

Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life

Eco-Judaism: Why and How to Care for Creation



Values and Texts

Actions

IN THE BEGINNING...

...male and female God created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them: "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the Earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, and over every living thing that crawls upon the Earth." (Gen. 1:27-28)

And God said, "See, I give you every seed-bearing plant that is upon all the Earth, and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit; they shall be yours for food." (Gen. 1:29)

And YHVH God took Adam and placed Adam in the Garden of Eden, *l'ovdah* [to work/serve/till it] *u'l'shomrah* [and to guard/till it]. (Gen. 2:15)

WHOSE EARTH IS IT, ANYWAY?

The Earth is God's, and the fullness thereof; the settled land and its inhabitants. (Ps. 24:1) [*Contradiction:*] The heavens are God's heavens, but God gave the Earth to humankind. (Ps. 115:16) [*Resolution:*] Humankind is forbidden to enjoy anything without saying a blessing over it...the former verse applies before one pronounces the blessing; the latter verse applies after one pronounces it. [*Talmud Bavli, Brakhot 35a-b:*]

...if you really listen to my commandments...to love YHVH your God and to serve God with all your heart and all your soul, then...you will eat, and be satisfied. [BUT!] be careful, lest your heart be seduced, and you turn away and serve false gods, and worship them. Then the wrath of YHVH will be upon you; God will stop up the heavens, and there will be no rain, and the Earth will not give its produce; and you will speedily be evicted from the good land that God is giving you..." (Deut. 11:13-17; *Shma* #2)

BAL TASHCHIT -- DON'T WASTE

When you besiege a city for a long time in order to defeat and capture it, do not destroy [*lo tashchit*] any of its trees, bringing an axe against it. You may eat from them, but you must not cut them down - for is the tree in the field human, that it can withdraw into the city before you?! (Deuteronomy 20:19 – *origin of the law of not destroying or wasting*)

Rav Zutra said: Whoever covers an oil lamp, or uncovers a naphtha lamp, transgresses the law of *bal tashchit*. (Talmud Shabbat 67b)

And not only [does *bal tashchit* apply] to the trees; rather, anyone who destroys dishes/vessels, or tears clothes, or demolishes a building, or stops up a spring, or destroys food in anger -- [that person] transgresses the law of *bal tashchit*. (Maimonides, MT Melakhim 6:10)

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; they are like demons. They rejoice in the destruction of the world, just as they destroy themselves.... (Sefer HaChinuch 529; 13th century)

... Apply [*bal tashchit*] to your whole life and to every being which is subordinated to you, from the Earth which bears them all up to the garment which you have already transformed into your own cover. Yea, "Do not destroy anything!" is the first and most general call of God. (R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, 19th Century German Orthodox: at Deut. 20:20; Horeb 56)

(1) *Oved* and *shomer* (serve and guard) this good Creation in all that we do – how we act, drive, eat, vote, buy, and live.

(2) Limit our "dominion" to "enlightened stewardship."

(3) 'Eat low on the food chain.' Each *pareve / milchig* (vegetarian) meal we eat saves 100's of gallons of water, many pounds of carbon emissions, and much topsoil.

(4) Enjoy life to the fullest; delight in small and simple things – *take nothing for granted*. We often want more 'stuff', rather than delighting in what we have. Blessings focus our awareness – Marge Piercy writes "the art is in compressing attention" -- and cultivate gratitude. Treasure what you have, and bless it.

(5) Since this law starts with trees, let's begin by not wasting them. Americans use half a *billion* trees each year just for paper. To help, buy paper with at least 30% *post-consumer* pulp, and without dioxin-causing chlorine bleach. Save old memos or flyers that are clean on one side, and use them in the *copier* or *printer*.

(6) With Rav Zutra, let's see energy efficiency as part of Jewish law – so we violate *bal tashchit* when we leave *lights* on... keep *thermostats* high... drive *gas-guzzlers*... use *disposable* plates or cups... use incandescent rather than *CFL* bulbs...

SHABBAT / SABBATICAL – ECOLOGY, JUSTICE, & SANITY

"Sabbath in our time! To cease for a whole day from all business, from all work, in the frenzied hurry-scurry of our time! To close the exchanges, the workshops and factories, to stop all railway services - great heavens! How would it be possible? The pulse of life would stop beating and the world perish!" The world perish? On the contrary, it would be saved. (Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Judaism Eternal* 2:30)

To set apart one day a week for freedom ... a day on which we stop worshipping the idols of technical civilization, a day on which we use no money, a day of armistice in the economic struggle with our [fellows] and the forces of nature - is there any institution that holds out a greater hope for [our] progress than the Sabbath? (A.J. Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 1951, 28)

[The world] has never 'made Shabbos'... It has never paused to say: 'making and doing and learning to control is not the goal'... Every seventh year all debts should be annulled, and the land should stand at rest. It should get to make Shabbos just like everybody else, because the earth (*adamah*) was as deeply God-given as *Adam*, its cousin. (Arthur Waskow, 'Rest,' *referencing the Sabbatical Laws from Leviticus 25*)

OUR HUMBLE PLACE WITHIN CREATION

Earth is satisfied by the fruit of Your works ... the trees of God are satisfied; the cedars of Lebanon which God has planted -- there birds make their nests; the house of the stork is in the fir trees. The high hills are for the wild goats; the rocks are a hiding-place for the badgers... (Ps. 104:10-18)

Even those creatures you deem superfluous in this world -- like flies, fleas, and gnats -- nevertheless have their allotted task in the scheme of Creation. (Exodus Rabbah 10:1)

Do not believe 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, 12th Cent. Egypt; *Guide of the Perplexed* III:13)

One day Honi was walking on the road, and saw a man planting a carob. Honi said to him, "since it takes seventy years for the carob to bear fruit, is it so clear to you that you will live seventy years and eat from it?!" The man replied, "I came into a world full of carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted for me, so do I plant for my descendants." (Talmud Ta'anit 23a)

God took Adam and led Adam around all the trees of the Garden of Eden. And God said to Adam: "See My works, how good and praiseworthy they are?! And all that I have created, I made for you. [But,] be mindful then that you do not spoil and destroy My world -- for if you spoil it, there is no one after you to repair it." (Qohelet Rabbah at 7:13)

THE PRESENT -- RESOURCES

Read *Torah of the Earth I & II*, ed. A. Waskow, 2000; *Ecology & the Jewish Spirit*, ed. Ellen Bernstein, 1998; *Trees, Earth, and Torah – a Tu B'Shvat Anthology*, ed. Elon-Hyman-Waskow, 1999. Explore COEJL's rich website, www.coejl.org. See www.tevacenter.org for educational materials, www.iiued.org.il & www.heschelcenter.org for Israel, www.nrpe.org for interfaith...

(7) Link *social & environmental* justice. Avoid toxins for you & others in vinyl, pesticides, etc.

(8) Traditionally, Shabbat is a day of *non-consumption* – of not buying things, driving, or flipping switches for electricity. However observant you are, consume less – on Shabbat, and off!

(9) Shabbat stands for a value higher than money, than producing and consuming. The answer to the ecological crisis lies in *valuing community and spirituality* – which are infinite – and not the finite material realm.

(10) *Biodiversity*, life's creativity, is in the millions of species who call Earth home. Our *wood* from cut rain-forests, *fish* from dead coral reefs, or *houses and malls* atop former swamps and fields, all diminish that diversity.

(11) If Maimonides is right, we must '*reduce our ecological footprint*,' change our ways, and use less – '*live more lightly on the Earth*' – so the rest of God's Creation can have its place too.

(12) Consider the future in all decisions. With free will given, "*choose life, that you and your children may live*" (Deut. 30:19).

(13) Learn, explore, think. "It aint easy bein' green," but going green is important for us to do as Jews, citizens, and humans.

(Compiled & Translated by R. Fred Scherlinder Dobb)

Lo alecha ha'm'lakha ligmor, v'lo ata ben khorin l'hibatel mimenah – It's not upon you to finish the task, but neither are you free to desist from it. (*Mishnah Avot* 2:15)

Next Eco-Jewish Steps: Contact, Rely Upon, and Support COEJL

Please sign me up to receive general info _____ I want to learn more about COEJL for my synagogue _____
Name _____ Email _____ Address _____
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