

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Environmental and climate justice is complex, impacting racial justice, economic inequality, food insecurity, and more, presenting opportunities for impactful action in local communities and through collective policy change at every level of government.

Each person and each community is at a different place on the journey to create climate and environmental justice. While some are seasoned activists who have been doing this work for decades, others might just be dipping their toes in the water. Whether you are beginning or continuing this work in your congregation or community, these steps provide a basic framework to help guide successful justice work.

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Where to get started

1. **Build a team.** No one can do this by themselves. Gathering a team of lay leaders, clergy and synagogue professionals, and youth committed to doing this work together increases capacity and provides a structure of support. Spend some time building relationships, studying text, and understanding each other’s approach and reason for caring about the environment. This investment in your team is irreplaceable in giving you the capacity to succeed. A strong and diverse team can increase the members and areas of the congregation or community that are reached.
2. **Take stock of current practices.** Conduct an analysis of the steps your congregation or congregants take to be environmentally friendly, including recycling and composting, using reusable materials, using renewable energy, cleaning up your local area, and advocating for policy. A good way to start is to see how many of the possible actions in this resource guide you, your community, or congregation already do.

3. **Meet other local advocates.** Spend time connecting with individuals and organizations already doing this work in your local community. [Interfaith Power and Light](#) and the [Sierra Club](#) both have many local chapters that could provide a useful jumping off point or help you to make other connections. Make an extra effort to connect with organizations and advocates that work with disproportionately impacted communities, including low-income communities, communities of color, and indigenous communities.
4. **Find the most salient issues and get to work!** Based on your goals, practice inventory, and meetings with other partners, decide what your top priorities are and start working!
5. The team will need to **research** the internal synagogue practices, policy, or legislative process that the issue will need to go through.
6. **Identify the key targets** – who are the decision makers that need to be contacted? Consider the best ways to raise awareness in the community and the best time to bring the issue to the decision maker. It is important to lay the groundwork and show that there is community interest in this issue before meeting with the decision maker. This can then be referenced during the [meeting](#) with an elected official or decision maker.
7. [Plan a meeting](#) with an elected official or decision maker. During this meeting try to get a commitment from this individual. Also identify if there are other elected officials or decision makers who you will need to meet with to move this issue forward.

Greening your Congregation: Ideas for Direct Action

There are a wide variety of personal and communal actions that can make a substantial difference in addition to advocating for policy change. Some of the actions a congregation or community can take are listed below. This list is not exhaustive, but can provide a starting point or spark ideas for sustained communal action. These actions can, and should, be taken by both individuals and communities.

Make your building more energy efficient: Improving energy efficiency alone can provide [up to 40 percent](#) of the reduction targets under the Paris Climate Agreement. [These steps can include](#) installing LED lightbulbs, replacing your windows to increase insulation, replacing roof insulation, installing more efficient air conditioners, refrigerators, or heaters. This can also include a more extensive retrofit or renovation. One option is to get [LEED certification](#) for new or [existing](#) buildings.

Increase your use of renewable energy: Congregations have a variety of opportunities to increase their use of renewable energy. If possible, [install solar panels directly onto your building or property](#) to generate electricity . If this is not possible, your congregation can purchase renewable energy to be added to your power grid to offset your energy usage.

Eliminate Single Use Items: Also known as disposable items, Styrofoam or plastic plates, cups, cutlery, napkins, wrappers, etc., often sit in a landfill (and are harmful to the environment) and require a lot of fossil fuels to produce. Beyond not using straws and plastic bags, there are many sources of disposable plastic that we can reduce. One option is to replace the plates and cutlery at lunches, bagel breakfasts, and other gatherings with reusable items. This can be a great investment for the planet and eliminates the cost of every event with purchasing these items. Even if this is not feasible, consider purchasing compostable plates and cutlery, which are widely available. However, ensure that compostable items are disposed of to a composting facility and not sitting in a landfill. Do research in your local area to find out where to bring compost.

Add plants to your community: Whether it is a community garden, planting trees on your property or your area, or simply adding plants, greening your space is both beautiful and eco-friendly. Plants are “CO₂ sinks,” meaning that they take CO₂ out of the atmosphere, which limits our carbon footprints. They also help restore the ecosystem around our buildings that might have been destroyed by their construction, bringing animals and other plant life back into the area.

Recycle and Compost: Does your congregation already recycle or compost? If not, this is another great step to reduce our carbon footprint. Each municipality is different in terms of what can be recycled and how pick up works. Make sure to do the research before launching into this initiative! Want a way to kickstart these efforts? Consider a “zero-waste” challenge: Can your synagogue have a zero-waste event? Which committee or synagogue group can be the first to accomplish this?

Reduce your travel emissions: Transportation is [the largest source](#) of carbon emissions in the U.S. Carpooling and encouraging public transportation when applicable are two great ways to reduce emissions. When the synagogue owns or rents cars or buses, they can be hybrid or partially electric. Another major way to reduce travel emissions is to [purchase carbon offsets](#). If you are taking a flight as part of a group trip, such as confirmation, travel to L’Taken, or trips to Israel, you can [purchase carbon offsets](#) to plant trees or support other ways to reduce CO₂ emissions.

Disaster Preparedness and Resiliency: Unfortunately, natural disasters are part of our reality, and climate change increases the frequency and severity of these disasters. Part of addressing climate and environmental justice is understanding which people, communities, and infrastructure is most vulnerable and [what we can do to support it](#). This can include both understanding your own building’s vulnerabilities, which members are most likely to suffer the most severe consequences, and how you can partner with other community institutions or local governments to assist the broader community.

Education on the climate and environmental justice: Education is a crucially important aspect of any environment or climate justice work. Education events can accomplish many different goals, including: raising awareness and buy-in for new synagogue initiatives, discovering what type of action congregants might be most willing to support, and combatting both denial and feelings of fatalism that arise when discussing climate change.

Hazon Seal of Sustainability: A roadmap for Jewish institutions to become healthier and more sustainable through education, action, and advocacy. Many institutions want to engage in healthier, more humane, and more sustainable behaviors, but don't know where to start. Others have already begun – be it starting a garden, composting food waste, or installing LED light bulbs – but don't know how to keep up the momentum. The [Hazon Seal of Sustainability](#) provides a roadmap to advance sustainability-related education, action, and advocacy in the Jewish community and beyond.

Advocating in your Community: Creating Systemic Change Locally

Turning climate trends around will require organized collective action. There are a variety of policies on the local, state, provincial, and national level that all can play a substantial role in helping prevent the worst impacts of climate change.

Below is a list of possible advocacy opportunities to pursue locally. However, each locality is drastically different in terms of their current policies and future commitment. Any attempt at advocacy should begin with researching the current policies and meeting with partner organizations to understand what the landscape is and what are some of the long-term goals.

Local Government Action

- **Access to clean drinking water:** Having [reliable access to safe drinking water](#) is an issue for communities across the U.S., from New York to Michigan to California. [Degraded pipes](#), overdrawn aquifers, and unequitable spending all contribute to this problem, which has many negative health and environmental outcomes. Do research to see if this is an issue in your community and how people are seeking to address it, like [efforts by RAC-CA](#).
- **Greening public transportation:** Transitioning to electric buses and renewable energy for public transportation [is a major priority of the U.S. environmental movement](#). A robust and clean public transportation system could make a significant impact in reducing carbon emissions from transportation. However, the transition to electric buses, subways, and streetcars must be accompanied by adding renewable energy to the energy grid.
- **Increasing access to recycling and composting:** While recycling is a great personal action, it only works if there are adequate facilities to collect and process the recycled material. A key part of

advocacy is ensuring that individuals who want to take personal action have the tools to do so. Each municipality has different standards on what can be recycled or composted, when, and how.

- **Increasing trees and plant life public property:** Just as you can plant trees or gardens on your private property, the city can increase the plant life on roads, parks, and other public property. Increasing plant life is great for biodiversity, reducing our carbon footprint, and beautifies the city in the process.
- **Restrictions on styrofoam and single-use plastics:** Several cities and states have used legislation to reduce single-use plastics, including having a five-cent tax on plastic bags and banning the use of plastic straws. Research whether your community has such regulations, and if so, are they effective.
- **Building more bikes/walkways:** A great way to reduce emissions is to drive less, but that is not always possible without the right infrastructure for alternate modes of transportation. Ensuring there are safe paths for biking and walking, especially along heavily trafficked routes, can make using those modes safer and more attractive.

Advocating in your Community: Creating Systemic Change Statewide

Turning climate trends around will require organized collective action. There are a variety of policies on the local, state, provincial, and national level that all can play a substantial role in helping prevent the worst impacts of climate change.

Below is a list of possible advocacy opportunities to pursue at the state level. However, each state or province is drastically different in terms of their current policies and future commitment. Any attempt at advocacy should begin with researching the current policies and meeting with partner organizations to understand what the landscape is and what are some of the long-term goals.

Statewide Efforts

- **Increasing fuel efficiency standards:** Currently, there are federal fuel efficiency standards for vehicles in America. California received permission from the federal government to have standards more stringent than the federal standard, [and 13 other states have followed](#) the California standard. With the Trump Administration's proposal to reduce the federal standard, following the California standard is an important advocacy opportunity to increase fuel efficiency and decrease CO₂ emissions from cars.
- **Renewable energy portfolios/standards:** [Over 35 states](#) have a renewable energy portfolio or standards, which is the amount of energy that is required by law to come from renewable energy. We believe that the entire U.S. needs to be operating at 100 percent renewable energy by 2050 in order to prevent the worst impacts of climate change. Already Washington, New Mexico California, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico, along with over 100 cities, have 100 percent renewable energy targets. [RAC-CA's fight for SB 100](#) is a great example of what can happen when the Jewish community comes together to work for

renewable energy.

- **Tax credits for climate-friendly choices:** There have been a wide variety of tax credits offered to individuals who make climate-friendly choice around the country, including for installing renewable energy in homes, purchasing hybrid or electric vehicles, incentives for companies to increase their energy efficiency, and more. Investigate what kinds of policies exist in your state (or used to exist but have expired) and consider advocating for increased options. One of the biggest barriers to individuals making climate-friendly choices are the costs, and tax incentives can help alleviate the burden.
- **Just transitions programs:** Some communities will be adversely impacted by this transition to renewable energy. Communities near power plants, coal mines, and oil rigs may lose economic productivity. Low-income communities may be saddled with unaffordable increasing costs until these policies have been scaled up sufficiently to drive down costs. Every state has their own communities that will be disproportionately impacted. Figure out who these communities are in your state and work to ensure that they too have access to the opportunities a new green economy provides.
- **Carbon pricing:** One of the most effective and complicated solutions to climate change is putting [a price on carbon](#). This exists in many forms, including cap-and-trade, a carbon tax, and other initiatives at the state or regional level. Carbon prices would help promote the transition to renewable energy by making carbon-intensive energy such as coal, oil, and fossil fuels more expensive than renewable options. There are [many factors to consider](#), including who pays the tax (and how that [impacts low-income communities](#)), what kinds of carbon are taxed, and what to do with the money (lower other taxes, provide a dividend, invest in renewables, etc.). [The Friends Committee on National Legislation has a great set of principles](#) and the RAC has our own principles derived from the [2009 URJ Climate Change and Energy Resolution](#). Carbon pricing is a great policy to advocate for, but before deciding how to approach that, feel free to reach out to the RAC staff to have a more in-depth conversation about what to consider.

8. **ACTION**

9. **Advocating in your Community: Creating Systemic Change Nationally**

10. Turning climate trends around will require organized collective action. There are a variety of policies on the local, state, provincial, and national level that all can play a substantial role in helping prevent the worst impacts of climate change.

11. Below is a list of possible advocacy opportunities at the national level.. Any attempt at advocacy should begin with researching the current policies and meeting with partner organizations to understand what the landscape is and what are some of the long-term goals. For more information on these priorities or relevant legislation in the U.S. Congress or administration policies, reach out to RAC staff.

12.

13. National

14. **International leadership:** As one of the world's wealthiest nations and a historic emitter of fossil fuels, the U.S. has a unique responsibility to be a world leader on climate action. All countries are needed in this effort to make swift, worldwide change, and the U.S. can play a critical role in garnering worldwide support for action. For this reason, it is important to be vigorous in supporting international climate actions such as the Paris Agreement and the Green Climate Fund, actions to protect the Arctic, and work to pass legislation at the federal level, like the [Climate Action Now Act \(H.R. 9/S.1743\)](#) to make that a reality.

15. **Grid modernization:** One of the barriers to fully relying on renewable energy is the structure of the electricity grid. The grid must be updated and modernized to fully facilitate the transition to renewable energy and ensure comprehensive and reliable access to energy.

16. **Research and Development:** There is still much we do not know about how to solve climate change and the work that must be done to make the technology effective and affordable. One of the most prominent areas of research is in energy storage, which would allow solar panels and wind turbines to generate extra electricity that is stored for days or months for when those sources are not producing energy. A second area of research is in carbon capture and storage, to take carbon out of the atmosphere and transform it or store it safely.

17. **Carbon pricing:** One of the most effective and complicated solutions to climate change is putting [a price on carbon](#). This exists in many forms, including cap-and-trade, a carbon tax, and other initiatives at the state or regional level. Carbon prices would help promote the transition to renewable energy by making carbon-intensive energy such as coal, oil, and fossil fuels more expensive than renewable options. There are [many factors to consider](#), including who pays the tax (and how that [impacts low-income communities](#)), what kinds of carbon are taxed, and what to do with the money (lower other taxes, provide a dividend, invest in renewables, etc.). [The Friends Committee on National Legislation has a great set of principles](#) and the RAC has our own principles derived from the [2009 URJ Climate Change and Energy Resolution](#). Carbon pricing is a great policy to advocate for, but before deciding how to approach that, feel free to reach out to the RAC staff to have a more in-depth conversation about what to consider.

18. **Public Lands Protections:** In the U.S., the federal government maintains control of a wide variety of public lands, including land and oceans that may contain oil or natural gas. Protecting these lands is critical to support biodiversity and limit deforestation. Additionally, oil and gas exploration on these lands threatens the natural ecosystem and moves the U.S. further away from renewable energy. Preventing offshore drilling or drilling on protected lands are also the topic of federal legislation.