Interfaith Climate Justice Community Cares!

By Sara Schultz

*Tu b’shvat* – the New Year of Trees--is almost here. Perhaps now is a good time to pay attention to what is so difficult to comprehend. We have read about floods and fires and recently of 11,000 scientists and more than 200 scientific organizations who have established the unequivocal scientific evidence that anthropogenic (man-made) climate change is happening. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, as well as the U.S. Fourth National Climate Assessment, has declared that time is running out. We need to make the huge changes to prevent future suffering on a scale that we have never seen.

How do we cope with such overwhelming facts? As Jews, we are not permitted to feel powerless. As a people we believe in working toward t*ikun olam* (repair of the world). Now is the time to pay attention to the commandment, *bal tashchit (*thou shalt not destroy). This commandment truly will repair the world! This may sound overwhelming but In *Pirkei Avot,* (*Ethics of the Fathers*)Rabbi Tarfonteaches: “It is not your responsibility to finish the work [of perfecting the world], but you are not free to desist from it either” (3:2). In other words, try not to get overwhelmed by the greatness of the task, but do jump in and do what you can. That is all that is expected of us.

 I recently met with Mara Koven-Gelman and Deborah Goldman from the Buffalo JCRC to discuss the intersectionality between the JCRC mission of social justice, combating hatred and intolerance and Interfaith legislative work with the environmental justice work of the ICJC (Interfaith Climate Justice Community) . My volunteer work with the Sierra Club Niagara Group and now with the Interfaith Climate Justice Community has led me back to my own Jewish community.

Working on greenhouse gas drawdown, renewable energy, green transportation initiatives and the restoration of habitat for the very life that sustains us are all goals that should be woven into our Jewish lives. “The earth is the Lord’s” Psalm 24:1. We are partners in her care not here to use and abuse. Sallie McFague suggests we “view the world through the lenses of Martin Buber's famous distinction between I/THOU and I/IT: the world is not an "it", not merely a tool in human hands to be used and then discarded. The earth and humankind stand in an I/THOU relationship, in which we appreciate the earth as earth and fellow expression of our creative God.”

 The first opportunity for action can come as soon as Feb. 10th. *Tu b’shvat* is approaching as Israel welcomes spring and celebrates the awakening of life. Jewish law regarding trees guides us toward the profound importance of protecting them. This year, think about planting native trees that will contribute to the cycle of life in our region. The United Nations’ trillion tree campaign is a serious response to the climate emergency of our time. Plant-based solutions to climate change are an excellent place for all of us to participate and contribute. If you are looking for more ideas, COEJL (Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life) and JCAN (Jewish Climate Action Network) are just a few of the organizations to find resources to help you and your synagogue walk more lightly on the planet.

 On Feb. 6th Sierra Club Niagara Group is sponsoring a presentation on Community Solar. This is an opportunity for those who cannot have solar panels for various reasons to be tied into community solar projects around WNY. Please join us at the Crane Library, 633 Elmwood Ave. at 6pm to learn how you can save money and live more sustainably.

 If you have teenagers, please encourage them to get involved with the WNY Youth Climate Council ( buffaloclimatestrike@gmail.com). This group of passionate teens under the supervision of the WNY Environmental Alliance is working to push our local leaders to take action for the future of our youth.

 From my connection with the Interfaith Climate Justice Community I have learned the strong need for faith groups to speak out. Pope Francis’s 2015 Encyclical, *Laudato si’* “On Care for our Common Home” declares, “If we destroy Creation, Creation will destroy us.” And “We can no longer remain silent before one of the greatest environmental crises in world history.” This is also a very Jewish concept. The churches are ringing their bells to call parishioners into action. Shouldn’t we be sounding the shofar? We have an active Jewish community in WNY. Imagine what we could accomplish if we added “care for creation” to our list of life sustaining goals.

 Where to go from here? Let’s start with ourselves, our homes, our synagogues and very importantly who we support at the polls. Look for the Sierra Club endorsements. Our endorsed candidates understand local issues that affect our health and well-being, affirm science and promote policy that will determine the future of our children, all children. I pray that Jewish voices in our community will rise and the shofar will call us all to pay attention to the voice of creation. May every *Tu b’shvat* Seder include at least one action each of us can take that will lead to a more sustainable home for all.

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