



The Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life
110 Maryland Avenue, NE, Suite 203
Washington, D.C. 20002

TREES, TORAH, AND CARING FOR THE EARTH

Tu Bish'vat, "the New Year of the Tree," has become known as a day for raising Jewish-environmental awareness. That the New Year of the Tree has come to be associated with sensitivity to and appreciation of the natural environment is not by chance. Many Jewish sources connect trees with our proper stewardship of the earth. Understanding these teachings on Tu Bish'vat can help us improve our relationship to God's creation, our world.

The Torah is called a "tree of life" (Proverbs 3:18), showing how trees connect to the highest Jewish values. Trees also symbolize a healthy and sustainable environment.

"When God created the first man He took him and showed him all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to him 'See My works, how beautiful and praiseworthy they are. And everything that I created, I created it for you. Be careful not to spoil or destroy My world--for if you do, there will be nobody after you to repair it.'"

This Midrash singles out the trees of the Garden of Eden--rather than the Garden of Eden itself--to represent the natural world God created and the imperative not to destroy it. Trees also symbolize the necessary environment for human life when the Jewish people enter the land of Israel. Encouraging us to emulate God, the Midrash teaches:

"It is said, 'follow the Lord, your God' (Deuteronomy 12:5). This means follow His example. When He created the world, His first action was to plant trees, as it written, 'and God planted a garden [of trees] in Eden' (Genesis 2:8). So you, too, when you will enter the land of Israel, planting trees should be your first involvement."

There are numerous other essential elements for human beings in a healthy environment, yet these sources identify trees as emblematic. Trees also take a long time to bear fruit, which is why we plant them first. Thus trees represent the long-term needs of the land and people.

The message of Bal Tashchit--the prohibition against waste and needless destruction--also begins with trees. The Torah (in Deuteronomy 20:19-20) teaches us that we are not to cut down fruit trees in wartime. It asks, "Is the tree of the field a man, to go into the siege before you?" Destroying trees is understood by our sages to encompass the entire range of needless destruction.

Rashi (France, 1040-1105 C.E.) understands this verse to mean that, since the tree is not an enemy, we have no right to destroy it or make it suffer. Rabbeinu Bachya (Spain, 1255-1340 C.E.) explains this to mean that trees are so important to people that they are compared to human beings, which is to say, destroying those trees destroys human life, because it may destroy the lives that depend on them.

These Jewish Sages highlight the Torah's use of trees to generate within us compassion and awareness of interdependence, both essential for living in ecological balance.

In addition to inappropriate destruction, lessons about trees also teach proper use of resources. The Midrash (Tanchuma, Teruma 9) teaches that the Israelites planted saplings when they arrived in Egypt. When the Jews left Egypt, they cut these trees for use in the Sanctuary of God. The trees sang with joy because they were being elevated for a holy, long-term purpose. We too can sanctify our resource use with holy intent.

Jewish teachings about trees apply not only to biblical Israel, but also to the environmental challenges we face in the modern world. Today we use trees in myriad ways, more than ever before, with tremendous ramifications for the future of the rainforests, the global climate, and human civilization itself. A few ways we can reduce our tree consumption are to buy products in bulk and thereby use less packaging, arrange to receive bank, phone, and other bills electronically, and bring a cloth bag instead of using paper (or plastic).

Bringing this wisdom about trees into our daily lives can help us become more cognizant of the precious resources we have been given, and more careful about how we use them. In so doing, we can transform our relationship to the natural world, sanctify our daily actions, and take better care of the planet God created.

Source: Dr. Akiva Wolff, Rabbi Yonatan Neril, and the Jewcology Project