



JCI's Guide to Carbon Offsetting

Today more and more synagogues, JCC's, families and individuals are going green. Carbon offsetting is a way of counteracting some of our carbon footprint; it can also be incredibly confusing. How does it work? Is it ethical? Is it Jewish? How can I know if an offsetting program is really helping save the world or whether it's a scam?

At [Jewish Climate Initiative](#) (JCI), we created the following guide to answer all these questions and more, and also to provide information about the main offsetting projects based in Israel. It can also be a small, seasonal step toward *teshuvah*, positive transformation in the way that we use energy. We hope our offsetting guide will be a useful resource for you and your community and would love to hear your feedback.

With best wishes for a Shanah tovah u'metukah, a good, sweet year,

The [JCI Team](#)

Global Climate Change

The effects of climate change are already being felt around the world. Scientists predict that temperatures will rise up to 6°C further over the next century. This will cause rises in sea level, extreme weather events such as hurricanes and heat waves, and water shortages and disease, particularly in the world's poorest countries. (Visit [JCI's Climate Science Page](#) for more on the effects of climate change).

The scientific consensus is that global warming is caused primarily by greenhouse gases emitted by humans into the Earth's atmosphere. The biggest contributor is carbon dioxide,



which is generated by burning fossil fuels such as coal, oil or gas. ***Every time we drive our cars or fly in planes, we are contributing, in a small but direct way to the Earth's change in climate and its harmful impacts.*** It can be hard to get our heads around the moral implications of our radical interconnectness with the rest of world.



The ideal solution would be for people to stop driving, flying and using electricity generated from fossil fuels. However, this is not likely to happen any time soon...

How Does Carbon Offsetting Work?

That's where offsetting comes in - as an **interim solution**. Here's how it works:

First, calculate the quantity of carbon you emit by flying, driving or using electricity. Second, pay for a project that reduces carbon emissions by this same



amount. These might include generating electricity from [solar](#), [wind](#) and [hydroelectric](#) sources instead of fossil fuels, or reducing fuel use by [increasing efficiency](#). Since greenhouse gases circulate freely in the atmosphere, this project can be located anywhere in the world.

Is Offsetting Ethical?

Two kinds of objection are leveled against offsetting. The first are criticisms of particular types of projects for not, in fact, having the carbon-reducing effects that their sponsors claim. We'll address that line of argument below.

The other more fundamental critique is that offsetting is simply *unethical*. Critics argue that we need to radically reduce our carbon emissions; offsetting your flight to Australia will, at best, neutralize the extra carbon you spewed into the atmosphere whereas what is required is to produce less of the stuff. Some have compared offsets to a child shifting her spinach to the other side of the plate and pretending that consequently there is less of it.

Underlying this is the idea that if some act or behavior is *wrong*, paying to do it won't make it right. The spoof website www.cheatneutral.com makes this point in a funny but sharp way: You can't offset marital infidelity by paying someone to be faithful on your behalf. So too, if living a high carbon life-style is immoral then buying offsets doesn't make it OK.

This critique can be supported by Jewish sources. Somebody who physically damages another person is required to pay five categories of damages; damage, pain, loss of earnings, medical expenses and embarrassment (*Bava Kamma* 83b). Does this mean that if you beat someone up and then pay all the expenses that the court asks of you you've made everything alright? No. Beating people up is wrong. You're not allowed to do it even if you fully intend to pay damages afterwards. Money alone cannot make it right (*Bava Kamma* 91b, *Maimomides*, *Hilkhot Hovel u'mazik*, 5:1).

Nevertheless, [Jewish Climate Initiative](#) is in favor of offsetting (That's why we're producing this handy guide). Here's why:

1. It's much, much better than doing nothing. As long as we continue to fly, drive big cars, etc. offsetting mitigates some of the effects.
2. The kind of people who offset are usually the kind of people who are also trying to shrink their carbon footprints. They are offsetting *in addition* to reducing emissions, not instead of it.
3. It gives a boost to ecologically friendly projects, communities and technologies, which has positive knock-on effects.
4. Offsetting can support green initiatives in Israel (see below for some options).
5. Judaism recognizes that change takes time. The process of transforming one's life, *Teshuvah*, does not happen all at once, but one step at a time (People who do become deeply observant overnight often revert to their former life-style just as quickly.)



*The world is entering a process of teshuvah, positive and profound transformation, in the way we all use energy; it needs to happen pretty darn fast, say within a decade, but still it will take time. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, in his work Orot Hateshuvah advised baalei teshuvah, those in the process of teshuvah, to acknowledge the things they don't yet have the power to fix in their lives, and pray for the ability to repair them in the future. **Offsetting is one way to repair a little of the damage we still do to the earth and its most vulnerable citizens in our everyday use of fossil fuels, even as we all work towards a new energy culture that is in harmony and not at odds with the planet.***

Carbon Offsetting: With Who? From Where?

A quick Google of the words “Carbon Offsetting” yields three million hits: a bit much to search through during holiday high time.

So to ease up the job we've compiled a list of five services, each of which you can be confident will put your money and good intentions to important use.

For those up for a more personal challenge, we've included a brief guide (below) on how families and communities can create their own offsetting programs and put their carbon costs towards minimizing their own carbon footprints in the future.

Each of the following services offers a “Carbon Calculator.” You simply enter data regarding miles driven and flown, electricity used, weddings made and visits hosted, and are instantly answered with an emissions total and corresponding monetary cost.

We've given a one-to-five rating for each service, based on positive environmental impact, user-friendliness and reputation among environmental authorities. We've specifically listed whether the services fulfill the following four qualifications:

1) Additionality (A)- If the project would not happen without the offsetting funds. For example, if a project is just paying for a company's fulfilling national waste management requirements, it is not “Additional” (Sounds crazy, but in the early days of offsetting, carbon credits often supported such “causes.”).

2) Choice (C)- If a service offers a choice of offset projects for consumers to fund.

3) Supports Causes in Israel (I)- A nice way to give both to the Jewish homeland and the planet as a whole at the same time.

4) Standards/Monitoring (S)- If the service maintains international standards, such as the [Clean Development Standard](#), the [Gold Standard](#) or the [Voluntary Carbon Standard](#).

As an example, a rating of **A/C/I** describes a service characterized by additionality, a choice of projects, and supports Israel.

And the Services:

1. **[The Good Energy Initiative](#)**- **A/C/I/S**- **Overall Rating: 4.8**

Our favorite voluntary offsetting project, the [Heschel Center for Environmental Learning & Leadership's Good Energy Initiative \(GEI\)](#) keeps offsetting simple, offering well-explained and clearly beneficial environmental projects in Israel. GEI focuses on fostering energy independence in Israel, and uses offsetting to approach socio-economic challenges with solutions in energy efficiency. Offset projects include:

-**[Let there be Light](#)**: Sponsoring energy-efficient CFL light bulbs for impoverished families.

-**[Kol Dudi](#)**: Supplying solar water heaters in low-economy public housing in Tel- Aviv

-**[The Children's Power](#)**- Circulating solar-powered medical equipment for children in need

2. **[TerraPass](#)**- **A/C/S**- **Overall Rating: 4.1**

A favorite of Grist, the esteemed environmental news authority, TerraPass focuses almost more attention on emission reduction than on offsetting. They're an excellent resource on eco-tips and gadgets, and offer a well-monitored offsetting service that



features projects on clean energy, farm power (animal waste management) and landfill gas (landfill emissions containment.)

3. [Go Neutral/The Jewish National Fund \(JNF\)](#)- A/C/I- Overall Rating: 3.7

Satisfy grandma *and* your environmentally conscious teens with JNF! Through Go Neutral, you can plant a tree in Israel and offset your carbon emissions in one shot. Go Neutral's website calculates your emissions and charges you for a corresponding number of CO₂-slurping, emission-offsetting trees. Making life especially easy for those spending the holidays in the Holy Land, Go Neutral offers a fixed rate on offsetting flights to Israel.



One may also donate to JNF's "[Environmental Projects](#)," including Sustainable Afforestation, Agricultural Research and Development, Combating Desertification and Sustainable Watershed Development.

4. [CarbonFund](#)- A/C/S- Overall Rating: 3.7

The chosen service of Avis Car Rental, Discovery Communications (Including [Planet Green](#)), Dell Computers and university Hillel students. CarbonFund's attractive website provides easy offsetting and offers a choice of programs. (Like "Back to School"- Offset a year of dorm use for 30 bucks!).



5. [ClimateCare](#)- A/S- Overall Rating: 3.6

ClimateCare was recently adopted by finance giant JP Morgan. Take that as a plus or a minus, but it probably means that ClimateCare is going to be providing offsetting services for years to come. ClimateCare divides offset funds between numerous projects and calculates offsets in [pounds](#), [American](#) and [Australian dollars](#).



Creating Your Own Carbon Offsetting Project: A Fun and Powerful Way for Families and Communities to Invest Carbon Costs into their own Reduced Carbon-Emission Futures.

With some creativity and a loose translation of traditional offsetting, carbon costs can stay local, going directly towards more eco-friendly lifestyles at home.

To begin, calculate your carbon footprint/obtain a carbon cost from any of the websites above. Set aside the money in a **Cutting Carbon Footprint Fund** and begin an improvement project of your choice. (But remember Additionality- don't go 'a funding something you'd be doing anyway!)

Some suggestions:

1. Soil to stomach, [the average American meal travels 1500 miles](#), and is responsible for tens of tons of CO₂ emissions. Cut your food-travel emissions by using your Cutting Carbon Footprint Fund to join a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) program in your area and receive weekly packages of locally grown, organic produce. (This is one decision your taste buds won't regret!)

Communities can organize CSA programs, too, and synagogue members can donate their personal offsets and synagogue carbon costs to the CSA fund.

[Hazon](#) runs an outstanding program called [Tuv Haaretz \(Good of the Land\)](#). Visit their website and learn about the benefits of CSA, find a CSA in your area or find out how to start one.



2. How many disposables does your shul use per weekly Kiddush? Emissions-wise, that's a costly post-prayer snack. How much could be saved if only reusable dishes and utensils were used? Community carbon costs could go toward buying reusables, (and paying someone to wash them every week).

3. Renovating? Rebuilding the shul/community center? Why not use your Cutting Carbon Footprint Fund to subsidize [greener construction](#)?

Projects could include funding the extra cost of a Hybrid car, eco-friendly cleaning agents, organic dairy products, water-saving equipment, solar panels, etc. Synagogues can hire energy-efficient delivery vehicles, develop sophisticated composting systems and buy only recycled paper for printing out flyers and bulletins. The New Year is a fantastic opportunity to sit together and decide- "How can we live better this year?" Putting carbon costs towards a healthier family and community lifestyle is a great way to do that.

And that's all. Good luck!

Whether you are choosing between a standard offsetting service or creating your own, we'd love to hear about your experience. Which service did you use? How did it go? What kinds of projects did you create? How did your family/the community respond? [Click Here to Contact Us](#)- We'd love to here about how you're fixing the world!

Climate change is both a global crisis and an opportunity. It challenges us all to live better and walk more wisely and responsibly on the Earth. [Jewish Climate Initiative](#) is a Jerusalem-based NGO that mobilizes the wisdom of Jewish teaching and the collective passion and ingenuity of the Jewish people to inspire a vision for the future that matches the magnitude of the challenge.