Heed the warning signs

by Rachel Jacoby Rosenfield and Evonne Marzouk
Special to WJ

Last month, the White House released an alarming and detailed scientific report of the catastrophic effects global climate change will have on our continent in by midcentury and beyond if we fail to reduce significantly emission of greenhouse gases. Hartford and Philadelphia could average more than 30 days of 100-plus temperatures per year, while New Hampshire’s climate could resemble that of North Carolina. These are grim predictions and demand decisive action on global warming emissions.

But technological fixes are not enough. Any serious solution to global climate change must confront the behavioral paradigms that allowed humanity to engage in such widespread environmental degradation in the first place.

The Jewish tradition has a way of ritualizing our understanding of warning signs in such a way as to deter us from a destructive path. The Three Weeks, which we began last week in the Jewish calendar, includes an initial fast day (the 17th of Tammuz); a period of time restricted from celebrations like weddings (those three weeks); a more intense period of time (the nine days) in which we are further restricted from engaging in enjoyable activities like swimming for pleasure; and a final fast day of great mourning (Tisha B’Av), which commemorates the destruction of our Temple. Each of these increased restrictions warns us of potential impending doom, and empowers us to turn back.

The environment, too, is giving us warning signs. Climate change is one of them. The rate at which we use resources has already exceeded the carrying capacity of our planet; we face local problems like polluted air and water and global problems like ozone depletion and invasive species. Climate change is the most severe of the difficulties facing us, but it will hardly be the last.

Of course, we must invest in renewable energy, weatherize our buildings and, yes, remember to turn off the lights. But focusing on technological solutions alone fails to address that climate change itself is a symptom of much larger societal problems: our overuse of resources and our disconnect from one another. If we do not address these issues, we will have won the battle, yet lost the war.

The wisdom of the Jewish tradition can help us change our path.

“Who is rich?” The second-century rabbinic text Pirke Avot asks. “The one who is happy with his or her portion.” Imagine a community in which this value is lived out on a daily basis: People spend less time shopping and more time playing cards with their children, hosting friends at home. Neighbors exchange toys and share yard tools instead of purchasing new ones, and perhaps even help each other with household tasks. The synagogue has a community garden that provides food for kiddush and a communal compost heap. The Jewish community center has a bin for swapping and recycling textiles.

It sounds fairly simple, and yet it’s a radical departure from the hyperindividualized, highly consumptive way we have been living; it is consistent with Jewish values and very much in keeping with the notion of environmental sustainability.

Environmental activist and educator Bill McKibben has called upon us to rethink the ways we conceive of community, focusing on local resources to sustain us and community to provide security and happiness. “In a changed world,” McKibben writes in his 2007 book Deep Economy, “comfort will come less from ownership than from membership. If you’re a functioning part of a community that can meet at least some of its needs — for food, for energy, for companionship, for entertainment, for succor — then you’re more secure.” Jewish teachings provide many guidelines for sustainable living: prizing community over hyperindividualism; relationship over wealth; and long-term well-being over instant gratification.

In November, religious leaders from across the world will gather at Windsor Castle to share long-range strategies for addressing global climate change and environmental sustainability in their communities. Jewish environmental leaders internationally have begun a high-level process to develop and implement a Jewish pathway toward sustainability. We should support this effort as a high priority investment in our long-term well-being. Let us embrace the opportunity of The Three Weeks this year to respond to the warnings of the scientific community, not just by reducing our electric bill, but by renewing our relationship with the world’s limited resources and with one another.

Rachel Jacoby Rosenfield directs The Jewish Greening Fellowship, a project of the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center. Evonne Marzouk is executive director of Canfei Nesharim.

BBC pro-Israel? Don’t make me laugh

by Simon Plosker
The Jerusalem Post

In the latest shot across the BBC’s bows, the corporation has been accused of bias — in favor of Israel. And it’s not just the BBC. Al Jazeera is also pro-Israel. Yes, you read that correctly. Arab Media Watch’s Sharif Nashashibi conducted a study of the BBC and Al Jazeera Web sites over a four-month period (February-March 2009). It concluded, among other things, that while every BBC article included Israeli sources, 35 percent had no Palestinian sources, and of the remaining 65 percent that did, 82 percent devoted more words to Israeli sources.

So, have Jeremy Bowen et al become paid-up members of the Zionist Organization of America? Not quite. HonestReporting has published a number of studies on the BBC over a longer period of time and concluded the exact opposite of AMW.

While such studies cannot claim to be wholly scientific, AMW’s method of counting the number of words in an article attributed to either side is anything but.

In an age of sound bites, do word counts mean anything? It’s very rare that an Israeli spokesperson is afforded the luxury of explaining the origins of the conflict as far back as 1948, let alone 3,500 years of Jewish history in the region. How many times has a Palestinian representative fired back with the oft-heard “occupation, occupation, occupation?” Palestinian interviews are more likely to reveal “our messages” when confronted by media. How many Palestinians in Gaza are brave enough to admit on the record, in the presence of a journalist’s Hamas “minder,” that terrorists were firing from their homes?

An Israeli source, on the other hand, could mean anyone from the settler movement to the B’Tselem human rights organization and 6 million Jewish wannabe prime ministers somewhere in between. It could even include Israeli anti-Zionists. What then is AMW’s definition of an “Israel source?”

AMW fails to examine adequately the prominence of images in accompanying stories. After all, a photo of a Palestinian child covered in blood will likely trump anything an Israeli official can say in defense of an Israel Defense Forces operation. While HonestReporting also has previously studied the BBC’s use of images and found it to be biased against Israel, Al Jazeera is the master of this technique.

It was Al Jazeera’s carefully controlled and crafted footage from Gaza’s Shifa Hospital during Operation Cast Lead that, perhaps more than anything else, caused such considerable damage to Israel’s image during the conflict.

But perhaps the clincher is AMW’s claim that both the BBC and Al Jazeera overwhelmingly portrayed Israeli violence as a response to Palestinian violence. The effect of this is to legitimize and justify Israeli violence, while portraying Palestinians as the instigators of violence that has no explanation or cause.

If only this were the case. HonestReporting’s own studies of the BBC concluded the diametric opposite — that Israel is almost always portrayed as the aggressor, while Palestinians are absolved of responsibility for violent actions and terrorism.

If AMW’s findings are accurate, then that can only be a welcome development. More likely, however, is a statistical blip that only serves to expose AMW’s (and much of the media’s) willful blindness to the concept that Israeli military operations might actually have some reasonable justification.

While HonestReporting has examined BBC coverage over periods of time that have included events such as Operation Cast Lead, AMW has chosen the past few months, a relatively “quiet” time when, according to AMW, only 26 relevant articles have appeared on BBC Online.

In addition, by concentrating solely on articles covering acts of violence, AMW has ignored a significant amount of anti-Israel coverage. In the aftermath of Cast Lead, the BBC has gleefully pronounced upon accusations of “war crimes,” aided and abetted by interviews with Palestinian “eyewitnesses.” These deficiencies are more than enough to render the AMW study inconclusive and unreliable.

What about those stories that the BBC omitted in the first place, such as several years’ worth of attacks against the South? In 2007, there were almost 1,500 rocket and mortar attacks targeting civilian populations, resulting in, on average, one strike every 10 hours. The BBC chose to publish only six articles focused on the attacks during the entire year.

Sorry AMW, but your snapshot study just won’t cut it. If it walks like a duck, quacks like a duck and looks like a duck, then it must be a duck. Most of us don’t need stats to recognize anti-Israel BBC bias (or Al Jazeera’s) when we see it, but AMW’s distorted statistics are simply disingenuous.

Simon Plosker is managing editor of HonestReporting (www.honestreporting.com).