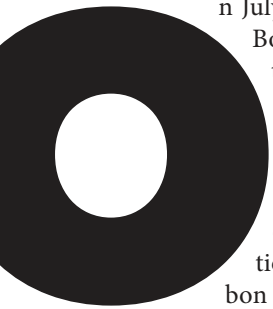


How my Omaha roots will help me chair Hazon

RICHARD SLUTZKY



In July 1 of this year, I was installed as Board Chair by the Board of Directors of Hazon, a national Jewish environmental organization (www.hazon.org), for a two-year term.

The primary focus of Hazon, “the Jewish lab for sustainability,” is to educate Jews of all ages to take action personally to reduce their carbon footprint, and, by doing so, improve the environment for themselves, their

families and the rest of us.

Hazon educates through immersive experiences at various locations, including at a Hazon retreat center in Falls Village, Connecticut, as well as by training scores of young, environmentally-knowledgeable Jews (through a program called JOFEE Fellows (Jewish Outdoor Food, Farming and Environmental Education) to disseminate useful information throughout the country through JCCs, day schools, synagogues, etc. Hazon has also successfully created a Seal of Sustainability that is awarded to Jewish institutions that have undertaken environmentally-sustainable initiatives, including using solar energy to partially power their activities and using recyclable materials instead of plastic plates and utensils for social activities like Oneg Shabbats or meetings, etc.

Hazon is perhaps best known to many as annually sponsoring a week-long Israel bike ride which it operates in partnership with the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies in the Negev Desert at Kibbutz Ketura. In 2015, I had the good fortune of biking through the Negev with Omahan Marty Shukert and former Omahan Nancy Rosenstock Barag along with another 160 cyclists.

At Hazon retreats, I have seen young Jews, very secularized and uninvolved, become turned on by learning how our tradition has interpreted our relationship with the environment. They have also become enthused about their Jewishness by recognizing that there is a growing community of like-minded Jews who care deeply about the environment and are concerned about the potentially cataclysmic damage caused by climate change. As we envision what the Jewish community will look like in 20 years or more, I hope that Hazon can take significant responsibility for building a stronger, environmentally-sensitive Jewish community that takes the concept of repairing the world quite literally.

When the first Earth Day was announced, it was April, 1970 and I was a student at Lewis and Clark Junior High School, anxious to enter Central High that fall. Earlier that February, Barry Commoner, the biologist and environmentalist (and future professor of mine at Washington University) was on the front cover of *Time Magazine*. Commoner and Wisconsin Senator Gaylord Nelson who initiated Earth Day, called attention to the ways to avoid the Earth’s despoliation. I recall that one of our activities in the newly-formed environmental club at junior high school was to clean up a local creek. I had rarely gotten my hands dirty like that, and I came into contact, perhaps for the first time, with the trash that people intentionally and disturbingly threw into the creek.

At the same time, in Hebrew school at Beth El, Professor Freund, who also taught at UNO, used Al Vorspan’s Jewish Ethics and Social Values book to help us understand and formulate opinions on current international topics including civil rights, civil liberties, the environment, abortion, etc. The issues surrounding the Jewish response to the environment continued to concern me, especially as we celebrated our holidays, many of which had agricultural roots. We were the people who built a nation in the desert and survived and who eradicated the swamps when Israel became a state. Back in the ‘70s, national Jewish leadership was not focused on the environmental movement, and that perhaps was a missed opportunity to connect with environmentally-concerned Jews.

Even though many years have passed, I recall from Dr. Freund’s class that it was very clear from Jewish tradition and text that we Jews are only temporary stewards of the land and that as other previous generations planted trees for fruits and shade for us, so must we plant for generations to follow. During those same years, U.S.Y. themes and messaging by the Omaha Jewish Federation highlighted the importance of Tikkun Olam (repairing the world) and C’Lal Israel (we are responsible for one another) as well as the critical importance of Tzedakah. Lastly, classes like Eleanor Whitman’s Jewish American literature, where we read Saul Bellow, Elie Wiesel, Philip Roth and Chaim Potok, gave me a sense of the rich diversity in American Jewish culture, that many paths were possible, that individual actions have consequences and that while life can be full of contradictions, controversy and conflict, at the same time there are threads of hope that run through much of the Jewish American experience.

Had I grown up in Larchmont, Great Neck or Newton, I may not have been as sensitive to environmental issues as I was growing up in Omaha. While I grew up in suburban Omaha, the city relied heavily on the nearby agricultural community for our commerce. Farming had its own daily TV news segment and when I was in high school, my parents moved us out to what was west

Omaha in the ‘70s. I remember hiking (OK, trespassing) through nearby cornfields, and cycling while inhaling pesticides and herbicides around farmland where now the Meadowbrook subdivision exists. To the west and east of Omaha, Interstate 80 in the ‘70s cut a swath through fields of corn, sorghum, alfalfa, soybeans, etc. At that time, we couldn’t really claim a farm-to-table culture since much of the produce went to feed cattle. What existed then, and perhaps still does today, was a highly industrialized approach to growing our food. Michael Pollan in his best selling books like the *Omnivore’s Dilemma* traces many of the challenges we Americans must confront as a result of how our food economy has been built and how agriculture as currently structured contributes to global warming on a massive scale. Much can be done politically to legislate change to create more sustainable agribusiness solutions.

Hazon is a nonpartisan charity and does not lobby for legislative change. That said, part of Hazon’s role is to educate its participants on the scientific research regarding the interrelationships between agriculture and climate change so they can take their own actions in the political arena with ample information. Whether it was attending day camp at Hummel Park Nature Center, then sleep-away camp at Esther K. Newman Camp and later at Herzl Camp in Wisconsin, being in nature was infectious, no pun intended. Whether it was the diversity of shrubs and trees (including the missed Dutch Elms), the humming of the crickets, the chirping birds, the sound of the rivers and lakes around me, I felt then and still do feel connected spiritually to nature. Back then, nature seemed to exist on a different plane of perception from Judaism, which in my mind at the time seemed solely text-based. Now, in adulthood, through Hazon, I am seeing more clearly how interconnected Judaism is to our environment.

As I experienced my youth in Omaha, the lectures and classroom study as well as my perception of my local environment did not intuitively illuminate a path for me to follow for the future, but only in retrospect do I know now that my teachers and experiences made a significant impact on me, ultimately leading me to become involved in Hazon as an active cyclist on Hazon rides, as a participant on their sustainability mission in Israel, as a donor and as a board member. I regret that I cannot travel back in time to thank my Beth El Hebrew school teachers, biology teachers, camp counselors and others who, many years later, I recognize helped me build the necessary ethical foundation and requisite passion for my new leadership role. For more information about Hazon, please visit our website, www.hazon.org.



Omaha native Richard Slutzky proudly wearing my Nebraska shirt in front of the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center, which is part of Hazon.

Happy New Year!

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