



## Transcription of the Interview with Rabbi David Rosen CBE, International Director of Interreligious Affairs for AJC

*Interview by Rachel Winner of The Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development*

Rachel: Can you tell us a little bit about how you personally became invested in ecological issues?

Rabbi Rosen: I have been on a journey, and I suppose we are all seekers continuously on a journey, and I suppose one could say that my journey is the quest to know the Divine... to know God out of a conviction that God is above all expressed in the human encounter and in the whole world around us. I suppose that consciousness became even greater when I was a rabbi in Cape Town under apartheid and there was a question of a social justice struggle. I came to interfaith relations after coming into social justice, it's always been together. And I discovered how that was really important, and I discovered other worlds of other faith traditions. And a broadening consciousness emerged out of those encounters.

I was blessed to grow up in a home that was a deeply Orthodox home, and at the same time very open and embracing of others and of global issues. I suppose already as a young boy the issue of compassion was a central part of the world in which I grew up in. There was always a love of animals, I grew up in the countryside therefore with a love of nature. And I remember saying as a child that I didn't really think it was right to eat other animals, but I liked meat too much; you get hooked on it if you're brought up that particular way, I'm not one of those souls that was naturally revolted by the idea so it had to become a question of mind. I became more conscious that that was the right thing to do, and started moving together with my wife Sharon in the direction of vegetarianism when we were in Cape Town. We became therefore much more aware of environmental issues as it came together with our vegetarian consciousness. And I suppose at that time, we're talking now into the 70's and into the 80's, there was an increasing global consciousness so we became much more aware of broader health, environmental, social justice issues on a global scale. So there was no real separation of these different dimensions and I don't think there should be; I think the question of social justice, of human compassion, and of our responsibility for the environment should all flow naturally one into the other.



Rachel: I wanted to go back to what you said about your experience in Cape Town and connecting interfaith with social justice and tie that back into sustainability. So how do you see the role of people of faith coming together to promote environmental sustainability? How do you see that manifesting and why do you think it's important from a faith perspective?

Rabbi Rosen: I suppose that in certain parts of the Western World and especially Western Europe that the relationship between religion and environmental sustainability is not obvious, but to me it couldn't be otherwise. Religion that does not relate to the issues around, in my opinion, is not worthy of the name. And religious traditions all teach the significance of the cosmos, of the creation. And if we are to leave a sustainable planet for our children and our grandchildren, this is surely an imperative above all of the religious communities that affirm the Divine presence behind the world, behind the cosmos, as a manifestation of Divine glory. So it's obvious to me that there should be religious engagement in this area and in fact it surprises me that there are those who don't find it obvious. Now we have a responsibility to be greater than the sum of our different parts: if I don't work together with somebody who affirms the value of human dignity, then if I say that's a value in some way I'm letting it down because I'm not working together with others of value, so it's the same with sustainable development. If I say this is important that we have to have a clean and healthy planet for ourselves, our children, our grandchildren, then I have an obligation to work together with others for this cause. Especially those who affirm that the cosmos of the world around us is a manifestation of the Divine. In other words, it's not just practicality, well it is very practical you have to have sustainability in our own interests, but it's more than that. It's an affirmation that there is significance of our cosmos that testifies to a higher reality. That is the imperative that demands that religions should work together for this important goal for humanity.

Rachel: Do you think it is possible that climate change could be an opportunity for global consciousness or are we past that point of no return?

Rabbi Rosen: I think it is true and we can see already that the challenges of climate change can bring together a broader global human consciousness. I think that is already evident. The question is, is that consciousness that is going all the time going to be sustainable in itself, that it will be able to survive those negative forces and those degradations that take place; I am not a prophet nor the son of a prophet and can't be sure in that regard, but certainly there is more global consciousness just as there is more global interaction than ever before. And I think that the challenges of climate change are galvanizing governments; they're not quick enough and not affecting much, but they are galvanizing governments to support initiatives to look for alternative resources or alternative ways of management. So this crisis has potentially a great blessing, it's only in retrospect that we'll be able to know if that was the case or not.



Rachel: You mentioned at the Green Symposium Pilgrimage in April 2013 that you thought environmental sustainability was a central challenge facing humanity, and efforts that are not focused on it are like rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic. Would you mind expanding on that thought?

Rabbi Rosen: Well the image of rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic suggests that you're facing a much greater catastrophe, a much greater challenge than any other issues you might be preoccupied with. And it's obvious, if we don't have a planet on which to be able to flourish and provide a place that has the capacity to sustain future generations, all the other issues become irrelevant. So it's not that we shouldn't worry about other matters, or our own spiritual growth, or the improvement of human condition, or the advancement of social justice, or for special care for minorities, or the weak or the marginalized and the great affirmation of human dignity; all of these things are terribly important but if you don't have a planet on which to be able to live and to be able to empower human dignity, it's going to be meaningless; you wouldn't have any future. So the issue of environmental sustainability is an imperative survival issue for humanity.

Rachel: You mentioned that the main focus is building the capacity for the next generation in addition to fortifying our own consciousness. Within your own personal experience and knowledge that you've gained over the years, as well as facing the environmental situation we're all looking in the face right now, what traits do you think are most critical to bestow on our children's generation?

Rabbi Rosen: Well it's interesting that your question presumes that we can influence character traits; that is a matter of debate. And I'm not going to take any side here, but what is obviously clear is that we do have responsibility to educate our children and future generations. Now education, if I'm not mistaken, can come from either educari or educare. Either to lead somebody to, or to enable something for another to allow their potential to be materialized. And I suppose we have to do the two things in a manner that is creative without stymieing individuality. We need to first of all explain to people the consequences of their actions; people need to understand how different consequences emerge from different things that we do, so our responsibility for younger generations is that they grow up having the knowledge that most of us, the elder generation, didn't have growing up so therefore they can guarantee their own sustainable future as well as other generations.



But above all the important thing is to educate in a manner that people can fulfill their potential as human beings and fulfill potential in society and to label that growth. And then I suppose what we need to educate for is both greater consciousness, in other words greater awareness, awareness of our environment, of where we live, awareness of others, how we affect one another; I can relate it to that concept of awareness and consciousness is the concept of compassion because compassion means being aware of how your actions affect others or how others are affected by their different environments. So and I think that's at the heart of all religious traditions: compassion, consciousness, awareness. This I would say are the different components of authentic spirituality. So I would like to say we need a more spiritually conscious world. The problem with the worlds' spirituality is that it's a bit of a fuzzy word and people don't exactly know what you mean; so I think therefore that compassion, awareness, greater sensitivity and sensibility are easier terms to use as the kind of qualities we need to instill and nurture within the younger generation.

Rachel: What do you see as the importance and relevance of the work at the Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development?

Rabbi Rosen: Well I suppose everything I've been saying is why I see the Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development to be important. Sustainable development we said is the critical challenge of our times; if we don't have a home then we have nothing to care for to put it into. And interfaith is particularly important because the different religious traditions are highlighting the deeper significance of the cosmos or the higher significance of the cosmos, therefore we need to be greater as a sum of our different parts. So what the Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development has done is to take the step of these different forces together to be greater than the sum of different parts. The more it can work to do so globally, the greater the gift and the greater the security for human society.

The Conversations on Faith and Ecology project is a joint initiative by the [Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development \(ICSD\)](#) and the [United Planet Faith & Science Initiative \(UPFSI\)](#). The project will interview religious leaders, community organizers, and environmental justice advocates throughout the world to discuss their own experience with environmentalism and their respective religion's take on sustainability. The Conversations on Faith and Ecology initiative will catalog these discussions, making them readily available online in video and written format for people of diverse faith backgrounds to access throughout the world.

The aim of the initiative is twofold: firstly, to record the spiritual insight of religious and community leaders regarding sustainability, and secondly to ignite interfaith discussions regarding the nexus between spirituality and sustainability.