

QA | AGENDA

Jewish Perspectives on Environmentalism

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Materials: sheet of paper and pencil or pen

This is a Tikkun Olam – healing the world – seminar. The daily news shows that the environment is a lower priority than other issues – COVID-19, BLM, politics, real estate development, immigrant rights, repairing the West Seattle Bridge, and other items.

Part of the reason is that we take the environment for granted. It's really important – we can't live without it. It's the air we breathe, the water we drink, the outdoors where we walk and play, our animal and insect habitats, and the source of all the resources we use to grow, eat, build and make everything that keeps us alive. Humans used to live IN the environment, and they thought about it all the time. That's where the Jewish environmental principles came from. We'll get to those soon.

Today, we live ON the environment. Part of that is the Torah's fault: In Genesis 1:26-28, after creating Adam and Eve, God blesses them and says, "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." We've taken that to mean that we humans have license to do whatever they want on the Earth. The Torah dates from about 1700 years ago – when editors combined oral histories, and about 400 years of writings since the Dead Sea Scrolls, into what became the Torah we know today.

In the Agricultural Revolution about 10,000 years ago, hunter-gatherer humans settled down, and started claiming spaces to grow food and herd livestock. Prior to that, and for millennia after, humans lived IN the Earth – that is, subject to its weather patterns and growing seasons and migrations of insects and animals. But gradually, as humans improved their techniques and technologies for farming and livestock raising, for resource extraction and manufacturing, for communications and shipping, for food preservation and refrigeration – we came to feel we could manage and control the Earth. It's pretty ironic – Genesis 1:26 has kind of become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Today in Seattle – as in every city on Earth, all land is owned. Wherever development occurs, Nature is elbowed aside, into parks, building landscapes, and places where nothing can be built. We look at the environment mostly as decoration now – it's what makes Seattle "The Emerald City." Our current federal

government is trying to eliminate protections for air, land and water, to open national parks to logging and mining, eliminate habitat and species protections, and other actions they call “business friendly.”

Of course, you and I take some part in harming the environment. We drive, cars we fly on airlines (or we used to, and we probably will again), we create trash, and we live in cities that don't value the environment. This sounds like a confession at Yom Kippur! At the same time, we're taking actions that help the environment. And the more we take, the better

Exercise 1: Bring something from your home that you are doing to help make the world “greener,” show it to us and tell us a little about it.

Exercise 2: On your paper, make a circle in the center and label it “Me.”

Write down what you're doing personally, on your own and with your family. Now make another circle, label it “Work,” and list what you're doing there. Finally, make another circle, label it “The World,” and list what you're doing there.

Question 1: how do we make a living if we don't make it from the environment – through agriculture, logging, mining, fishing?

Question 2: how do we reduce our impact in each area as much as possible?

What have the rabbis said?

Religion takes the long view – beyond our day-to-day activities, to how everything plays out over eternity. Jewish environmentalists agree that the health of our environment is conditioned on our beliefs about our nature and our destiny, including by our religion. They disagree that Judeo-Christian belief systems gave humans the right to plunder their planet.

So, think back over the past 2000 years, as Jewish sages in the Torah and rabbis in the Mishneh, Gemorah, Talmud & Mishneh Torah made their laws and commentaries. You might observe that humans haven't changed much in the past 2000 years. They explored issues that we face today: pollution, environmental destruction and protection, population growth, obesity and conspicuous consumption, conservation, and urban planning, design and sprawl.

What they came up with were basic guidelines over the years, from Torah on, including:

- *Sabbath for humans* – for weekly spiritual refreshment (Genesis)
- *b'al tashchit* – do not waste (Leviticus)
- *tsar b'aleih chayyim* – be aware of pain of living things, (Leviticus),
- *Shmita* -- Sabbatical year for land (Leviticus)) – basis for crop rotation and letting land lie fallow
- *Gleanings for poor at edges of fields* (Leviticus) – take care of the poor
- *Jubilee year* for divesting ownership, and re-distributing wealth, (Leviticus) – still too radical to embrace. Neither the Torah, the Talmud nor Mishneh Torah (Maimonides' legal code) explains how we're supposed to run an economy we dissolve and re-create every 50 years, so that remains a tantalizing question.
- *b'tzelem Elohim* (Deuteronomy) – all people are created in God's image (animals should also be included!) and *pikuach nefesh* (Leviticus) – live by Torah law rather than die because of it, (and Talmud) – saving the vital spirit, or the mitzvah of preserving (or saving) life (that's in danger),
- *tikkun olam* (from *mip'nei tikkun ha-olam*, "for the sake of repairing the world" – originally enunciated in the 3rd Cent. C.E. Mishneh Torah). The world is broken, said 16th Cent. C.E. Rabbi Isaac Luria, and we are obliged to repair it.
- The transitory nature of land ownership (in *Shmita*, Leviticus) – since God created the Earth and entrusted it to human care, the Earth is not ours to own. Rather, we hold it in trust, in common, in perpetuity, and anyone who damages it, i.e., what we hold in common (or the commons), is liable for repairing and restoring it, and compensating all injured parties.
- *Study...leads to action* (Rabbi Akiva, Talmud, Kiddushin 40b) we must invest in the actual work of personal and institutional change, and
- *It is not incumbent on you to finish the task; neither are you free to desist from it* (Rabbi Judah, c. 200 C.E., (Pirkei Avot (Ethics of The Fathers) 2:16)

Several Talmudic rabbis note that in Genesis, God created humans last, on the sixth day, after all the animals and insects, so we shouldn't get such big heads about ourselves. As God walks Adam through Eden, the Creator cautions, "Tend the Garden carefully, for if you destroy it, no one will come after you to set things right."

Overeating, for example, is seen as doubly violating *bal tashchit* -- wasting food, and damaging one's own body (Orach Meisharim 6:29). Bearing more than two children per family, say both Hillel and Shammai, also violates *bal tashchit*, though many post-Holocaust rabbis advocate

boosting Jewish births to replace those lost in World War II. Urban green space is first mandated in Numbers, when the Levites are installed in 48 cities, where they'll be supported by tithes from surrounding pastures and orchards.

The 19th Century Polish master, Rabbi Simcha Bunims, said "Everyone must have two pockets, with a note in each pocket. When feeling lowly ..., one should reach into the right pocket and find the note saying "The world was created for me." But when feeling high and mighty, one should reach into the left pocket, and find the words, "I am but dust and ashes."

Available Jewish environmental resources:

Trailblazers such as Abraham Joshua Heschel, Robert Gordis, Eric Freudenstein, Ellen Bernstein and others started laying the foundation for a Jewish environmental philosophy in the late 1960s. Rich, accessible books:

- Jeremy Benstein's *The Way Into Judaism and the Environment* (2006),
- Carol Diament's 1993 collection, *Judaism and Ecology*,
- Lillian Ross' *The Judaic Roots of Ecology* (1981)
- Hava Tirosh-Samuelson's 2003 collection, *Judaism and Ecology*

What good is happening in the world? Just type "Environmental organizations" into Google, and you'll find thousands of entries – from here in Seattle to around the world.

What more you can do to

(a) reduce your impact, and

(b) join others in reducing impact?

I suggest that you put a note in your calendar, partner with one of our seminar members here, or with another partner or friend – and check back on yourself and each other about follow-through in two weeks. Here are some of my ideas:

- Join PCC Natural Markets – they work to preserve organic farmland (through PCC Farmland Trust), and to provide organic and otherwise vetted products. And they're the world's biggest co-op supermarket chain
- If you cook a lot at home, a CSA (community supported agriculture) delivery once a week or two supports local farmers all year long
- Go meatless – or reduce the meat in your diet and increase the vegetable-based foods
- If you live in West Seattle, the Delridge Grocery Co-op (<https://delridgegrocery.coop/>) needs members to build its

business in the Delridge food desert, and you can order a DGC Essentials Box every week for \$20 online

- If you travel, offset your carbon footprint by purchasing “gold standard” offsets. The related stores include: [How Guilty Should You Feel About Flying? - The New York Times](#), and where to get top quality carbon offsets: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/24/climate/nyt-climate-newsletter-carbon-offsets.html>, and
- Support your favorite environmental organization(s) with donations, and volunteer hours. Many here in the Seattle area run activities for adults, and many that are kid-friendly.

Thank you for joining us. Now let's take some time for questions!