists. On college campuses, Jews often head up environmental groups and post-college Jews flock in throngs to programs such as Green Corps, the environmentalist's answer to the Peace Corps.

In 1996, the Sierra Club elected its first Jewish national president, then 23-year-old Adam Werbach. During his presidency and afterward, Werbach was active with COEJL and in bringing recognition to Jewish environmentalism.

Margie Klein, 22, joined Green Corps after graduating from Yale University last spring. Her assignment included coming to Atlanta for two months to launch a campaign to get the Staples office supply chain to sell more recycled paper. She says her parents and her Jewish background emphasized the importance of social responsibility. "In the creation story, we're put here to be stewards in the earth," she said.

Klein likes to cite a phrase from Devarim in the book of Deuteronomy:

"When thou shalt besiege a city a long time, in making war against it to take it, thou shalt not destroy the trees thereof by wielding an axe against them; for thou mayest eat of them, but thou shalt not cut them down; for is the tree of the field man, that it should be besieged of

thee?"

"Even in battle you should not cut down any fruit trees in your enemies' territory," Klein said. "The rabbis extrapolated that never, ever in a time of peace should you destroy the environment. That was a very core teaching to the rabbis that has sort of been lost."

Klein has also brought a bit of Jewish flavor to fellow Green Corps participants — she started inviting them over for Shabbat dinner. The tradition spread.

"My Indian friend had a Shabbat dinner in Miami and my Korean friend had a Shabbat dinner in Iowa," Klein said.

Bringing a religious aspect to environmental work is also politically salient.

"Green Corps was very excited when I said I wanted to work with the Jewish community," Klein said. "They recognize that it is so important to include the religious community because it has the potential to be one of the most effective constituencies to effect change." This fall, Klein plans to organize a conference in New Haven, Conn., about Judaism, labor and environmental responsibility.

Jon Mattson, a recent Emory University graduate, assisted Klein on the Staples campaign in Atlanta. Although he is not an observant Jew, Mattson said his Reform Jewish roots taught him the importance of social action.

"Being Jewish, tikkun olam is to heal the world. I feel an obligation being a Jewish person to get involved and heal the world," he said.

And some young people in Atlanta are literal caretakers of earth. Joffe and Eisenberg, both 25, have been working for the past several months shoveling dirt and designing plans for the garden at Camp Isidore Alterman.

This summer, they want to clean the camp's pond and restore native plants to the area, then create a self-guided hike for children around the water, says Eisenberg, owner of PermaTerra Designs, who is also designing a garden at Southface Energy Institute in Midtown.

Joffe, meanwhile, is making plans to collaborate with the federation on getting COEJL programs started right away. He wants to have them up and running by the time he moves to Athens, Ga., to start classes at the

University of Georgia this fall.

In the meantime he will keep working on the garden — there's a whole orchard of fruit trees to tend.