

Temple Israel's green pledge

February 06, 2019

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Rabbi Elaine Zecher and Cantor Roy Einhorn at Temple Israel's CSA, or "community supported agriculture program"
COURTESY PHOTO

BOSTON – Temple Israel of Boston is making strides to fight climate change, most recently becoming the first Reform synagogue in New England to earn Energy Shield Certification – a merit badge awarded by interfaith environmental organization GreenFaith.

In 2015, Temple Israel, motivated by what is written about the earth in the Torah, launched "The Green Team" – a group of congregants, clergy and staff dedicated to improving sustainability, educating the community and decreasing the Temple's overall carbon footprint.

Green Team co-chairs Joan Rachlin and Jill Hahn – longtime congregants of Temple Israel and lifelong lovers of the earth – spoke to The Jewish Advocate about this achievement, what they have done to reach this point and where they intend to take it from here.

Rachlin said she joined Temple Israel just over 30 years ago, "largely because of its reputation for social justice projects and for its diversity and inclusion."

Hahn agreed, saying she joined Temple Israel just as she started seeing the signs of climate change in her work as a biologist.

"I became interested in the subject of 'How do you get people motivated by a subject if they don't feel personally affected by it?'" she said.

The GreenFaith pledge motivated the congregation.

"It gave us a goal," Rachlin said. "It gave us structure; it gave us materials; and it gave us a way to really involve congregants because GreenFaith and the Energy Shield Program have five elements."



The program comprises five elements, according to Rachlin: reducing the carbon footprint of the synagogue; having 15 percent of congregants pledge to improve sustainability practices throughout their lives; developing environmental educational programming for all ages; incorporating prayers and readings about ecology in services; and participating in advocacy activities on all governmental levels.

Meeting the 15 percent requirement was challenging, Rachlin said, since Temple Israel, the largest Reform congregation in New England, does not have an exact active congregant count. GreenFaith, therefore, allowed TI to estimate the number of active congregants and use that number as a benchmark.



Anita Feins, left, with Fran Putnoi and Buckle Farms owner Jim Buckle at Temple Israel's CSA, or "community supported agriculture program"
COURTESY PHOTO

Rachlin noted several accomplishments to date of the Green Team. The synagogue replaced its incandescent lights with LED bulbs; improved efficiency in the heating and cooling systems; sealed all leaky windows; educated congregants on climate change; installed new recycling bins with improved signage; began composting; reduced single-use plastics by purchasing glass kiddush cups; hosted a community supported agriculture program, or CSA, to support local farmers; and installed water stations for reusable bottles.

The synagogue also created a green b'nei mitzvah program.

Hahn suggested the success of the Green Team has come through making many small yet impactful changes.

"In order to combat climate change," she said, "you don't have to have people doing heroic, very difficult things. You just have to have a large number of people doing smaller,

more accessible things. The question is how to engage people in that work – how to engage people to make small changes in their lives that collectively can have a big impact.”

“We’ve been asking each other as a congregation,” she said, “How can we engage more members of the congregation? How can we have them excited and empowered to make some changes in their lives that can address climate change?”

“We’re finally getting to a point where there are initiatives going on in the larger community,” Hahn said, “and I know there are a lot of exciting things starting to happen in Boston around becoming carbon-neutral by 2050.”

She added Temple Israel is looking into installing solar panels, noting big projects take time.

“There’s a program where you actually purchase the panels,” Hahn said. “You can donate part of the energy that you generate to a low-income or disadvantaged community. As part of our mission as a temple, that’s very attractive to us.”

Hahn and Rachlin hope their efforts will encourage other congregations to look at their own facilities.

“Judaism teaches us that we are to take care of the earth,” Rachlin said, “We are to preserve it for future generations. It’s throughout the Torah. It’s been made clear by so many rabbis – as well as environmental scholars and ethicists – that that is a very strong commandment, based on not only the repetitiveness in the Torah, but also the specific language.”

For more information on Temple Israel’s green efforts, visit tisrael.org/green-team.



New recycling bins featuring improved signage at Temple Israel COURTESY PHOTO