



The People's Climate March in New York City in 2014, which was supported by many Jewish groups. Photo by Alejandro Alvarez, Wikimedia Commons: <http://bit.ly/2xy2qM9>

Note on this Case Study:

Global anthropogenic—or human caused—climate change has deeply impacted the ways that religions are practiced around the world. At the same time, religions have also played major roles in framing the issue among their believers. Some Jews work tirelessly to change their habits and mitigate human impact on the climate. Others ignore the crisis, or do not believe in Jewish environmentalism. Read this case study with this in mind: the Jews described here show a range of reactions to climate change, but all of them are Jewish.

As always, when thinking about religion and climate change, maintain a focus on how religion is internally diverse, always evolving and changing, and always embedded in specific cultures.

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Jews and Fossil Fuel Exploration

Most Jews accept the science proving climate change, and are concerned with lowering emissions. For example, in the US, Jews played a major role in organizing the People's Climate March, and many national Jewish groups such as the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL) work to fight climate change. COEJL cites the Jewish duty of *tikkun olam* or “repairing the world” to show that Jews are expected by God to steward and heal the planet. Thus, some Jews assert that burning fossil fuels violates their covenant with God. Rabbi Arthur Waskow has called on Jews to reject fossil fuels by comparing climate change to the book of Exodus, in which the Jewish people escape oppression from the Egyptian Pharaoh. Waskow stated: “today the Pharaohs are giant corporations: big coal, big oil, and big natural gas.”¹

However, there are some Jews that reject climate science and have lobbied for fossil fuel expansion. For example, several Jews were original signers of the Cornwall Declaration on Environmental Stewardship, an interfaith document by conservative Christians and Jews which denies the threat of climate change.² These Jews also believe in *tikkun olam*, but they argue that funding renewable energy will result in unreliable energy and job losses which will endanger human welfare, and thus threaten—not repair—the world.³

Still, while climate change concerns most Jews, many have complex views regarding fossil fuel exploration, often related to Israel—a country in the Middle East created in 1948 as a Jewish state. Most of Israel's

neighbors have become wealthy due to massive fossil fuel resources which they sell internationally, and many of these neighbors have tensions with Israel. Around the world, many Jewish people are concerned about the safety of their co-religionists in Israel, so they often strongly oppose importing oil from Arab nations, who they fear will use their wealth against Israel in periods of conflict. Because of this, while many Jews are in favor of fighting climate change, their strategies to fight emissions are often influenced by a desire for energy independence from Arab nations. Sometimes, this means that Jews concerned about climate change support fossil fuel exploration in other parts of the world.

¹ Julie Halpert, “Judaism and Climate Change,” *Yale Climate Connections*, (New Haven, CT), Feb. 29, 2012. <http://bit.ly/2zv38h6>

² E. Calvin Beisner, “Early and Notable Signers of the Cornwall Declaration,” *The Cornwall Alliance*, Oct. 29, 1999. <http://bit.ly/2zOfSAb>

³ Halpert, “Judaism and Climate Change.”

For example, in the United States some Jewish groups, like the American Jewish Committee (AJC), have lobbied Congress to approve the Keystone XL pipeline which would import tar sands oil from Canada. While AJC has stated that the US should take strong measures to lower its greenhouse gas emissions, they prioritize energy independence from Middle Eastern nations that threaten Israel. On the other hand, other American Jews have opposed the pipeline; two rabbis were arrested at the White House in 2011 for protesting its construction.⁴

A type of fossil fuel drilling called hydraulic fracturing—commonly known as fracking—has also split the Jewish community. The disposal of fracking waste has contaminated drinking water and even caused earthquakes.⁵ Still, some Jews have promoted fracking as a means of energy independence from Middle Eastern nations hostile to Israel. Like Keystone XL, the AJC has supported fracking if the government regulates the process to ensure safety. In 2008 and 2009, four Jewish summer camps in Pennsylvania sold fracking rights on their land to fossil fuel companies. However, some Jewish parents have been concerned about possible contamination of the camps' drinking water and have questioned the moral message that these fracking deals send to their children. The contracts spurred the creation of an advocacy group called Jews Against Hydrofracking which has worked to organize Jewish communities to oppose fracking at summer camps and across the US.⁶

Companies have also begun fracking in Israel and Israeli occupied lands; in 2015, Afek Oil and Gas discovered vast deposits in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, which they claimed could provide Israel with all its energy needs for years. However, many Jewish environmental groups have fought this fracking exploration since it began. Since most countries consider the Golan Heights to be occupied territory, Israel's right to extract these resources is also contested.⁷

Fossil fuel divestment has also proved controversial. Divestment is a tactic used by universities and other organizations to put moral and economic pressure on the fossil fuel industry. Groups that divest refuse to buy stock in fossil fuel companies, and sell any stock in the industry that they have already purchased. By 2016, divestors had removed over \$5.2 trillion of combined assets from the fossil fuel industry.⁸ Some Jews have promoted divesting as "a matter of *tikkun olam*," and have encouraged synagogues to divest. However, other Jews—even many who are deeply concerned about climate change—have rejected fossil fuel divestment, as they believe that it will encourage the growth of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement. Though not nearly as successful as fossil fuel divestment, BDS uses similar strategies to protest the Israeli occupation of Palestine by encouraging groups to divest their money from Israeli businesses. Many Jews worry that by promoting fossil fuel divestment, divestment will become more common in other areas, and be used by BDS against Israel. Thus, the AJC has rejected fossil fuel divestment, and even the COEJL has no stated policy on divestment, though their director treats it skeptically.⁹

⁴ Halpert, "Judaism and Climate Change."

⁵ Nick Stockton, "Fracking's Problems Go Deeper than Water Pollution," *Wired*, June 18, 2015. <http://bit.ly/2kyAeFN>

⁶ Halpert, "Judaism..."; Josh Nathan-Kazis, "Fracking Comes to Jewish Summer Camp," *The Forward*, July 13, 2011. <http://bit.ly/2mfmkdy>

⁷ Andy Tully, "Major Shale Find Could Guarantee Israel's Oil Supply for Years," *Nasdaq*, Oct. 9, 2015. <http://bit.ly/2yvvsis7>

⁸ Damian Carrington, "Fossil Fuel Divestment Funds Double to \$5tn in a Year," *The Guardian*, Dec. 12, 2016. <http://bit.ly/2hfXs0R>

⁹ Hody Nemes and Nathan Guttman, "Jewish Groups Push Back in Fight for Divestment from Fossil Fuel Companies," *The Forward*, May 22, 2014. <http://bit.ly/2yQUASd>

Additional Resources

Primary Sources:

- Opinion piece in *The Forward* about fracking at Jewish summer camps by Jews Against Hydrofracking founder Mirele Goldsmith (2011): <http://bit.ly/2xm3jee>
- AJC statement welcoming congressional approval of the Keystone XL pipeline (2015): <http://bit.ly/2Ay1eZU>
- Information about Jews and fracking from COEJL (2012): <http://bit.ly/2zAufVz>
- AJC statement which connects fossil fuel divestment and BDS divestment (2016): <http://bit.ly/2mg9vQ6>
- Various Jewish commentaries on fracking from Jews Against Hydrofracking: <http://bit.ly/2md3K5u>

Secondary Sources:

- Vox video on the complex history of the creation of Israel: <http://bit.ly/21wKvhH>
- National Geographic video describing the fracking process: <http://bit.ly/1nParlg>
- PBS video on water contamination from fracking: <http://bit.ly/2hkpMOX>
- The Guardian video on fossil fuel divestment: <http://bit.ly/1Lwg0hR>

Discussion Questions

- How do Jewish actions concerning fossil fuel exploration show how Judaism is internally diverse?
- Look at two of the Jewish perspectives from Jews Against Hydrofracking in the last primary source. How are these Jewish commentators using their beliefs and their holy texts to justify their anti-fracking stance?
- Most Jews are concerned by climate change, but how does their cultural context complicate the ways that Jews work to address these problems? How has Jewish history impacted their actions?
- Most Jews live in the United States and Israel.¹⁰ How do Israeli politics influence the ways that some American Jews think about fossil fuel exploration?
- Read the AJC statement on divestment. Do you agree that fossil fuel divestment will lead to divestment in other areas like BDS? Why or why not?
- Why does “energy independence” matter to many Jews?



A hydraulic fracturing or “fracking” operation in Pennsylvania, 2013. Photo by US Geological Survey. Wikimedia Commons: <http://bit.ly/2g1dCNd>

¹⁰ World Religion Database, ed. Todd M. Johnson and Brian A. Grim (Boston: Brill, 2015).