

Community and Society Archive

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Believing Cassandra

By Robert Rabinowitz

What do you do when you believe the world is headed for doom and nobody seems to be listening, least of all your own community? This painful predicament is the subject of a recent book, *Believing Cassandra* by prominent environmental advocate and consultant Alan Atkisson (<http://www.chelseagreen.com/Cassandra/index.html>). I came face to face with the predicament myself last month when I attended the annual conference of the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (www.coejl.org), the national Jewish environmental organization. At the conference, I was privileged to meet some people who live by Maimonides' recommendation to think of the world as if its fate were hanging in the balance, to be decided by the moral quality of one's own actions.

- Michael Ableman did not go to college after graduating from high school, but instead chose to devote his life to organic agriculture, founding the Center for Urban Agriculture near Santa Barbara, California (fairviewg@aol.com). The most dramatic moment of Michael's talk was when he showed slides of the aerial views of his organic farm, Fairview Gardens, in 1954 and in 1998. The first slide showed one farm among many spread out in a checkerboard of fields and orchards. Fifty years later, Fairview Gardens is a lone island surrounded by suburban lots and retail complexes, swimming pools and asphalt. Listening to Michael talk about the importance of urban agriculture as a way of helping people to reconnect to the earth and its natural cycles, I thought of the Torah verse about the construction of the Sanctuary in the wilderness: "And let them make me a Temple and I will dwell among them." (*Exodus* 18:8) An urban farm in a neighborhood really acts like a sanctuary, a place to re-center oneself and to re-establish harmony with the world.

- At the age of 15 Andy Lipkis mobilized his fellow Jewish summer campers to pull up the asphalt of an old parking lot and plant a meadow. Rather than go to college, he founded TreePeople, an organization dedicated to inspiring the people of Los Angeles to treat their city as a living eco-system (<http://www.TreePeople.org>). Andy told the story of how he learned accidentally that an enormous percentage of the money dedicated to refurbishing L.A.'s public schools was earmarked for re-asphalting school yards, while nothing had been designated for greenery. TreePeople demonstrated that, apart from making school yards less dangerous and more pleasant, planting trees would eventually pay for itself by reducing the need for air conditioning, saving 12% of utility fees. After a two-year battle with bureaucrats, the school district agreed to the largest landscaping project in the history of Los Angeles, replacing up to 20 million square feet of asphalt with lawns, plants and trees.
- Jodi Sugerman-Brozan works for Alternatives for Community and Environment (<http://www.netcom.com/~psloh>), an environmental justice organization based in Roxbury, a poor area of Boston with many minority inhabitants which contains many sources of pollution. Jodi told the inspiring story of how a group of teens had led the successful campaign to persuade the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority to switch from diesel buses, which emit toxic fumes and ultrafine particles that are thought to be connected with the area's very high rate of childhood asthma. The MBTA has now agreed to purchase 200 compressed natural gas buses and to move a bus garage away from the center of a heavily populated area.

Perhaps the most frustrating moment of the conference came during a panel discussion in which a local rabbi talked about how COEJL members might make an impact on synagogues. Many participants talked about the difficulties they had faced in getting their community organizations to adopt environmental policies or even in explaining their concerns to family and friends. Quite simply, the environment does not yet seem to have really made it onto the radar screen of organized Jewish life. For example, no senior representatives of large communities, national organizations and major philanthropies attended the COEJL conference even though COEJL is the Jewish community's official contribution to what is perhaps one of the three major social movements that arose in America in the last half of the 20th century.

In his book, Atkisson quotes with approval Philip James Bailey's statement that "the worst way to improve the world is to condemn it." Condemnation is very tempting when the world seems to be ignoring what you think is the one vital thing to which it should be paying attention. But generally it does not bring change. This is something that CLAL emphasizes at the annual retreats we hold for rabbis. It can be tempting for them, too, to condemn the congregants who fail to attend synagogue services and who insist on playing tennis while their kids are at Hebrew School instead of participating in family education programs. An attitude of condemnation can turn a rabbinic career into an isolated and embittering experience instead of into an opportunity to enrich and deepen the Jewish significance of the most important places in people's lives.

Some of the people I met at the COEJL conference felt that humanity's treatment of our natural world was indeed leading us toward doom. They really saw themselves as contemporary Cassandras: prophets whose words are not being heeded by a community which is too concerned with

meeting the urgent demands on its resources and with the crisis of continuity. Such an attitude can easily lead to bitterness and despair. The challenge faced by COEJL members is to decide where to focus their efforts. Should they try to get the environment onto the Jewish community's agenda only to risk the bitterness of rejection? Or should they instead concentrate on building a movement outside the community mainstream, recruiting the many passionate and talented Jews, like Michael, Andy and Jodi, in the business, governmental and non-profit worlds who care about the environment? As I contemplate the latter option, which seems to me the most fruitful, the phrase from Ethics of the Fathers – "Do not separate yourself from the community!" -- echoes in my head. And I ask myself, "Is the only way to avoid playing the role of Cassandra to ignore those who don't seem to be listening, even if they are your own community?"



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