

# THEOLOGY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

(A Jewish Perspective)



1

God blessed them  
And God said to  
them, “Be fertile  
and increase, fill the  
earth and master it;  
and **RULE** the fish of  
the sea, the birds of  
the sky, and all the  
living things that  
creep on the earth.”

וַיְבָרֶךְ אֱלֹהִים  
וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים פְּרוּ  
וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ  
וּכְבֹּשׁוּהָ וּרְדוּ בְּדַגַּת הַיָּם  
וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבְכָל־חַיָּה  
הָרֹמֵשׂת עַל־הָאָרֶץ:

2

# וּכְבֹּשָׁה

sheep, conquer,  
subdue, suppress,  
restrain, pickle,  
preserve, surface,  
occupy, thrust, tup,  
ramp, roll

כּוּשׁ

3

Our translation uses the word: MASTER

Herein lies the problem. Is it:

MASTER	CONQUER
SUBDUE	PICKLE
RULE	SHEEP

4

Rashi: The Hebrew verb is missing a “vav”, implying that one can also read it was directed to the male: “Master her.” The male dominates the female, to the extent that he prevents her from spending too much time out and about. Moreover, it teaches you that the commandment to “be fertile and increase” applies only to the male, to whom mastery comes more naturally, not to the female.

5

Nachmanides: He gave them power and dominion over the earth to do as they wished with the animals and all the other creatures, to build up and to tear down, to carve precious metals out of the mountains, and everything else that follows from this. They should “rule...the whole earth.”

6

From Reform Judaism:

As heirs to a tradition of stewardship that goes back to Genesis and teaches us to be partners in the ongoing work of Creation, we cannot accept the escalating destruction of our environment and its effect on human health and livelihood. It is our sacred duty to alleviate environmental degradation and the human suffering it causes instead of despoiling our air, land, and water.

7

Some texts that help us understand the Jewish Environmental passion.

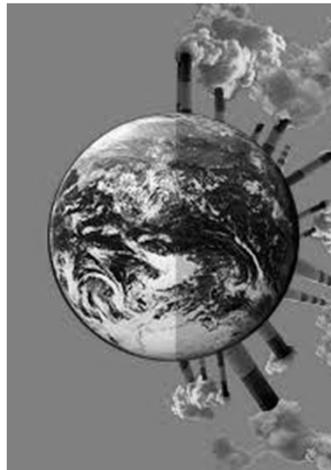


8

Jewish tradition teaches us to care for our planet in order to preserve that which God has created. Psalm 24 notes, "The earth is Adonai's and the fullness thereof," a dramatic assertion of God's ownership of the land.

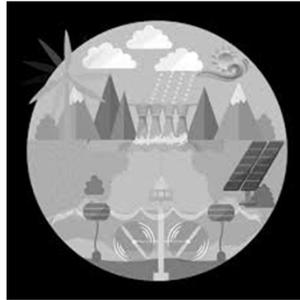
9

It follows, then, that any act that damages our earth is an offense against the property of God.



10

The Jewish concept of *bal tashchit*, "do not destroy," forbids needless destruction. Judaism emphasizes our need to preserve our natural resources and generate new ones for future generations.



11

The Talmud tells the story of the sage Choni, who was walking along a road when he saw a man planting a carob tree. Choni asked, "How long will it take for this tree to bear fruit?" "Seventy years," the man replied. Choni then asked, "Are you so healthy that you expect to live that length of time and eat its fruit?" The man answered, "I found a fruitful world because my ancestors planted it for me. Likewise, I am planting for my children." In fact, tradition values this concept so much that the rabbis teach that if a man is planting a tree and the messiah appears, he should finish planting the tree before going to greet him (*Avot d'Rebbe Natan 31b*).

12

We are encouraged *l'vadah ul'shamrah*, "to till and to tend," to become the Earth's stewards. In Isaiah 41:17-18, God promises, "I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them. I will open rivers in high places and fountains in the midst of valleys; I will make the wilderness a pool of water and the dry land springs of water."

*In other words, we were given our planet as a loan from God, and we should work to preserve it.*

13

Three major foci of the Reform Jewish environmental movement:

Climate Change

Clean Water

Environmental Health

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## Climate Change

"Justice, justice  
shall you pursue"

(Deut 16:20),



15

Judaism underscores the moral imperative of protecting the poor and vulnerable:  
"When one loves righteousness and justice, the earth is full of the loving-kindness of the Eternal" (Psalms 33:5).  
Indeed, poor nations are likely to bear the brunt of the negative impacts associated with climate change.

16

Our energy policy must also be **equitable** and **just** - and the countries most responsible for climate change should be those most **responsible** for finding a solution to the problem.

17

Our sacred texts teach that:

- humankind has an obligation to improve the world for future generations;
- Jewish tradition encourages families and communities to reduce their waste and make smart consumer choices;
- investing in companies that do not pollute and supporting behaviors and policies that encourage conservation.

18

## Clean Water

Water has a special place in Jewish tradition

- Isaac's wife was chosen for him at a well;
- the baby Moses was saved after floating down a river;
- the Israelites were freed when the red sea parted;
- Miriam will forever be remembered by her gift of water to the Jewish people in the desert.

19

Jewish tradition has long advocated that local and national governments take appropriate measures to remove or ameliorate the growing threats of environmental pollution and to afford protection to the environment.



20

## Environmental Health



*pikuach nefesh*, saving human lives above all else

21

We are taught:  
"You shall not stand idly by the blood of your  
neighbor" (Leviticus 19:16)



"Choose life, that you and your descendants may  
live" (Deuteronomy 30:20)

22

It follows, then, that Jewish values command us to preserve the earth and its varied life for our sake and for generations to come. It is our obligation to preserve human life by educating ourselves about the dangers of environmental health risks and working to prevent them for the sake of all humanity.

23

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24

When God created the first human beings, God led them around the Garden of Eden and said: Look at my works! See how beautiful they are, how excellent! Take care not to spoil or destroy My world, for if you do, there will be no one to repair it after you.

Midrash Rabbah , commentary on Ecclesiastes 7:13

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### **A Tu BiShvat Prayer for Creation**

Source of Creation and Life of the Universe, we gather together on Tu BiShvat, as Jews of conscience, with a deep spiritual bond to your natural wonders, to affirm and preserve creation.

We are grateful for creation in all its majesty: the ever-flowing waters, the azure blue skies, the complex life of Earth's forests, the myriad of lifeforms--amoebae and falcon, black footed ferret and wild turkey, human being and soaring eagle.

26

The life of all creatures and our own lives are One, profoundly dependent upon each other.

We call our ancient scroll of wisdom, the Torah, an eytz chaim, a tree of life, for it, like the Earth's great forests, sustains us. Torah teaches us that creation, in its great diversity, is harmoniously interconnected. Like the trees, we too need strong and deep roots for nourishment.

27

The uplifted branches of trees point to our future. God let us be strong, as strong as ancient trees. The Psalmist was right when he said, "like a tree planted by the waters, we shall not be moved."

We are grateful for the life we are lent. We pledge to lift up our voices both in praise of You and in defense of Your Creation.

*Rabbi Warren G. Stone, COEJL*

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