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In Combating Drought, L.A. Should Follow Israel's Lead

by Paul Koretz Posted on Apr. 30, 2015 at 9:12 am

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A sprinkler waters grass in Los Angeles, California April 17, 2015. Photo by Lucy Nicholson/Reuters

California's current drought is calamitous, and there's no end in sight. The good news is that we're busy taking appropriate, absolutely necessary action.

For years, the city of Los Angeles has focused effectively on water conservation, but the problem has suddenly grown at a monumental pace and scale, due significantly to climate change and a dawning realization that we can no longer reasonably expect to store our water as snowpack in the Sierra Nevadas.

To find our way, there's a lot we can learn from Israel. As the Jewish Journal has reported, Israel has been doing many things right, including advances in technology, adjustments in policy and achieving broad public consensus in order to deal with Israel's desert conditions and the ever-present threat of drought.

As a lifelong environmentalist, I am willing to meet the challenges of

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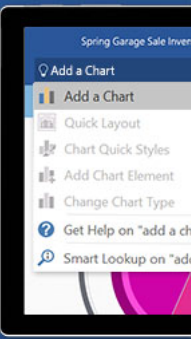
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California's drought crisis head-on, and in a responsible manner. As a Jew, I'm very much inspired by the tradition of tikkun olam, which, translated into English, calls on us to "repair the world." Given the environmental damage that has been done to Earth, in particular by climate change, repair is much needed.

In Israel, more than 80 percent of all municipal sewage is reclaimed and reused — whereas, L.A.'s Hyperion Water Treatment Plant treats and discharges up to 350 million gallons of wastewater into the ocean every day — that's water we could be using. A decade ago, the L.A. public was very uneasy about water reclamation/reuse, and so certain policies were not undertaken. Today, even Orange County uses treated wastewater and returns it to potable use. I recently introduced a slate of L.A. City Council drought-response motions, including one to explore the city's possible reuse of Hyperion's treated water.

L.A. has myriad options that don't include building pipelines and tunnels into other counties, states or the ocean — nor gutting the Endangered Species Act protections in the Bay Delta (a key environmental habitat/ecosystem in California). There are other ways to confront the drought. For example, "dewatering" protects a building's foundation and underground garage from inundation by groundwater and underground springs — but currently, that water gets sent down the storm drain to the ocean. Another motion of mine calls for reusing that water onsite, or directing it via the sewer system to the Tillman Water Reclamation Plant for recycling and reuse.

After Hyperion, the city's most valuable untapped option is the contaminated San Fernando Valley aquifer. The L.A. Department of Water and Power (LADWP) is applying for Proposition 1 funding to clean it up so we can better access it for local water supply use. My three fellow L.A.-area representatives on the Metropolitan Water District Board and I were able to get approved a \$20 million loan to LADWP to kick-start this important effort.

LADWP's replace-your-lawn program is booming, thanks to Mayor Garcetti's Executive Directive No. 5, increasing the rebate to \$3.75 per square foot. But we need to do more than replace lawns with rocks, irrigation and a few plants. We need to use rainwater as a first source of irrigation, which has the additional benefits of preventing polluted runoff and reducing flooding. We must also do the following: Grade and shape the ground to enable rainwater to slow down, spread out and sink into soil. Add some compost and fresh tree trimmings for mulch to create living soil to sponge up the water, which plants can then tap during dry months. Allow excess water to flow down to replenish aquifers and also maintain creek and river flows. Plant native flora that is water thrifty and provides food and habitat for birds and our pollinators, bees and butterflies, which are struggling to survive. Plants also remove carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas, from the atmosphere — with soil able to lock up five to six times more of the carbon than plants.

Residents who replace their lawns should remember to water their

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trees. Tree health is a vital component to climate change resiliency, especially in the San Fernando Valley; a recent UCLA study predicts an increase in extreme heat days from eight to 30 annually in places such as Porter Ranch. I've introduced a motion calling on our Bureau of Street Services' Urban Forestry division to report on protecting the health of our urban forest in the drought.

LADWP gives incentives for using 55-gallon rain barrels to capture rainwater; we should also encourage larger, more effective rain tanks, or even larger underground cisterns for installation under residential lots. Additionally, I've introduced a motion asking LADWP to work with our Department of Building and Safety to permit and incentivize installation of gray-water systems for homeowners, so they can reuse the water from their showers and washing machines to water their landscapes and support our trees.

There are certainly other efforts under serious discussion: We can push the state's farmers to use targeted drip irrigation, which has made a huge difference in Israel. We can stop hydraulic fracturing (fracking), as I've called for here in L.A.; fracking turns millions of gallons of clean water per well in California into toxic sludge capable of polluting other groundwater. We can encourage reduced consumption of the most water- and greenhouse gas-intensive food — beef.

Building a local water supply helps us meet Mayor Garcetti's transformative goal of 50 percent local water by 2035, simultaneously creating jobs, protecting the economy and reducing our carbon footprint (transporting water is California's largest energy user). Climate- and drought-resilience efforts and funding should focus on cost-effective, local solutions like those mentioned above, which we're implementing in L.A. as quickly as possible.

Israel got religion about the drought crisis long ago; now, Los Angeles has clearly — finally — done the same.

Los Angeles City Councilmember Paul Koretz represents the 5th Council District in Los Angeles. He is also one of Mayor Eric Garcetti's appointees to the Metropolitan Water District (MWD) Board. MWD is a consortium of 26 cities and water districts that provides drinking water to nearly 19 million people in Southern California.

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