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Walking with Justice

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ENVIRONMENT

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INTRODUCTION

What does Judaism say about nature and contemporary environmental challenges? I often begin lectures by disabusing audiences of the belief that what we're going to talk about is "what Judaism says about...", for two reasons. First, there is no such thing as "Judaism," some reified entity that speaks in its own name. Moreover, given the bewildering array of books, people, schools of thought, historical periods, ideological orientations, etc. encompassed by Jewish tradition - there are very few issues about which one thing is said. Judaism is less a set of rigid answers to fixed questions, than an ongoing dialogue in which the questions arise, along with various answers from different times and places, and even more generally, a language in which to engage in the dialogue and formulate the questions in the first place. And nowhere is this truer than in the case of Jewish attitudes and values regarding the environment, and the challenges and claims put forth by the movement known as environmentalism.

What do we mean by "environment", or "environmentalism"? First, the use of the term, "environment" is intentional and meant to be distinct from "nature". Focusing on nature circumscribes the discussion to issues of wilderness, species, trees, and animals. These are fascinating and crucial issues to develop, but they are only a part of what I would call the environmental agenda, which is best summarized by the broad term "sustainability".

Sustainability is a big idea that can mean different things to different people, but for our purposes, a sustainable society is one that integrates social, environmental and economic concerns of health and justice, and can both *sustain itself* over time, living up to responsibilities to future generations, as well as *sustain and nourish* its members, materially and spiritually, in the present and in the future. The crisis of which environmentalists speak - including everything from mass extinctions, resource depletion, and global warming, to poverty, the widening social gap, unfair trade, urban issues and loss of social capital - refers to the growing realization that we are not fulfilling either of these basic conditions, and we need to figure out what must change in order to do so.

It is clear from this list that environmental questions are not technical or technological. The natural sciences can only help us grasp certain *symptoms* of the problems, for the underlying *causes* of those challenges relate to human values and behavior. Thus a discussion of Jewish perspectives on these issues is not only relevant but necessary. It's not just about whether we as Jews love nature, and whether that love is different from secular, Christian or pagan love. It is about the direction of society that is not only "harming nature" but changing the definition of what it means to be human, our cultural and spiritual horizons, and the dynamic dialogue between matter and spirit.

Both environmentalism and Judaism are value systems, pluralistic within certain bounds, that propose alternatives to the media- and market-driven lifestyles so prevalent in our contemporary society. Judaism, all too often a ritualistic adornment to our spiritual complacency, can be, needs to be a faith with teeth: a striving, a confrontation, whether in the lofty call to be a "holy people" or simply to actualize prophetic visions of justice and caring. This type of Judaism has something to say about our lives and our world - and it is often a critique. And those who are searching for or have embraced some sort of critique of contemporary life will be most open to one or both of these languages of *heshbon nefesh*, self-criticism, literally "soul accounting".

Formulating a critique of one's own lifestyle and civilization is far from easy. We are so embedded in our society that it's hard to transcend its worldview in which we have so much invested, and look at it from without. Judaism, as an age-old tradition, can help us do that. So here we would like to connect a critique of contemporary society, in the context of issues that are the focus of environmentalism, such as consumerism and the challenges of material abundance, the notion of human progress through technological innovation (involving the intensifying manipulation of nature), and the culture of individualism (often at the expense of communal well-being, to the sources and values of the Jewish tradition.



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But aren't the lives of primitive, small-scale farmers and modern urbanites fundamentally incommensurable? Are we trying to reproduce those antique life forms? Is there only one type of sustainability? That is, does the equilibrium they found in their world determine the limits of ours? Can we actually learn relevant lessons from ancient agrarian tales for our modern technological lives?

My answers to these questions are: no, no, no, no - and yes. I would argue that there are certain eternal unchanging truths about the human condition and human-nature relations that a patina of modern technological sophistication doesn't fundamentally alter. That is, one can accept the essential newness of many of the issues we face in the 21st century, and still embrace the need for guiding values and insight from timeless sources. While some of the problems of our own day, such as soil erosion and health-impairing pollution, were known in the ancient world, the phenomena that make up the issues of today's environmental movement are relatively without historic parallel. It is the underlying questions, however, that have remained unchanged over millennia of human culture and religious thought: what is the appropriate relationship between humanity and the rest of Creation, and the material and the spiritual in our lives? What are our responsibilities to future generations regarding the word we shall bequeath them?

AGGADAH AND HALAKHAH, CREATION AND CONSUMPTION

Since Judaism deals with all of life's issues and challenges, and since environmental questions are not just about trees and flowers, or water pollution, but about larger questions of individual, society and the world, there are many points of engagement between Jewish texts and values, and environmental concerns. Let's take a look at two examples, from two types of sources, one *aggadic* (narrative), and one *halakhic* (legal) example.

The Creation Stories: Genesis chapter 1 relates the divine commandment, "Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule..."¹ Clearly a call to dominion. But the humans are created on the same day as the other mammals - and as is clear from the very next verse, this mastery and rule didn't originally even include eating animals. Eden, and the other end of history, the messianic period, are vegetarian ideals.² Nevertheless, this idea of the centrality and domination of the human (a chosen species, as it were) is seen by many as the root of all eco-evil. But for much of human history this verse was categorically an uplifting and empowering *blessing*. Some 3,000 years ago (and 2000, and 1000 as well) this vision promised hope and dignity for a society with a short average life-span and great susceptibility to natural threats.³

This blessing is also a proclamation of emancipation from the more oppressive nature-human relations of paganism. While it is currently fashionable to idealize nature-worshipping tribal religions, especially in environmental terms, the power ascribed to deified nature, coupled with the technological inability to cope with natural threats, often led to the increased subjugation of the human to natural forces. These induced terror and required appeasement, including human sacrifice. Thus if nothing else, the force of this commandment was that the humans are not to be cruelly subjugated to the natural world, or to natural forces. The promise of human mastery and dominion over the natural world - a total pipe-dream at the time of its promulgation - was therefore reassuring, and even liberating.

There are more nuances and complexities of Chapter 1, but Chapter 2 also needs to be brought into the discussion: "The Lord God took *adam*, the human, and placed him in the garden of Eden to till it and tend it."⁴ If Chapter 1 speaks of dominion and rule by the god-like human (created in God's image), the Chapter 2 describes a role of stewardship, by the human (*adam*) fashioned from the earth (*adama*). The key phrase here is *le'ovdah u'leshomrah*, "to till and to tend", "to work and to watch", or (my personal favorite), "to serve and to preserve". *Avodah* is work or labor (and in the context of land, cultivation), and *shemirah* is guarding or protecting. One can add to that "observe" (as in commandments, like *shemirat Shabbat*, the observance of the Sabbath), for it is surely no accident that both these terms have such cultic associations. Cultivating the soil and worshipping God are the same word in Hebrew (*avodah*); indeed the English word "worship" is from "work," just as "cult" is the root of "cultivate."

¹ Genesis 1:28

² see eg Isaiah 11:7

³ See, for instance, the very real threat of animals to humans expressed, *inter alia*, in Jeremiah 15:3, 34:20 and Isaiah 34

⁴ Genesis 2:15



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If we try to divine the meaning of these terms from their referents in other contexts, our relationship to the garden, and by implication, the world, is homologous to our relationship with God: we are enjoined to do to the garden what we do for God (*avodah* – service), and also what God does for or to us, as in the priestly blessing of Numbers 6:24: “*yevarechecha... veyishmerecha*”, “May God bless you, and watch over you.”

This observation leads us to dig deeper into the dynamic of *le’ovdah u’leshomrah*, and uncover further layers. For instance: from what exactly are we meant to protect or guard “the garden”? Some say wild animals, or the less ordered, more chaotic world of nature outside the garden. This doesn’t ring true, though, since animals are clearly included in the garden, and the entire world has already been deemed “very good.” There is no implication of a radical dichotomy between the garden and the world. I would suggest that the main threat to the garden, and by extension, the world, is precisely the other pair of the dyad - the cultivation, the human work.

The mission is to work, to produce, to develop - but at the same time to preserve, to guard, to be vigilant that the work doesn’t get out of hand. It must remain, in a word, sustainable. Indeed, perhaps the best translation of *le’ovdah u’leshomrah* is “sustainable development”. Working the land is crucial for human flourishing—but guarding the earth is the critical complement. We need to guard the world precisely from our *avodah*, the effects of our own work. In our struggle for the earth’s fruits, we sow the seeds of our own, and the world’s, destruction—unless we temper our toil with responsibility and concern for posterity. This responsibility is at the root of the very important contemporary notion of stewardship. Classically, to be a steward is to be in the middle: above is the lord of the manor, who has entrusted his domain to the charge of the servant-steward, below is the realm of responsibility. Notice the duality here in the notion of responsibility: the steward is responsible *to* the one who is really in charge, and at the same time responsible *for* the things entrusted. There is no traditional Hebrew term for the idea of stewardship, but it seems clear that this is another good translation of the ideal of *le’ovdah u’leshomrah*.

When read together, these stories (chs. 1 and 2) use a sort of “literary parallax” to create a composite portrait that strives to do justice to the many sides of its subjects: the Creator, the creating, the creation, and the creatures, including ourselves. We do indeed have a central role to play in the world, combining the prowess called for in chapter 1, with the responsibility explicated in chapter 2. We cannot manage the earth - nor should we strive to - but our impact on it is so great that we have to take responsibility for shaping policy for our actions, that determine a great deal of the course of the planet. In other words, if there is anything that we need to manage, it is ourselves, first and foremost. This brings us to our next example.

THE LAWS OF BAL TASHCHIT (DO NOT DESTROY)

Probably the best-known Jewish value concept and collection of *halakhot* regarding environmental responsibility are those grouped under the heading of *bal tashchit* (lit. “do not destroy”, or “waste”), which prohibits many forms of waste, destruction, vandalism and the like. The career of this mitzvah begins in the book of Deuteronomy, develops in Tannaitic literature, expands in the Talmud, is refracted through medieval commentaries and codes, and is applied in early and late halakhic responsa.

For anyone familiar with this value from references in contemporary environmental literature, it may be surprising to discover that the original context refers exclusively to fruit trees and their use, and that in a time of war!⁵ While other texts deal with proper treatment of the enemy, and terms of peace agreements, the verses in question here focus on the treatment of nature during the waging of war. This may seem esoteric at first, but the fact is that from the ancient Romans sowing salt in enemy fields, to the scorched earth policy of the Russians in their desperate war against Napoleon, to the devastating American chemical defoliation of Vietnam with napalm and Agent Orange and Saddam Hussein’s burning of oil wells in Kuwait, armies have used environmental destruction as a tactic in warfare. Why cavil at the loss of a few trees (or farmland, or air and water) when military victory and human lives are at stake?

⁵ Deuteronomy 20:19-20.



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Let us remember the context, which is essentially one of life and death: shortening a war means saving lives and reducing suffering. Given the supreme value of human life in the Jewish tradition, one would think that nearly anything that would lead to the end of the conflict would therefore be justifiable. Thus it is surprising to find that what the Torah is concerned about is how the Israelite army treats the trees.

And yet, the Torah, which calls us to dominion, and generally justifies various uses of nature, says here that there are strict limitations: acts of destruction with dire long-term consequences are inadmissible even for pressing short-term goals. Moreover, a strict distinction must be preserved between human conflicts and our relationship with the natural world, which must be kept out of the fray. Nature must not become a pawn on a human chessboard.

The text declares that scorched earth is immoral, for though you may need the wood of the fruit trees to secure immediate victory—you will need their fruit in peaceful years to come even more. If you're going to live in a land after the smoke clears and the fighting is over, you had better not destroy exactly that thing you were fighting for.⁶

Despite its somewhat esoteric context—battlefield forestry rules - the rabbis rightly perceived the wide-ranging implications of such a regulation for daily life. One can apply the reasoning known as *kal va'homer* (*a fortiori*): if in the most extreme case of wartime, a life-and-death situation, it is forbidden to irrevocably harm the natural environment, then how much more so regarding day-to-day situations of personal comfort and economic profit and loss.

The Mishnah categorically states that while one who cuts down plants belonging to another is criminally liable, it is likewise unlawful to cut down one's own plants (*neti'ot* – apparently not even limited to fruit trees).⁷ Here is a clear limitation on what we modern Westerners would take as basic property rights; what is ours is not really ours.

The rabbis widened the scope of this principle, but also limited its applicability. As framed in Maimonides' classic legal code, the *Mishneh Torah*, it becomes forbidden to “smash household goods, tear clothes, demolish a building, stop up a spring, or destroy articles of food”⁸. Even human-made elements are protected against wanton destruction.

The rabbinic expansion of the jurisdiction of *bal tashchit* encompasses a variety of areas that are quite environmentally salient. For instance, the question of energy conservation is addressed in the tractate of *Shabbat*: “Rabbi Zutra said, ‘One who covers an oil lamp, or uncovers a naphtha lamp transgresses the prohibition of *bal tashchit*, since these acts cause the lamp to burn with unnecessary speed.”⁹ It is not at all a far cry to ask what this value has to say about gas-guzzling cars, or energy intensive appliances, and the rate at which we are consuming resources for energy. If it is possible to be more efficient, to slow down, to conserve - then we are violating a mitzvah by not doing so.

We can contemplate similar extensions in our own day. For instance, *bal tashchit* can be defined as forbidding the wanton destruction of anything of value. But value is relative: for instance, recycling technologies mean that garbage now has value. Therefore not recycling should be declared a flagrant violation of this Biblical injunction. The *Sefer Hahinukh*, a 13th-century elucidation of the Commandments, saw in the mitzvah of *bal tashchit* a very general principle, a *middah*, a virtue, to be cultivated:

...to love that which is good and worthwhile and to cling to it, so that good becomes a part of us and we will avoid all that is evil and destructive. This is the way of the righteous and those who improve society... that nothing, not even a grain of mustard, should be lost... if possible they will prevent any destruction that they can. Not so are the wicked, who rejoice in the destruction of the world, and they are destroying themselves.¹⁰

⁶ Writing this from Israel, I can't ignore the fact that the issue of destroying trees in times of war, which might seem esoteric in the Diaspora, is painfully relevant here. Jews uproot Arab olive trees (to prevent them being used as cover for attackers, or as spiteful vandalism, and sometimes for economic reasons, to resell to other Jews), and there have been hundreds of incidents of arson against the 'Jewish' pine trees of JNF forests (many of which are planted over the ruins of destroyed Arab villages, or admittedly used to prevent the expansion of Israeli Arab towns and villages). The Land of Israel has been one of the great silent victims of the century long conflict in which we are embroiled.

⁷ Mishnah Bava Kamma 8:6

⁸ Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings 6:10; cf. Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 129a

⁹ Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 67b

¹⁰ Sefer Ha-Hinukh #530



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And as for consumerism: against the *zeitgeist* of wanting more and better things come religious pronouncements that seem downright primitive, if not anti-humanist: “Who is rich? One who is satisfied with one’s portion.”¹¹ While no one can argue with inner peace, many of us unconsciously equate contentment with complacency, and from there it is but a small step to stagnation. Western society, it is claimed, has succeeded because of *dissatisfaction*, through struggling and striving for more. But there are two nagging problems with this otherwise rosy picture. One is ecological, or material: the continually increasing through-put of the consumer society is leading to resource depletion and increased waste and pollution. The other is psychological, or spiritual: perennial dissatisfaction is not a great recipe for satisfaction.

What is required is not frugality and self-denial, but a different model altogether of happiness and fulfillment, a radical *de-coupling* of personal satisfaction and happiness from the need for ever-increasing material goods. We should rephrase the *Avot* question and answer: “Who is wealthy? One whose personal fulfillment and happiness is not tied to material affluence and consumption; where the good life is not a function of a life of goods.”

JUDAISM AND ENVIRONMENTALISM: A COMMON VISION

There are in fact more points of agreement between religion and (allegedly secular) environmentalism than might first meet the eye. For instance, ecological and Jewish perspectives dovetail in seeing the natural world as precious or purposive. Moreover, as opposed to secular humanism, both ecological thought (with its recognition of interdependence and the trans-human complexity of ecosystems) and religion (with an all-embracing God at the center), share a crucially important perspective, which I shall call “something-else-centrism”. Whether the Earth belongs to God or simply to itself, it surely isn’t ours.

Environmentalism and religion speak with one voice of imposing on modern Western liberal technological society and free-market capitalism a transcendent set of values and criteria that buttress the belief in something greater than the individual and the fulfillment of her or his immediate personal needs.

Religion speaks in terms of eternity, emphasizing the long-term, much as environmentalists emphasize how our actions today will affect the Earth and future generations. This contrasts sharply with the quarterly report and the four-year term of office, which fail to take environmental health and human well being over the long term into account. Religion can also help promote spiritual fulfillment over materialism, helping us to combat the rampant, vapid consumerism of modern life. Focusing on spiritual growth helps our reprioritization of personal and collective goals, re-envisioning the good life and what is necessary to make it a reality.

IN CONCLUSION...

Consider God’s doing! Who can straighten what He has twisted?” (Ecclesiastes 7:13). When the Holy Blessed One created the first Adam, God showed Adam all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said: ‘See My works, how lovely they are, how fine they are. All I have created, I created for you. Take care not to corrupt and destroy My world, for if you ruin it, there is no one to come after you to put it right.’¹²

While we have emphasized the novelty of many environmental challenges, clearly the sages of over a thousand years ago also had a sense of the possibility of widespread destruction of which the human being was capable. But preceding the gloom of the threat is the invitation to appreciate the beauty and joy that is part of the natural world. This piece of Midrash is a powerful educational statement: first we are to open ourselves up to what the world does to us, for us, and only then can we confront what we do to the world in return, our responsibility for it.

As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel expressed it: “As civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines. Such decline is an alarming symptom of our state of mind. We will not perish for want of information, but only for want of appreciation.”¹³

¹¹ Mishnah Avot 4:1

¹² Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7

¹³ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, p. 46



ENVIRONMENT – TEXT 1

תלמוד בבלי סנהדרין לח:א

תני רבנן: אדם נברא בערב שבת. ומפני מה?

(1) שלא יהיו מינים אומרים שותף היה לו לקדוש ברוך הוא במעשה בראשית.

(2) דבר אחר: כדי שיכנס למצוה מיד.

(3) דבר אחר: שאם תזווח דעתו עליו אומר לו: יתוש קדמך במעשה בראשית.

(4) דבר אחר: כדי שיכנס לסעודה מיד. משל למלך בשר ודם שבנה פלטרין

ושכללו, והתקין סעודה, ואחר כך הכניס אורחין...

BABYLONIAN TALMUD *SANHEDRIN* 38A

The Rabbis taught: *adam* [the human] was created on the eve of the Sabbath [i.e. last]. Why?

[1] So that heretics would not be able to claim that God had a partner in the act of Creation;

[2] Another answer: so that the human could enter into a mitzvah immediately [the Shabbat];

[3] Another answer: so that if he becomes too haughty, he can be told: the gnat preceded you in the order of creation.

[4] Another answer: so that he could enter into a banquet immediately. This is similar to a flesh-and-blood king who that built a palace, and furnished it, and laid a banquet, and then invited in the honored guests....

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Explain answer [1]. What does it say about the place of humans in creation?
- In answer [2] – what was created later, humans or Shabbat? Why is this important?
- What does answer [3] teach us?
- What are the responsibilities of the 'honored guests' in answer [4]?



ENVIRONMENT – TEXT 2

תלמוד בבלי בבא קמא ל:א

תָּנּוּ רַבָּנָן חֲסִידִים הָרָאשׁוֹנִים הָיוּ מְצַנִּיעִים קוֹצוֹתֵיהֶם וְזִכּוּכֵיהֶם בְּתוֹךְ שְׂדוֹתֵיהֶן וּמַעֲמִיקִים לָהֶן ג' טַפְחִים כְּדֵי שְׁלֹא יַעֲכֹב הַמַּחְרִישָׁה רַב שֵׁשֶׁת שָׂדֵי לְהוּ בְּנוּרָא רַבָּא שָׂדֵי לְהוּ בְּדַגְלַת אָמַר רַב יְהוּדָה הָאֵי מֵאן דְּבָעֵי לְמַהוּי חֲסִידָא לְקַיִם מִיֵּלֵי דְנִזְיָקִין...

BABYLONIAN TALMUD BAVA KAMMA 30A

The Rabbis taught: The early pious ones [*hassidim rishonim*] would hide their thorns and broken glass three handbreaths deep in their fields, so they wouldn't hold up the plowing. Rav Sheshet would throw his in the fire, and Rava would throw his in the Euphrates River. Rav Yehudah said: whoever wants to be a *hasid* should observe the laws of damages.

תלמוד בבלי בבא קמא נ:ב

תָּנּוּ רַבָּנָן: לֹא יִסְקַל אָדָם מִרְשׁוֹתוֹ לְרְשׁוֹת הַרְבִּים. מַעֲשֶׂה בְּאָדָם אֶחָד שֶׁהָיָה מְסַקֵּל מִרְשׁוֹתוֹ לְרְשׁוֹת הַרְבִּים וּמַצְאֵהוּ חֲסִיד אֶחָד. אָמַר לוֹ: רִיקָה! מִפְּנֵי מָה אַתָּה מְסַקֵּל מִרְשׁוֹת שְׂאִינָה שְׁלָדָה לְרְשׁוֹת שְׁלָדָה. לְגַלְגַּל עָלָיו. לְמִיָּמִים נִצְרָדָה לְמַכּוֹר שְׂדֵהוּ וְהָיָה מְהַלֵּךְ בְּאוֹתוֹ רְשׁוֹת הַרְבִּים וְנִכְשַׁל בְּאוֹתָן אֲבָנִים. אָמַר: יָפָה אָמַר לִי אוֹתוֹ חֲסִיד מִפְּנֵי מִפְּנֵי מָה אַתָּה מְסַקֵּל מִרְשׁוֹת שְׂאִינָה שְׁלָדָה לְרְשׁוֹת שְׁלָדָה.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD BAVA KAMMA 50B

It has been taught: A person shouldn't remove stones from his own field to common property. Once there was a man who was removing stones from his field to the public thoroughfare, when a *hasid* said to him: "Hey, you foolish man, why are you removing the stones from property that isn't yours, to that which is?" The man laughed at the *hasid*. Later, when the man was forced to sell his field, he was walking along the thoroughfare, and tripped over his old stones. "That *hasid* spoke well about removing the stones from property that was not mine to that which is."

STUDY QUESTIONS

- How many lessons can we learn from the first text?
- In the second text, what are the implications of common property being 'ours'?
- Is there any difference between the waste the hasidim threw away and our waste?
- Do these teachings apply to us, today? Why/why not?



ENVIRONMENT – TEXT 3

שמות כ"ד

יד לא תחמד בית רעך ס לא תחמד אשת רעך ועבדו ואמתו ושורו וחמורו וכל אשר לרעך:

Exodus 20:14

Do not covet your neighbor's house: do not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor's.

תלמוד בבלי שבת קמ"ב

ואמר רב חסדא: האי מאן דאפֿשֿר ליה למיכל נהמא דשערי ואכל דחיטי - קעבר משום בל תשחית. ואמר רב פפא: האי מאן דאפֿשֿר למישתי שיכרא ושתי חמר - עובר משום בל תשחית. ולא מילתא היא, בל תשחית דגופא עדיף.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD, *SHABBAT* 140B

Rav Hisda said: Whoever can eat barley bread, but eats wheat bread, violates the precept of *bal tashchit* ['do not destroy']. And Rav Papa said: Whoever can drink beer but drinks wine, violates the precept of *bal tashchit*. But [others claim]: these opinions are not correct, because *bal tashchit* regarding one's own body takes precedence.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Why is it a commandment not to covet?
- Are the rabbis in the second text calling for us to be ascetics? Why/why not?
- How might the second text be related to the first?
- What does the final sentence of the second text mean? Is there a lesson for today we can draw from that text?



ENVIRONMENT – TEXT 4

דברים כ:ט-כ

יט כִּי־תָצוּר אֶל־עִיר יָמִים רַבִּים לְהִלָּחֵם עָלֶיהָ לְתַפְשָׁהּ לֹא־תִשְׁחִית אֶת־עֵצֶיהָ לְנֹדַח עָלֶיהָ גְרֹזוֹן כִּי מִמֶּנּוּ תֵאכַל וְאַתָּה לֹא תִכְרֹת כִּי הָאָדָם יֵעַץ הַשָּׂדֶה לָבֹא מִפְּנֵיךָ בְּמָצוֹר: כ לֹךְ יֵעַץ אֲשֶׁר־תִּדְעַע כִּי לֹא־יֵעַץ מֵאֲכָל הוּא אֶתְּו תִּשְׁחִית וְכָרַת וּבְנִית מְצוֹר עַל־הָעִיר אֲשֶׁר־הוּא עֹשֶׂה עִמָּךְ מִלְחָמָה עַד רִדְתָּהּ:

DEUTERONOMY 20:19-20

If you besiege a city for many days in order to battle against it and seize it, you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them; you may eat from them but you shall not cut them down – are trees in the field human beings, for you to lay siege to them? You may use only such trees as you know are not for food; those you may destroy and cut down to build siegeworks with them against the city which is at war with you, until it surrenders.

תלמוד בבלי בבא קמא צא.ב

אָמַר רַב: דִּיקְלָא דְטָעוֹן קָבָא - אָסוּר לְמִקְצָצֶיהָ. מִיִּתְיָבִי: כַּמָּה יִהְיֶה בְּזִית וְלֹא יִקְצָצוּ? רֹבַע שְׁאֲנֵי זֵיתִים, דִּחְשִׁיבִי. אָמַר רַבִּי חֲנִינָא: לֹא שְׂכִיב שִׁיבַחַת בְּרִי, אֶלָּא דְקָץ תִּיאִינְתָא בְּלֹא זְמַנָּה. אָמַר רַבִּינָא: וְאִם הִיא מְעוּלָה בְּדָמִים - מוּתָר.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD *Bava Kamma* 91B

Rav said: if a palm tree is holding a kab's worth – it is forbidden to cut it down. But we have another source that says something different! Here it is: How much should an olive tree hold in order not to be cut down? A quarter of a kab! But olives are different: they are more important. Rabbi Hanina said: the only reason my son died was that he cut down a fig tree before its time. But Ravina held: if its [the tree's] monetary value [for other uses] is greater than that of its fruit, it is permissible to cut it down.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- What strict ideal is expressed in text 1? Is that ideal modified in the text? If so, how?
- What further ideals are expressed in text 2?
- How do you understand Rabbi Hanina's comment?
- Is it possible to resolve Rabbi Hanina's position with Ravina's? Why/why not?



ENVIRONMENT – TEXT FOR GROUP STUDY

A NEW CATEGORY OF *MITZVOT*?

The dominant classical understanding of the *mitzvot* divides them into *mitzvot bein adam le'havero* (obligations between people, lit. “between human and ‘his’ fellow”) and *mitzvot bein adam la-makom* (obligations of people to God, lit. “between human and the Place” – a fascinating epithet for God in our context).¹ The former are seen usually as ethical and social responsibilities, while the latter are ritual or cultic observances. Environmental issues, neither ritual/cultic nor ethical in a classical sense, fall between the cracks.

Today we need a new category. This is not to suggest inventing new *mitzvot* or *halakhot* out of whole cloth, but rather regrouping and refocusing existing concepts and values to facilitate our engagement with them. We need to begin speaking in Jewish language of our moral and ethical obligations to the earth - those actions that have never been grouped together before - as *mitzvot bein adam le-'olam*, “between people and the world.”

- Dr Jeremy Benstein



SESSION SUGGESTIONS – ENVIRONMENT

INTRODUCTION

This unit begins the ‘subject-specific’ sessions: you may be placing it after Unit 5, or directly after the Introduction. You might wish to begin this particular session (and the ones that follow) with an audit of the group – what do they already do in relation to this topic, and what are their basic views?

Recap the basic points of the essay: how Jewish tradition and the environment are related, creation and consumption, the injunction not to destroy,

CHAVRUTA STUDY

The texts deal with various aspects raised by the essay – creation, waste, consumption, destruction. After the chavruta groups have reported, you might wish to ask which of the texts, if any, felt the most directly relevant to the group (the answers are likely to vary). Why was that? How can the group translate the message of the texts over to their lives and the effect of their lives on our world?

GROUP STUDY

The text provided is short, but its message is radical: how do we create a new category of *mitzvot* to enable us to protect and cherish our environment? Participants might wish to refer back to the essay and texts for ideas here. Once the list is created, discuss ways to use and publicize it. Discussions here could lead on to the conducting of an informal environmental audit of people’s lives, or of the synagogue as a whole; or to the formulation of a new policy; or to a ‘top 10’ personal plan for environmental action.

If you do not wish to use the text – there is a wealth of material available about protecting the environment. You might wish to show a movie, invite representatives from local groups to study with the group and speak to them afterwards. If you google ‘rabbi environment’ you will find numerous sermons from all denominations – you might wish to study a single one, or a number of them together. Or you might have pre-existing material of your own. A search using ‘Jewish environment’ will take you to the websites of numerous Jewish organizations working in the field.

The aim should be to prompt action – study alone is not enough. However: it is easy for people to feel intimidated or powerless in the face of the large-scale challenges we face in this area. You might find that material along the lines of Rabbi Tarfon’s maxim, “It is not for you to finish the work...but neither are you free to desist from it” (Mishnah Avot 2:16) will be of use in reinforcing the translation of study into action.

CONCLUSION

Allow time for participants to update and amend their personal manifestos. How will they incorporate protection of the environment into their Jewish practice? Hand out the essay for next time, and conclude the session.

¹ see Bereishit Rabba 68:9



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See the various essays on social justice at www.bradartson.com

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Jewish Funds for Justice website, www.jewishjustice.org



MUSICAL PLAYLIST TO ACCOMPANY EACH SESSION

Compiled by Noam Raucher

You can use any or all of the songs in the suggested sessions. They are listed in the order of title-artist-album, and all are available on iTunes. Please note that one or two have explicit lyrics – these are clearly marked.

Introduction

How Come – Ray LaMontagne – Trouble
For What It's Worth – Buffalo Springfield – Buffalo Springfield
If I Had A Hammer – Peter, Paul and Mary – The Best of Peter Paul and Mary
What's Going On – Marvin Gaye – What's Going On

The Prophets and Social Justice

Fuel – Ani DiFranco – Little Plastic Castle
Chimes of Freedom – Bob Dylan – Bob Dylan: The Collection
Keep On Rockin' In The Free World – Neil Young – Greatest Hits

The Ethical Impulse in Rabbinic Judaism

Talkin' Bout A Revolution – Tracy Chapman – Tracy Chapman
Blowin' In The Wind – Peter, Paul and Mary – The Best of Peter, Paul and Mary
Down By The Riverside – Waste Deep In The Big Muddy And Other Love Songs

A Torah of Justice – A View from the Right?

Hands – Jewel - Spirit
The Times They Are A Changin' – Bob Dylan – The Essential Bob Dylan
We Are One – Safam – Peace By Peace

A Torah of Justice – A View from the Left?

He Was My Brother – Simon and Garfunkel – Wednesday Morning, 3AM
Oxford Town – Bob Dylan – The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan
A Change Is Gonna Come – Sam Cooke – Ain't That Good News

Environment

The Horizon Has Been Defeated – Jack Johnson -On and On
Holy Ground – The Klezmatics – Wonder Wheel
Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology) – Marvin Gaye – What's Going On
Big Yellow Taxi – Joni Mitchell - Dreamland

Business Ethics

Working Class Hero – John Lennon – Working Class Hero: The Definitive Lennon
Carpal Tunnel – John O' Conner – Classic Labor Songs From Smithsonian Folkways
We Do The Work – Jon Fromer - Classic Labor Songs From Smithsonian Folkways

International Economic Justice

We Are The World. – USA For Africa – We Are The World (Single)
Outside A Small Circle of Friends – Phil Ochs – The Best of Phil Ochs
El Salvador – Peter, Paul and Mary – The Best of Peter Paul and Mary

Special Needs

What It's Like – Everlast – The Best of House of Pain and Everlast – **EXPLICIT LYRICS**
Mr. Wendall – Arrested Development – 3 years, 5 months, and 2 days in the life Of...
The Boy In The Bubble – Paul Simon – The Essential Paul Simon

Kashrut

All You Can Eat – Ben Folds – Supersunnyspeedgraphic, The LP – **EXPLICIT LYRICS**
Mr. Greed – John Fogerty - Centerfield
We Just Come To Work Here, We Don't Come To Die –Anne Feeney - Classic Labor Songs From Smithsonian Folkways

Israel

Hope: Pray On – Sweet Honey In The Rock - 25
Yihyeh Tov – David Broza – Things Will Be Better, The Best Of David Broza
Misplaced – Moshav Band

Afterword

With My Own Two Hands – Ben Harper – Diamonds On The Inside
Living For The City – Stevie Wonder – Number 1's
Redemption Song – Bob Marley - Legend



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