THE ECOSYNAGOGUE WAS BORN THREE YEARS AGO AFTER RABBI

BY SHIRA SILKOFF

When London’s Kol Chai Reform Synagogue decided to renovate its building, some members hoped to garner support for the installation of solar panels among the rest of their congregation.

To help them was EcoSynagogue, an organization that encourages environmental sustainability and awareness in the British Jewish community, one shul at a time.

Headed by Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg of the Masorti movement, Rabbi David Mason of the Orthodox United Synagogue, Rabbi Mark Goldsmith of the Movement for Reform Judaism and Rabbi Tanya Sakhnovich of the

“There is an audit for everything in the church.”

British Liberal Judaism movement EcoSynagogue’s goals and ideals appeal to all streams of Judaism.

Launched in February 2018, the idea for EcoSynagogue began after Rabbi Wittenberg met environmentalist and founder of EcoChurch Ruth Valerio at an interfaith retreat.

“I was taken with how there is an audit for everything in the church, in all aspects of how they treat food, in teaching and the communities. I asked if this could be translated into the Jewish way of living,” he recalled.

“The lockdown interrupted us, but EcoSynagogue continued to develop on its own, and we still have a close relationship with EcoChurch, and the multifaith voice is significant.”

EcoSynagogue’s primary aim is to encourage all synagogues to register for and participate in their Environmental Audit.

There are five categories of the Environmental Audit: community, prayer and teaching; lifestyle; land, building and consumables; and community and global engagement.

A synagogue participating in the audit must have an environmental policy in place, and the congregation’s leadership, including the rabbi, will have made formal commitments to improve the environmental credentials of their synagogue.

This may include: delivering lectures on environmental issues during services, incorporating environmental awareness as a teaching theme in childhood education and youth work, and encouraging members to take measures to reduce their personal carbon footprints.

According to EcoSynagogue’s founders, the need for action in Jewish communities is important because “the climate crisis is not simply a technological problem to be resolved through better science. It is a moral and spiritual crisis in our relationship with the earth.”

“Judaism understands us not as masters, but as stewards, of God’s creation. We have a primary responsibility to care for the earth and to teach our children in a state of wholeness and health.”

Rabbi Wittenberg expanded on the organisation’s beliefs, speaking of his love for nature and Judaism, and the points at which they intersect and overlap.

In terms of specific commandments, the Teshuvot (do not destroy waste), the Ba’ala Tishuvot (do not harm a living animal), and the cycles of Shemita all serve to show the importance of environmentalism in Judaism, Rabbi Wittenberg added.

Following the launch of the Ecossynagogue, Rabbi Wittenberg blogged about his hopes for its new movement.

“We must now look urgently at what has to be done in our synagogues. I feel ashamed at what sometimes goes on in bins and rubbish,” he wrote.

“My plan is to stop this practice, and we will be buying more fresh food in season – locally grown, as much as possible. To minimise food waste, we have issued updated guidelines for kiddushim.”

Other steps the community has taken include giving food to those in need, placing colour-coded recycling bins around the building, and providing weekly eco tips to congregants in the online.
ATTENDED AN INTERFAITH RETREAT WITH AN ENVIRONMENTALIST

up to the save planet

PIONEER: Rabbi Wittenberg

newsletter.

The [climate] emergency is laid bare in an abstract concept [for us]," she said. "We are cushioned and protected — for now.

"We don't have to worry about our food supplies — often flown from afar and appearing ready packaged on the shelves of our local supermarkets.

She stressed the importance of her own community becoming more eco-friendly.

"We don't have to come face to face with the decimation of rain forests as we continue to protect and enjoy our closest natural environments.

"But the climate emergency is a reality for people who live according to the rhythms of nature. In symbiosis with their environment — like our biblical forefathers," she said.

There are 370 million indigenous peoples whose lives have been ruined by exploitation of the land.

The Kol Chai Synagogue first approached EcoSynagogue earlier this year for help to build support within the congregation for the installation of solar panels, as part of the building's refurbishment plans.

"The key to obtaining approval for the installation of the solar panels was to build support within the community on measures to reduce Kol Chai's environmental impact, and also showing the financial benefits to the community," said Rabbi Shlomo Collins, a member of the community's Green Group.

We held a series of events, including a well-attended Green Debate, which generated a lot of interest within the community, and resulted in a large number of people joining the group.

We also held a Green Shabbat, and various Zoom meetings, in order to pursue our agenda.

After gaining support from an environmental perspective, the group reassured doubtless community members that the visual impact of the solar panels would not be significant, that maintenance would be minimal, and that suppliers would be reliable.

Collins said that the proposal showed that not only did the solar panels prove to be beneficial from an environmental standpoint, but from an economic one too.

"Our building does not have a gas supply, so our electricity usage is high. Solar power offers significant savings," explained.

"The approximate installation cost of £10,500 is expected to be recovered within 10 years, and the estimated electricity bill savings over 25 years is forecast at approximately £5,000.

Similar projects have been initiated with the help of EcoSynagogue.

After the United Synagogue's Rishlip Shul adopted the Environmental Audit, the congregation calculated that it would be financially beneficial to install a solar panel, allowing the building to reduce heat loss.

With some 40 synagogues across the UK currently participating in the EcoSynagogue scheme, Kol Chai Synagogue, in partnership with the Board of Deputies, looked to expand even further, taking on COP26 in Glasgow.

At the start of the conference, EcoSynagogue operated a stall, having been selected from among 40 synagogues, said Rabbi Wittenberg, who believes Judaism sees environmental awareness as imperative.

"It's very positive that the Board of Deputies and EcoSynagogue have this physical presence at COP26," said board president Marie van der Zyl.

"By the Jewish community being out in force, alongside other voices of civil society and fellow faith communities, we are joining together to send a clear message to the COP negotiators: the world is watching, and we are united in our need for you to succeed.

"It's no exaggeration to say that the future of the planet depends on what world leaders agree in Glasgow.

To spread awareness ahead of the conference, EcoSynagogue hosted a Carbon Zero event at the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh.

The event, "Carbon Zero, if not now, when?" was hosted by the EcoSynagogue rabbinitic team, as well as Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis, and Mrs van der Zyl.

The event explored why Jewish communities should be engaged with the climate emergency, and the ways Jewish communities in the UK and abroad are engaged in environmental initiatives.

During the gathering, the Chief Rabbi stressed the importance of climate action.

"What do I do in my kitchen in my home makes all the difference to the entire world," he said. "No one is an island, no one can say this has nothing to do with me, and I don't have to bear responsibility."

"We have to bear the responsibility individually and collectively," he continued. "This situation where we threaten our world and threaten our grandchildren and our great-grandchildren, they are the ones who will be directly affected in a most serious way.

Also addressing the issue as a matter of religious obligation and urgency was Rabbi Wittenberg, who believes Judaism sees environmental awareness as imperative.

"Yesterday we read the portion of Noah in the Torah in which God promises a covenant between God, humanity, and all life on earth," Rabbi Wittenberg said.

"The covenant did not call for people to find a middle ground in the world, nor was it even the aim to make peace between all living things." (Jerusalem Post)