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Letter to the Editor

Responsible Judaism and Sustainability

LISA KEMPLER

In his December 2011 *Sh'ma* essay, “Sharing a Divergent Path,” Bruce Weinstock, my husband, accurately and respectfully depicts my perspective regarding leaving lights on during Shabbat. In fact, my discomfort extends to other standard practices in observant homes, such as leaving on the oven, the air conditioner, or the heat. When Shabbat is preceded or followed by a *chag* (holy day), observant families may leave on their electricity for more than 72 hours.

As the essay illustrates, my husband and I compromise. Over the years, I have come to appreciate the beauty of creating the self-sufficient Shabbat bubble, which, once initiated, like camping in the woods, doesn't require support or allow interference from the external world. However, that idyllic construction comes at a cost. The actual consumption is easily measured by the variance in our monthly electric bills; now multiply that by the number of observant households. This practice of consuming unnecessary energy burns fossil fuels and emits carbon into our already warming atmosphere. As my husband states, this seems “antithetical to the idea of conserving and respecting creation.”

Another common practice (less fraught with the question of what is or isn't *malakhah*, forbidden Shabbat “creation”) is the weekly reliance at synagogues on paper and plastic ware for Shabbat *kiddush*-luncheons. In most cases, there are no facilities for recycling or dish-washing. We can reasonably assume that few of these synagogues use renewable energy. Thus, these practices waste resources and damage the planet, and they demonstrate to our children that such waste is acceptable and even encouraged in the name of faith.

As Jews, we should focus on building a world where we don't cavalierly cut off mountain tops to mine coal, hydro-frack beneath Jewish camps in New York and Pennsylvania, or waste resources just because it's more convenient. However deep our faith may be, the planet's capacity to withstand our abuse is finite. As Jewish individuals and leaders, we should develop new practices and compromises that are more sustainable for us and the natural world.

—Lisa Kempler,
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Our Sigi Ziering Ethics Column
will resume next month.