

A Sustainable Environment: Our Obligation to Protect God's Gift

By
George P. Nassos

We Should Learn and Adopt from Abroad

About 40 years ago, I spent four years working in Germany and The Netherlands for an American chemical company, and that was when the seed was planted for me to develop interest in energy and the environment. I have since been trying to implement some of the learning systems here in the U.S. but have not been as successful as I had hoped.

Last month, I had the opportunity to travel through Israel and couldn't help but notice what this country is doing for the environment, particularly for energy and water. The first day of our tour traveling by bus south from Tel Aviv, we went almost three hours before we saw the first traffic light. Prior to that, all the intersections were roundabouts where the bus never had to stop unless a vehicle was in the roundabout prior to the bus. The bus made better time and hardly ever had to idle for the three hours.

While traveling through Israel, noticing the size of the cars was also something different for an American. At least 95% of the cars are small and probably with small engines. It really doesn't make much sense to drive large cars that seat five to eight people when most of the time there is only one passenger in the vehicle – the driver. Besides being a small country, the other reason for small cars is probably the price of gasoline which is over \$8.00 per gallon. If that were the price of gasoline in the U.S., I am sure we would have more small cars.

In the larger Israeli cities, most of the public transportation was with electric rail cars, also called streetcars. Some years ago, the City of Chicago had many lines of streetcars that were used for public transportation. They would ride down the center of the street on rails but the electrical source was a trolley that connected with the electrical wires above. These vehicles were also known as trolley cars or trams. When these streetcars operated in Chicago, it was unusual to see them going underground below the Chicago River and return to the surface on the other side. While they are no longer in Chicago, other U.S. cities like Boston and Portland still rely on this mode of public transportation – very efficient for traveling and energy consumption.

Another environmental feature that became very apparent is the very common use of dual flush toilets. No matter whether I was using a toilet in the hotel, in a restaurant, in a monastery, or wherever, invariably they were all of the dual-flush design – using less water to flush liquids than for flushing solids. This is very understandable because of the limited supply of fresh water in the Middle East. Americans living near the Great Lakes are really “spoiled” as they live next to 20% of the world's fresh water that serves less than 50 million people. There is no reason why dual flush toilets should not be adopted even here in the U.S. We must learn to be environmentally efficient wherever we live as the environment is a global issue.

Also apparent in Israel and surrounding countries is the implementation of other energy saving systems. On several occasions I had to use a public washroom, and in a few instances there was no one else in the washroom when I entered. So most of the lights were not on until I activated a motion detector that turned on the overhead lights – all of which were LEDs. Again, this makes a lot of sense not to have the lights on when no one is in the washroom.

On the return trip to the U.S., we had a connecting flight in Istanbul, Turkey. After departing the plane we had to walk to another terminal with our carry-on luggage. The wide path connecting the terminals included a moving sidewalk that was not operating so we decided to walk along side of it. But then we noticed the airline crew walking toward that moving sidewalk that wasn't moving. But they knew something I didn't. As soon as they stepped on the moving sidewalk, it started to operate. This really should not have surprised me as I had experienced something similar 40 years ago living in Cologne, Germany. Back then, I had to take an escalator down to use the city subway but the escalator was not moving. So I decided to walk down the escalator, and to my surprise, it started up as soon as I stepped on it. When I got to the bottom and no one else was on the escalator, it stopped. Again, this really makes sense not to consume energy when no one is on the escalator or, in my recent experience, on the moving sidewalk. The only negative of these systems is the potential wear on the motors that start and stop often.

Not having traveled abroad for some time, I have forgotten about the environmental and energy systems that have been adopted by smaller and more efficient countries. We need to do a better job in adopting some of these systems here in the U.S. for the benefit of the global environment.