



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

TU BISH'VAT: A STUDY OF JUDAISM AND THE ENVIRONMENT

“In the hour when the Holy one, blessed be He, created the first man, He took him and let him pass before all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to him: “See my works, how fine and excellent they are! Now all that I have created, I created for your benefit. Think upon this and do not corrupt and destroy My world, For if you destroy it, there is no one to restore it after you.” - Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:28

A Compilation of Jewish Environmental Texts:

Laws, warnings, and suggestions of how we should live within God's creation.

- Six years shall you sow your land and gather in its produce. And in the seventh, you shall leave it untended and un-harvested, and the destitute of your people shall eat, and the wildlife of the field shall eat what is left; so shall you do to your vineyard and your olive grove. - Exodus 23:10-12
- Just as you came and found trees planted by others, so you must plant for your children. - Midrash Tankhuma, Kedoshim
- Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai says: If you are holding a sapling in your hand, and someone says to you, “Here comes the Messiah!” – come and plant the sapling, and afterwards go and welcome the Messiah”. - Avot D'Rebbe Natan B 31
- God said to Israel, “Even if you find the land full of all good things, you should not say, ‘We will sit and not plant.’ Rather, be diligent in planting! Just as you came and found trees planted by others, you must plant for your children. A person must not say, ‘I am old, how many years will I live?’ You must not excuse yourself from planting. As you found trees, plant more, even if you are old. - adapted from Midrash Tankhuma, Kedoshim
- 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? - Deuteronomy 20:19
- Righteous people of good deeds...do not waste in this world even a mustard seed. They become sorrowful with every wasteful and destructive act that they see, and if they can, they use all their strength to save everything possible from destruction. But the wicked are not thus... - Sefer Hasidim 530
- In order to serve God, one needs access to the enjoyment of the beauties of nature, such as the contemplation of flower-decorated meadows, majestic mountains, flowing rivers, and so forth. For all these are essential to the spiritual development of even the holiest of people. - Rabbi Abraham Ben Maimonides

- Rav, Rabbi Hanina, Rabbi Johanan, Rav Habiba taught the following: Whoever can protest and prevent their household from committing a wrongdoing and does not, is accountable for the wrongdoings of their household; if a person could protest and prevent their fellow citizens, they are accountable for the wrongdoings of their fellow citizens; if the whole world, they are accountable for the whole world. - Shabbat 54b
- Indifference to evil is more insidious than evil itself. - Psalm 104
- Every blade of grass sings poetry to God. - Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav
- Ask now the beasts, and they shall teach you. And the birds of the sky, and they shall tell you. Or speak to the Earth, and it shall teach you. And the fish of the sea will tell you stories. - Job 12:7-8
- Scriptures will not permit a destructive act that will cause the extinction of a species. - Rabbi Moses Nahmanides commentary to Deuteronomy 22:6
- Even things you see as superfluous in this world – like flies, fleas and mosquitoes – they are still part of the greater scheme of the creation of the world. - Exodus Rabbah 10:1
- It should not be believed that all beings exist for the sake of humanity’s existence...(rather) all the other beings, too, have been intended for their own sakes. - Maimonides, Guide 3:13
- The land must not be sold beyond reclaim, for the land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me. - Leviticus 25:2
- In Exodus 20:8-10, God commands people to keep the Sabbath day, where no work is done, and animals are included in this day of rest.
- “A person should not eat or drink before first providing for his animals.”(Based on Deut. 11:15)

A Partial List of Ecological Crises in the World Today:

- **Depletion of the ozone layer:** Air pollution and acid precipitation are already causing widespread injury to humans, forest, and crops.
- **Extinction and endangerment of many species:** By the year 2100, we may lose 1/3 of all species currently living. This is irreversible and especially serious. We are losing the potential they hold for providing medicinal and other benefits, and the contribution that genetic diversity of life forms gives to the robustness of the world's biological systems.
- **Massive deforestation:** At the present rate, some critical forests of all types will be gone in a few years. With them go large numbers of plant and animal species.
- **Poisonous deposits of toxic chemicals and nuclear waste.**
- **Rising concentration of carbon dioxide brought about by our dependence on fossil fuels.**
- **Erosion of fertile topsoil:** which is crucial for food production. Since 1945, 11% of the earth's vegetated surface has been degraded. Per capita food production in many parts of the world is decreasing.
- **Energy Consumption:** 40% of the world's energy production is consumed by only 6% of the world's population, and that is by the USA.
- **Increased health problems:** today, linked to environmental causes, more than ever before.
- **Manufacturing plants:** producing hazardous wastes are often located in communities which are overcrowded with people from lower socio-economic areas
- **Narrow private interests:** (such as mining, timber, and petro-chemical industries) are building a movement to dismantle many of the environmental protections that are already in place in America, such as the Clean Water Act, the Safe Drinking Water Act, and the Endangered Species Act. Congress is giving these special interest groups unprecedented attention.

Discussion Questions

- According to the Torah, what is our relationship to the earth? Discuss the idea of ownership vs. guardianship of land. Is it important to even discuss environmentalism and why?
- Discuss the idea of the Divine Presence in everything. What is its significance regarding environmentalism? How do the laws of Shabbat relate to the idea of conservation? Discuss Brachot in relation to the Divine Presence.
- What is Shmittah and what is its' significance to the environment? Discuss the importance of planting (trees and other things). Considering the laws of Shmittah, what is our responsibility to other humans? What is the significance of trees to merit its' own holiday and what are other holidays which are specifically related to nature?
- What is the law of Bal Tashchit? Discuss its' importance. What are things we can do as a synagogue to implement Bal Tashchit in our lives. Specifically, should we continue to use Styrofoam? What is over-consumption and how does it relate to the laws of Bal Tashchit? It is said that pollution of the environment will only be overcome when the polluter realizes it is his own world he is polluting. How can we get this message across to ourselves and our children?
- Considering the law of Bal Tashchit, what should the Jewish response be to purchasing products which are over-packaged? Discuss examples of superfluous packaging and what are some alternatives. Discuss ways we can activate Bal Tashchit on a daily basis, including recycling, reusing, etc. What are some political or civic things that we can do as citizens to address environmental problems?
- What is our relationship to animals? How are we to view them? Considering laws regarding animals, should the eating of veal be permitted? What about the use of products made by companies which blatantly misuse animals?
- How is nature important to us and why? Is it important for us to make attempts to be out in nature? For both groups and individuals, discuss suggestions for nature-oriented activities. What about ways to increase environmental awareness? Give specific ideas for doing things in a more ecological way.

Source: Congregation Beth Israel Abraham & Voliner