

# Judaism, Climate Change, and Laudato Si

This June, Pope Francis shared his first encyclical (authoritative Catholic teaching), *Laudato Si*, on climate change and Creation care. [Shomrei Breishit](#) and [COEJL](#) (Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, which has long represented Jewry arm-in-arm with [interfaith partners](#) like the [US Catholic Conference of Bishops](#) and [Catholic Climate Covenant](#)), welcome the new attention on eco-religion.

Through the Papal visit, and this Fall’s key Paris global climate negotiations, these teachings will remain in the news. As Jews we have always applied our texts and values to the contemporary reality; our Hindu, Muslim, Protestant, Buddhist, and other friends do likewise (as the Pope notes, para. 7). With the Catholic Church offering parallel teachings to ours, we now link Jewish insights with those in *Laudato Si*.

Please read, even **study**, this document – then **act on** this message! Take these teachings seriously (see resources at [www.coejl.org/climatechange](http://www.coejl.org/climatechange)); apply them to your life and your community, with all the power of *tshuvah* (introspection-repentance), and the “fierce urgency of now” (MLK).

*Numbering here follows the paragraphs in the encyclical; each excerpt is accompanied by parallel classical or contemporary Jewish teachings. Enjoy; Compare; Discuss; Act!*

ENCYCLICAL LETTER

*LAUDATO SI'*

OF THE HOLY FATHER

FRANCIS

ON CARE FOR OUR COMMON HOME



1. *"LAUDATO SI', mi' Signore" – "Praise be to you, my Lord".* In the words of this beautiful canticle, Saint Francis of Assisi reminds us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us. "Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs".



"Blessed are You, Eternal our God, Ruler of the world, Creator of the fruit of the tree" (one of many traditional daily *berakhot* / blessings... Note the origins of "Praise be to You" [as in *Hodu L'Adonai*, Ps. 136], & parallel language in our daily thanksgiving prayer, *Modim Anachnu Lach*.)



11. Francis...communed with all creation, even preaching to the flowers, inviting them "to praise the Lord, just as if they were endowed with reason". His response to the world around him was so much more than intellectual appreciation or economic calculus, for to him each and every creature was a sister united to him by bonds of affection. That is why he felt called to care for all that exists.



"May it be my custom to outdoors each day, among the trees and grass, among all growing things... And may all the foliage of the field, all grasses, trees, and plants, awake at my coming – to send their powers of life into the words of my prayer – so that my prayer and speech are made whole through the life and spirit of all growing things." (R. Nachman of Bratzlav, circa 1800, *Sichot HaRan* 227.)

## CHAPTER ONE WHAT IS HAPPENING TO OUR COMMON HOME



19. ...Our goal [in reviewing climate facts] is not to amass information or to satisfy curiosity, but rather to become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it.



"My neighbor's material needs are my spiritual needs." (attributed to R. Israel Salanter, founder of the ethical Musar / *מורו* movement, ca. 1858)



33. It is not enough, however, to think of different species merely as potential "resources" to be exploited, while overlooking the fact that they have value in themselves. Each year sees the disappearance of thousands of plant and animal species which we will never know, which our children will never see... extinct for reasons related to human activity. Because of us, thousands of species will no longer give glory to God by their very existence, nor convey their message to us. We have no such right."



"The trees of the Lord drink their fill... where birds make their nests; the stork has her home in the junipers. The high mountains are for wild goats; the crags are a refuge for rock-badgers..." (Ps 104:17-8)



36. Caring for ecosystems demands far-sightedness .... We can be silent witnesses to terrible injustices if we think that we can obtain significant benefits by making the rest of humanity, present and future, pay the extremely high costs of environmental deterioration.

☆ “God, God... extending loving-kindness to the thousandth generation...but...applying the sins of the parents onto the children and grandchildren, even to the third and fourth generation.” (Ex. 34:6-7)



52. ...The poorest areas and countries are less capable of adopting new models for reducing environmental impact because they lack the wherewithal to develop the necessary processes and to cover their costs... regarding climate change, there are *differentiated responsibilities*. As the United States bishops have said, greater attention must be given to “the needs of the poor, the weak and the vulnerable, in a debate often dominated by more powerful interests”. We need to strengthen the conviction that we are one single human family. There [...is no] room for the globalization of indifference.

☆ “Humanity was created singly [from one mythic ancestor]... for the sake of peace among people, so that one should not say to his or her fellow, “My parent is greater than yours.” (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5)



58. In some countries, there are positive examples of environmental improvement... men and women are still capable of intervening positively. For all our limitations, gestures of generosity, solidarity and care cannot but well up within us, since we were made for love.

☆ “You & I will change the world. You & I: then soon all will follow. It’s been said before; that doesn’t matter. You & I will change the world.” (Arik Einstein / Miki Gavrielov, “Ani V’Atah”, 1970)

## CHAPTER TWO THE GOSPEL OF CREATION



66. ...human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself... these three vital relationships have been broken, both outwardly and within us. This rupture is sin.

☆ “The dominant classical understanding of the *mitzvot* divides them into *mitzvot bein adam la-makom* (obligations of people to God...) and *mitzvot bein adam le’chavero* (obligations between people...). The former are seen usually as ritual or cultic observances, while the latter are ethical and social responsibilities. Environmental issues, neither ritual/cultic nor ethical in a classical sense, fall between the cracks. Today we need a new category... we need to begin speaking in Jewish language of our moral and ethical obligations to the Earth... as *mitzvot bein adam le’olam*, ‘between people and the world’.” (Jeremy Benstein, *The Way into Judaism and the Environment*, 2006, pp. 88-89)



67. We are not God. The earth was here before us and it has been given to us. This allows us to respond to the charge that Judaeo-Christian thinking, on the basis of the Genesis account which grants man “dominion” over the earth (cf. *Gen* 1:28), has encouraged the unbridled exploitation of nature by painting him as domineering and destructive by nature. This is not a correct interpretation of the Bible... “The earth is the Lord’s” (*Ps* 24:1); to [God] belongs “the earth with all that is within it” (*Dt* 10:14). Thus God rejects every claim to absolute ownership: “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me” (*Lev* 25:23).

☆ “If humanity merits it, *yirdu*, it will have dominion. If humanity does not merit it, *yeradu*, humanity will stumble and fall, and the animals shall rule over it” (Rashi, circa 1100, on *Gen*. 1:26). “Do not think that this verse [conferring dominion, *Gen*. 1:28] comes to tell us how we *should* behave; rather it simply gives information as to the *nature* with which the Holy Blessed One has stamped each human” (Rambam, 1190, *Moreh Nev.* 3:13).



68. ...rest on the seventh day is meant not only for human beings, but also so “that your ox and your donkey may have rest” (*Ex* 23:12). Clearly, the Bible has no place for a tyrannical anthropocentrism unconcerned for other creatures. 193. ... we need also to think of containing growth by setting some reasonable limits and even retracing our steps before it is too late...

☆ “For Jews, it is the awareness of the Sabbath that can bring the realm of time and its accompanying sense of restraint and limit to stewardship. It is the Sabbath that defines the relationship between steward and Ruler. It is the Sabbath, ultimately that completes and confirms the environmental wisdom of Judaism.” (David Ehrenfeld and Rabbi Philip Bentley, 1985, in *Judaism* 34, p. 311)

84. ...that each human being is an image of God should not make us overlook the fact that each creature has its own purpose. None is superfluous. The entire material universe speaks of God's love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God.



”Even things you see as superfluous (*meyutarin*) in this world -- like flies, fleas, and mosquitos -- they are part of the greater scheme of the creation of the world, as it says (Gen. 1:31), ‘And God saw all that God has created, and behold it was very good.’ And R. Acha bar R. Chanina said, even things you see as superfluous in this world -- like snakes & scorpions -- they are part of the greater scheme of the creation of the world.” (Exodus Rabbah 10:1)

### CHAPTER THREE THE HUMAN ROOTS OF THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

124. Any approach to an integral ecology, which by definition does not exclude human beings, needs to take account of the value of labour... 125. If we reflect on the proper relationship between human beings and the world around us, we see the need for a correct understanding of work...

”Jews must look to labor, to nature... We should engage in all forms of labor, especially in the tilling of the soil; we should avoid the exploitation of the labor of others... We, who have been torn away from nature, who have lost the savor of natural living – if we desire life, we must establish a new relationship with nature... you had been wandering until you returned to Nature.” (A.D. Gordon, labor-Zionist, 1910)

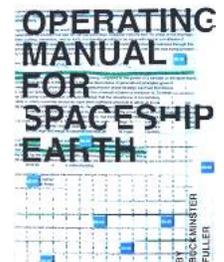
### CHAPTER FOUR INTEGRAL ECOLOGY

139. ... We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature. 141... There is an interrelation between ecosystems and between the various spheres of social interaction, demonstrating yet again that “the whole is greater than the part”.

”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 and the Jubilee (Lev. 25). There is a whole program in the Torah for creating a balanced distribution of resources across society (Ex. 22, Lev. 25, Deut. 23-24). This is an expression of the concept of *Tzedek*, which means righteousness, justice and equity”... “Environmental protection cannot be allowed to burden the poor. Scarcity cannot be allowed to burden the poor. Debt cannot be allowed to condemn the indebted. Caring for the earth cannot be done at the cost of burdening the poor. When both land and the poor are cared for, everyone thrives.” (Rabbis Lawrence Troster, 2012, and Nina Beth Cardin, 2008, at coejl.org)

156. An integral ecology is inseparable from the notion of the common good, a central and unifying principle of social ethics... 158. ...the principle of the common good [is]... a summons to solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters.

Shimon bar Yochai said: “People were sitting on a boat. One of them took a drill, and began to drill under his own place. His fellow travelers said to him, ‘what are you doing?!’ He said, ‘what do you care – aren’t I drilling [only] under my own place?’ They said, ‘the water will rise and cover us all!’” (Vayikra Rabbah 4:6)



### CHAPTER FIVE LINES OF APPROACH AND ACTION

201. The majority of people living on our planet profess to be believers. This should spur religions to dialogue among themselves for the sake of protecting nature, defending the poor, and building networks of respect and fraternity. Dialogue among the various sciences is likewise needed, [...as well as] between the various ecological movements... The gravity of the ecological crisis demands that we all look to the common good, embarking on a path of dialogue...”

”Our communities won't and needn't agree on everything -- within the Jewish or Catholic worlds, much less between us! But on a wide range for social teaching -- social justice, racial equality, worker's rights, human dignity -- Jewish and Catholic thought aligns closely, and our institutions work arm-in-arm to bring those values to the wider world. Nowhere is that more obvious than with the challenge of climate change...” (COEJL Encyclical Guide, June 2015, R. Fred Scherlinder Dobb, p.1)



CHAPTER SIX **ECOLOGICAL EDUCATION AND SPIRITUALITY**



202. Many things have to change course, but it is we human beings above all who need to change. We lack an awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared with everyone. This basic awareness would enable the development of new convictions, attitudes and forms of life. A great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge stands before us, and it will demand that we set out on the long path of renewal.

☆ “Each of us should learn to think of [sic] himself as though he were a cell in some living organism – which, in a sense, he actually is – in his relation to the universe or cosmos. What we think of as a coherent universe or cosmos is more than nature; it is nature with a soul. That soul is God. As each cell in the body depends for its health and proper functioning upon the whole body, so each of us depends on God. (Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, et al, “Introduction,” Reconstructionist Prayer Book, 1945)



208. We are always capable of going out of ourselves towards the other. ...concern for others, and the rejection of every form of self-centeredness and self-absorption, are essential if we truly wish to care for our brothers and sisters and for the natural environment...

☆ “The very relationship with the other is the relationship with the future... Faith is... believing that love without reward is valuable.” (Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 1969)



210. ... Environmental education should facilitate making the leap towards the transcendent which gives ecological ethics its deepest meaning. It needs educators capable of developing an ethics of ecology, and helping people...to grow in solidarity, responsibility and compassionate care.

☆ “Cooped up in the concrete box of a classroom,, kids don’t stand much of a chance of finding God. But outdoors, feet touching the earth, bodies immersed in the wind, Ruach Elohim, there’s a real likelihood they and we might remember our Creator... we need to take this outdoor education – this farm & wilderness education, this authentic Jewish spiritual education – seriously. We need to give it the dignity it deserves and infuse our curricula & our Jewish life with it.” (Rabbi Ellen Bernstein, CAJE Keynote, 2008)



217. ...the ecological crisis is also a summons to profound interior conversion... all need...an “ecological conversion”, whereby the effects of their encounter with [divinity] become evident in their relationship with the world around them. Living our vocation to be protectors of God’s handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our [religious] experience. 218.

... healthy relationship with creation is one dimension of overall personal conversion, which entails the recognition of our errors, sins, faults and failures, and leads to heartfelt repentance and desire to change.

☆ “Finally, love of the Creator, and love of that which God has created, are one and the same.” (Martin Buber, *On Judaism*, 1920, p. 209). “For sins between a person and God – *bein adam l’Makom* -- Yom Kippur atones. But for sins between one person and another – *bein adam l’havero* – Yom Kippur does not atone, until the one has appeased the other.” (Mishnah Yoma 8:9)



222. ... We need to take up an ancient lesson, found in different religious traditions and also in the Bible. It is the conviction that “less is more.”... It is a return to that simplicity which allows us to stop and appreciate the small things, to be grateful for the opportunities which life affords us, to be spiritually detached from what we possess, and not to succumb to sadness for what we lack.

☆ “Ben Zoma said: ‘Who is rich? – Whoever is happy with their lot’.” (Mishnah Avot 4:1)

(222) בן זומא אומר... איזה הוא עשיר -- השמח בחלקו. (230) איזה הוא מכובד? -- המכבד את הבריות.



246. *A prayer for our earth*  
All-powerful God... You embrace

with your tenderness all that exists.  
Pour out upon us the power of your love,  
that we may protect life and beauty.  
Fill us with peace, that we may live  
as brothers and sisters, harming no one.  
O God of the poor,  
help us to rescue the abandoned

and forgotten of this earth,  
so precious in your eyes.  
Bring healing to our lives, that we may  
protect the world and not prey on it,  
that we may sow beauty,  
not pollution and destruction...  
Encourage us, we pray,  
in our struggle for  
justice, love and peace.



See also [www.aytzim.org/rce](http://www.aytzim.org/rce) (*Shomrei Breishit: Rabbis and Cantors for the Earth*); [www.hazon.org/rabbis](http://www.hazon.org/rabbis); etc

Fuller citations from Pope Francis and more Jewish environmental thinkers are at [www.coejl.org/climatechange](http://www.coejl.org/climatechange)

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