



*The International Association of  
Conservative / Masorti Rabbis,  
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## BP Oil Spill Disaster in the Gulf Coast

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3080 Broadway  
New York, NY 10027  
Phone 212.280.6000  
Fax 212.749.9166  
[info@rabbinicalassembly.org](mailto:info@rabbinicalassembly.org)  
[www.rabbinicalassembly.org](http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org)

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Dear Colleagues,

I returned yesterday from a day and a half long religious leaders' tour of devastation in the Gulf region on behalf of the Rabbinical Assembly and in connection with COEJL and sponsored by the Sierra Club. Rabbi David Saperstein was on the tour with other faith leaders including Rev. Jim Wallis of *Sojourners Magazine*, Rev. Sally Bingham, founder of Interfaith Power and Light and Dr. Sayyid Syeed of the Islamic Society of North America.

Your history, as a Conservative rabbinate, of activism driven by deep connection to Jewish tradition in areas of environmental responsibility, as well as many others, was the reason that our participation was sought. In this case, our Magen Tzedek Standards, while designed for the kosher food industry, speak directly to the greed and indifference that was the cause of this man-made disaster in this benighted region. The Magen Tzedek standards, developed over two intensive years, give a concrete measurement to Jewish ethical standards in environmental responsibility; corporate accountability; worker wages and safety; and animal welfare. At just this time last year, so many of you came forward, despite the harsh financial times, to donate funds to make it possible to continue with the work of Magen Tzedek, led by our colleagues Morris Allen and Michael Siegel.

The unique voice of your Conservative Rabbinate as articulated through these standards was a powerful source of *hizzuk* to the deeply religious people of the region who were strengthened to know that our rabbis bring a religious voice to the struggles they face including a loss of livelihood; for fishermen, a permanent loss of a generations old way of life; poverty; and physical danger due to the unsafe environmental conditions in this oil soaked region. The clearly articulated Magen Tzedek standards also helped other religious leaders galvanize across faith traditions to respond. Many articulated how such a clear and serious statement, grounded in Jewish tradition, renewed their hope.

The tour began on Tuesday night with an Interfaith Service. Our colleague, Ethan Linden of Congregation Shir Chadash in Metairie, LA participated in the service by reading a prayer of "reflection and lament." You can read his powerful composition on our [website](#). On Wednesday morning, our delegation of faith leaders constituted a fleet of five small boats to view the inland coastal marsh areas devastated by the BP oil spill. It was striking that while the technology for oil extraction has advanced so far as to precipitate such a monumental spill, the technology for inland cleanup is primitive. Long pieces of absorbent material, only

two feet by two feet are strung out along the marshes. It appeared as though they were trying to clear this massive oil spill with a Q-tip. Tragically, the captains of our tiny boat have witnessed not only their livelihoods, but their entire way of life permanently eradicated. When I asked the young captain of our boat, the new father of an eight-month old baby what his plans were, he merely said, "I guess I'll try to work for BP on the cleanup. The shrimp in these waters are so delicate that sunscreen on your hands killed them immediately. It will be years before we can fish here again."

It is a bitter irony that the cause of this disaster, man-made rather than natural, adds many layers of complexity to providing relief to those affected and to addressing the environmental impact. The relationship between the local people and BP is complex and troubling. The oil spill has robbed fisherman of their livelihood and their way of life. But the only way for these same fishermen to support their families is to work for BP. The Federal government's response is still incomplete. Seeing the double bind that BP's economic power places on the people of the region and noting the relationship between this tragedy and US addiction to oil, I can only feel that when we mortgage our futures to our appetite for fuel, we, along with the working people of the Gulf, are all "shopping at the company store."

I had a very interesting discussion with Rev. Jim Wallis. He refers to this disaster with its clarion call to action as the "Epiphany in the Gulf." Rev. Wallis' Christian theological statement reflects the belief that an inexorable process of change must follow an "epiphany." The lessons from this oil spill show the wisdom of Jewish tradition. The remedy to this epiphany is the precise opposite of an epiphany. We can only address this "crisis" through countless right choices every day, that bring moderation, as kashrut is designed to do, to our appetites for consumption. Indeed, as Magen Tzedek teaches us, the "ritual" side of consumption and the "ethical" dimension are inextricably intertwined.

Issues of economic justice are not only found between oil interests and the locals, there is a long history of dispute between the state of Louisiana and the Federal Government in terms of how much of the high revenues of oil and gas extraction are returned to the state for the welfare of the people and the restoration of the coastal region. Louisiana oil and gas revenues are the second largest contributor to the US Treasury, the first is the Federal income Tax. Yet whereas other states that have such revenues flowing to the federal coffers see a 50% return, in Louisiana it is 5%. But it is not their issue alone. The deterioration of wetlands, at the rate of a football field every half hour affects the entire continent.

We met with Mayor Mitch Landrieu at his offices in City Hall. As he put it, "we don't want to throw BP out of the house, we are married to them and need them to take responsibility for their family here in the Gulf." A meeting of our delegation with the Mayor was a powerful reminder of the efficacy of a religious voice in a democratic society to bring greater justice. Sixty-seven days in office, he is an impressive thinker who contextualizes the current crisis in moral terms, owing in part, I am told, to his strong Catholic faith. When I suggested that the Gulf region is "ground zero for the ethical and moral dilemmas facing the American people," he corrected me by saying, "I prefer to describe it as America's greatest laboratory for the future of our democracy."

It is impossible to describe the situation on the ground in the Gulf without seeming to speak in hyperbole - but it is no exaggeration. This crisis reflects several of the profound moral challenges

facing our generation, all of them addressed by our tradition that must be heeded. These include our addiction to fossil fuels; our willingness as a society to invest in our consumption while threatening our future safety and well-being; the fact that the destruction of our environment places all of our lives and lifestyles at fundamental risk; the fact that our lifestyle is built at the expense of many people whose dignity and worth is left unaccounted for and who are exceptionally vulnerable when calamities or other circumstances disrupt their fragile equilibrium. Our delegation offered several prayers for the Gulf.

There cannot be too many prayers.

Rabbi Julie Schonfeld  
Executive Vice President