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# genesis 2

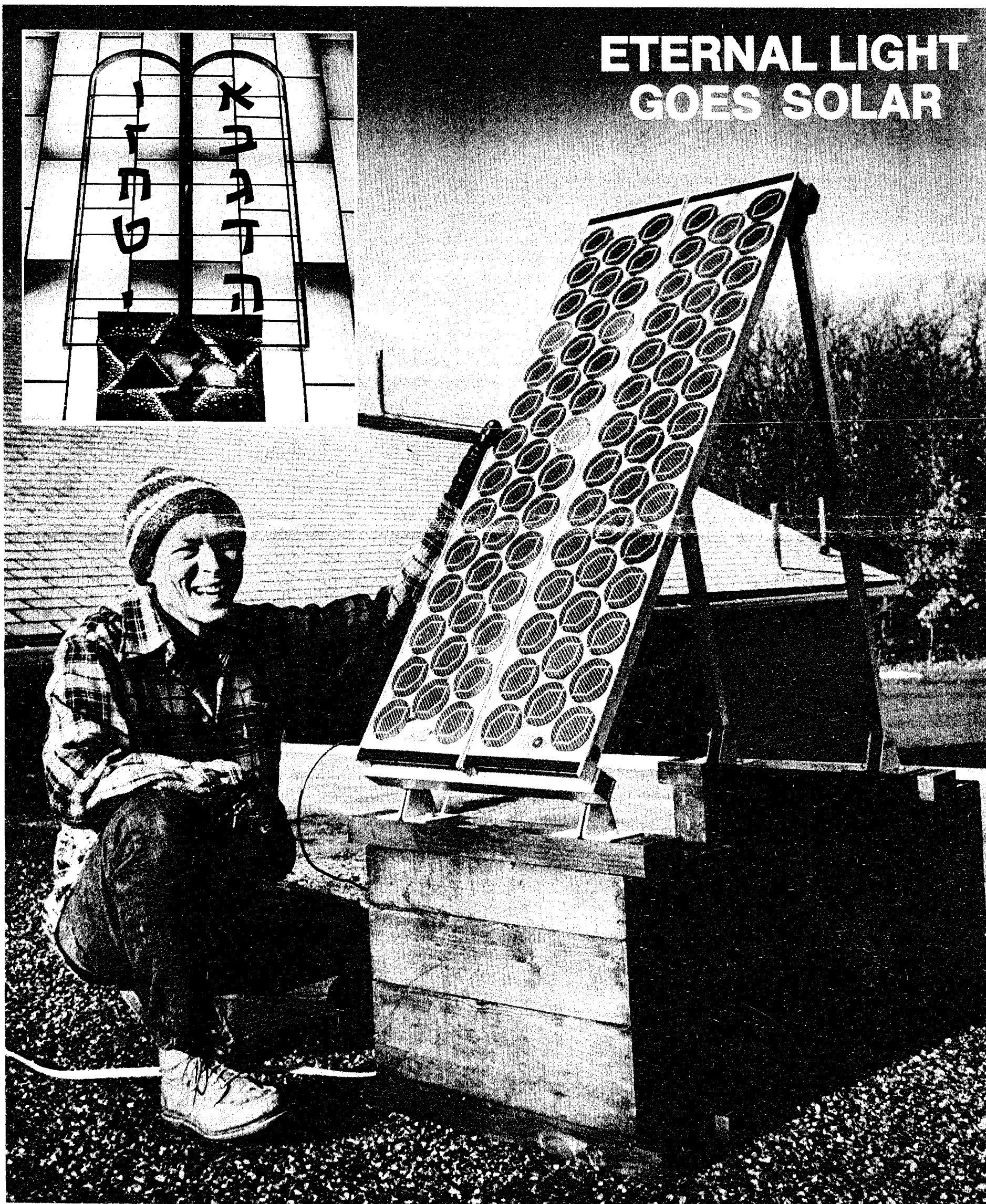
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## ETERNAL LIGHT GOES SOLAR

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# Building a solar consciousness

For the past year and a half, Temple Emanuel in Lowell has been using a Ner Tamid (Eternal Light) powered by solar energy. Rabbi Everett Gendler of Temple Emanuel, who first conceived of the idea for a solar paneled eternal light has long been an advocate of energy conservation and of honoring the Biblical mandate to respect and preserve the earth's natural resources.

The following excerpts were taken from a recent interview with Rabbi Gendler during which he explained the significance of his solar powered Ner Tamid (the only one known of its kind) while he addressed general questions concerning energy and nuclear power.

Interviewed by Cherie Brown

**genesis 2: What made you decide to install a solar Ner Tamid?**

**Rabbi Gendler:** Ah! It happened about a year ago last autumn when there was a particularly beautiful day, and I could feel the shortening of the daylight. At the same time, I was especially aware of the power and strength of the sun. I was musing at the Temple. Every once in a while I think about Psalm 19 with its celebration of the sun. I begin thinking about the sun as a symbol of the Divine, so inferior to, yet derivative from the great Source. A mutation of that, the *Ner Tamid*, is what symbolically stands above the arc.

I was thinking, my God, here's this reality of enormous Power and energy which for our eternal lights is mediated by such questionable sources of power, either rapidly disappearing fossil fuels — coal or oil or the really lethal and dangerous to the future of human existence — nuclear power.

It suddenly struck me so forcibly that such sources of power for the *Ner Tamid* were incredibly inferior to the beautiful solar collector which is the olive tree and the olive oil. I managed to resist the temptation to say: "Abolish all electrified eternal lights and return to olive oil," which was my first thought.

I had heard about photo-voltaics. Symbolically, at the spiritual level, how beautiful it would be if the light above the Torah directly derived from the sun. Also, I was thinking, My God, what a contribution to all of our awareness of the energy question at a practical, societal level.

**genesis 2: What has been the response from members of the congregation? Has it been useful in raising people's awareness?**

**R. Gendler:** At each season of the year now, we do something special at the temple, which invites an ongoing educational program. For example, on the first anniversary, we actually added the internal lights of the arc off the same solar powered unit. We had an astronomer, a friend of the congregation, come with slides and talk about the sun.

Also the celebration of Tamuz and the beginning of the summer was quite special. This spring, we had Professor Robert Case, a mathematician from Northeastern speak on ethics and energy, the solar transition.

Partly, we're more attuned to the sun and that means that seasonal shifts and energy questions come in for more explicit consideration. But it's more than that. It really touches people at a very deep symbolic level. Sometimes I can feel the greater spiritual tonus — and that's the only word. It feels more vibrant. We've become a little more spiritually alive and not so flabby, as is often the case.

**genesis 2: Can you add anything else that Jewish tradition has to say about energy and natural resources?**

**R. Gendler:** There are several propositions that guide my approach to this kind of question. One is a verse from Isaiah 45:18:

... the Lord Who created the heavens  
(He is God!)  
Who formed the earth and made it  
(He established it),

He did not create it a chaos,  
He formed it to be inhabited!

Proposition number one is that this planet was created as a kind of life experiment and we're part of it. Everything we do has to be measured against maintaining the inhabitability of the planet. One of my favorite Midrashim, "Your World" is from a collection by Nachum Glatzer, *Hammer on the Rock*. It says:

In the hour when the Holy One,  
blessed be He,  
created the first man,  
He took him and let him pass before  
all the  
trees of the garden of Eden,  
and said to him:

See My works, how fine and excellent they are!

Now all that I have created, for you have I created.

Think upon this, and do not corrupt and desolate  
My world:

for if you corrupt it, there is no one to set it  
right after you.

The second point is that the earth was created to be inhabited, and we are primarily responsible for maintaining it as a hospitable place for other creatures and for us. Any energy that's proposed has to conform to these requirements. It has to operate in a way that doesn't threaten either the possibility of future life continuing on this planet or else assume that somebody else will pick up the pieces and clean up the mess after us. In so far as any source threatens the basis of human life, to that extent it seems to me it's invalid and has to be ruled out.

**genesis 2: What do you think should be included in an overall energy policy for the Jewish community?**

**R. Gendler:** Conservation at the institutional and individual level is important. Secondly, there should be massive support for funding of research and development of solar alternatives, which include wind and hydroelectric, which are in a sense derivatives of the sun. All the clean, renewable sources of energy deserve full support.

I'd also emphasize small de-centralized sources of energy, in so far as possible, so that we don't get into the additional problem of huge electrical grids which require very high voltage for efficiency, and which then set up electro-magnetic fields which themselves pose certain dangers both to other animals and also to the human nervous system. The idea that the 765 kilovolt lines are to cross the country is appalling because there's a lot of evidence that it is not good for birds, for cows, or for us humans.

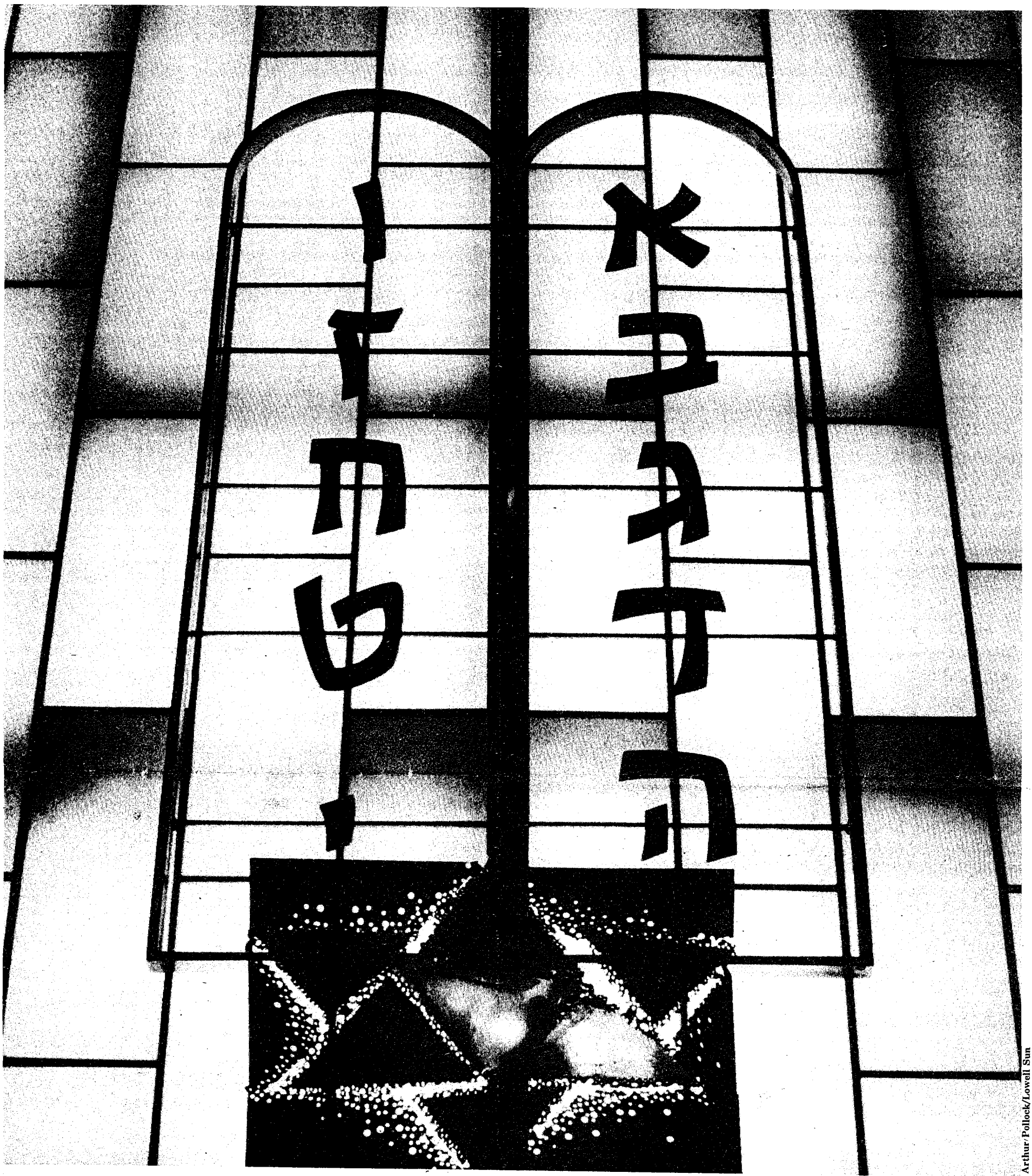
A policy which puts a premium on small local units which offer greater community independence and self-determination and which requires less massive, centralized, bureaucratic control are also advantageous and much more in the spirit of what I think is the de-centralism of "proclaimed liberty throughout the land," from Leviticus to the Jubilee proclamation which is still on the Liberty bell — unrung!

My own sense is that the danger of radio-active leaks and accidents, the unsolved problem of nuclear waste disposal, the incredible hazards of transporting it, and the fact that it threatens generations to come, says to me, in light of those earlier two general propositions, that nuclear power is simply prohibitive. We have to do everything possible both to prevent more nuclear reactors from being built and we have to work for a rapid shut down and de-commissioning of those presently operating. That's my honest reading of the life affirming tradition.

**genesis 2: Are there any final comments you'd like to add?**

**R. Gendler:** There is a lot of marvelous and ingenious thought going into ways we can capture more of this daily gift of solar energy which is just staggering in its abundance. Human ingenuity has barely begun to look into the possibilities of drawing on it for constructive purposes.

One of the beautiful things that is



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# THIS ETERNAL LIGHT RUNS ON THE SUN

happening is the number of people who, here and there, are looking into it and really devising wondrous ways of utilizing it increasingly. I especially love the "passive solar people," who are themselves very active, but who are fin-

ding ways of drawing from it that don't involve elaborate further technological expenditures.

I'm very hopeful that all this will make possible a more humane way of living. What strikes me is that the most impor-

tant solar energy is solar and spiritual and I think in some way, we've all been distracted by the idea of energy as we've known it in recent decades. We've become so bedazzled by it that we've almost lost sight of personal energy, spiritual energy. I

think in some ways that the present material energy crisis may be a very nice warning not to lose sight of the energy that really matters.

*Cherie Brown is genesis 2's Public Affairs Editor.*