

# New Jewish Year dedicated to environmental repair

## Community urged to put values into practice

By: Sharon Chisvin

The autumn Jewish holiday season, which began with Rosh Hashanah on Sept. 29 and ended with Simchat Torah on Oct. 22, marked the start of the year 5780, according to the Hebrew calendar.

Environmental activist Nigel Savage, CEO of the American non-profit organization Hazon, has dubbed this new year the Year of Environmental Teshuva.

Teshuva is the Hebrew word for repentance and a core theme in Judaism.

"Teshuva is about returning to our best selves," Savage says. "Or, looked at a different way, it's about figuring out where we've acted badly, trying to make amends and committing to do better in the future."

Both of these frames, he says, apply to the global climate crisis.

"We know that we're over-consuming the world. We know that our behaviours are contributing to damage today and potentially much worse damage in the future. And so now is a time for 'environmental teshuva' — bringing this Jewish frame of return and repentance to our daily behaviours and habits."

What this means is that Hazon, and other like-minded organizations like Shoresh in Toronto, have started to challenge Jewish community and spiritual leaders to address the global climate crisis and take actions to mitigate it. These actions will help contribute to a more environmentally sustainable world and, at the same time, strengthen Jewish values and Jewish identity.

There are several steps, both large and small, that institutions and individuals can take, Savage says. Examples include better managing energy resources and plastic waste,

wasting less food, buying local, consuming fewer industrial meat and dairy products, limiting air travel, and organizing green teams at every Jewish school, synagogue and summer camp.

In Toronto, Shoresh works to mobilize the Jewish community to put environmental values into practice through a number of different initiatives, including a multi-acre reforestation project and bee sanctuary. It also co-hosted one of the 100 debates on the environment that took place across Canada in early October.

"All the work we do with Jewish programs is about cultivating an awareness of the natural world through a Jewish lens and also cultivating an awareness of the challenges faced by the natural world," executive director Risa Alyson Cooper says.

"It is about having people understand from a Jewish perspective what the global crisis is, what habitat loss is, and how fluctuations in water, drought or storms come to affect the food systems and the ecosystems that we are dependent on."

The Torah is explicit about the Jewish obligation to care for the Earth, Cooper says.

"We are told that Adam, the first human being, was put in the Garden of Eden to work the land and to protect the land. So the very first mitzvah that humans are given is to this dual responsibility that we can't just take from the land, but that we also need to be ensuring that we are protecting its resources."

Protecting and caring for the Earth is also a form of Tikkun Olam, Cooper adds. Tikkun Olam, meaning repair of the world, is the moral imperative in Judaism to protect the vulnerable and disadvantaged.

"Environmental justice is social justice. What is more Tikkun Olam than caring for the Earth that sustains all of the people and animals?" she asks. "We have to understand that the choices that we make and the implications that are expressed through them will directly affect the most vulnerable in our communities."

Of course, while Tikkun Olam is a specific Jewish obligation, Jewish people alone will not be able to save the Earth from devastation.

"We must have humility," Savage says "There are over seven billion people on the planet and barely 15 million Jews. So our material contribution will be important, but by ourselves we can't fix this. This is going to need every faith community, every people, every nation, and every institution.

By taking up this call to action and combining their efforts, perhaps they will make 5780 not just the Year of Environmental Teshuva, but the first year of an entire Era of Environmental Teshuva.

swchisvin@gmail.com