Is Climate Change a Jewish Priority?

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An article found in the Jewish Telegraphic Agency authored by *David Kraemer*, of the Jewish Theological Seminary sparked some intense thought.

With the rise in antisemitism, anti-Zionism and a cadre of other existential threats facing the Jewish people and Israel, it is easy to forget other issues that clearly affect us as a community and society as a whole. One such dilemma we must confront, is whether or not climate change, global warming, and our collective responsibility for the planet we call home, is a necessity, priority or even a Jewish value?

That the earth has been warming in recent years is indisputable. At issue are the causes of this warming and its consequences. In other words, this is not merely a matter of principle. If scientists are right, this is a matter of life and death for potentially large numbers of creatures, including humans.

Matters of life and death are central to the concerns of Jewish thought and religion. So, we Jews must ask, what do Jewish teachings demand of us in the matter of global warming?

From a Jewish perspective, it makes no difference that there are those, including a small number of scientists, who dispute the science and therefore that the conclusions are the source of alarm. Because global warming *might* lead to human deaths, it falls into the category of *safek nefashot*, or occasions when human life might be at risk. And Jewish law is unambiguous when life might be at risk: You are obligated to "err" in the direction of caution.

So, on Yom Kippur, if a pregnant woman says she is fine without eating but a doctor says her life is at risk, ***you are obligated to feed her***. Similarly, if the doctor says she is fine, but she says she is failing, ***you are similarly obligated to feed her***. What this means is that even if the "alarmists" might only be right, we are obligated to take the steps they advise. If human life might be at risk, we must act so as to avert the risk.

Judaism is also clear in insisting that our obligations extend not only to those who live today, ***but also to future generations***. As Moses, speaking for God, says in *Deuteronomy 29:13-14*: "I make this covenant … not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before the Lord our God and with those who are not with us this day." The covenant, with its obligations to save lives, is a "generation to generation" covenant.

Finally, our obligation as Jews extends not just to our own species but to the world as a whole and to all of God's creatures within it. Psalms declares that "the earth and its fullness

are the Lord's" (*24:1*). We are, as *Leviticus* announces, mere "resident-aliens" (*25:23*) on the land. But does not *Psalms* (115:16) also teach that "the heavens belong to the Lord while He gave the earth to the children of men"? Yes, says the Talmud, but only after we take responsibility for the earth by recognizing its creator and following the creator's commandments to care for it (see *Berakhot 35a–b*). The earth is not ours to exploit — let alone to destroy — at will. It is ours only if we are good stewards. As *Genesis 2:15* says, we are placed in this "garden" of ours "to work it *and to guard it."*

It would be unfair to say that Judaism requires us to take a particular stance; however, biblical, and rabbinic prescriptions are not simplistically translatable into the details of 21st-century policy. But Judaism does require us to pursue the goals of environmentalism. The fact that questions remain does not change this conclusion.

In the view of Judaism, the survival of the earth and its creatures

is our responsibility.