

### Lenten Teaching 3 – Greenhouse Gas Emissions as a Religious Issue

One of the teachings that appears in both the Old Testament and the New Testament is to “love your neighbor as yourself.” (Lev. 19:18; Mark 12: 30-31; Matt. 22: 36-40) This is to serve as a principle to guide our actions.

The legal authorities in biblical times, when the Israelites ruled themselves, were also religious authorities, and they drew on this principle in making decisions and writing regulations. One instance of this occurs with cases about air pollution, which resulted from the fumes from tanneries, cemeteries, and the carcasses of dead animals. The foul-smelling air made life unpleasant for those who had to endure it. Appeals for relief resulted in various rulings, all consistent with “love your neighbor as yourself.” For example:

Carrion, graves, and tanyards [tanneries] must be kept fifty cubits<sup>1</sup> from a town. A tanyard must only be placed on the east side of a town.<sup>2</sup> [Because the east wind is gentle and will not carry the fumes into the town].

Notice the closing phrase: Because the east wind “will not carry the fumes into the town.” Thus, an individual is prohibited from engaging in an activity that injures the community.

Another example concerned a fixed threshing floor, where wheat was separated from chaff. The wind-borne chaff would irritate those downwind. The ruling states that threshing floors must be fifty cubits outside the city limits and away from neighbor’s fields.

These ancient post-biblical rulings, rooted in biblical teachings, can be found pulled forward in time into English and early American law. In *Blackstone’s Commentaries*, the main legal reference for our founding fathers, we find:

. . . if a person keeps his hogs . . . so near the house of another, that the stench of them incommodes [inconveniencences] him and makes the air unwholesome, this is an injurious nuisance, as it deprives him of the use and benefit of his house. A like injury is, if one’s neighbor exercises any

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<sup>1</sup> A cubit is about 18 inches, based on the length of a man’s forearm.

<sup>2</sup> *Babylonia Talmud*, Baba Bathra 25a, Soncino Edition, 6021.

offensive trade; as a tanner's, a tallow chandler's, or the like; for though these are lawful and necessary trades, yet they should be exercised in remote places.<sup>3</sup>

Many contemporary applications for this ruling readily come to mind, including:

- Intense odors from hog farms that degrade the lives of residents downwind; and
- Emissions of greenhouse gases that harm the entire earthly community.

Thus, one root cause of climate change, emissions of greenhouse gases, violates both a familiar biblical teaching and English and early American law and today would form part of an Environmental Impact Statement. Climate change is, indeed, also a religious issue.

Action: This Lenten teaching observes that emissions of greenhouse gases (GHG) are a form of air pollution, which existed in biblical times from tanneries and other sources. A post-biblical teaching, rooted in "love your neighbor as yourself," yields the principle that an individual is not to engage in an activity that injures one's neighbors, or indeed the entire world community. Consider whether this finding about GHG emissions as a religious, as well as environmental, issue increases your resolve to work on climate change. If the faith aspect does not increase your motivation, think about why that might be.

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<sup>3</sup> William Blackstone and George Tucker, *Blackstone's Commentaries* (Philadelphia: William Young Birch and Abraham Small, Robert Carr, printer, 1803, 360). Sir William Blackstone (1723—1780) was an English jurist, judge, and Tory politician, most noted for writing the *Commentaries on the Laws of England*.