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Fighting the fossil-fuel pharaoh

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Introduction
The most important story in Jewish history is God’s redemption of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt at the hands of the Pharaoh, about 3,300 years ago according to Jewish tradition. Today, environmentalists in the United States are leading the Jewish effort to free society from a newly emerged pharaoh: fossil fuels. We may no longer be enslaved in Egypt, but today our bondage takes the form of an addiction to the burning of coal, gas and oil – a connection most famously made explicit by Rabbi Arthur Waskow, who has warned of “Carbon Pharaohs” (Waskow, 2014a), “Climate Pharaohs” (Waskow, 2014a), “Corporate Pharaohs” (Waskow, 2014a), “Pharaohs of Our Day” (Waskow, 2010), “Institutional Pharaohs” (Waskow, 2008) and “Pharaohs of Global Scorching” (Waskow, 2004) for the past two decades after railing in the early 1970s against “Pharaohs of the Modern Superstate” and their air pollution from burning gasoline (Waskow, 1971). [Inspired by Waskow, I started referring to the “Fossil-Fuel Pharaoh” in 2012 (Krantz, 2012).]

Jewish climate-focused initiatives have grown into what some call the Jewish climate movement, a multi-stakeholder-populated subfield of the Jewish environmental movement (although the distinctions between the overall field and its handful of subfields have long been blurred). Much of the growth can be attributed to the all-volunteer efforts of two leaders – Rabbi Katy Allen and Mirele Goldsmith – coupled with the institutional efforts led by Dayenu,¹ one of the newest entrants to the movement, and Hazon, the largest and one of the oldest Jewish environmental nonprofits. The growing prominence of climate action among U.S.-based Jewish organizations reflects climate change as an increasingly important political concern for American Jews. Indeed, recognition of the severity of environmental problems such as climate change has been higher among Jews – regardless of the degree of one’s religious commitment (Arbuckle and Konisky, 2015) – than it has been among Americans of every other faith (Jones et al., 2014).

This chapter first provides an overview of some of the earliest examples of Jewish climate activism and the subsequent boom in Jewish climate groups before proceeding with largely chronological highlights of the Jewish climate movement over the past dozen years and concluding with a call to action.
Pioneers of Jewish climate activism

Early U.S.-based Jewish environmental groups that took on climate as an issue include Aytzim (founded in 2001), the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (commonly known as COEJL, founded in 1993), Hazon (founded in 2000), Jews Against Hydrofracking (now defunct, founded in 2011), Kayam Farm (established at the Pearlstone Center in 2006) and The Shalom Center (founded in 1983). However, aside from Hazon’s Jewish Climate Change Campaign, the work was not always labeled as climate activism, but rather the groups addressed climate from other vantage points, such as by promoting renewables and energy efficiency and working against fossil-fuel exploitation. For example, Aytzim joined with Israeli groups in opposing fracking and in-situ retorting of oil shale in Israel (Krantz, 2011a). Jews Against Hydrofracking formed specifically to fight fracking in the New York metropolitan area (Krantz, 2023). And in 2012, Kayam Farm included a trip to Washington for a day of advocacy and lobbying on climate and the Farm Bill as part of its two-day summit on shmita, the biblical sabbatical year (Kayam Farm, 2012; Krantz, 2016).

Still, there was a divide between Jewish environmental groups that saw climate action as essential to their missions and those that saw it as political and outside their purviews. An ad hoc climate quartet of COEJL’s Sybil Sanchez, NeoHasid’s Rabbi David Seidenberg, The Shalom Center’s Waskow, and I (representing Aytzim, then known as the Green Zionist Alliance) emerged within the Green Hevra – a former network of 16 Jewish environmental initiatives – to encourage our fellow Green Hevra members to take stronger stances on climate. We were only moderately successful. When Sanchez and Seidenberg, citing that “Jewish texts and traditions highlight the importance of caring for the world”, authored a Green Hevra letter opposing the alignment of some Jewish groups with gas and oil companies, only 12, or three-quarters, of the Green Hevra groups signed (Sanchez and Seidenberg, 2013). Similarly, when a group of Green Hevra leaders wrote a letter saying that because the Hebrew Bible “calls for deeper gentleness toward the Earth” that Jews should oppose construction of the Keystone XL pipeline, only 13 Jewish groups overall signed – including only eight members, or only half, of the Green Hevra (Green Hevra, 2014).

The differing emphasis on climate also can be seen in print. A Green Hevra 2013 study of the Jewish environmental movement resulted in a 16-page report in 2014 that mentions climate once (Green Hevra, 2014a). At about the same time, Hazon was conducting a study of immersive Jewish outdoor, food and environmental-education programs (nicknamed JOFEE²), and its corresponding 59-page report mentions climate twice (Informing Change, 2014). By comparison, the 100-page Jewish Energy Guide, a 50-article book co-published in 2014 by Aytzim and COEJL, mentions climate 104 times (Krantz, 2014). The conflicting viewpoints between groups that embraced climate activism and those that eschewed it or were not quite ready for it was a source of friction between Green Hevra members, ultimately contributing in part to the network’s demise.

The rise of Jewish climate activism

Where the Jewish environmental movement of the 1990s and 2000s consisted primarily of educational, food and agricultural groups (Green Hevra, 2014a), the Jewish environmental movement of the past decade increasingly has marked a shift toward a Jewish communal focus on climate. The spike in Jewish climate groups (see Table 25.1) has included the founding of the Jewish Climate Action Network (Boston) and the Move Our Money/Protect Our Planet project (launched jointly by The Shalom Center and Interfaith Moral Action on Climate)
Table 25.1 Jewish climate-focused initiatives in the United States

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initiative</th>
<th>Founded</th>
<th>Original Focus</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Legal Status</th>
<th>Affiliated Groups</th>
<th>Staffing</th>
<th>Operationality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Shalom Center</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Anti-nuclear proliferation</td>
<td>Education and advocacy</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>501c3 nonprofit</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Paid</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Education and interfaith</td>
<td>Education and advocacy</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>Project of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs</td>
<td>None currently</td>
<td>Paid</td>
<td>Intermittent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jews of the Earth</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Sustainability</td>
<td>Education and advocacy</td>
<td>Greater Washington, DC</td>
<td>Formerly independent; current project of Aytzim</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>Intermittent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hazon</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Biking and food</td>
<td>Education and networking</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>501c3 nonprofit</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Paid</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aytzim: Ecological Judaism</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Sustainability</td>
<td>Education and advocacy</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>501c3 nonprofit</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish Climate Change Campaign</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Climate</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>Project of Hazon</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Dormant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jews Against Hydrofracking</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Energy and water</td>
<td>Education and advocacy</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>Unincorporated</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>Dormant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish Energy Covenant Campaign</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Energy</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>Project of the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Paid</td>
<td>Dormant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish Climate Action Network (Massachusetts)</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Climate</td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>Unincorporated</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Move Our Money/Protect Our Planet</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Climate</td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>Project of The Shalom Center and Interfaith Moral Action on Climate</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Intermittent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initiative</th>
<th>Founded</th>
<th>Original Focus</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Legal Status</th>
<th>Affiliated Groups</th>
<th>Staffing</th>
<th>Operationality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shomrei Breishit: Rabbis and Cantors for the Earth</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Climate</td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>Project of Aytzim and GreenFaith</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Intermittent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher Ground Initiative</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Climate</td>
<td>Education and advocacy</td>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>Project of Temple Solel 4</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish Climate Action Network (New York City)</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Climate</td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>Unincorporated</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish Climate Action Network – DMV</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Climate</td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>Greater Washington, DC</td>
<td>Project of Interfaith Power and Light (Washington, DC; Maryland; northern Virginia)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Paid</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish Climate Coalition</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Climate</td>
<td>Networking</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>Project of Marlene Meyerson JCC Manhattan</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Intermittent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish Earth Alliance</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Climate</td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>Unincorporated</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>Active</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jewish Youth Climate Movement</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Climate</td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>Project of Hazon</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riverdale Jewish Earth Alliance</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Climate</td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>Unincorporated Jewish Earth Alliance affiliate</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>Intermittent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dayenu: A Jewish Call to Climate Action</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Climate</td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>Fiscally sponsored by Social Good Fund</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>Paid</td>
<td>Active</td>
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<tr>
<td>Group Name</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>Advocacy Type</td>
<td>Type</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Legal Status</td>
<td>Staffing Type</td>
<td>Operationality</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish Action Team of Citizen’s Climate Lobby</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Climate</td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>Project of Citizen’s</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish Climate Action Network (Georgia)</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Climate</td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>Project of Georgia</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Paid</td>
<td>Intermittent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big Bold Jewish Climate Fest</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td>Climate</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>Fiscally sponsored by</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Dormant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bay Area Jewish Earth Alliance</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td>Climate</td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>California</td>
<td>Unincorporated Jewish</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronx Jews for Climate Action</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td>Climate</td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>Unincorporated</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado Jewish Climate Action</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td>Climate</td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td>Unincorporated</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania Jewish Earth Alliance</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td>Climate</td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>Unincorporated Jewish</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern California Jewish Earth Alliance</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td>Climate</td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>California</td>
<td>Unincorporated Jewish</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young Jews for a Green New Deal</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td>Climate</td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>Project of the Workers</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exodus Alliance</td>
<td>2022</td>
<td>Climate and interfaith</td>
<td>Education and advocacy</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>Project of The Shalom Center</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Paid</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NY Jewish Clergy Students for Climate Action</td>
<td>2022</td>
<td>Climate</td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>Unincorporated</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish Climate Leadership Coalition</td>
<td>2022</td>
<td>Climate</td>
<td>Networking</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>Project of Hazon</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Paid</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Data contained in the chapter and the author’s personal experience*
in 2013; Aytzim and GreenFaith's jointly run Shomrei Breishit: Rabbis and Cantors for the Earth in 2014; Temple Solel's Higher Ground Initiative in 2016; Jewish Earth Alliance, Jewish Climate Coalition and Hazon's Jewish Youth Climate Movement in 2019; the Jewish Action Team of Citizen's Climate Lobby and Dayenu in 2020; Big Bold Jewish Climate Fest and Bronx Jews for Climate Action in 2021, the same year that the Workers Circle College Network launched Young Jews for a Green New Deal; and NY Jewish Clergy Students for Climate Action, The Shalom Center's Exodus Alliance and Hazon’s Jewish Climate Leadership Coalition in 2022.

Like L’OLAM, Shomrei Adamah and COEJL in the 1980s and 1990s, the Jewish Climate Action Network (founded by Allen), Jewish Earth Alliance (co-founded by Goldsmith), Hazon (founded by Nigel Savage) and Dayenu (founded by Rabbi Jennie Rosenn) in turn have inspired a slew of independently run affiliates, including the Jewish Climate Action Network in New York co-founded by Goldsmith in 2016; Jewish Climate Action Network in the greater Washington, D.C., metro area co-founded by Goldsmith in 2018; Jewish Climate Action Network in Georgia in 2020; Colorado Jewish Climate Action in 2021; Riverdale Jewish Earth Alliance in 2019; Bay Area Jewish Earth Alliance, Pennsylvania Jewish Earth Alliance and Southern California Jewish Earth Alliance in 2021; at least 39 (as of 1 May 2022) local chapters, or what Hazon calls kvutzot (community groups), of the organization’s Jewish Youth Climate Movement; and at least 69 (as of 1 May 2022) locally run affiliates of Dayenu, or what Dayenu calls Circles, many of them housed in synagogues and other mainstream Jewish communal institutions.

Thanks mostly to the efforts of Dayenu and Hazon, at least 120 new Jewish climate groups have been founded in the United States since 2019.

**Highlights of Jewish climate action: 2009–2022**

Where the early U.S.-based Jewish environmental initiatives working on climate – such as Aytzim, Hazon and The Shalom Center – initially focused more broadly on sustainability or more narrowly on topics such as biking and anti-nuclear proliferation, the first significant initiative to form with climate as its *raison d’être* was Hazon’s Jewish Climate Change Campaign, led by Jessica Haller. The project started in the lead-up to 2009’s COP15 in Copenhagen – the much-hyped 15th meeting of the Conference of Parties to the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change, and also the first attended by Aytzim representatives – and a preceding event at Windsor Castle hosted by the U.K.-based Alliance of Religions and Conservation, which invited Hazon and the Jewish Climate Initiative (a project of the Jerusalem-based Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development) to participate on behalf of the Jewish community.

In the summer leading up to the Windsor Castle event and COP15, the Teva Learning Center – using one of the more eye-catching devices employed in the history of the Jewish environmental movement – sent the Topsy Turvy School Bus across the United States to call for climate action as part of the Jewish Climate Change Campaign (Krantz, 2011b). The bus – “imagine two stacked school buses glued together at their roofs, so that wheels touch both the ground and the sky” (Krantz, 2016) – originally was designed by graphic artist Stefán Sagmeister for Ben Cohen of Ben & Jerry’s Ice Cream in 2002 and modified by the late art-car maker Tom Kennedy in 2007 “to create its current topsy-turvy form, representing the topsy-turvy nature of the U.S. military budget and U.S. spending on education, health care and the environment” (Krantz, 2011b). Teva educator Jonathan Dubinsky modified the bus to run on biofuel in advance of the trip to raise awareness about climate change (Krantz, 2016).

At the Windsor Castle event, representatives of the Jewish Climate Change Campaign presented a 44-page report detailing a seven-year sustainability plan as a “call to build a movement”,

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a “call upon the Jewish people – as individuals and families, as institutions, and as a wider community – to take determined steps to live more sustainably, and to act and advocate to create a more sustainable world for all” (Haller et al., 2010). The document also set four ambitious goals for the global Jewish community to accomplish by 2015:

- “To play a distinct and determined role in responding to climate change, and fostering sustainability, between now and September 2015; both the Diaspora Jewish communities and the state of Israel shall be widely seen – and we shall see ourselves – as being at the forefront of education, action and advocacy responses to the challenges of climate change and environmental degradation.
- For each Jewish organization, small and large, to create a sustainability committee by September 2010. The sustainability committee can be a green team, a climate change task force; it can be professional or volunteer.
- To integrate education, action and advocacy in addressing the challenges of climate change and environmental sustainability.
- That Israel will be a renewable light unto the nations powered lowered [sic] by clean energy sources, and Jerusalem will become a model green city”.

(Haller et al., 2010)

None of those goals was accomplished – neither by 2015 nor by 2022 – which is not surprising, given the audacity of their scale and scope. In hindsight, the value of the goals and the report may have been more in its vision than in the blueprint it offered. The Jewish Climate Change Campaign was beginning, ever so slowly, to shift the Overton window (Russell, 2006) of what the Jewish community would see as within the realm of possibility.

In 2012, COEJL launched the Jewish Energy Covenant Campaign, aka the Jewish Environmental and Energy Imperative. Citing the Jewish responsibility for Earth stewardship as well as concerns for the well-being of the United States, Israel, nature and humanity, the Jewish Energy Covenant Campaign set goals for adopting climate advocacy, increasing philanthropy to Jewish environmental organizations, incorporating Jewish environmental education into Jewish communal life, carrying out comprehensive energy audits, and reducing the carbon emissions of the Jewish community by one-seventh, or 14%, by 2014, and by 83% of 2005 levels by 2050 – commitments made by 53 leaders from some of the most significant organizations in American Jewish life, including the Academy for Jewish Religion, American Jewish World Service, American Zionist Movement, Federation of Jewish Men’s Clubs, Hadassah, J Street, Jewish Labor Committee, Jewish Theological Seminary, Jewish War Veterans of the United States of America, National Council of Jewish Women, Orthodox Union, Rabbinical Assembly, Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, and Union of Reform Judaism (Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, 2014). The Jewish Energy Covenant Campaign was, and likely remains, the most significant attempt to focus mainstream American Jewish organizations on climate action. Unfortunately, a lack of funding led to a lack of follow-up, and it is unclear what, if any, actions signatories took to follow through on their commitments – and it was another 10 years before another organization tried anything similar at the same scale.

Serving as a leadership fellow at COEJL at the time in addition to my role leading Aytzim, I edited the *Jewish Energy Guide* as part of the Jewish Energy Covenant Campaign. Contributors included Rabbis Nina Beth Cardin, Fred Scherlinder Dobb, Steve Gutow, Jill Jacobs, Seidenberg, Lawrence Troster, z”l, and Waskow; other prominent Jewish leaders such as Goldsmith, Jakir Manela, Evonne Marzouk, Joelle Novey, Sanchez and Alon Tal; and allies such as Al Gore and Bill McKibben (Krantz, 2014).
A year after 350.org’s 2012 launch of its carbon-divestment campaign, Waskow brought a divest-reinvest plan to the Jewish communal agenda in the form of the Move Our Money/Protect Our Planet (“Mom and Pop”) project, launched jointly by The Shalom Center and Interfaith Moral Action on Climate in 2013, resulting in two major outputs in 2014. The first was a handbook compiled by Miriam Joffe-Block that offered climate-friendly options for banking, credit cards and investing (Joffe-Block, 2014). The second was the “Rabbinic Call to Move Our Money to Protect Our Planet”, a letter signed by 425 rabbis and calling for Jews, as individuals and as a community, to stop purchasing fossil fuels and instead utilize renewable energy; to switch banking services from institutions that lend money to “Big Carbon” to community banks and credit unions; to divest from fossil-fuel stocks and bonds and invest instead in renewable-energy and community-health enterprises; and to utilize synagogue congregations to lobby for local and state governments do similarly with their pensions and for the federal government to reallocate the money it uses to subsidize the fossil-fuel industry to instead support the further development of renewable energy (Waskow, 2014a; Waskow, 2014b; The Shalom Center, 2015). Again, due to a lack of funding and follow-up, it is unclear what, if any, actions signatories took to follow through on their commitments.

Simultaneously, Aytzim and GreenFaith also were gathering rabbis, cantors and clerical students for the launch of their joint project, Shomrei Breishit: Rabbis and Cantors for the Earth, led by Troster. The initial Shomrei Breishit letter – which, compared to the Mom and Pop letter, garnered less attention but was more international in scope – attracted more than 100 signatures, including the chief rabbis of some countries, calling for a new global climate treaty by 2015, for a transition to 100% renewable energy in the world by 2024, and for “Jewish institutions to advocate for strong national and international climate legislation; to become carbon neutral through conservation and the purchasing of carbon offsets; and to review investment portfolios and redirect funds to sustainable energy investment” (Shomrei Breishit: Rabbis and Cantors for the Earth, 2014). Once more, due to a lack of funding and follow-up, it is unclear what, if any, actions signatories took to follow through on their commitments.

Jewish participation in climate protests

On a bitter cold day in Washington in February 2013, an estimated 35,000 to 50,000 people attended the Forward on Climate rally organized primarily by 350.org, the Hip Hop Caucus and the Sierra Club to protest the Keystone XL pipeline and the lack of action on climate change in what was to that point the largest climate protest in American history. Of the event’s 160 cosponsors, about a dozen were Jewish, including Am Kolel and its Buber Youth Network, Aytzim, COEJL, Hazon, Jewish Farm School, Jewcology, Kayam Farm, NeoHasid, the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, The Shalom Center and the Teva Learning Alliance (formerly the Teva Learning Center). Kayam and Teva coordinated transportation from the Pearlstone campus in suburban Baltimore to Washington following Kayam’s annual Beit Midrash weekend of Jewish environmental learning. Teva and Eden Village Camp educator Jonah Adels, z”l, joined on a bus from Yale University. As a handful of Jewish environmental leaders, we found each other and formed a small contingent within the interfaith section, organized by Interfaith Moral Action on Climate, Interfaith Power and Light, and Sojourners. From the rally’s stage on the National Mall, Waskow invoked the shehecheyanu prayer before we marched from the Washington Monument to the White House (Seidenberg, 2013; Svoboda, 2013; Jewcology, 2013).

The Forward on Climate rally effectively served as a warm up for both the organizers and Jewish environmental groups in planning the 2014 People’s Climate March in New York, which drew an estimated 311,000 people, obliterating the 2013 rally’s record for largest climate protest
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At least 106 Jewish groups – largely assembled by the Jewish Climate Change Campaign and The Shalom Center – formally or informally endorsed the march, including at least four rabbinical schools as well as the organizational bodies of the Conservative and Reform movements (Jewish Climate Change Campaign, 2015), the two largest affiliated Jewish sects in America. Synagogues from across the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic sent busloads of congregants to attend the march in New York. Thousands of Jews attended, with perhaps 100 or more of us blowing shofarot, Jewish ritual horns, as a call for climate justice. The People’s Climate March marked an inflection point for American Jews. Climate action was at the very beginning of entering the Jewish organizational mainstream.

*Mushrooming of Jewish climate groups*

In the wake of the Forward on Climate rally, Allen’s 2013 founding of the Jewish Climate Action Network (JCAN) in Boston served as the inspiration for the Jewish environmental shift to focusing on climate. Independently operated, locally organized and largely volunteer-run Jewish Climate Action Networks blossomed in New York, Washington, Atlanta and Denver, each sharing only a name, logo – featuring a blue-and-green Earth at the center of a green *magen David*, or Jewish star – and a mission to educate and organize Jews regionally for climate action. The flagship JCAN’s actions have included hosting three Jewish Climate Action Conferences, a webinar series, a weekly narrative-writing workshop with author Thea Iberall, and a collaboration with MassEnergize to help JCAN members reduce their carbon and environmental impacts. JCAN has played a pivotal role in raising climate activism within both the Jewish environmental movement and the wider Jewish community. JCAN’s biggest accomplishment, though, is that it inspired Jewish environmentalists across the country to replicate its activity.

Using lessons learned from her time running Jews Against Hydrofracking, Goldsmith co-founded the next two JCANs, in New York and Washington, buttressed by relationship building through in-person meetings (Krantz, 2023) – in pre-Covid times, with a transition to Zoom meetings after the Covid-19 pandemic began. The New York group, going by JCAN NYC, has met with legislators; worked in coalition with a range of partners, including Dayenu, Hazon, NY Renews and the Jewish Earth Alliance; and developed climate-focused booklets for congregational use during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. And across the city, JCAN NYC has made itself a fixture at climate and environmental protests, where you are bound to see members holding banners and placards with the group’s logo.

The Washington-area group, run by the local chapter of Interfaith Power and Light, hosts webinars, networks local Jewish environmentalists, and supports the work of Jewish Earth Alliance.

Goldsmith’s idea in co-founding Jewish Earth Alliance in 2019 was simple and potent: Organize Jewish communities to write letters to their legislators about environmental issues on a monthly basis. With 41 partners (as of 1 May 2022), including independently run Jewish Earth Alliance groups in Riverdale (in New York City’s Bronx borough), Pennsylvania and two in California, Jewish Earth Alliance has been delivering hundreds of letters a month from environmentally minded Jewish voters to members of Congress (Goldsmith, 2022), one of the most-powerful volunteer-run efforts in the history of the Jewish environmental movement. Letters have addressed a range of issues – from calling for an end to fossil-fuel subsidies (Jewish Earth Alliance, 2020) to endorsing ratification of the Kigali Amendment that would phase-out hydrofluorocarbons, aka HFCs (Jewish Earth Alliance, 2021b), to supporting protection for threatened and endangered species (Jewish Earth Alliance, 2022) – and generally have focused on climate. To push for passage of Pres. Joseph Biden’s Build Back Better agenda, the Jewish
Earth Alliance sent a letter, signed by 37 Jewish groups, to members of Congress urging support for the plan – noting that, as Jews, we have a responsibility to care for our neighbors, especially ethnic minorities who are on the frontlines of climate change (Jewish Earth Alliance, 2021a). Additionally, the Jewish Earth Alliance hosts regular webinars featuring Jewish environmentalists, scientists and legislators.

Importantly, both Jewish Earth Alliance and the Jewish Climate Action Network, as well as most of their respective affiliates, are unincorporated all-volunteer groups. They are capacity limited in that nearly everyone involved does so effectively as their second or third priorities after their families and paying jobs. In that sense, everything they do – without paid staff and largely without funding and other resources – is already an over-achievement. Lack of finances has long been a challenge for most of the Jewish environmental movement, with the majority of initiatives relying solely on volunteers (Green Hevra, 2014a), including even decades-old organizations such as Aytzim, while the financial constraints of others – such as COEJL and The Shalom Center – have kept staffing small and/or intermittent. Successful projects such as Jewish Farm School and Hazon’s Jewish Greening Fellowship even shut down for lack of enough ongoing financial support. Longtime Jewish environmental leaders have dreamed of what could be possible if a Jewish group would have both the desire and the financial resources to address climate on a national scale. In the last few years, Hazon and Dayenu have begun answering that call.

The Jewish climate group boom

In 2019, Hazon launched the Jewish Youth Climate Movement, the largest-ever effort to organize Jewish middle- and high-school students on climate. The national initiative is run by a board of 33 students and its 39 kvutzot (as of 1 May 2022) are locally run. The youth group asks Jewish institutions to commit to seven climate commitments for the seven-year shmita cycle: adopting a climate-justice plan; appointing a climate-crisis coordinator or committee; incorporating climate into the organization’s regular messaging; supporting local and federal climate legislation; building partnerships with Indigenous peoples and other climate-frontline communities; starting a kvutza and/or empowering youth within the institution; and providing the Jewish Youth Climate Movement with regular updates on the institution’s progress on the commitments (Jewish Youth Climate Movement, n.d.). A list of organizations that have made commitments is not publicly available.

The Jewish Youth Climate Movement has participated in public actions as well, including co-organizing a 2021 event in New York with Hazon and GreenFaith outside one of the offices of BlackRock, the world’s largest asset manager, to protest the $100 billion company’s financial support of the fossil-fuel industry. The protesters said that BlackRock’s CEO, Larry Fink, who is Jewish, should divest the company that he leads from fossil-fuel investments in order to comply with the Earth-stewardship values of his Jewish faith. Six teenagers and three rabbis were arrested (Jewish Youth Climate Movement, 2021; Gergely, 2021).

In 2020, Rosenn founded Dayenu, meaning “it would have been enough for us”, i.e., we have had enough of unabated climate change and we have had enough of a lack of adequate response to it because all the carbon already in the atmosphere is more than enough for us.

“It also means, we have enough”, Rosenn said. “We have what we need – the resources, science, and innovations – to bring about a livable, sustainable world, so that everyone can have enough” (eJewish Philanthropy, 2019).
Dayenu launched with $1.4 million in funding, including support from director Steven Spielberg’s Genesis Prize (Chernikoff, 2021). Most Jews are probably more familiar with the song by the same name sung during the Passover seder, but Dayenu is making an impact, exciting people both inside and outside of the American Jewish community. Dayenu already has developed at least 69 locally run Circles. And Dayenu’s all-star and fast-growing staff is, as of this writing, up to a dozen and includes Jewish Farm School co-founder Nati Pason, longtime Jewish environmental educator Rabbi Laura Bellows, 350.org co-founder Phil Aroneanu, and Dahlia Rockowitz, who previously planned activist trainings for Gore’s The Climate Reality Project.

Dayenu’s first major project was called Chutzpah 2020, a get-out-the-vote effort in advance of the U.S. presidential elections of November 2020. As audacious as its name implies, Chutzpah 2020 engaged 43 partner Jewish groups and 1,615 volunteers to reach out via phone and text message to 803,078 climate-concerned voters of all faiths in the battleground states of Arizona, Florida, Michigan, Minnesota, North Carolina and Pennsylvania, resulting in 21,515 voters making or confirming their plans to vote (Dayenu, 2020). The scale of the campaign’s output was unprecedented in the Jewish environmental movement.

In Elul – the month during which Jews blow the shofar daily, except for Shabbat, in the lead-up to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur – of 2021, Dayenu held its Hear the Call campaign. In Elul, one is supposed to hear the call of the shofar and take action to better oneself and society. Following prior calls for Elul to be the month for climate action (Krantz, 2018), Dayenu challenged Jews in Elul to hear the call to fight for climate action and that legislators, in turn, should hear their calls. At rallies in 16 cities and 13 states across the country, Jews blew the shofar and gathered with religious leaders of other faiths to call for climate action. A few months later, as Americans hunkered down during the delta variant’s wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, Dayenu held an online “Time to Deliver” rally to support Biden’s Build Back Better agenda.

In the wake of the 2022 report from the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change unequivocally saying that we must stop building fossil-fuel infrastructure (Pathak et al., 2022), Dayenu turned its attention to institutions that finance carbon. During the week of Passover, Dayenu, the Jewish Youth Climate Movement and The Shalom Center’s newly formed Exodus Alliance co-organized 20 protests across the country, and one in Toronto, Canada, at branches and offices of seven financial institutions: Bank of America, JPMorgan Chase, Citigroup and Wells Fargo – the “Big Four” American banks that are responsible for a quarter of fossil-fuel financing (Kirsch et al., 2022) – the Royal Bank of Canada, BlackRock and Vanguard (The Shalom Center, 2022; Dayenu, 2022a; MacDonald, 2022; Waskow, 2022a; Dayenu, 2022e; Dayenu, 2022d; Dayenu, 2022f), forming what they were calling the “Schmutzy Sheva”, or the Dirty Seven. Dayenu originally had been planning for State Street – the fifth-largest asset manager in the world, behind BlackRock, Vanguard, UBS and Fidelity – to be the seventh target, but ultimately the protest locations were chosen by local organizers (Cohen, 2022; Dayenu, 2022b; Dayenu, 2022c; Keeling, 2022), with the national offices of Dayenu, the Jewish Youth Climate Movement and The Shalom Center serving more of a facilitator role.

The protests included what Waskow called “street seders”, utilizing an interfaith haggadah – the seder’s prayer book – that he wrote “for street and table, challenging the Carbon Pharaohs to end climate plagues” (Waskow, 2022b). Based on the haggadah that he wrote for the interfaith and interracial Freedom Seder – organized by Jews for Urban Justice and led by Waskow on the third night of Passover in 1969 on the first anniversary of the assassination of the Rev. Martin
Luther King, Jr. – the 2022 haggadah is a modern take on the Exodus story. For example, the biblical 10 plagues are replaced by 10 climate plagues:

1. “Wildfires”  
2. Heat Strokes  
3. Melted Arctic and Antarctic Ice  
4. Disappearing beaches, disappearing waterfronts  
5. Flooded subways, flooded cities  
6. Acidic Oceans  
7. Asthma and cancer epidemics in targeted neighborhoods  
8. Darkness so deep and thick that no one could see or touch her neighbor  
9. Mass Extinctions of plants and animals  
10. Death of humans” (Waskow, 2022b)

More than 1,000 people attended the 2022 street seders – or an average of about 50 people per protest (The Shalom Center, 2022; Dayenu, 2022a). Protesters held up matzah – baked unleavened dough eaten on Passover – while instructing the financial institutions to “move their dough” away from carbon investments that support the Fossil-Fuel Pharaohs (MacDonald, 2022; Fisher, 2022).

Mainstream Judaism takes on climate

Increasingly, since the People’s Climate March in 2014, Jewish organizations that previously were hesitant or uninterested in engaging on climate have been adopting the issue. For example, climate has become a regular topic of discussion at meetings of the JOFEE Network, which has grown to include dozens of organizational leaders, helping to partially fill a hole lost by the Green Hevra’s dormancy. And in 2021, the Workers Circle College Network – the collegiate division of the Workers Circle, a nonprofit founded as the Workmen’s Circle in 1900 – launched Young Jews for a Green New Deal.

Even the Jewish Federations of North America – the umbrella nonprofit for Jewish communal life in the United States and Canada – is boarding the climate-action train. The 2022 edition of the Big Bold Jewish Climate Fest – the second online conference focused on a Jewish response to climate change – featured a panel titled, “Why Climate Change Must Be a Central Moral Issue of the Jewish Community”, with Rosenn, Savage, former American Jewish World Service president Ruth Messinger, and Eric Fingerhut, president and CEO of the Jewish Federations of North America (Big Bold Jewish Climate Fest, 2022). And the Jewish Federations of North America is joining the Jewish Climate Leadership Coalition, a newly formed group organized by Hazon – now run by Manela – with membership featuring the largest organizations in Jewish life, not just the Jewish Federations of North America but also Birthright Israel, the Central Conference of America Rabbis, Foundation for Jewish Camp, Hillel International, Jewish Agency for Israel, Jewish Community Centers Association of North America, Jewish Funders Network, Jewish National Fund, Moishe House, Network of Jewish Human Service Agencies, Rabbinical Assembly, Reconstructing Judaism, Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, Union for Reform Judaism and United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. All are committing to complete climate-action plans by Passover of 2023 (Jewish Climate Leadership Coalition, 2022). Knowing Manela, I am sure that climate-action plans are just the start. Like the Jewish Energy Covenant Campaign before it, the Jewish Climate Leadership Coalition has the potential to scale Jewish climate action nationally and internationally to the point that when people think of Jews, they think of us as the people fighting the Fossil-Fuel Pharaoh. With at least 78% of American Jews considering climate
to be either a major problem or a crisis (Jones et al., 2014), Jewish organizations embracing climate action finally have begun to catch up with the sentiments of their constituency.

**Conclusion**

Historically, Jewish action on the environment and climate has been slow to reflect Jewish environmental values – which are a core part of Jewish ethics, law and tradition – but there has been massive growth in the Jewish environmental movement in the past decade, and newly formed groups like Dayenu, Jewish Climate Action Network, Jewish Earth Alliance, Hazon’s Jewish Youth Climate Movement and perhaps especially Hazon’s Jewish Climate Leadership Coalition offer much promise for future Jewish climate action.

With only about 15 million Jews worldwide, we make up less than two-tenths of a percent of the global population. Our small population has its challenges, but it also offers an opportunity, in that it can be relatively easier to pivot than it would be for larger groups. We could be a green light unto the nations – not just the People of the Book, but the People of Earth Stewardship. After all, the Hebrew word for human, *adam*, comes from the Hebrew word for Earth, *adamah*. In the Hebrew Bible, God creates the first trees and the first animals, including the first human, but it is the Earth from which we are formed; God breathes life into us, but it is the Earth that births us all (Genesis 2:7, 2:9, 2:19). We would be wise to recall the words our sages attribute to God at that time: “Observe how beautiful is the work of Creation. Take care not to destroy it, for no one will repair it after you” (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13).

About 3,300 years ago, God released our people from Pharaoh’s bondage. Now we must take care of Creation and free the Earth from the Fossil-Fuel Pharaoh that threatens us all.

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**Notes**

1 Not to be confused with the Jewish LGBTQ+ group of the same name founded in Australia in 2000.
2 Sometimes farming is added, making it a network of Jewish outdoor, food, farming and environmental-education programs – but still JOFEE with one F.
3 One-seventh is significant as representing *shmita*, the biblical sabbatical year that occurs every seven years. Shmita years began on Rosh Hashanah of 2014 and 2021.
4 Goals informed by scientific and government targets at the time.
5 An honorific for Jews who have passed, z”l is the abbreviation for the Hebrew phrase *zichronah livracha* for women and *zichrono livracha* for men; it is basically the way that Jews say “of blessed memory”.

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