STATEMENT OF
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BEFORE THE
SENATE ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC WORKS COMMITTEE
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Thank you for inviting me to address you this morning.

I am Rabbi David Saperstein, Director and Counsel of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism. I want to thank Marc Katz, an Eisendrath Legislative Assistant at the RAC working on environmental issues, for his assistance in preparing this testimony. The Religious Action Center's work is mandated by the Union for Reform Judaism, whose 900 congregations across North America include 1.5 million Reform Jews, and the Central Conference of American Rabbis, whose membership includes more than 1,800 Reform rabbis. The Religious Action Center has been the hub of Jewish social justice and legislative activity in the nation's capital for more than 40 years. I am also pleased to represent the Coalition on the Environment in Jewish Life, an umbrella group serving 29 national Jewish agencies as the Jewish community's most broad-based voice on environmental issues.

I am pleased to join the other distinguished members of this panel who, I'm sure, share my sentiments when I say, "At last!" At last the Congress is recognizing the importance of looking at the perspectives of faith, values, and environmental justice. At last, the Congress is recognizing the depth of concern and the breadth of activity among religious Americans on environmental issues. At last, our government seems to be beginning to address the global climate change crisis with the sense of urgency through science that the ethics of the crisis demand. From the perspective of the religious community, whatever else comes of this hearing, this is a very important day.

I have been working in and with the American faith community for 33 years. Often the diversity of religious practice and scriptural readings that exist within and between denominations of Judaism and Christianity have meant that we do not always agree on matters of morality and public policy. Those of you on the committee know all too well the diversity of voices in the religious community, and the even greater diversity of opinions—often conflicting—expressed by members of those communities.

But on issues that bear on the integrity of God's creation here on earth and, more specifically, the urgent need to address global warming and its particular impact on the poor, this degree of deeply shared unity is rare, resulting in our abiding resolve to work together. The urgency of climate change mixed with our strong scriptural mandates have connected our faiths and compelled us to act in unison to forge an answer to our climate crisis.

Now this is not just rhetoric or claim. In fact, religious communities have been actively engaged in this pursuit for some time. Whether it's the humorously titled program like the Evangelical "What Would Jesus Drive?" campaign aimed at raising the moral concerns about fuel economy

and pollution from vehicles or the Jewish community's, "How Many Jews Does It Take To Change A Light Bulb?" that mobilized synagogues to install over 50,000 compact fluorescent light bulbs during this past Hanukkah, or a score of other national programs, the religious community has manifested its resolve and commitment to stewardship and the preservation of God's creation.

This commitment is being felt across the spectrum of religious life in America. It's happening at the national level, by major denominational governing bodies, and it's happening in the pews. Our congregants are taking the lessons they learn in our synagogues and churches and placing them "on the doorposts of their homes and upon their gates" (Deuteronomy 6:9) in the form of solar panels, wind turbines, and neighborhood recycling programs.

Care for God's creation is quickly becoming a central concern of the faith community generally and *the* defining characteristic and priority of the next generation of religious leaders. Preserving our natural world is a key component at the heart of what it means to be religious.

To be religious is to inexorably bound up with being a "light unto the nations" (Isaiah 42:6), a partner with God in shaping a better world. As children of God we have been endowed with wisdom and faith to vivify our tradition and pursue justice. Faced with the degradation of our natural world, we must embody the biblical command of *bal tashchit*, do not destroy, and when faced with a chance to correct our misdeeds, proclaim in one voice, "we will do and we will hearken" (Exodus 24:7).

These themes were powerfully captured in the recent public letter "Wonder and Restraint" from key leaders of all the streams of the American Jewish community:

> "***Two covenantal responsibilities apply most directly to the environmental challenges*** of our time. The first demands inwardness, the second, outwardness. The first fulfills the traditional Jewish role as a "holy nation," the second, as a "light unto the nations."
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> The first, in a word, is *restraint:* to practice restraint in our individual and communal lives. Judaism encourages this sensibility in many of its most fundamental metaphors and *mitzvot*. There is the restraint embodied by *Shabbat*, our central holy day of wholeness and not-producing. There is the restraint expressed through *kashrut*, dietary consciousness, which gives us an appetite for sacredness instead of gluttony.
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> There is the restraint expressed as *bal tashchit*, the injunction against wanton destruction that is rooted in the Torah's responses to the environmental ravages of warfare; and as *tza'ar ba'alei chayyim*, pity for the suffering of living creatures, requiring us to treat our fellow creatures as sentient beings, not as objects for exploitation.
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> There is the restraint required to fulfill the demands of *kehillah* — the communal and intergenerational obligations that Judaism applies to our wealth, our private property, our decision-making, and our salvation. In the tradition of Maimonides, modesty and open-handed generosity have long been hallmarks of Jewish life.

There is the restraint implied by *sh'mirat haguf*, protection of our own bodies and by *pikuakh nefesh*, the commandment to protect life at nearly any cost. There is the restraint mandated by *s'yag l'torah*, building a "fence around the Torah," which bids us to err on the side of caution when it comes to matters of life, limb and spiritual integrity — all of which are surely endangered by the destruction of biological diversity and the degradation of the biosphere, most obviously by the catastrophes likely to be induced by global warming.

In the Jewish mystical tradition, it is God who sets the example of restraint by practicing *tsimtsum*, self-withdrawal, in order to permit the universe to emerge into being. The mystics, drawing upon the Talmud (*Chagigah* 12a), linked this creation story to the appellation *Shaddai*, usually translated to mean "Almighty," but understood by mystics as the One Who said to the infant universe, "*dai*," "enough," and thus gave form and boundary to the chaos.

Today, we who are made in the image of Shaddai must emulate this act of *tsimtsum* if we want our world to persist in health and abundance. Human activity is now as consequential to the Earth and its wealth of species as glaciers, volcanoes, winds and tides —so we cannot persist in the illusion that the world is inexhaustible. Human activity has split the seas, brought down manna from heaven, cured pestilence, built vast tabernacles — so we cannot continue to quake and stammer at the prospect of assuming the responsibility given to us along with our power. Instead, we must transform ourselves from nature's children to nature's guardians by learning to say "*dai* ," "enough," to ourselves.

But not only to ourselves: for the second covenantal obligation that our Earth and our faith require is that we speak out, and speak truth, to the world's leaders.

We are obliged to contrast our religious and ethical values with the values of self-indulgence, domination, short-term national security, and money-worship that fuel the ravaging of the Earth.

We are obliged to oppose the political empowerment of religious fatalists who view our environmental crisis as a mark of Armageddon and a glad-tiding of redemption.

We are obliged to support policies that ease poverty and spare the planet its ravages; that protect underdeveloped countries from serving as the world's environmental dumping grounds; that tie economic development to environmental stewardship; and that enable poor people to pursue sustainable economic lives.

We are obliged to withdraw support from corporations that act parasitically rather than symbiotically with the natural world, or that tamper with fundamentals of Creation without caution, without reverence, but solely for purposes of short-term profit and petty self-interest.

> *We are obliged* to challenge the fever of consumption that drives unsustainable economic growth.
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> *We are obliged* to challenge public officials who deify property and wealth, reducing our living planet to a commodity.
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> *We are obliged* to seek peace and pursue it — to oppose easy recourse to military violence, outside of legitimate self-defense, not only for its destruction of human life and health, but also for its shattering impact on nature and natural resources.
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> It is precisely in taking these kinds of prophetic stances, lifting our voices to join protest to prayer, that we renew Judaism's capacity for stirring the *rachamim*, the womb-love, of God and of the human race, thus keeping the gates open to a healthy future for our planet and its inhabitants."

As you have previously heard, the birth of our religious environmental connection explicitly coincides with the creation of the world and humanity's charge to act as its caretaker and steward. With these shared beliefs the religious community has worked tirelessly to protect and preserve God's creation. However much common cause there has been in the past, though, we believe there is an entirely new dynamic and concern at work that will only strengthen this unity and resolve; our voice must be loudest, and clearest, when addressing the impact of climate change on the most vulnerable. This is not simply an issue of the environment; it is at the core of the religious community's passion for economic justice.

The book of Proverbs teaches us to "speak up, judge righteously, [and] champion the poor and the needy" (31:9). Extremes of weather have and will continue to have disproportionate impact on the world's poorest populations and we must be their voice. A 2004 UN report highlights this; wealthy countries constitute 15% of people who are exposed to extreme natural events, but only 1.8% who die from such events. We need only consider the record surface temperatures of the last 20 years or look into the faces of the victims of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Those with the fewest resources get left behind and forgotten. Disproportionately, they are the ones forced to fend for themselves.

Thus, we must first prepare to aid those communities that will face difficulties as they work to adapt to the changing climate. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has been clear that even in the best of scenarios, the earth is facing a 2-degree rise in temperature in the next century that will significantly change worldwide weather and precipitation patterns. We must do more for these communities, here and abroad, helping them switch to sustainable agriculture practices, urge fair trade practices, publicly finance renters' and home owners' insurance, and providing effective emergency assistance for those dislocated by weather-related events.

Already the religious community has acted as a leader in promoting worldwide climate justice, working with NGOs and charities like World Vision, Catholic Charities, Jewish Federations, and Church World Service to provide billions of dollars in aid to affected areas.

Yet as we provide these direct services, we are all too aware that it will take you, Members of Congress, to address the root of the problem through changes in policy. We must ensure that as we reduce emissions with a "cap and trade" program or carbon tax, sufficient revenues are in place to offset the rising energy costs and worker displacement, predicted in the CBO report, "Trade-Offs in Allocating Allowances for CO2 Emissions" (April 25, 2007). It is our moral obligation to provide for these populations by establishing programs to retrain them to work in our future energy marketplace. We must aid those less fortunate by providing energy and tax rebates and by helping lower income families weatherize their homes, thus lowering their need for higher priced heating.

The Talmud, a cornerstone of Jewish theology, elaborates on this, teaching us that on Adam's first night in the garden, God led him around saying, "Look at my works! See how beautiful they are—how excellent! For your sake I created them all. See to it that you do not spoil and destroy My world; for if you do, there will be no one else to repair it." (Midrash Kohelet Rabbah, 1 on Ecclesiastes 7:13). Humankind has a fundamental choice: are we going to continue to abuse the earth, or help to build our sanctuary for God to dwell (Exodus 25:8)?

The task of the Jew, the task of all people of conscience, is to ensure that God's mandate is heard today by all humanity. For this Earth is <u>our</u> garden, and this time we face not expulsion but devastation. And that we cannot—we dare not—allow, neither for our children's sake nor for God's.