



The Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life
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“FIRST WEEK” SERMON STARTERS

“First Week” Sermonic Material

The “first week” material is designed to be used in many different ways. Among the possibilities are:

- Hosting a Shabbaton that explores Judaism and the environment in depth over an entire weekend, with several sermons/discussions during the course of the Shabbaton, each one covering one or two “days.” Such a Shabbaton could be held at any time during the year, but it would be especially appropriate at such times as Simchat Torah when Bereshit is the weekly parashah, or around Earth Day or Tu B’shvat, because of their environmental focus.
- Giving a “sermon cycle” of seven separate sermons, either on successive weeks or perhaps spread out over the course of several months. In the latter case, an especially appropriate time frame would be the seven months from Earth Day to Simchat Torah or vice versa.
- Using pieces from several sections to combine them into one sermon. Again, there are many occasions during the year when such a sermon might be appropriate, such as on Rosh Hashanah, which traditionally marks the “birthday of the world.”
- Using the material from only one or a few of the “days,” since each is designed to be able to stand on its own. Day One and Day Seven are the most general of the sections; indeed, Day Seven, because of its focus on the environmental meaning of the Sabbath, could be given any time during the year.
- Turning the material into a Torah study course of seven sections, instead of using it for sermonic purposes.

Introduction to “First Week” themes:

“When God began to create the heavens and the earth...” These words begin not only the Torah itself, but a passage that, with power and beauty, brings forth many of the most fundamental of environmental principles. Indeed, there is no better place for the Jewish community to begin addressing environmental issues than at The Beginning, in Genesis [1]. Whatever our interpretive framework, the Genesis account of creation illustrates the role of both God and humanity in our universe; it highlights the wonder and magnificence to be found in the close connections between creation and Creator.

The following section uses the themes of the Genesis account, of the “First Week,” supplemented by other classical Jewish texts, to illustrate possible sermonic explorations of a Jewish response to the environmental crisis. While each Day is meant to stand fairly well on its own, they all develop themes outlined in Day One.

DAY ONE: Out from Chaos and Darkness: God's Order and Environmental Justice:

“When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water, God said, “Let there be light,’ and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from darkness.”

Day One, especially when taken in conjunction with the rest of Genesis 1 and 2, demonstrates first and foremost a principle basic not only to environmental ethics, but to the Jewish faith as a whole: through creation, God became Owner of All [2] God's ownership and rulership of all is the basis for accepting God's commandments - for even “our” bodies, let alone “our” property or “our” Earth, are in reality God's. We live in a God-centered, not human-centered, universe, and so we should follow God's laws in treating body, property, and Earth with respect [3]. But the principle that “the Earth is the Eternal One's and the fullness thereof,” that we are but “strangers resident” upon God's land (Psalm 24:1; Lev. 25:24), taken together with the Birkhot Nehenin, the blessings we recite before sharing in the Earth's goodness [4], not only demonstrates the inherent good, indeed the sacred qualities of which the Earth partakes - but also our obligations to our fellow created creatures. Hunger, as we well know, exists not merely because of lack of resources, but because of their distribution as well. Since we are all equally God's children, we must share the bounty of the Earth equitably with all. Similarly, we must all take responsibility for the problems we make in God's creation, and all of us, to the best of our abilities and to the fullest extent our resources allow, must work together to solve these problems. Even that which, to our human perspective, we think we “create,” cannot exist without the foundation of God's creation - so that the best work of our hands, too, is God's and should also be equitably shared [5].

But through creation, God does more than assert ownership. God also instills order and meaning in the universe [6]. Genesis Rabbah teaches that God used Torah as a blueprint for creation, founding the world upon justice (See Genesis Rabbah 1:1, 1:7; Jeremiah 33:26; Zohar Shemot 161a-161b). When the powerful exploit the weak, they abuse this foundation of the world. When we dump toxic wastes in poor neighborhoods or export them to poorer countries, when we strip the resources from undeveloped countries because we have already exploited our own, when we reap short-term profits by skirting environmental laws, when our convenience comes above others' needs, we pervert that justice. And our treatment of God's world is not only an ethical question in and of itself, but a paradigm for our behavior toward the powerless in general. For example, Rashi teaches that the High Priest is commanded to take care not to uncover himself as he walks toward the altar (Exodus 20:23), in order to show us that if stones are deserving of respect, how much the more so should we act with respect toward animate beings, human and otherwise.

Furthermore, because there is order in the world, when we pervert justice, there are consequences. The second paragraph of the Shema teaches that rains are withheld because of unjust acts; Isaiah speaks of the land lying polluted because of injustice (Isaiah 24), and the Talmud teaches that exploitation in the marketplace causes earthquakes, while the destruction of trees leads to eclipses (Bava Batra 90b, Sukkah 29a). Many no longer believe that there is quite so precise a quid pro quo between our misbehavior and God's response - but we cannot any longer escape the knowledge that our environmental misbehaviors do, in fact, beget lethal consequences. Wastes we thought safely hidden in the ground have risen up to haunt and harm us, making communities unlivable, perhaps forever.

Through creation, God also shows us that everything is interconnected. When surveying all of creation, God saw “all that God had made, and found it very good.” This emphasizes not only the goodness of creation, but its unity - “it,” not “they” or “all the things,” was good. As Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch wrote, “one glorious chain of love, of giving and receiving, unites all creatures” (Nineteen Letters). Furthermore, since God's presence is everywhere and with everything, there should be no “elsewhere” to dump our refuse, no “other” to exploit. The whole world is God's “backyard,” and we ignore this interconnectedness only at our peril. Leviticus Rabbah 4:6 (see Tesefta Bava Kamma, end of Chapter 2 and Bava Kamma 50b for similar examples) teaches us that the world is like a boat - only fools would drill holes under their seat and say to the rest of the passengers, “it is no concern of yours, I only drilled under my seat.”

Through creation, God grants us continual opportunity for renewal and re-creation. The world is not endlessly cyclic, a repetition of the status quo. Nor is there a steady decline from a past Golden Age. Rather, the world began through an act of Divine love, and it is moving toward redemption. Each Rosh Hashanah we not only celebrate the renewal of the year; we relive the birth of the universe. And this rebirth tells us something profound; we can choose. We can choose life and blessing - failure is not preordained. But since every moment is a sacred opportunity, the choice is urgent. Each act we take may be the one to save or damn the world - not only in a spiritual sense, but, as we are becoming increasingly aware, materially as well.

What is humanity's role in this well-ordered creation? We are both a part and apart from the rest of creation; but another voice in the chorus of creation and yet with a sacred task and responsibility. We see in a number of Psalms (see, e.g., 104 and 148) that all creation not only is dear to the Creator, but, through its very being, sings praises to God. The human species is but one part of this cosmic and continual song of praise - and as with any chorus, when one voice overpowers the others, the beauty and harmony, the essential unity, of the music is lessened. Again, in God's speeches to Job, God describes a vast creation that is fundamentally independent of humans, a creation over which we have no direct hierarchical claim (see especially Chapter 38 and 39). Even the principle of *bal tashchit*, do not destroy, shows humanity to be an integral part of the natural order - for we are commanded to abstain from wantonly destroying both natural objects and those fashioned by humans.

And yet, as the Talmud says (Shabbat 10a), we are partners with God in creation. Only humans make moral (or immoral!) choices - and only humans have the power to either destroy the world or repair the work of creation. This partnership means that God will not clean up after our messes; as Ecclesiastes Rabbah states (on verse 7:13), "God showed the first people the beauty of the world and then instructed them: Do not destroy or corrupt my world, for if you do, there is no one to set it right after you." But we are to do more than merely avoid messes; we are to seek constantly to improve ourselves and the world. As the Medibozser rebbe taught, God placed sparks of holiness within all of creation. It is the Divine will that people bring forth these holy sparks through holy deeds.

The Zohar poetically ties together these two aspects of human nature, that which we share with the rest of created creatures, and that which reflects uniquely upon God. It teaches, "after all creatures were made, God said to them: Let us make one more creature in partnership. Each of you shall have a share in this human, and I will give the human a portion of Myself as well" (Zohar, IV, 238b).

DAY TWO: The Expanse of Waters: Clean and Living Waters:

“God said, ‘Let there be an expanse in the midst of the water, that it may separate water from water.’ God made the expanse and it separated the water which was below the expanse from the water which was above the expanse.”

Water is the source of life; life began there, and all life needs water to sustain itself. Polluted water leads to human disease and death even as it destroys the ecosystem as a whole. Rains refresh the Earth and enable it to bring forth rich produce; acid rain kills forests and sterilizes lakes and streams. Our ancestors knew the vital role of water; Torah, which gives spiritual life, was often compared to water, which gives physical life. And rain was a sweet gift from the Divine.

Ezekiel calls rain a blessing (Ezekiel 34:26), Joel sees it as evidence of God’s kindness (2:21-24), and the Torah (Deuteronomy 28:12) names it as God’s “good treasure of the heavens.” Midrash Tehillim on Psalm 117 teaches that the sending of rain is greater than the giving of the Torah, for Torah is a joy to Israel alone, while rain gives joy to the entire world, including animals and plants. A special blessing is recited upon seeing the ocean, and the sages of the Mishnah described the beauty of the Second Temple by comparing it to the ocean (Bava Batra 4a).

But rain is not an unconditional blessing. Pharaoh, through his arrogance and his exploitation of the Israelites, caused God to turn the waters of the Nile to blood, the rains into fiery hailstorms. The good treasure of the heavens is only opened (according to Deuteronomy) for the righteous. The Talmud is replete with tales about righteous individuals, such as a helpful donkey driver, whose prayers bring rain even when the prayers of rabbis cannot. (See, e.g. Ta’anit 64b) We can interpret this more allegorically in our day - our actions determine whether or not the rain is a blessing or a curse. Will we continue to acidify rain with sulfuric and nitric oxides? Will our actions continue to change weather cycles, causing widespread drought and desertification? Or will we work to return the expanse of heavens to their pristine and life-giving state?

The cleansing and life-renewing properties of water are so great that two separate prophetic visions tie the abundance of clean water to the Age of Redemption. In Isaiah 35, streams and pools replenish the wilderness and the desert - but this vision can only be fulfilled if people walk [7] the Sacred Way. In Ezekiel 47, just after an admonition to the prince of the land not to take any property away from the people, the prophet is granted a vision of a purifying, wholesome stream bursting forth from the Temple, God’s seat of justice. It cleanses foul waters, bringing forth life along its banks. For the millions across who do not know clean water, and who suffer from their lack, we can work to spread God’s justice and thereby make Ezekiel’s vision become reality.

DAY THREE: The Earth Brought Forth Vegetation: Deforestation and Erosion:

“God said, ‘Let the water below the sky be gathered into one area, that the dry land might appear....’ And God said, ‘Let the earth sprout vegetation, seed-bearing plants and trees of every kind...’”

Each year, we decimate thousands and thousands of acres of forests. In these forests and in agricultural areas around the world, ton after ton of rich topsoil erodes away with loss of soil and trees, deserts spread across the globe. This process has gone on for centuries - but it was not always so. Our people have a tradition of planting trees, not cutting them down; of enriching the soil rather than impoverishing it, so that vegetation indeed sprouts forth and trees grow abundant.

A testimony to the important of planting can be seen in the Bible’s descriptions of God’s actions. In the beginning, God planted a garden in Eden. And the psalmists (see, e.g., Psalm 104:6) see God as continuing to plant and to care for these forests and gardens. Trees serve in the Bible as metaphors for all that is worthwhile: A righteous person is like a tree planted by the waters (Psalm 1), while the Torah itself is called the Tree of Life (Proverbs 3). But plants have more than allegorical importance. Genesis Rabbah (10:7) teaches that there is no plant without its own guardian star in the firmament which says to it, “Grow!” The Talmud recounts that those who destroy trees will never see blessings in their lifetime (Bava Batra 91b), while later traditions hold that cutting down a tree sends out a cry that goes around the world, that a tree cut down before its time is like a murdered soul (Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer³⁴, Nachman of Bratzlav).

Why are trees and the riches of the soil so important to us? For both practical and spiritual reasons. The Ture explains that trees are more important for the settling of the world than buildings (Hoshen Mishpat #175). Midrash Sifre on Parashat Shofetim teaches that we do not cut down trees because our lives depend on their produce. Today, scientists mourn the destruction of thousands of tropical plant species before we can even discover their many potential medicinal benefits. But the Zohar understood these benefits long ago. Referring to medicinal herbs, it teaches, “if people but know the wisdom that the Blessed Holy One has planted in the Earth ... they would proclaim the power of God” (II:80a).

Even this passage about physical benefits points toward a deeper understanding of trees’ significance. Trees lead us to praise God - they are vital to our spiritual well-being. As its said in Genesis Rabbah 13:2, trees give companionship to humans. And Rabbi Nachman taught that every blade of grass sings prayers to God, prayers that can strengthen and aid our own (Likkutei Mohoran, II, 306). The act of planting itself proclaims our faith in the future, our ties to the generations yet to come. People of faith may not grow old and excuse themselves from planting, saying, how many years will I yet live. Rather, as our forebears planted for us, so will we strive to fill the world with trees for the generations yet to come. (See Ta’anit 23a and Midrash Tankhuma, Parashat Kedoshim). And, according to the Talmud, “faith is exemplified by Tractate Zeraim (seeds), for people prove their faith in eternal life by planting” (Shabbat 31a).

Trees bring life; they shade the body and the soul; their very planting demonstrates our faith. And they are as well a foretaste of a greater hope. The Talmud lists the restoration of trees to Israel as one of the most obvious signs of the dawning of the Messianic era (Sanhedrin 98a). Isaiah depicts a beautiful vision weaving together forests with redemption; as cedars grow in the wilderness, cypresses thrive in the desert (41). The redemptive hope of trees is brought together with acts of righteousness in a beautiful teaching of Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezchirech. He taught that a person’s righteous acts are seeds that God plants in that person’s own portion of paradise. By acting justly, we each create our own Garden of Eden.

DAY FOUR: The Bearers of Light: Energy and Technology:

“God said, ‘Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate day from night; they shall serve as signs for the set times...and they shall serve as lights in the expanse of the sky to shine upon the earth.’”

The creations of the fourth day seem peculiar at first - if light was created on the first day, how could the creation of the sun, moon and stars remain to the fourth? One original point of this ordering was to denigrate the very objects that most cultures surrounding the ancient Israelites believed were gods. By holding off their creation until the fourth day, and through the phrasing we see above, it becomes clear that even the “great bearers of light” of the sky are but servants of the one true God, the Creator of all. And these servants know their place - the sun, moon, and stars join with the rest of creation in singing a chorus of praise to God (Psalm 148).

We no longer worship heavenly bodies. But idol worship, though altered in form, is far from dead. These days, many people seem to have elevated technology to the exalted status once reserved for a sun god, and seem all too ready to offer sacrifices upon the altars of the god of technology. Whence cometh our salvation? Why, from the technological breakthrough that lies just over the horizon, they say.

In so saying and in so believing, they forget what our ancestors knew - that technology is meant to serve, not to rule and certainly not to be worshipped. They do not understand that technology is a sword that cuts both ways. Our ancestors, wise to the ways of the desert, realized that the sun could become an enemy. Even a cursory look at smog-filled skies or poisoned lakes shows quite readily the far-from-divine side of technology. Only when we set technology in the context of its role as servant, under the regulations of God’s laws and ethical principles, only when we see that God, and not technology, is our tree guardian, can we prevent the sun from striking us by day, or the moon by night (Psalm 121).

Technology is not a god. But neither is it, in and of itself, evil. We cannot blame our problems on technology - for we alone have fashioned it; only our own shortsightedness has caused us to cease being its master; only our unleashed greed has driven us to abdicate our moral principles in favor of unlimited “progress.” It is often more convenient, and it is certainly easier on our conscience, to blame some evil technology “out there,” instead of realizing our role in creating and promoting it. Take the Exxon Valdez spill, for example. Was it caused by “evil oil companies?” There is certainly plenty of blame to go around - but what about our role? Who is it that wants cheaper gas more than environmental protection? And think of what would have happened had Valdez not crashed. As we the consumer would have burned the various products made from that oil, we would have produced over 60 million pounds of carbon dioxide, contributing to global warming, as well as tons of toxic wastes.

How can we place technology within a moral context? Our tradition, in and of itself, suggests an answer, for halacha can be viewed as a “technology” of ethics. Our sages did not leave ethical behavior up to the imagination; the halacha they laid down was meant as a practical guide to ethical behavior in the real world. The rabbis concerned themselves with the practical to such a great extent that they themselves directly oversaw the safety of the technology of their age, inspecting walls and digging new cisterns (Tosefta Shekalim 1:2).

More broadly, God as Creator sets the context for our understanding of progress. Within that context it is plain that genuine progress must be defined in moral terms. This world is not working the way it was meant to, the way God intended; the task of the Jew is to participate in the world’s repair. Tikkun Olam B’Malchut Shaddai, the mending of the world under God’s sovereignty, thus becomes the true standard against which “progress” is measured and judged. With this firmly in mind, our society - with the involvement of the Jewish community - can develop practical “halacha” to guide our use of technology.

No better example of humanizing, or perhaps creation-izing, technology can be found than that aspect the sun most clearly symbolizes - energy. We have known for decades that the most pollution-free source of energy, and often the least expensive, is simply to cut down on our waste of energy. The Talmud already

shows concerns about wasting energy when it regulates the burning of oil lamps (Shabbat 67b) in order to insure the most efficient use of fuel. And waste has a spiritual as well as a physical dimension. According to Rabbi S. R. Hirsch (Horeb, 279-80), wasting part of God's creation is equivalent to "treachery against My (God's) world ... murder and robbery ... you sin against Me!" Thus, preventing energy waste cuts down pollution and shows respect for God's creation. And if we turn to the "great light" of the sun as a source of energy, perhaps we too will hear the songs of praise that the sun, moon, and stars sing in the high heavens.

DAY FIVE: Across the Expanse of Sky: Clean and Open Air:

“God said, ‘Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and birds that fly above the earth across the expanse of the sky.’”

We close each prayer service by thanking our God who “spread out the heavens.” Indeed, as the psalmist proclaimed, “the heavens declare the glory of God, the sky tells of God’s handiwork” (19:2). Our hearts are rarely so moved as when we behold a beautiful sunset or see the vast blanket of stars spread across a clear sky. But such sights become rarer each year. No longer can one see vast panoramas while standing on the rim of the Grand Canyon. An air traveler to most major cities is greeted by a blanket of noxious smog rather than one of stars. We erect a barrier between ourselves and God’s glory, God’s gift. And far more than aesthetics are at stake - for as we poison the air, we spread disease and choke off the growth of our children.

Clean air is vital to our every moment, our every breath. It is a constant “breath of life,” such as God breathed into Adam. It is no coincidence that the three Hebrew words for soul nefesh, neshama, and ruach, are all related to wind and breath. For like the soul, a breath is invisible - and yet without it, we cannot live.

Our sages recognized the vast influence the surrounding air has on our quality of life. The Talmud regulates a variety of types of air pollution, for aesthetic reasons, to reduce vile odors or soot which might tarnish the glowing golden stones of Jerusalem, and for health reasons (see, e.g., Tamid 29b, Bava Batra 25a). Maimonides, a physician as well as a rabbi, recognized how even in his time city air was much less healthful than the clean air of the country. He wrote that the “concern for clean air is the foremost rule in preserving one’s health” (Treatise on Asthma).

Today, his case would be even stronger. Air pollution degrades the health of us all, especially those of us in cities. Once again, this environmental concern intersects with our pursuit of justice - for the health burdens from air pollution fall unfairly on our children, the sick, and the elderly. These burdens are worst for those living in the most crowded areas of the world, usually the poorest of urban dwellers. And once again, though we would like to blame air pollution on evil factories, we need to address our own responsibility - for who buys the products of those factories? And who drives those millions of cars with but a single passenger in them, producing waste gases and toxic chemicals with each mile we travel? We declare our “handiwork” in the brown and poisonous clouds we spread over our cities. But it is not too late. We have the resources, if we apply them, to restore cleansed heavens to the world, so that the expanse of the sky can once again teem with life, so that the life breath of all of God’s creation can once again become pure and healthy.

DAY SIX: Every Kind of Living Creature: Species Preservation and the Human Role:

“God said, ‘Let the earth bring forth every kind of living creature: Cattle, creeping things, and wild beasts of every kind.’”

God created a universe with meaning and order, a universe where every part of creation is of inherent worth. God declared the “goodness” of creation long before the existence of humanity, for indeed it has goodness independent of humanity. Nothing, not one single species, even species humans might consider unnecessary, such as “gnats, fleas, and mosquitoes,” was created in vain, for all species are a valued part of creation (see, e.g., Shabbat 77b, Genesis Rabbah 10:8). God cared for Ninevah not only because of its human population but also because there lived therein behamah rabbath, many animals (Jonah 4:11).⁸ And God continues to show compassion to creation, in the context of a universe teeming with possibilities for life (Psalm 145:9).

What, then, is the role of the human, created, as no other species upon our planet is, b’tzelem Elokim, in the divine image? On the one hand, we are a part of creation. Indeed, our sages taught that we were created last, on the eve of the first Sabbath, so that in case our hearts grow proud, it might be said that even the gnat preceded us (Sanhedrin 38a). Like all other species, our sustenance comes from use of the world around us. And yet, we have both abilities and responsibilities unique to our species. We have the ability to wipe out thousands of species through our actions and inactions - but we have the responsibility, as God instructed Adam and Eve, to “till and to tend” the Garden (Genesis 2:15). Indeed, the two Hebrew verbs used in this phrase, *avad* and *shamar*, to have stronger meanings still. *Avad* means to serve, to obey, and has connotations of sacred service. *Shamar* means to guard; a *Shomer* is a guardian, usually of someone else’s property - in this case God’s. These are the functions of steward, to serve obediently and with sacred faith, and to guard and preserve.

Thus, our use of creation must differ from that of any other species. While we have the ability to wreak havoc upon our world, we have the moral responsibility to heal and improve it. As Nachmanides taught, our use of the world’s resources must be wise and guided by the sacred nature of creation. He wrote, commenting on Deuteronomy 22:6, that “scripture will not permit a destructive act that will cause the extinction of a species, even when it has permitted the use of that species for food.” The task of preserving God’s creation, including individual species, becomes an act of faith, a proclamation of God’s love, that “does good to others and brings them closer to the Torah” (Sefer Ha-Hinukh, #529, 294, 545).

There are those who argue that all species become extinct anyway, that extinction is part of the natural order and so we need not be concerned if we wipe out an extra few thousand species this year. But when humanity causes the extinction of a species, whether directly or indirectly, we act immorally on three levels simultaneously. First, we act against God and the inherent sacred quality of each species, permanently erasing a worthy part of creation, stating through our actions that we know the value of the world better than does its Creator. And in addition to the worth of a species in and of itself, when we destroy a species we take from future generations the possibilities of medical cures, food, water purification, knowledge, and other benefits we have yet to imagine. We act with hubris, pretending to know the outer limits of the consequences of our actions - though it is clear that we do not, clear that the extirpation of a seemingly insignificant species can destroy a whole ecosystem. Religion and science alike agree that there is a profound integrity to the natural order, the fabric of life - and when we tear at that fabric, we, in the end, endanger ourselves, especially, all too often, the poor and disenfranchised of the world.

But perhaps the most immoral aspect of our destruction of species is that we have a choice - and yet we choose to act foolishly. Unlike the natural course of evolution, even unlike the unwitting actions of our ancestors, we know that we are killing off species, we know that for the first time in geological history, extinction is happening as a matter of conscious will. All species have needs - but ours is unique both in that it has appetites that far exceed its needs and in that we have the ability to conquer these appetites, to make moral choices. We can transcend even those drives that are the basic instincts of all other creatures; we even have the ability to sacrifice ourselves for others. So the question becomes, will we continue to

willfully destroy species after species, to ignore the consequences of such destruction? Will we, despite our knowledge, decide to stand idly by and do nothing to protect and preserve endangered species? Or will we live up to the uniquely human potential for moral action and make the effort to save endangered species? If we are to live up to the divine image the Creator implanted within each of us, we must respond to the call to work as God's partners in tending this exquisite garden, this precious planet of ours.

DAY SEVEN: To Cease and To Bless: The Sabbath of Sufficiency and the Messianic Ideal:

“On the seventh day, God finished the work of creation, and God ceased on the seventh day from all God had done. And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy.”

The Sabbath is a time to pause, to reflect, to cease treating nature as a “tool box” to be used and instead to join it as a singer in the psalm of creation. We neither create nor destroy on the Sabbath; we put aside all our attempts at gain. Even the smallest work done on the Sabbath denies God as creator and master of the world. Indeed, a key purpose to the Sabbath, as well as to its extensions, the Sabbatical and Jubilee years, is to reaffirm God’s ownership of the land. The Sabbath also affirms the essential equality of all humans, all equally privileged to rest on this day, to cease working either for themselves or for others, with obligations redirected instead toward God. But most of all, the Sabbath reasserts the essential harmony of life. On the Sabbath, animals as well as people rest, become refreshed, regain their balance. The Sabbath becomes for time what wilderness preservation is for space.

And what is the nature of the harmony that the Sabbath teaches us? It is a balance between work and rest, between striving and acceptance, between the momentary and the eternal. We recite no petitionary prayers on the Sabbath, because, for a day, we imagine that all our needs are truly fulfilled - and so we taste, for 24 hours, the wisdom of Pirke Avot, that happy are those that enjoy their portion, that the more possessions, the more worry (Avot 4:1, 2:7). We turn away from ostentatious materialism, from the idolatry that our looks and possessions are more important to us than our God. We turn instead to the contemplation of creation, to the beauty of the world around us, said by our mystics to be the “garments of the divine presence.”

Shabbat teaches us that we must radically realign our goals, for the sake of our souls as well as our planet. The only way out of our predicament is to realize that spiritual sufficiency, not material accumulation, brings true happiness and contentment. We need to turn from single-minded efforts to increase a gross national product, to seek instead quality of life for all. We need to change the focus of the global community from the illusory desires of the affluent few to the real needs of all creation. And, most of all, we need to bring our discordant actions back into the harmony of the psalm of all creation. For in this harmony, Shabbat gives us a foretaste of the Age of Redemption, the Messianic ideal realized.

In the pre-messianic world, we live through the unavoidable use of resources, resources that have a cost to their use. In the pre-messianic world, there is striving and competition, not just between humans, but in all of creation. That is the present reality. But while we must not hide from reality, neither can we afford to forget the ideal. In the prophetic visions of what would later become called the Messianic era, we see great harmony within creation and between humans and the rest of creation. The wolf lies down with the lamb, and the lion grazes like the ox (Isaiah 65)21-25). Neither the soil nor the beasts of the field will fear; they will rejoice and be glad (Joel 2:21-22). And humanity will be an integral part of that harmony. We will have a “pact with the rocks in the field, and the beasts of the field” (Job 5:23). God will make a covenant between humankind and “the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground....I will let them lie down in safety” (Hosea 2:20-21).

If we can learn the great spiritual truth of the Sabbath, if we can redirect our efforts from the heaping up of an ever-greater pile of material “gods” to an ever-richer spiritual harmony, if we cease being possessed by our possessions, then we too can find the blessings of the Sabbath, and perhaps know more than just a foretaste of the age of redemption.

Footnotes:

1. Note: Starting with Lynn White in 1967, a variety of environmental polemicists have attempted to portray the Genesis 1 story, particularly the phrase “master it and rule” (1:28), as giving people permission to abuse the environment. Some have gone so far as to argue that this phrase is the primary source of all our environmental problems. A number of essays have thoroughly countered such assertions; suffice it to say here that Jewish traditions has never, in commentaries from Midrashic times down to S.R. Hirsch, interpreted this phrase as permitting environmental degradation. Even in the original context, the very next line limits the “mastery” of humanity - for the first humans are not allowed to eat meat, while Genesis 2:15 instructs humanity “to serve and to tend” the Garden. Rather than focus on defending religious traditions from a tired and inaccurate charge, this sermon material shows the positive environmental message of genesis.

2. Two separate Hebrew verbs, *koneh* and *oseh*, mean both “make” and “possess,” showing how closely these two concepts were related in the minds of our ancestors.

Contrast this with the paradigm of idolaters and unjust rulers, Pharaoh, who (Ezekiel 29:3) claims that “my Nile is my own; I made it.” Only those acting with Pharaoh’s hubris can attack the environment on the one hand or exploit the weak on the other.

4. We learn in Berakhot 35a that when one enjoys benefits from the world without reciting the proper blessings, it is as if one had taken sacred objects from the Temple. This teaches us that all creation is as sacred as things explicitly declared to be Temple property. Nonetheless, though creation is valued, only the Creator is worshipped.

5. Again, Hebrew philosophy helps demonstrate this point. The verb *bara*, creation from nothing, is applied only to God’s actions. Human “creation,” *yotzer* or *oseh*, only shifts or alters matter created by God.

6. The anthropologist Mary Douglas has asserted that the laws of *kashrut* reflect an attempt by the ancient Israelites to highlight this divine order every time they ate.

7. *Halacha*, the classic term for Jewish law, is derived from the same Hebrew root as the word “walk,” for our faith enjoins upon us the necessary actions we must take as Jews.

Source: COEJL