

THE BATTLE FOR
HOLOCAUST MEMORY

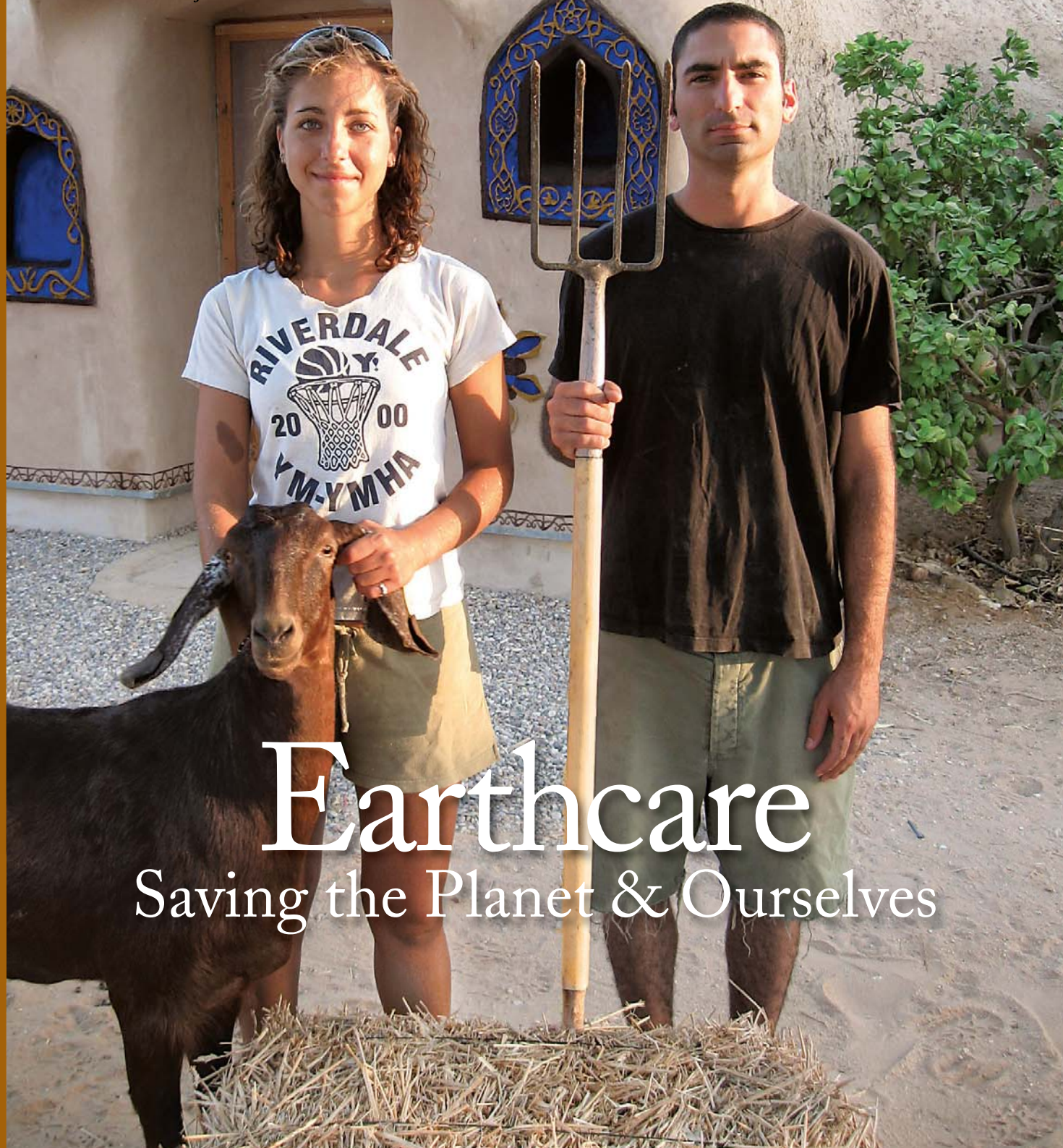
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Earthcare

Saving the Planet & Ourselves

Earth

An Ethical Culture Designed to Save



Care

Our Planet & Ourselves

Adobe igloos, hand crafted from straw bales and local earth, house students studying at Kibbutz Lotan's Center for Creative Ecology.

Kibbutz Lotan, a community in Israel's Negev conceived to fuse egalitarian ideology with Reform Jewish values, has become an internationally recognized institute for practical environmental education centered on the Earthcare concept known as "permaculture." In this Reform Judaism magazine interview, four of Lotan's leading ecology experts explain how Reform Jews and congregations throughout North America can re-envision and transform our relationship with the Earth.

At Kibbutz Lotan's Center for Creative Ecology you offer a Green Apprenticeship in Permaculture and Ecovillage Design. What exactly is permaculture, and why do you believe it's so important to be taught?



Mike Kaplin, co-creator, director, and head permaculture teacher, Center for Creative Ecology

In the 1970s, Bill Mollison, an Australian ecologist, and one of his students, David Holmgren, developed the concept—a contraction of “permanent agriculture” (or sustainable agriculture) that soon turned into “permanent culture” (or sustainable culture). Permaculture is a culture, philosophy, and design method that teaches us to look at a whole system or problem, to observe how the parts relate, and to mend what needs fixing by applying time-tested sustainable practices. For example, when we're about to purchase an item at a store, such as a bottle of milk, rather than think only of its immediate usage, which is only a small part of the system, we consider the whole picture: Do I really need it, where was it produced, what materials is it made of, and, always, what happens after it's used, how will it be disposed of? To

Green Apprenticeship students from Israel, Australia, California, and London hang out in a straw bale house in process. Construction using this renewable, natural resource began 100 years ago in Nebraska and still provides spectacular insulation value in buildings worldwide.

guide us in our decision-making, permaculture has a simple reference we call “the three ethics”: 1) Care of the Earth, including all living things—plants, animals, land, water, and air; 2) Care of People, promoting access to resources, self-reliance, and community responsibility; and 3) Fare Share, placing limits on consumption to ensure that the planet's limited resources are used wisely and equitably. Now, before we make our milk purchase, we can ask: “Care of the Earth” questions: *Were the animals who gave the milk treated well? Were they fed sprayed food, which might affect milk quality as well as the earth the food was grown in? Is the dairy farm local, avoiding pollution that would be generated from the milk's transport?* We ask “Care of the People” questions: *Does the farmer properly manage the manure so as not to pollute the local drinking water? Will the milk sale generate income for a neighborhood farm, increasing the likelihood that money will be reused efficiently within the*

local area? And we ask “Fare Share” questions too: *Are part of the cow pastures and woodlands kept “wild” for wildlife? Can the milk bottle be reused or recycled easily, or will disposing of it contribute to the landfill?* Once we truly understand that we only have one planet Earth and her resources are limited, we appreciate that we are invested with the power to change Earth, for better or worse, in every decision we make.

You quote from the permaculture designer Graham Bell: “Permaculture is about investigating and finding the way to go back into ourselves, to find within ourselves what we need to live and to stop looking for it elsewhere.” What does he mean by this?

Mike: If we can just stop for a second and look at our lives, we may realize that everything we need, want, and makes us

“With all our modern have to say hello to our

truly happy is simple, priceless, and probably universal: family, friends, love, and health. In contrast, our consumer culture



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drives us to seek happiness by acquiring the newest, fastest, most efficient contraptions—but after a short period of time that happiness is gone. And ironically, with all our modern super-duper time-saving appliances, how much time do we have to say hello to our neighbor, play with the kids, and visit with family and friends?



Alex Cicelsky, a founding member of Lotan, researcher, designer, and builder with an emphasis on environmentally appropriate systems

Making time for family and friends takes active effort. It took me a while to understand that watching even “educational TV” about foreign lands and ethnic cooking was taking time away from the family. Now, using Shabbat as a model for taking a respite from weekly patterns, we keep the TV off, restrict Internet time, cook all our meals together, and invite friends for dinner each Saturday night. Instead of

work the land, grow food—and spiritually, its meanings are prayer, appreciation, even reverence.

In 1955, eight years before Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* ignited the environmental movement, Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote these prophetic words: “As civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines. Such decline is an alarming symptom of our state of mind. Humankind will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation” (*God in Search of Man*). As Rabbi Burt Jacobson says, at the root of the environmental crisis is the eclipse of wonder and its replacement by mindless-



Lotan seminar participants combine environmentally friendly materials such as earth, sand, and fibers to decorate the walls of a children’s workshop space constructed on a recycled car tire foundation.

super-duper time-saving appliances, how much time do we neighbor, play with the kids, and visit with family and friends?”

“looking for it elsewhere,” we’ve initiated our own integrative travel and cooking show—like the Mexican food fiesta we created with tortillas made from scratch. It’s been great, and the kids always look forward to next week’s adventure.

How do Jewish teachings inform your commitment to community and environmental awareness?

Alex: When we built Lotan in Israel’s Arava desert, far from the centers of activity, we followed former Prime Minister David Ben Gurion’s call to “conquer the wilderness.” Today, as it was for our ancestors who passed through here after the Exodus, the wilderness experience transforms us politically, socially, and spiritually. Here in the gardens that we plant in the desert, Genesis 2:15 is our teacher, advising us, in two Hebrew words, how to nurture the environment in order to realize its potential as a Garden of Eden: *l’ovda ulshomra*, meaning “to till and to tend.” The word *ovda* (till) has the same root as *avodah* (the word for both work and worship). So, on the physical side, *ovda* means work—

ness, greed, and domination. Our *avoda*, in contrast, is to appreciate this magnificent world without the filter of “it’s here for me.” At Lotan we work to reexamine what we “need,” what we use to fulfill those needs, and how we do so without producing waste and pollution. We live at the intersection of Jewish ethics and permaculture.

Some people have argued that environmentalism is not essentially a Jewish imperative, that the two are related but not integrated ideas. How would you respond?



Leah Zigmond, Eco Center Academic and Educational Director; gardener; former market-garden businesswoman and biodynamic farm apprentice

I would say that the two are inseparable. After God created the world, the Torah tells us there were no trees in the fields or herbs in the gardens, for God had not yet sent rain or created a human to work the soil. Only after forming man from dust

and blowing life into his nostrils did God plant a garden. As it is written, “...God took the man and placed him in the Garden of Eden, to work and to protect...” (Genesis 2:5-2:15). From this passage I conclude that to some degree *the whole world was waiting for us humans to get to work*. Note that God’s act of planting the garden was unlike the creation of other natural spaces in that God simply commanded the latter spaces into existence. The garden, a metaphor for the earth, requires ongoing tending.

Note, too, our original purpose as humans, according to the Torah: Our first job title was gardener. Caring for the earth is surely holy work, Jewish work.

To engage in this holy work, where should we begin?

Mike: Because every deed has consequences, positive or negative, the first step is thoughtful observation: you observe, collect information, ask questions rooted in the three ethics of permaculture, and keep an open mind before

making judgment and taking action.

Think about the three Rs—Reduce, Reuse, Recycle—in that order of importance. Begin by making small changes. Ask yourself: *Will I start recycling? Composting? Carpooling? Riding my bike more? Growing herbs?* You'll be amazed at how small changes can start a domino effect.

Alex: Rabbi Hillel's adage, "If I am not for myself, who am I? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?" perfectly applies to our choices as consumers:

"If I am not for myself...": I am entitled to take my share in this world.

"If I am only for myself...": If I take more than my share, I am out of balance with what the world can give.

"And if not now, when?": I will start now, because my every action affects someone else. Maybe I can afford to leave the lights on, but that means I'm telling the electric company to burn more coal, pollute more air, and harm more people and animals. Here in Israel, 1,600 people die each year from industrial, electrical, and vehicle exhaust-related air pollution.

So, the next time I shop, I won't take

the plastic bag; I'll pack groceries in my backpack. Before going to bed, I'll pull the plugs or turn off the power strip on all electronic appliances, because they use electricity even when they're not in use. I'll put a bucket in the shower and use the saved water to water my plants. And when the time comes to renovate my house, office, or synagogue, I'll use the healthiest, most environmentally friendly materials I can find to conserve energy.

Given the magnitude of the world's environmental ills, it may seem to many that what's being proposed here is but a "drop in the bucket"—hardly worth the trouble.

Alex: From a permaculture perspective, we each need to take one step at a time with no preconditions as to the final outcome. From a Jewish perspective, Rabbi Tarfon addressed the concern regarding confronting a seemingly insurmountable challenge when he said: "It's not up to you to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it."

Am I already practicing permaculture if I grow food in my own organic garden?

Leah: Organic gardening addresses food production, which is only part of the whole. Permaculture takes into account the entire "ecological footprint" of the food cycle—tracing it along its path from production to consumption—where the initial inputs (seeds, fertilizers, soil amendments, water) come from, where it's produced, how it gets to the consumer, and what happens to any waste along the way.

What permaculture gardening practices do you recommend?

Leah: In permaculture we talk about reducing waste by making sure that every single component in a system serves at

"According to the Caring for the

least three different purposes. So, for example, if you join with others in growing fruits, vegetables, and herbs, the three benefits might be: 1) increasing awareness of what produce looks and tastes like straight from the earth; 2) discovering as a community the world beneath the soil; and 3) experiencing the empowering feeling of planting a seed and later harvesting an ear of corn or a head of broccoli.

What common gardening mistakes might we avoid?

Leah: A common mistake is thinking that this adventure is not going to include a lot of hard work. Gardeners need to weed; to keep plants irrigated (you can place natural mulch over the soil, such as dried leaves or straw, which among other things prevents the soil from drying out); and to provide for their nutrition (you can mix in compost made from discarded garden and kitchen waste, which provides nutrients and improves soil texture).

Alex: The biggest mistake is giving up when you don't succeed. Sometimes things

Courses in Creative Ecology

Kibbutz Lotan's Center for Creative Ecology offers:

1 The Peace, Justice & the Environment Fall Semester in Israel, a 16-credit college program for 14 students, accredited through U Mass Amherst, which teaches Social Justice, Group Dynamics, Sustainable Agriculture and Design.

2 The Green Apprenticeship Practical Ecology Training Program, an intensive seven-week work/study permaculture experience: Students learn local food production, organic gardening, ecological design techniques, natural and alternative building, sustainable technologies, community design, and environmental ethics while living in a unique eco-neighborhood—a prototype model for sustainable living.

3 Jewish Community and Practical Environmental Education Seminars specifically designed for Reform congregational and youth group trips to Israel.

For detailed information please visit www.kibbutzlotan.com or www.rjisrael.org, or email kibbutzlotan@gmail.com.



Seminar participants Ariel (a Venezuelan-Israeli gardener) and Frederick (an agro-engineer from Cameroon) produce sun-dried bricks. The same recipe the Children of Israel used to make mud bricks while in Egypt is applied today in the fabrication of carbon neutral walls, modern furniture, and pizza ovens.

don't work out. As Yom Kippur reminds us, what's more Jewish than to make mistakes, reflect, and learn from them?

Ask yourself: *What can I learn from this? Who might be able to help?* Somewhere nearby there may be an elderly gentleman who grows tomatoes that his wife cans, and they're much better teachers than the back of the seed package or the gardening show on TV. Bake some cookies, go over, and ask them for pointers.

How might we begin reducing consumption and waste?

Leah: A good starting point is composting organic waste. On our kibbutz, 40% of our waste is organic and compostable, so we turn it into high-quality fertilizer. If, instead, we allowed this waste to be decomposed in the landfill, it would give off large quantities of methane, a signifi-

cant greenhouse gas. keyboard got bent—so I did a web search, discovered step-by-step instructions with photos on opening up the keyboard, and, following along, was able to bend the board back into place. It's worth trying.

Another option is asking for help. That guy down the street who's always tinkering with his car—he's probably got a machine shop full of tools and would be glad to come over and help you take apart your washing machine to unclog the pipe leading to the pump. Just don't forget to bake some cookies as a thank you.

Given the many "green" technologies available today, how does one choose?

Alex: It's best to make a "low carbon" choice which supports the natural topography, climate, and solar path, as well as the amount of human energy needed to

maintain it. The idea is to break old models in favor of new, highly efficient practices; and to recognize the maintenance schedules (i.e. every garden needs to be weeded) to which you're committing. Also, you need to check the practicality of your designs, asking such questions as: *What happens if the money runs out or the rains come early?* It is possible to plan a passive solar house and organic garden that looks good on paper, only to discover upon completion that trees shade the windows needed to heat the house, the house shades the garden, or both get too much sun. Using the permaculture process, many expensive fixes can be avoided.

If you're about to begin a project—anything from turning a swampy backyard into a vegetable garden to renovating your home or synagogue—I'd suggest you take a PDC (permaculture design course). Usually a 2-week seminar or a series of weekly study sessions, PDCs are now taught practically everywhere in the world, including of course at Lotan's Center for Creative Ecology (see sidebar). Students learn a large pool of technologies, some low tech

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Next, reuse your resources. Avoid as many disposable items as possible—you can even buy plastic birthday party plates that can be washed. Pour used dishwater on the garden. Spend a little more to buy items that, if broken, can be repaired.

Alex: Reducing waste takes conscious effort. My kids tell me our computer is old. It is. It was overheating, so I replaced the fan. It was low on memory, so we added another hard drive. Eventually we will replace it, but only when it can no longer be repaired.

Look in your trashcan. The trashcan is a great teacher, when you are willing to listen to it.

Repairing items isn't easy if you're not mechanical.

Alex: Pick up this great book: *Dare to Repair: A Do-it-Yourself Guide to Fixing (Almost) Anything in the Home* by Julie Sussman. Look on the Internet—I'm always astounded by the number of people willing to freely share their expertise. Not long ago, my laptop fell off my bike and the



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and some quite advanced, as well as a series of designing processes to map environmental constraints and resources. A good PDC can empower a person to become her/his own contractor. You don't have to do all the work yourself—all you need to know is what's right for you.

I've seen the process lead to unexpectedly sensible projects. In rural Germany, instead of building the water storage tank that the fire department demanded, a community created a lovely large natural swimming pool with a small sandy beach to hold the water to be pumped in case of fire. On Lotan a wastewater treatment system irrigates a pasture for goats and has become a resting spot for migratory birds.

How can city dwellers practice permaculture?

Mike: Cities are the most exciting places where permaculture can have an effect. There is an advantage to having many people in a small area, if everyone works together toward a common goal. You can begin with areas of agreement, such as: *Everyone in our city has a right to clean air. If we all use cars in this small area, it can cause a lot of pollution.* Then it's about being creative, turning problems into solutions.

In some cities, the solutions are ingenious. For example, the Curitiba region in Brazil, which is home to 1.6 million people, has become an international model for sustainable development, despite challenges during the planning stages, in this case a military dictatorship and an economic crisis. There's a rapid, cheap, all-bus transit network running on bus-only avenues that's so efficient, auto traffic has dropped significantly, and Curitiba now registers the country's lowest rates of ambient pollution and per capita gas consumption. Curitiba also boasts 52 square meters of green space per person, up from fewer than one square meter in 1970; residents planted 1.5 million trees along city streets and builders received tax breaks for projects that included green space. Recycling is integral to city functioning. Through the "green exchange" employment program, low-income families living in areas unreachable

by truck bring trash bags to neighborhood centers, where they're exchanged for bus tickets and food, resulting in less city litter, less disease, less garbage dumped in rivers, and a better life for the poor. Children, too, can exchange recyclable garbage for school supplies, chocolate, toys, and show tickets. Moreover, 70% of the city's trash is recycled by its own residents, and the city employs the homeless and recovering alcoholics in its garbage separation plant.

While not every city may be ready to become a Curitiba, we can do more. We can grow food in communal gardens, and we need to plant more trees—the answer to many global problems. Trees clean the air, regulate air temperature, prevent soil erosion, offer food and shelter to wildlife. They give back a lot more than they take.

Will saving the earth require mainstreaming the Lotan and Curitiba models of communal cooperation?

Alex: Let's look at the larger picture. For most of human history, we lived and shared resources within our tribe. In the *shtetl*, the Jewish community offered a safety net to all. Why? Because everyone knew everyone else and mutual responsibility was a *mitzvah* for all.

Today, too, when you know your neighbors, sharing is possible. When my wife, two children, and I lived in an apartment building in Rehovot, I didn't need to buy a single tool because I made friends with Haim on the fourth floor who had them all. I didn't need a car either, because once a week I got a ride to the supermarket with Karen or Yaron from the second floor.

There is so much unused wealth all around us into which we can tap, so long as we don't think we have to own it all by ourselves. We gorge our houses with stuff

we don't use. Nature, on the other hand, shares every atom, recycling it constantly.



Mark Naveh, General Secretary, Kibbutz Lotan; member, international Ecovillage education curriculum board

Community is both a value and a human need. Unfortunately, the destruction of traditional communities that occurred with the advent of the modern age has resulted in a whole range of social and environmental problems. The traditional community helped to create trust and a sense of belonging, and fostered respect and responsibility amongst people and toward the environment. When human beings are torn away from community, the result can be alienation, ultimately even violence, toward other human beings and toward the earth.

Ecovillages—human-scale communities that integrate a supportive social environment with low-impact living and a strong spiritual dimension—attempt to rectify this situation. While different ecovillages follow diverse paths, all share the understanding that spirituality is the essential ingredient that gives us purpose, and the glue that holds us together. True, the ecovillage model is currently outside the mainstream, but communities on the cutting edge of developing sustainable social, economic, and ecological solutions are having an ever-increasing impact the world over. Their ideas can be put into practice anywhere people live. All it takes is goodwill and a little creativity. Community is the key. And, of course, the synagogue as a spiritual community center has a vital role to play in this process.

Is there anything else you'd recommend to our readers?

Alex: Go outside and find a place where you feel comfortable. Make a list of what makes you happy. Consider if there are enough resources on the planet to give you and everyone else the same things on your list. Then reassess your needs and goals.

And if you want someone to talk to, give us a call (011-972-54-979-9009) or send us an email (kibbutzlotan@gmail.com). It's our *avoda* (all meanings of the word intended) to help. In the spirit of Rabbi Hillel: "Just do it, now." □

One-Stop Green Resource



The Union for Reform Judaism's "Greening Reform Judaism" web portal www.urj.org/green

offers Jewish teachings on the environment, steps to reduce your carbon footprint, educational programming, social action ideas, models of "green synagogues," and more.