

**Modern
Commentary**
דרש חדש

1 Seder Bereishit: Judaism's concern for maintaining what the rabbis called *sidrei bereishit*—the orders of creation, the plan and intent of the Creator, is expressed in several ways. Juridically we may distinguish two categories: first, injunctions against the despoliation of nature and natural resources [such as *bal tashit* and preserving species] and, second, legal imperatives regarding the development and conservation of the God-given environment [such as *yishuv ha-aretz* and *yishuv ha-olam*].

-Jonathan Helfand

Respect for the inviolability of Nature extends not only to Nature as a whole but to its major segments as well. The original identity of species must be protected against artificial distortion and obliteration.... Interestingly, one of the major biblical sources of the laws forbidding such intermingling of species is immediately preceded by the famous commandment 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.' Reverence for the integrity of identity is common to both laws.

-Rabbi Norman Lamm

**וירא אלהים
את כל אשר
עשה והנה
טוב מאד**

"And God saw all that was made and, behold, it was very good."

-Genesis 1:31

Traditional Sources
מן המקורות

2 The Torah specifically forbids human-caused extinction:

כִּי יִקְרָא קוֹרְאֵיךָ לְפָנֶיךָ בְּקִלְעֵץ אֹר
עַל־הָאָרֶץ אֲפָרָהִים אֹר בְּיָדִים וְהָאֵם רִבְעָה
עַל־הָאֲפָרָהִים אֹר עַל־הַבְּיָצִים לֹא־תִקַּח הָאֵם
עַל־הַבְּיָצִים שֶׁלָּךְ תִּשְׁלַח אֶת־הָאֵם וְאֶת־הַבְּיָצִים
תִּקְחֶלֶךְ לְמַעַן יִיטֵב לָךְ וְלֹא־תִרְכַּת יָמִים:

If, along the road, you chance upon a bird's nest, in any tree or on the ground, with fledglings or eggs and the mother sitting over the fledglings or on the eggs, do not take the mother with her young, in order that you may fare well and have a long life. -Deut. 22:6-7.

Nahmanides comments: Torah does not permit a killing that would uproot a species, even if it permitted the killing [of individuals] in that species. And here, the one who kills the mother and child on the same day... It is as if that person has made that species extinct.

7 To keep them alive: R. Levi said: The whole twelve months that Noah was in the ark, neither he nor his family tasted sleep because they were responsible for feeding the animals. R. Abba b. Kahana said: He

Science
מדע

3 Ecological, agricultural, commercial and recreational reasons:

Ecosystems around the world are now threatened by destruction, fragmentation, and simplification. Such degradation diminishes their intrinsic value and their ability to serve as life support systems and sources of biological diversity. The integrity of ecological systems is necessary to the survival of the human community. Ecosystems provide for our sustenance and well-being by purifying our water, creating our oxygen, generating soil, and providing primary genetic and biochemical resources upon which agriculture, medicine, and industry rely.

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4 Species diversity: In October of 1996, the World Conservation Union released the most comprehensive survey of threatened species around the world, estimating that 25 percent of mammals, 20 percent of reptiles, 25 percent of amphibians, and 34 percent of fish

Public Policy
מדיניות צבורית

5 Endangered Species Act – The Endangered Species Act (ESA), signed into law by President Nixon in 1973, is the nation's most important vehicle for the protection of biological diversity. It is awaiting reauthorization. The Act sets a mandate for the federal government to take actions necessary to prevent extinction, including the protection of habitat that is critical to the survival and recovery of an endangered species.

The Endangered Species Act has succeeded in preventing the extinction of the bald eagle, American alligator, and peregrine falcon. Less than one half of one percent of endangered species have recovered sufficiently to be delisted.

Sharp disagreements over the Endangered Species Act in the last two sessions of Congress prevented its reauthorization, which has been due since 1992. Unfortunately, the 104th Congress (1995-1996) took action to hamper the implementation of the law, including a year-long moratorium on new listings of endangered species, temporary suspension of the Endangered Species Act in national forests, and reduced funding for government agencies responsible for implementing the Act.



Biodiversity

נשימת כל חי

Support of the Endangered Species Act

Adopted by The Rabbinical Assembly in May 1996

Whereas Judaism teaches that creatures are part of **Seder Bereishit**¹ (Order of Creation) and that we are commanded by God to be wise stewards of Creation;

Whereas, **the Torah specifically forbids human-caused extinction of a species**;²

Whereas, there are important **ecological, agricultural, commercial and recreational reasons**³ for maintaining **species diversity**;⁴

Therefore be it resolved that The Rabbinical Assembly oppose any effort now in the United States Congress or in any state legislature, to undermine the **Endangered Species Act**;⁵ and

Be it further resolved that The Rabbinical Assembly **urge its members to contact their Senators and Representatives to support the Endangered Species Act**.⁶

ומכל־הֵחָי מִכָּל־בְּשָׂר שְׁנַיִם מִכָּל תְּבִיא אֶל־הַתֵּבָה לְהַחִיֵּת אִתָּךְ
 "And of every living being of all flesh, two of every sort shall you bring into the ark, to **keep them alive**⁷ with you."
 -Gen. 6:19.

**Modern
Commentary**
דרש חדש

9 Every living creature: Jewish thought insists that each species of animal has a "right" to exist that comes from, and is protected by, God. In the words of Sefer Ha-Hinukh (no. 294), "One should reflect that the watchful care of the Blessed God extends to all the species of living creatures generally, and with God's providential concern for them they will endure permanently."

For the Jew, God's unity pervades creation: all are connected to each, and each to all.

At present, the oneness of all living things is hidden, masked by our species' self-reliance and self-regard. But the illusion of humanity's dominion, maintained by our selfishness and delusions of power, will one day give way before the unification of God and God's name. Our covenant, as Jews and as God's stewards, impels us to assure the flourishing of the diversity that God created. Our calling, as Jews and as caretakers, is to exert our best efforts to protect all of life, and to fortify our faith in the bounteous flowering of life.
-Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson

Everything is full of riches and greatness, everything aspires to ascend, to be purified and to be elevated. Everything recites a song, offers praise, magnifies, exalts; everything builds, serves, perfects, elevates, aspires to unite and to be integrated...

When we contemplate the physical creation as a whole, we realize that it is

Traditional Sources
מן המקורות

brought branches for the elephants... Now some ate in the second hour of the night and some in the third hour of the day, hence you know that Noah did not taste a bit of sleep. R. Yohanan said: One time, when Noah was late in feeding the lion, the lion bit him, and he went away limping.
-Tanchuma, Noah 14

8 Noah
נח איש צדיק תמים
היה בדורתי
Noah was a righteous, whole-hearted man in his generations.
-Gen. 6:9.

Why is Noah called "a righteous man"? Because he fed the creatures of the Holy One, and became like his Creator. Thus it says, "For the Lord is righteous, loving righteous deeds."
-Tanhuma, Noah 4

9 Every living creature: It behooves you to represent to yourself in this fashion the whole of this sphere as one living individual, in motion and possessing a soul... It should not be believed that all the beings exist for the sake of the existence of [humanity]. On the contrary, all the other beings have been intended for their own sakes and not for the sake of something else.
-Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, 1:72; 3:13.

Science
מדע

are threatened with extinction. We know that we are now in a period of extraordinary biodiversity loss, although it is difficult to quantify losses precisely because so little effort has been devoted to gathering the necessary data. More than 50% of the wet-

lands are gone from the 48 contiguous states; at least 90% of the lowland ancient coniferous forests in the Pacific Northwest have been logged to oblivion; 99% of North America's tallgrass prairie has disappeared beneath the plow.

What are we doing that kills off so many other species?

- overexploiting species, taking more of them than they can replenish;
- physically altering or destroying the ecosystems in which species live;
- polluting habitats, putting toxic materials, excessive levels of nutrients, and garbage in species' homes;
- introducing alien species into places

where they had never previously occurred, wreaking havoc on native species; and

- altering the world's atmosphere in ways that change its physical properties--its ability to shield us from harmful ultraviolet radiation and maintain the stability of the climate.

These proximate threats have five ultimate causes: There are too many people. We consume too much. Our

Action
מעשה

6 Urge its members to contact their Senators and Representatives to support the Endangered Species Act: The Endangered Species Act (ESA), which serves as the final safety net for plant and animal species threatened with extinction, is overdue for reauthorization, and in danger of being significantly weakened. A new version of the bill is being drafted by Senators Dirk Kempthorne (R-ID) and John Chafee (R-RI) that would prioritize developers' and landowners' rights above the needs of endangered species. Their bill would also add provisions that would reduce enforcement.

In order to build bipartisan momentum for strong species protection, a broad coalition of conservation advocates, including the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL) and the Jewish Council for Public Affairs (formerly NJCRAC), have mobilized to support the 'Endangered Species Recovery Act' introduced on July 30, 1997 by Representatives George Miller (D-CA), Connie Morella (R-MD), Christopher Shays (R-CT), and others. The bill would encourage proactive conservation of species before they near the brink of extinction, such as identifying and protecting critical habitats and increasing citizen involvement in protecting endangered species.

Urge your member of Congress to cosponsor

Biodiversity

נְשִׁימוֹת כָּל חַי

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֵלֶינָח וְאֶל־בְּנֵי אֶתָּנָה
לֵאמֹר וְאַתָּה הֵנָּה מִקֵּדְמָה אֲתִירְדְּתָה אִתָּם
וְאֲתִירְצָם אֲחֲרֵיכֶם וְאַתָּה קָל־נֶפֶשׁ
הַחַיָּה אֲשֶׁר אִתְּכֶם בְּעוֹף בְּהֵמָה
וּבְכָל־חַיֵּי הָאָרֶץ אִתְּכֶם מִכָּל יִצְאֵן
הַמַּבֵּה לְכָל חַיֵּי הָאָרֶץ

"And God said to Noah⁶ and to his children with him: Behold, I establish My covenant with you and with your seed after you, and with every living creature⁹ that is with you, of the birds, of the cattle, and of every wild animal of the earth with you."
-Genesis 9:8-10

Endangered species are God's creatures. Millions of species are in danger of becoming extinct¹⁰ in the next half-century. Noah was a righteous person in his generation. Shouldn't we be¹¹ in ours?

Science

מדע

institutions degrade, rather than conserve biodiversity. We do not have the knowledge we need to protect biodiversity. And we do not value nature enough.

-Dr. Elliott Norse

President, Marine Conservation Biology Institute

10 Millions of species are in danger of becoming extinct:

- Twenty-five percent of mammals, 20 percent of reptiles, 25 percent of amphibians, and 34 percent of fish are threatened with extinction.
- The tropical moist forests of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, described as the global "hotspots," contain more than half of all species.
- Less than 5 percent of species in the tropics have been identified. Worldwide, on average, about three new species of birds are found each year. An estimated 40 percent of freshwater fishes in South America have not yet been classified.
- More than 700 species of vertebrates, invertebrates, and vascular plants have become extinct since 1600, and untold numbers probably became extinct without ever being described.
- Only five percent of the world's land surface is in national protected areas.

-World Resources Institute

Action

מעשה

the Endangered Species Recovery Act. Remind them that we, like Noah, have an obligation to ensure that all God's creatures have safe passage into the next epoch of human history. Our current ark, the Endangered Species Act, has leaks which can be patched with ESRA. Join the COEJL Legislative Advocacy Network to receive action alerts on this and other important environmental issues. Non-U.S. citizens should urge the appropriate government officials and agencies to develop and enforce strong clean air protections.

11 Shouldn't we be: In October 1996, the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL) launched *Operation Noah: Defending God's Endangered Creatures*. Hundreds of synagogues and schools have used the comprehensive program guides developed by COEJL to create educational programming and direct action concerning endangered species and habitat. **Following are a few of the numerous ways that families and synagogues can participate in Operation Noah:**

Explore Your Habitat: The best way to learn about your local native habitat is to go and explore it. Nature centers and local conservation groups can suggest places to go for a field trip. They can also provide knowledgeable guides eager to take students, families, or other Jewish groups on a tour of a local habitat. Consider areas of ecological importance such as wetlands, rivers, or old forests.

Field trips and other educational programs can easily be put into a Jewish framework by study of Jewish texts which consider caring for creation before, during and after programs on habitat. Use COEJL's text study materials to cultivate a Jewish appreciation for the place and purpose of everything in creation and the diversity and interdependence of all things.

Create Habitat at Home, Synagogue, or School: Creating habitat in your backyard or on the grounds of your synagogue or school enriches learning opportunities for everyone and demonstrates how small actions can help provide habitat for many species. Through the National Wildlife Federation's *Backyard Wildlife Habitat Program*, you can learn to develop the optimal habitat on your grounds.

Adopt a Species or Habitat: One way in which you can help protect species is to adopt endangered and threatened species and their habitats, or support organizations with "adoption" programs. Adopting a species can be done through families, classes, youth groups, b'nai/b'not mitzvah, social action committees, whole synagogues, or whole schools.

Operation Noah—Building an Ark: Environmentally Caring Practices for the Home, Synagogue, and School

The way we live our lives has an impact on the world around us. Our health, and the health of wildlife and the environment are affected by the chemicals we use in our home. Pesticides used in farming, gardening, and in the home can pollute the land, water and air. Many household chemicals used for cleaning contain phosphates, chlorine and other chemicals which harm humans and wildlife. See 'A Jewish Response to the Environmental Crisis' for specific recommendations.



Coalition on the Environment & Jewish Life

For education, program and action materials, contact the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL), 443 Park Avenue South, 11th Floor, New York, NY 10016-7322, 212.684.6950 ext. 210, fax 212.686.1353, coejl@aol.com, www.jtsa.edu/org/coejl