

DOMINION OR DEGRADATION?

Rabbi Jeffrey Newman asks if we will rise to the challenge set by climate change or continue to worship the 'golden calf'.



'I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Therefore, choose life'.
(Deuteronomy 30:19)

Such a teaching appears unnecessary. Of course we will choose life. But will we? Nature has enjoyed an enriching abundance of diversity and plurality of animals, birds, fish and insects. But for how much longer? Is it already too late? A world which is destroying itself, its species, resources and habitats; such a divided world is a religious challenge.

The changes we need to make in our lives if we are to redress this accelerating damage are daunting. It is clear that government, rather than leading, is prepared only to follow public opinion. So, while the religious traditions maintain some influence, it is right to expect them to take a lead. At the heart of Jewish teaching, we learn that God is One – that there is a unity in the plurality of things, people and creatures. Life and consciousness are one. Potentially, we know there is a one-ness between all religions – and those who are not religious – between rich and poor, East and West.

As far as Judaism in the UK is concerned, there are few signs that the community has awoken to the extent of the challenge. Though it is easy to cite relevant religious texts, there is little sign they are having much influence. Judaism's central statement of faith, the Shema, recited twice per day, includes a sentence (Deuteronomy 11:16-17), which says clearly:

Take care that your heart is not deceived and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them, for if you do, God's anger will be turned against you and God will shut up the heavens and there will be no rain and the land will not produce her fruits and you will quickly perish from the good land which God has given to you.

The 'other gods' whom we now worship, our 'idols', have not changed greatly through the centuries. We still demand our 'golden calf', more and more wealth, regardless of the finite resources of the planet and the poverty and sufferings of so many. The Millennium Development Goals are, however, a modern expression of the age-old Jewish demand for ethical living. 'He has told you, humanity, what is good and what God requires of you. Is it not to do justice and righteousness and walk humbly with your God?' (Micah 6:8) This, not ritual, is the heart of Judaism.

The demand upon us now, when instant



communication is possible throughout the world, is to go beyond the literal neighbour living next door to us. Through our extravagance and waste, through our greed and self-centredness, our whole planet, its climate, the rest of the human race and all life is impacted. We are far from being able to accept the weight of such responsibility. We still think ourselves too insignificant to really make much difference. It is here that communities, be they local areas or religious congregations, can bring about change.

In February, the Board of Deputies of British Jews, an august and somewhat conservative body more usually concerned with anti-Semitism and defence of Israel than with the environment, inaugurated a new web-site, www.biggreenjewish.org, hosted by Operation Noah, an environmental group celebrating its tenth anniversary. The web-site highlights good practice and encourages the community, both individuals and synagogues, to change behaviour. Currently under consideration is an ambitious proposal to 'green the community' by providing model projects of energy conservation and renewable generation for communal institutions, schools, synagogues and families.

One group, the Rabbis of the Reform Movement, has voted to endorse the Earth Charter, a global declaration of principles for a just, sustainable and peaceful twenty-first century and are now being urged to join the Archbishop of Canterbury in campaigning for Contraction and Convergence. This is an international movement asking governments of the world to agree to contract the amount of greenhouse gases going into the atmosphere to an amount the Earth can bear and share out the right to emit greenhouse gases on a per-head-of-population basis.

Those richer countries where the emissions far outweigh the population, in justice, pay for their surplus and the payments go to those countries where the emissions are much less but the populations much greater, namely the developing world.

Most Jews are city dwellers and it is through sustainable cities that we must either find a viable way forward, or finally over-develop all the Earth's systems, leading to catastrophic and irreversible climate change. The role of human beings is crucial. There is a haunting quote in the book 'Presence', (ed. Peter Senge) from Daniel Quinn's novel, *Ishmael*: 'With man gone, will there be hope for gorilla?' What a paradox! It seems so clear that we are the cause of the gorilla's potential extinction. But, as the book explores, might the gorilla need man, not merely for protection but for something more?

This is a key question. What does humanity potentially bring to creation? What is the gift that has been bestowed upon us, that until now we have largely abused? The verse in Genesis which says that humanity shall have dominion over the rest of creation contains a wonderful ambiguity. The word 'radah' can mean dominion but it can also mean degradation. If we are righteous and act consciously and honestly, we will play our central role in the creation. But, we are capable of acting more rapaciously than any other creature and bringing the world down with us. Which will it be? ■

Useful websites:

www.biggreenjewish.org

www.earthcharter.org

www.gci.org.uk/contconv/cc.html