

# A Taste of Eco-Torah, from COEJL

Synagogue projects with COEJL involve *Torah* (learning), *Avodah* (service/prayer), and *Gemilut Hasadim* (loving acts). Ecology, a “new issue,” is also our oldest one. Here, Torah inspires service & action.

Let’s start at the very beginning, a very good place to start ... when God created the heavens and the Earth, in Genesis 1. Few texts are as well-known and influential – or as controversial – as the verses in which God gives humanity “dominion” over the Earth, whatever that means. Read on, and decide for yourself...

1. “*And God said ‘let us [?!] make humanity in our image, after our likeness, and let it rule (v’yirdu) over the fish of the sea, and the birds of the sky’ ... And God blessed the humans, saying: ‘be fruitful and multiply, and fill the Earth and subdue it (v’kivshuha), and rule (urdu) over the fish of the sea....’*” (Genesis 1:26, 1:28)

Discuss, perhaps in *hevruta* (traditional one-on-one study): What do these difficult verbs *resh-dalet-hey* (rule/subdue) and *kaf-vet-shin* (dominate/conquer) mean to us today? How do we think they been interpreted over the years? Are we at all responsible to Creation in this model, and if so, how?

A COEJL interpretation: We must understand these words in a way that's faithful to their biblical usage, and at the same time points us toward ecological sanity today. The tradition helps us do this--

First, **conditionality**: the classical midrash Bereshit Rabbah, quoted by the master 11<sup>th</sup>-Century Torah commentator Rashi, makes a pun between the parallel Hebrew roots for "rule/subdue" and "stumble/fall". As it appears in Gen. 1:26 without vowels (which were only added to the Torah in the middle ages), the word could go either way. Their comment is simple: "If humanity merits, it will rule (*yirdu*); if humanity does not merit, it will fall (*yeradu*), and the animals will rule over it." Our dominion, then, is conditional on exercising it wisely, not a permanent condition with no strings attached.

Second, **context**: the very next verses (29-30) specify vegetarianism! Even without the contemporary implications of this diet, verses 29-30 temper "dominion" so it doesn't include taking the life of even one animal for even a defensible reason (like lunch), much less making hundreds of species extinct every day, as we are doing now. Dominion is so limited, then, that it becomes “sound stewardship”.

And finally, it's **descriptive, not prescriptive**: Maimonides wrote (in his 12<sup>th</sup>-Century *Guide to the Perplexed* 3:13) -- "do not think that this verse (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". In other words: God made our DNA mostly the same as that of other mammals, but the little differences (opposable thumb & well-developed cranium, mostly) suggest that we *will* by our very nature change the face of the Earth -- now, we need to figure out *how* to do that well, which is why this teaching comes in the very first chapter of the very first book of our sacred tradition.

2. “*And God looked at **all** that God had created, and behold! – it was **very** good.*” (Genesis 1:31)

God calls most of Creation ‘good,’ but is silent about humanity. Only at the end of Creation, when God surveys the rich totality of which humans are one special but still small part, does God call the whole thing “very good.” How do our lives reflect – or subvert – the idea that Creation is very good?

3. *God “placed the human in the Garden of Eden l’ovdah ul’shomrah, to serve and protect it.”* (Gen. 2:15)

We’re here to **serve** / work / till, and **protect** / guard / tend, the land. This mission, laid out for the first humans in the first ecosystem, only says we shouldn’t let it get worse on our watch. How’re we doin’?

## Together, We Can Do Better!

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