



The Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life  
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## TEN JEWISH TEACHINGS ON THE ENVIRONMENT

### *1. God created the universe.*

This is the most fundamental concept of Judaism. Its implications are that only God has absolute ownership over Creation (Gen. 1-2, Psalm 24:1, I Chron. 29:10-16). Thus Judaism's worldview is theocentric not anthropocentric. The environmental implications are that humans must realize that they do not have unrestricted freedom to misuse Creation, as it does not belong to them. Everything we own, everything we use ultimately belongs to God. Even our own selves belong to God. As a prayer in the High Holiday liturgy proclaims, "The soul is Yours and the body is your handiwork." As we are "sojourners with You, mere transients like our ancestors; our days on earth are like a shadow..." (I Chronicles 29:15), we must always consider our use of Creation with a view to the larger good in both time (responsibility to future generations) and space (others on this world). We must also think beyond our own species to that of all Creation.

### *2. God's Creation is good.*

In Genesis 1: 31 when God found all of Creation as "very good" it means several things. First of all it means that Creation is sufficient, structured and ordered (the rabbis called it Seder Bereishit, the Order of Creation). It is also harmonious. It exists to serve God (Psalm 148). This order reflects God's wisdom (Psalm 104:24), which is beyond human understanding (Psalm 92:6-7, Job 38-39). All of God's creations are consequently part of the Order of Creation and all are subject to its nature (Psalm 148). Humans are also part of the Order, which can be said to be a community of worshipers.

### *3. Human beings are created in the image of God*

Human beings have a special place and role in the Order of Creation. Of all God's creations, only human beings have the power to disrupt Creation. This power, which gives them a kind of control over Creation, comes from special characteristics that no other creature possesses (Psalm 8). This idea is expressed in the concept that humans were created in the image of God (tzelem Elohim). In its original sense, tzelem Elohim, means that humans were put on the earth to act as God's agents and to actualize God's presence in Creation. But it also has ethical implications, which means that human beings have certain intrinsic dignities: infinite value, equality and uniqueness. It also means that human beings possess God-like capacities: power, consciousness, relationship, will, freedom and life. Human beings are supposed to exercise their power, consciousness and free will to be wise stewards of Creation. They should help to maintain the Order of Creation even while they are allowed to use it for their own benefit within certain limits established by God (Genesis 2:14). This balance applies to human society as well to the natural world. Since the time of the expulsion from Garden of Eden, Creation has tended to be out of balance because of the human impulse towards inequality resulting from the misuse of its powers for selfish ends. The earth is morally sensitive to human misdeeds (Genesis 4, Leviticus 18:27-30).

#### 4. *Humanity should view their place in Creation with love and awe.*

It may be said that there are two books of God's revelation to humanity: The Torah and Creation itself. The book of Creation can help us to perceive ourselves as "living breathing beings connected to the rhythms of the earth, the biogeochemical cycles, the grand and complex diversity of ecological systems." (Mitchell Thomashow, *Ecological Identity*) This knowledge is gained both through an understanding of Creation through scientific knowledge. In Judaism, this can be understood as the fulfillment of the commandments to love and to fear God (Deuteronomy 6:5,13). Rambam (Moses Maimonides, 1135-1204) interpreted these commandments in the following way:

"When a person observes God's works and God's great and marvelous creatures, and they see from them God wisdom that is without estimate or end, immediately they will love God, praise God and long with a great desire to know God's Great Name...And when a person thinks about these things they draw back and are afraid and realizes that they are small, lowly and obscure, endowed with slight and slender intelligence, standing in the presence of God who is perfect in knowledge." (Mishneh Torah, Sepher Madah, Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah 2:1-2)

Thus, when we study Creation with all the tools of modern science, we are filled with love and a sense of connection to a greater order of things. We feel a sense of wonder but also a sense of awe and humility, as we perceive how small we are in the universe as well as within the history of evolution. Love and humility should then invoke in us a sense of reverence for Creation and modesty in our desire to use it. We should, according to Abraham Joshua Heschel see the world as God-centered, not human-centered. By putting God at the center of life, we see the sacred in everything and the natural world becomes a source of wonder and not only a resource for our use and abuse.

#### 5. *The Sabbath and prayer help us to achieve this state of mind.*

The Sabbath is a way to begin to engender this sense of love and humility before Creation. It is also a way to living a sustainable life. For one day out of seven, we limit our use of resources. We walk to attend synagogue and drive only when walking is not possible. We do not cook and we do not shop. We can use the day for relaxation, contemplation and to ask ourselves: what is the real purpose of human life? Are we here on earth only to get and to spend? As Rabbi Schorsch has written: "To rest is to acknowledge our limitations. Willful inactivity is a statement of subservience to a power greater than our own." (To Till and to Tend, page 20)

Prayer also helps us to recognize that everything we are, everything we have and everything we use ultimately comes from God (Babylonian Talmud, Brakhot 35a). When we say a blessing, we create a moment of holiness, a sacred pause. Prayer also creates an awareness of the sacred by taking us out of ourselves and our artificial environments and allowing us to truly encounter natural phenomenon. Prayer creates a loss of control, which allows us to "see the world in the mirror of the holy." (Heschel) We are then able to see the world as an object of divine concern and we can then place ourselves beyond self and more deeply within Creation

#### 6. *The Torah prohibits the wasteful consumption of anything.*

In Judaism, the halakhah (Jewish law) prohibits wasteful consumption. When we waste resources we are violating the mitzvah (commandment) of Bal Tashchit ("Do not destroy"). It is based on Deuteronomy 20:19-20:

"When in your war against a city you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy its trees, wielding the ax against them. You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down. Are trees of the field human to withdraw before you into the besieged city? Only trees that you know do no yield

food may be destroyed; you may cut them down for constructing siege works against the city that is waging war on you, until it has been reduced.”

This law was expanded in later Jewish legal sources to include the prohibition of the wanton destruction of household goods, clothes, buildings, springs, food or the wasteful consumption of anything (see Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings and Wars 6:8, 10; Samson Raphael Hirsch, Horeb, 279-80). The underlying idea of this law is the recognition that everything we own belongs to God. When we consume in a wasteful manner, we damage Creation and violate our mandate to use Creation only for our legitimate benefit. Modesty in consumption is a value that Jews have held for centuries. For example one is not supposed to be excessive in eating and drinking or in the kind of clothes that one wears (Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Discernment, chapter 5). Jews are obligated to consider carefully our real needs whenever we purchase anything. We are obligated when we have a simchah (a celebration) to consider whether we need to have elaborate meals and wasteful decorations. We are obligated to consider our energy use and the sources from which it comes.

#### *7. The Torah gives an obligation to save human life.*

The Jewish tradition mandates an obligation to save and preserve life (called in Jewish legal sources: pikuach nefesh) based on an interpretation of Leviticus 18:5, “You shall keep My laws and My rules, by the pursuit of which man shall live: I am the Lord (See Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 74a).” Jewish law forbids us from knowingly harming ourselves (Leviticus 19:28). There are also numerous sources mandated the proper disposal of waste is properly and that noxious products from industrial production must be kept far from human habitation (see for example, Deuteronomy 23:13-15, Mishnah Baba Batra 2:9) In the Jewish tradition, the public good overrides individual desires. While there are many useful and even lifesaving technologies that come from modern chemicals and materials, we have an obligation to be cautious in their use. Pikuach nefesh demands that we consider the impact of our use of chemicals and other materials, not only in the short term but also in the long term. For the Jewish tradition, the Precautionary Principle can be seen as a modern form of the warning not to tamper too much with the boundaries of Creation.

#### *8. The Torah prohibits the extinction of species and causing undo pain to non-human creatures.*

Our ancestors could not have anticipated the loss of biodiversity that the modern world has produced; from their perspective, there was no natural extinction rate of species. God, they believed, had created all species at one time and there could be no new creatures. Only humans could cause extinction and bring about the loss of one of the members of the Creation choir. In the Torah there is a law that says: “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. Let the mother go, and take only the young, in order that you may fare well and have a long life.” (Deuteronomy 22:6-7) Ramban (Moses ben Nachman, Nachmanides, 1194-1270) in his commentary to the Torah wrote: “This also is an explanatory commandment of the prohibition you shall not kill it [the mother] and its young both in one day (Leviticus 22:28). The reason for both [commandments] is that we should not have a cruel heart and not be compassionate, or it may be that Scripture does not permit us to destroy a species altogether, although it permits slaughter [for food] within that group. Now the person who kills the mother and the young in one day or takes them when they are free to fly, [it is regarded] as though they have destroyed that species.”

It is evident from the first chapter of Genesis and other Biblical texts (Psalm 104, 148, and Job 38-41) that God takes care of, and takes pleasure in, the variety of life that makes up Creation. And although we might regard a species as unimportant or bothersome to human beings, God does not regard them so. The rabbis understood that we do not know God’s purpose for every creature and that we should not regard any of them as superfluous. “Our Rabbis said: Even those things that you may regard as completely superfluous to Creation - such as fleas, gnats and flies—even they were included in Creation; and God’s purpose is carried

through everything—even through a snake, a scorpion, a gnat, a frog.” (Breishit Rabbah 10:7) In environmental terms, every species has an inherent value beyond its instrumental or useful value to human beings. Related to this idea is the concept of Tzar Baalei Chayyim, the prohibition of hurting animals without good purpose (based on Deut. 22:6, 22:10, 25:4, Numbers 22:32, Exodus 20:8-10, Lev. 22:27-8). These concepts bring to our relationships with the non-human world limits and controls over our power and greed.

#### *9. Environmental Justice is a Jewish value.*

The Torah has numerous laws, which attempt to redress the power and economic imbalances in human society and Creation. Examples are the Sabbatical year (Exodus 23:11, Leviticus 25:2-5, Deuteronomy 15:1-4) and the Jubilee (Leviticus 25:8-24). There is a whole program in the Torah for creating a balanced distribution of resources across society (Exodus 22:24-26, Leviticus 25:36-37, Deuteronomy 23:20-1, 24:6, 10-13, 17). This is an expression of the concept of Tzedek, which means righteousness, justice and equity. It is the value, which tries to correct the imbalances, which humans create in society and in the natural world. In the modern world globalization has strived to achieve the free movement of people, information, money, goods and services but it can also create major disruptions in local cultures and environments. While globalization has created great wealth for millions of people, many millions more have been bypassed by its benefits and it has had in some cases a negative impact upon the environment and human rights. The Jewish concept of Tzedek demands that we create a worldwide economy that is sustainable and that is equitable in the distribution of wealth and resources.

#### *10. Tikkun Olam: The perfection/fixing of the world is in our hands.*

There is a midrash (Rabbinic commentary on the Bible) which Jewish environmentalists are fond of quoting: “When God created the first human beings, God led them around the Garden of Eden and said: “Look at my works! See how beautiful they are—how excellent! For your sake I created them all. See to it that you do not spoil and destroy My world; for if you do, there will be no one else to repair it.” (Midrash Kohelet Rabbah, 1 on Ecclesiastes 7:13) In the Jewish liturgy there is a prayer called Aleinu in which we ask that the world be soon perfected under the sovereignty of God (le-takein ‘olam be-malkhut Shaddai). Tikkun ‘olam, the perfecting or the repairing of the world, has become a major theme in modern Jewish social justice theology. It is usually expressed as an activity, which must be done by humans in partnership with God. It is an important concept in light of the task ahead in environmentalism. In our ignorance and our greed, we have damaged the world and silenced many of the voices of the choir of Creation. Now we must fix it. There is no one else to repair it but us.

Source: Rabbi Lawrence Troster