

## No Quick Fix

Noach – Rav Hanan Schlesinger

"Some environmentalists are pushing a nifty idea to get people out of the moral quandary of being alarmed by CO2 emissions but not wanting to change their lifestyles. They are called "carbon offsets," and everyone from Al Gore to the Presbyterian Church is pushing them." So began an article by Peter Schweizer in the Viewpoints section of the Dallas Morning News last week. It continued saying that "the idea provides a simple way to absolve you of your guilt."

"Say you are wealthy and fly on a Gulfstream G400 jet. The plane will emit 1 ton of CO2 per passenger per hour. Flying commercial on a Boeing 777 will emit only 0.06 tons per passenger per hour. Wealthy environmentalists feel guilt about this, so they buy a carbon offset to supposedly reduce carbon emissions by an equal amount. The "offset" comes in the form of paying for solar panels or planting trees that "offset" the damage you have done. Buy an offset and - *voilà* -you are "carbon neutral. Americans are snapping up these offsets, according to *Time* magazine, and public figures such as California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., buy them regularly. In endorsing the practice, *Time* says it provides an opportunity to 'pay for your carbon sins'."

With the relish of a true cynic, the author goes on to muse that "we all have areas of our life that we feel guilty about. So why limit offsets simply to the carbon we produce? Why not expand offsets to erase our other sins?"

He makes a number of hilarious - and at the same time biting - suggestions. Here is the first of them:

**"The Adultery Offset.** People who are caught in compromising positions could purchase an offset from a pro-marriage organization such as Focus on the Family. By buying the Adultery Offset, the guilty parties would counterbalance their adultery footprint with a monogamous



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couple trained by this organization. Like the carbon-emitter absolved of carbon sin, this would allow an individual to be declared "adultery neutral" instantly. As with carbon offsets, the guilty party would not actually have to stop engaging in adultery; he or she would simply need to write a check after every occurrence."

The article of course, throws into bold relief the moral outrageousness of the whole 'offset' idea. Why outrageous? Because we all harbor a deep seated intuition that some things are intrinsically wrong and no payment in the world can turn bad to good. We believe in moral responsibility. Adultery, for example, is plain immoral. No offset will make its noxious odor smell like a rose.

It is from the Bible that we Americans - Jews and Christians alike - draw our sense of moral imperative. In this week's Torah portion, the world is destroyed by the Flood, not because the gods were having trouble sleeping and had nothing better to do with their time than to torture humanity, as recounted in the Gilgamesh Epic, a work roughly contemporaneous with the Torah, but rather because man had corrupted his way upon the earth. Violence and sexual licentiousness had become the norm. Men took women "of all whom they choose," married or not. And the ultimate **Ground of Decency** - whom for lack of a better title we call God - could not stomach that.

Many of us gave generous contributions to our synagogues just a few weeks ago on Yom Kippur. That's important. But let us remember that moral imperatives bind absolutely, and no amount of money can offset the need to live properly. As the new year gradually unfolds, let us turn to the bedrock of our tradition for guidance in how to do so.



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