



## Jews, Jewish Texts, and Nature: A Brief History

by Rabbi Daniel Swartz

Once upon a time -- but this is neither a fairy tale nor a bedtime story -- we knew less about the natural world than we do today. Much less. But we understood that world better, much better, for we lived ever so much closer to its rhythms.

Most of us have wandered far from our earlier understanding, from our long-ago intimacy. We take for granted what our ancestors could not, dared not, take for granted; we have set ourselves apart from the world of the seasons, the world of floods and rainbows and new moons. Nor, acknowledging our loss, can we simply reverse course, pretend to innocence in order to rediscover intimacy. Too much has intervened.

But we can explore the ways we once were, the times when we lived off the land, when we lived in the Land.

Our purpose in so doing is not to shake our heads in disbelief, whether at the naiveté of old or the alienation of our own time. We do it in order to assess the ingredients of our loss, as also of our gain, to inquire whether here and there, perhaps even more than merely here and there, our modern sophistication can be married to the ancient intimacy, whether we can move from our discord with nature to an informed harmony with this, God's universe.

Accordingly, this is not about the good old days. It is about us, and about how we came to where we are. It is about our people and its relationship to the natural world.

Not all of us, throughout all our history, lived intimately with nature, but some of us did most of the time and most of us did some of the time.

Which of us? When? What is, in fact, the story of our shifting relationship with the natural environment? And where does that story, along with our own, point us now?

### The Biblical Period

Among its many facets, the Bible is the story of people who cared about and knew intimately the land around them. That knowledge is richly, even lavishly, reflected in the language of the prophets and psalmists, in the poetry of the Song of Songs and Job. Indeed, the extravagant use of natural metaphor suggests that a vocabulary drawn from the world of nature was accessible to all.



Today, when we encounter God as a *nesher*, a griffin vulture (as we do in Deuteronomy 32:11), we must pause to examine just what is intended by the term. But we may surmise that then, when people first encountered that way of depicting God, they knew that the reference was to God as a fiercely protective parent, one who carries its young on its back to help them learn how to fly. Similarly, when Isaiah compares Israel to a terebinth oak in the fall (6:11-13), his listeners could appreciate immediately the two-edged nature of his metaphor. The terebinth is most glorious just before all its leaves drop -- but it is also among the hardiest of trees, even sprouting again from a cut-off stump.

No modern audience can appreciate as intuitively as the listeners of old the Song of Song's lyrical description of spring flowers reappearing on the Earth or of a lily among the thorns. So, too, the psalmists' hymns to all of creation, joining with the song of heaven's birds and young lions at their hunt (see, e.g., Psalms 104 and 148). And consider the difference between a modern dweller in cities and the ancients in comprehending the sheer power of God's promise to Abraham that he would have descendants like the stars in the sky: in the one case, the stars are perceived only through a haze of light and soot; in the other, the night sky dense with brilliant stars was part of the common experience.

The language of nature came to the people naturally, as it were, for their lives were bound up with the richness of the land, with the pastoral and agricultural economy of the time. That is why they tended the land so lovingly, that is why the cycles of their celebrations followed the seasons of the land (see, e.g. Leviticus 23). And though their efforts to tame the land, to make it more productive and more dependable, were often marvels of ingenuity, they understood, as well, the limits to their mastery -- for they knew God as Sovereign of the Land, and, through such institutions as the Sabbatical year and the Jubilee (Leviticus 25), they acknowledged God's ownership.

It followed that they had to treat the land well -- not only to give it rest, but to respect and plant trees, keep water sources clean, create parks near urban areas, regulate sewage disposal, avoid causing pain to animals. And they understood intuitively as well the connection between their responsibility to care for the environment and justice: Since the land was God's, not only should it be protected, but its rich produce should be shared with the poorest of God's children (Leviticus 19).

In a world where warfare typically included efforts by the victor to degrade drastically the environment of the vanquished -- cutting down trees, fouling waters, and salting the Earth -- our forebears behaved exceptionally, in all senses of the word. They developed the principle of *bal tashchit*, do not destroy (Deuteronomy 20:19). Do not cut down trees even to prevent ambush or to build siege engines; do not foul waters or burn crops even to cause an enemy's submission. And if, even in extremis, one is to avoid causing needless harm to the environment, *al akhat kama v'khama* -- how much the more so -- during the ordinary course of life.

We speak, then, of a time when people were possessed of an ideal vision of harmony, of *shlemut*, wholeness and peace. No, it was not an idyllic time, for they could not fully translate their vision into reality. No Eden, not any longer: the promised abundance had to be teased and more often wrested from the Earth by the sweat of the brow, and the seasons had a way of being fickle, not bestowing their appointed blessings. Hence work, hence prayer, hence, too, Shabbat, a time to rest from work, a time to remind themselves of God's endless beneficence, a time to dream of a time yet to come, when the world will be entirely Shabbat. And in that final and endless time, the wolf will lie down with the lamb, and humankind will be at peace with all of nature (See, e.g., Isaiah 65:21-25; Joel 2:21-24.).

In short, our ancient ancestors knew the wonderful reciprocity of Creation: Creation's sheer magnificence turns the heart towards its Creator (see, e.g., Isaiah 40), and the heart that has turned to God opens, inevitably, towards Creation, towards the awesome integrity of the natural universe that is God's gift.

### **Additional Quotes:**

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest... but you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I the Eternal am your God (Leviticus 19:9-20).

A time is coming ... when the mountains shall drip with wine and all the hills shall wave with grain. I will restore My people Israel, I will plant them upon their soil (Amos 9:13-15).

Let the heavens rejoice and the earth exult! Let the sea and all within it thunder, the fields and everything in them exult! Then shall all the forest trees shout for joy, at the presence of the Eternal One, who is coming to rule the Earth; God will rule the world justly and its people in faithfulness (Psalm 96:11-13).

But ask the beasts, and they will teach you; the birds of the sky, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth and it will teach you; the fish of the sea, they will inform you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Eternal has done this? (Job 12:7-9)

For now the winter is past, the rains are over and gone. The blossoms have appeared in the land. The time of the song-bird has come; the song of the turtledove is heard in our land. The green figs form on the fig tree, the blossoming vines give off fragrance (Song of Songs 2:11-13).

### **The Era of the Mishnah and the Talmud**

During the period when the Mishnah and Talmud were developed, although many of us became dwellers in cities, our urbanization was far from complete. Farming, perhaps because a large percentage of Mishnaic sages were farmers, was considered the normative way of life. We read, for example, in *Avot d'Rabbi Nathan* (30:6) that "one who purchases grain in the market is like an infant whose mother is dry [and so needs to be taken to a wet nurse], while one who eats from what one has grown is like an infant raised at its mother's breast."

The mystics of this period wrote *hekhalot* hymns, which visionary poets recited during their attempts to ascend through the "heavenly palaces." These hymns evoked the majesty of God by reference to the wonders of the Earth, as did the prayers of the early *paytanim* (such as Yose ben Yose). Even into the late Talmudic era of the fifth and sixth centuries, our sages remained knowledgeable about the natural environment, and they wrote with great concern about it.

One testament to their concern is the panoply of blessings they developed. Through these, the experience of the natural world, as well as interactions between people and nature, became sanctified. Not only the tasting of foods, but the fragrance of blossoms, the sight of mountains, the sound of thunder were to be blessed (See "Sunrise Service Handout" and "A Discussion on Seeing the Special in the "Ordinary" in the Program section of this kit for examples). Talmudic sages added such rituals of blessing as the *Kiddush Levanah*, a blessing for the renewal of the moon (which was later revived by medieval mystics and still later adopted by the Hasidim of the 18th century). Such blessings showed that God was author of the wonders of nature. And as to the work of human hands, such as the baking of bread, the rabbis understood that even such work was bound up in a sacred partnership of God and humanity, as given form in the bowels of nature.

Most of all, the myriad blessings reflected and reminded those who recited them of the foundational belief: God owns everything in the world; we are but tenants in the garden, meant to till and to tend, to serve and to guard.

The premise that "you and what you possess are God's" (*Avot* 3:7) underlies most of Talmudic thinking, both about the environment and about the nature of *mitzvot* in general. The doing of *mitzvot* acknowledges that we live in a God-centered and not a human-centered universe, that because of God's ownership, we have a variety of obligations to the Divine will. The rabbis further believed that many *mitzvot*, such as the Sabbatical year, had as their *central* purpose the reaffirmation of God's ownership of the land (*Sanhedrin* 39a). Philo, writing at the same time as the Mishnaic sages, devoted a whole treatise, *De Cherubim*, to the notion that humans cannot truly own anything, for all is God's. As was true with their biblical ancestors, this understanding of ownership strengthened for them the link between treating the environment justly and justly sharing with all of God's children the products of creation.

The particular and compelling gift of these sages is that they made their concerns concrete, translated ethical principles into codes of action. While *Genesis Rabbah* and *Leviticus Rabbah*, written at roughly the same time, express general concerns about the preservation of species and the sacredness of planting trees, the Mishnah and Gemarra set definite limits on the use of any one species and regulate in detail the planting of trees in urban areas. The Talmudic sages translated the general principle of *Bal Tashchit* into a series of specific prohibitions against wasteful actions. Similarly, they developed extensive regulations on the disposal of hazardous waste, and they curtailed industries that might cause air pollution (See, e.g. *Bava Batra* 25a.). Nor did they consider these matters to be secondary or delegate these concerns to others; the heads of the *Bet Din* themselves were to inspect wells (*Tosefta Shekalim* 1:2). Only through concrete acts such as these could the vision of the age of redemption become a reality.

### **Additional Quotes:**

Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai said, three things are of equal importance, earth, humans, and rain. Rabbi Levi ben Hiyata said: ... to teach that without earth, there is no rain, and without rain, the earth cannot endure, and without either, humans cannot exist (*Genesis Rabbah*, 13:3).

Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai ... used to say: if you have a sapling in your hand, and someone should say to you that the Messiah has come, stay and complete the planting, and then go to greet the Messiah (*Avot de Rabbi Nathan*, 31b).

How can a person of flesh and blood follow God? ... God, from the very beginning of creation, was occupied before all else with planting, as it is written, "And first of all [*mi-kedem*, usually translated as "in the East"], the Eternal God planted a Garden in Eden [Genesis 2:8] Therefore ... occupy yourselves first and foremost with planting (*Leviticus Rabbah* 25:3).

### **Medieval and Renaissance Times**

The urbanization of Jews continued throughout the Middle Ages. In some cases, our land was seized, or we were forbidden to own land, or we were in other ways forced off the land; in others, economic pressures, ranging from prohibitive taxes to business restrictions, as well as shifting economic opportunities, led us toward the cities.

But not all Jews became urban. In Europe, through the 1400s, many Jews cultivated vineyards. In the Islamic world, Jews played a vital role in agricultural life, first throughout the region, then, as we were displaced from the land, along its periphery.

From the beginning of this period, a number of important Jewish texts with environmental sensitivities, such as the late collections of midrash, *Ecclesiastes Rabbah*, *Midrash Tankhuma*, and *Midrash Tehillim*, were composed. Joseph Kimkhi, in his commentary on Genesis, wrote that the "us" in God's "Let *us* make humans" refers to God working together with nature and the Earth. And the expansion of Jewish mysticism and poetry also created an abundance of works concerned with the environment.

This concern was both practical and theological. Maimonides as a physician saw the ill effects environmental degradation could have on the health, and he proposed regulations to counter them (See, e.g. his *Treatise on Asthma*). Joseph Caro wrote about the responsibility of communities to plant trees (*Tur, Hoshen Mishpat* #175), while various responsa of Rabbi Yitzhak ben Sheshet (Ribash), of the early 14th century, deal with urban pollution issues, including noise pollution, and their effects on urban dwellers (See, e.g. *Responsa* 196).

But many of the sages of this period also viewed the beauty of the created world in a broader sense, as a path towards the love and contemplation of God. Both Maimonides and his son, Abraham, wrote that one could come to love God by contemplating God's great works in nature, and that such contemplation was in fact essential to spiritual development (*Sefer HaMada*, 2.2; *Ha-Mispil La-Avodat Ha-Shem*). The Jewish philosopher, Bahya ibn Pekuda, wrote that Jews should engage in "meditation upon creation" in order to sense God's majesty (*Duties of the Heart*, 137). *Sefer Ha-Hinukh*, a compilation by medieval pietists, claimed that those who truly love God cannot bear to waste even a grain of mustard (#529).

The vast number of Kabbalistic works developed during this time took contemplation of nature a step further, for, according to the Zohar, nature itself is a garment of the *Shekhina*. *Perek Shira*, a mystical poem from circa 900, has verses from all types of creatures singing God's praise. Abraham Abulafia began a tradition of Jewish mysticism that included outdoor meditation. And the mystics of Safed developed intricate *Tu B'shvat* Seders, to celebrate the presence of God in nature.

But mystics though they were, they did not restrict their relationship with nature to contemplation. Rather, they treated nature with great respect in deed as well as thought. As Moses Cordovero, author of one of these *Tu B'shvat Haggadot*, wrote in a tract about the sorts of ethical behavior in which mystics should engage, that "the principle of wisdom is to extend acts of love toward everything, including plants and animals" (*Tomer Devorah*, #3).

The particularly intense concern for and involvement with nature we find among the mystics might suggest that nature was somehow outside "mainstream" concerns. That was not the case. On the contrary, we find an abiding involvement with and appreciation of nature among some of the most "mainstream" rabbis and poets. Some of the greatest Sephardic sages, for example, were also talented nature poets. So, Moses ibn Ezra, in his poem "The Rose," wrote: "The garden put on a coat of many colors, and its grass garments were like the robes of a brocade . . . at their head advanced the rose; he came out from among the guard of leaves and cast aside his prison-clothes."

Judah Ha-Levi, perhaps the greatest poet of his age, in "A Letter to his Friend Isaac," wrote:

"And now the Spring is here with yearning eyes; midst shimmering golden flowerbeds, on meadows carpeted with varied hues, in richest raiment clad she treads. She weaves a tapestry of blooms over all."

Nahum, a 13th century Sephardi paytan, wrote:

"Winter is gone, gone is my sorrow. The fruit tree is in flower, and my heart flowers with joy. O hunted gazelle, (a reference to the *Shekhina*) who escaped far from my hut, come back. Trees of delight sway among the shadows."

And Abraham ibn Ezra, one of the great Torah commentators, wrote in his poem, "God Everywhere,"

"Wherever I turn my eyes, around on Earth or to the heavens/I see you in the field of stars/ I see You in the yield of the land/in every breath and sound, a blade of grass, a simple flower, an echo of Your holy Name."

All these poets saw nature as beautiful and worthy in and of itself -- and also as a path toward the most beautiful and worthy of all, God.

Another lasting contribution to an environmental ethic by these medieval sages is in the elaboration of the Mishnaic principle of "moderation." They elucidated a principle of moderation opposed to both a hedonism that requires ever-increasing consumption in futile attempts to satisfy ever-expanding appetites, and to an asceticism that devalues the natural world, for, as Judah Ha-Levi wrote, "the holy law imposes no asceticism, but demands rather that we grant each physical faculty ... its due" (*Kuzari*, 2:5). Of all the medieval sages, Maimonides was the foremost exponent of moderation, writing that "good deeds are ones that are equibalanced between too much and too little" (*Eight Chapters*, 54), and that "the right way is the mean in each group of dispositions common to humanity. One should only desire that which the body needs and cannot do without. One should eat only when hungry and not gorge oneself, but leave the table before the appetite is fully satisfied... This is the way of the wise" (*Hilchot Deot*, 1). Nor was Maimonides the only sage promoting the "golden mean." Ibn Gabirol wrote, "abandon both extremes and set about the right mean (*Ethics*, 145).

### **Additional Quotes:**

Rabbi Shimon said, "the shade spread over us by these trees is so pleasant! We must crown this place with words of Torah" (*Zohar*, 2:127a).

When Noah came out of the ark, he opened his eyes and saw the whole world completely destroyed. He began crying for the world and said, God, how could you have done this? ... God replied, Oh Noah, how different you are from the way Abraham ... will be. He will argue with me on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah when I tell him that I plan their destruction... But you, Noah, when I told you I would destroy the entire world, I lingered and delayed, so that you would speak on behalf of the world. But when you knew you would be safe in the ark, the evil of the world did not touch you. You thought of no one but your family. And now you complain? Then Noah knew that he had sinned (*Midrash Tanhuma, Parashat Noach*).

It should not be believed that all the beings exist for the sake of the existence of humanity. On the contrary, all the other beings too have been intended for their own sakes, and not for the sake of something else (Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, 456).

### **From the Rise of Modernity to Today**

On the eve of the modern period came the rise of Hasidism. In villages throughout Eastern Europe, beginning in the 18th century and continuing through the 19th, the rebbes of this movement spoke, often ecstatically, about the importance of a close relationship with the natural environment. The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, said that a man should consider himself as a worm, and all other small animals as his companions in the world, for all of them are created (*Tzava'at ha-Rivash*). Rabbi Schneur Zalman, the founder of the Chabad branch of Hasidism, taught that God is in all nature, a view he based on the fact that, in *gematria*, the name of God -- *Elokim* -- is equivalent to *ha-teva*, nature. Rabbi Zev Wolf taught that the wonders of the soil and of growing are to be contemplated before blessing food; the Medbozer Rebbe said that "God placed sparks of holiness within everything in nature" (*Butzina DeNehorah*, 22); Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav, the great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov and the Hasidic rebbe most closely attuned to nature, wrote that if we quest for God, we can find God revealed in all of creation (*Likkute Mohoran*, II, #12). Nachman prescribed to his followers daily prayer in fields, teaching that their prayers would be strengthened by those of every blade of grass (*Sichot Ha-Ran*, 227).

Even the erstwhile opponents of the Hasidim, such as some of the rabbis who started the *Musar* movement, joined with them in appreciation of nature. Rabbi Joseph Leib Bloch wrote that a good Jew "will be filled with wonder and excitement at the sight of the glories of nature

... and will know how to use these feelings for the sublime purpose of recognizing the Creator" (*Sha'arey Da'at*, I, 194).

With the dawn of the 19th century, a radical transformation of the Jewish circumstance commenced. It is doubtful whether, short of wartime, so much change in social circumstance was ever compressed in so short a period as the change we experienced in the 19th century. At the dawn of the century, Europe was home to 1.5 million of the world's then 2.5 million Jews. In the course of that century, Europe was utterly transformed, and we along with it. Old social, political, and economic structures crumbled; new possibilities emerged, enticed. Educational and economic opportunities, new places and new ideologies beckoned. And people moved: In 1813, there were some 8,000 Jews in Warsaw; by 1900, there were 219,128. In 1789, there were 114 Jews in Budapest; by 1900, there were 166,198; in 1816, there were 3,373 Jews in Berlin; by 1900, there were 92,206.

But even during this explosive time, significant rural populations remained. Thus, at the beginning of the 20th century, over 14 percent of Galician Jews were still engaged in agriculture. Many Jews emigrating to both North and South America (including, for example, the family of Rabbi Alexander Schindler) farmed during their first generation in the New World. And, perhaps more significantly, this period saw the rise of the first movements within Judaism advocating a return to the land, a reconnection with nature.

In Europe, the *Haskalah*, the "enlightenment," encouraged the establishment of thousands of farms during the 19th century in central and southern Russia. The *Haskalah* sought to reinvigorate the Jewish spirit -- and many of its writers believed that there was no better way to do so than through renewed contact with nature. A number of Chaim Nachman Bialik's poems reflect this contact, such as his "At Twilight:" "They [our fantasies] will soar to the heights rustling like doves, and sail along into the distance and vanish. There, upon the purple mountain ridges, the roseate islands of splendor, they will silently flutter to rest."

But the *Haskalah* poet most committed to a return to nature was Saul Tchernikovsky:

"And if you ask me of God, my God/'Where is God that in joy we may worship?'/Here on Earth too God lives, not in heaven alone/A striking fir, a rich furrow, in them you will find God's likeness, Divine image incarnate in every high mountain. Wherever the breath of life flows, you will find God embodied./And God's household? All being: the gazelle, the turtle, the shrub, the cloud pregnant with thunder/... God-in-Creation is God's eternal name."

Numerous Yiddish poets, both in Europe and America, wrote nature poems, some of which were influenced by Walt Whitman, such as "A Song," by Yehoash:

"A song of grass, a song of Earth, a song of gold ore in the womb of rock, a song of tin-white brook that bathes the body of the moon, a song of famished wolves that howl upon their snow-capped steppes."

Malka Heifetz Tussman's poems show a particular sensitivity to, perhaps even identification with, nature, as in her poem, "Songs of the Priestess:"

"Gather me up like wheat. Cut quickly/ and bind me/ before autumn's whirlwind sweeps me away./ Hurry/I am fully ripe."

Numerous Yiddish prose authors, such as Mendele Mokher Seforim in his *Of Bygone Days* and Joseph Opatoshu in his *Romance of a Horsethief*, show a great affinity for the beauties of the natural world.

But it was in the Zionist movement, particularly in elements of the *kibbutz* movement, that the return to nature found its strongest supporters. A.D. Gordon, the best-known of such

advocates, wrote "And when you, O human, will return to Nature, that day your eyes will open, you will stare straight into the eyes of Nature and in its mirror you will see your image. You will know... that when you hid from Nature, you hid from yourself... We who have been turned away from Nature -- if we desire life, we must establish a new relationship with Nature" (*Mivhar Ketavim*, 57-58).

For his part, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook saw the return to nature as part of the sacred task of the Jew in Israel, necessary to create "strong and holy flesh" (*Orot*, 171). Some of the Zionist poets directly tied their love of nature to the return to the Land; here, religion per se was abandoned, but the secularized product was infused with spirituality. So Rachel (Rachel Blustein) wrote, in one of her most famous poems,

"Land of mine, I have never sung to you nor glorified your name with heroic deeds/or the spoils of battle/all I have done is plant a tree/on the silent shores of the Jordan."

Others, such as Leah Goldberg, in her "Songs of the River," wrote of the beauty of nature in and of itself, apart from any Zionist aspirations: "

My brother the river, eternally wandering/  
Renewed day by day, and changing, and one/  
My brother the flow, between your banks/  
Which flows like myself between spring and fall."

There was an ideological point to such expression, for the early Zionist pioneers were taken (not to say obsessed) with the idea that the health of the Jewish people depended on its reconnection with nature, from which it had been so radically cut off in Europe. From A.D. Gordon's "Religion of Labor," his desire to "strike our roots deep into its [the land's] life-giving substance, and stretch out our branches into sustaining and creating air and sunlight," up until the extraordinary passion of contemporary Israelis to know the contours of their land, endlessly hiking through it and learning its ways, we may discern the echoes of an ancient tradition.

### **Additional Quotes:**

Nature is of the very essence of Deity (Israel Baal Shem Tov, *Shivkhe Ha-Besht*, 329).

Master of the Universe, grant me the ability to be alone; may it be my custom to go outdoors each day among the trees and grass and all growing things, and there may I be alone, and enter into prayer (Nachman of Bratzlav, *Maggid Sichot*, 48).

On Tu B'shvat/when spring comes/An angel descends/ledger in hand/and enters each bud, each twig, each tree, and all our garden flowers./From town to town, from village to village/the angel makes a winged way/searching the valleys, inspecting the hills/flying over the desert/and returns to heaven./ And when the ledger will be full/of trees and blossoms and shrubs/when the desert is turned into a meadow/and all our land a watered garden/the Messiah will appear (Shin Shalom, modern Israeli poet).

I can contemplate a tree. I can accept it as a picture... I can feel it as a movement... I can assign it to a species and observe it as an instance... I can overcome its uniqueness and form so rigorously that I can recognize it only as an expression of law... I can dissolve it into a number, into a pure relation between numbers, and externalize it. Throughout all of this the tree, the tree remains my object and has its time span, its kind and condition. But it can also happen, if will and grace are joined, that as I contemplate the tree I am drawn into a relation, and the tree ceases to be an It (Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, 57-58).

### **Guiding Principles for the Present and Future**

Comes the question: What relevance has that tradition today? Or, more broadly: As important as is our past relationship with the environment, as a source of both counsel and inspiration, how are we today to develop guiding principles for our present relationship to the environment?

The effort to develop such principles, tied whenever possible to our tradition -- tradition here understood as an amalgam of our texts and our experiences -- is open-ended. Here, we offer seven principles, asking that they be understood as we understand the Four Questions of the Passover Haggadah, not as an authoritative or exhaustive list but as an effort to move us forward on our journey.

### 1) ***Ideals and action, Halacha and fate***

One of the most basic of Jewish principles is that we are required to find ways to translate our ideals into a concrete course of action. Judaism has never been satisfied with rhetorical commitments; the *halacha* comes to give concrete shape to our most valued principles. Such concretization is not without its difficulties and controversies. We may, for example, become so overwhelmed at the complexity of the analysis and the actions it calls forth that we do nothing. How can one person help solve a global crisis?

But, as Rabbi Tarfon reminds us (*Pirke Avot*, 2:21), "We are not obligated to complete the task; neither are we free to abstain from it."

And then there is the problem of translation itself. Take even the most consensual ideal, one from which virtually no one would think to dissent, translate it into an action program, and suddenly there is debate, bickering, sometimes crippling dissensus. That is the real world.

Still, it is in the work of translation that we transform ourselves from *luftmentshen* to *mentshen*. And as difficult as the process is, it also reminds us of one of the central freedoms our faith proclaims: freedom from fate. Through our actions, we can choose life and blessing. It is up to us, even if it is not always or entirely clear which paths lead where. To succumb to inaction because the problems we face are complex, because our ideals are challenging, because there is pain along the way, is to abrogate our partnership with God in creating a better world, to abandon our stewardship along with our ideals, along, finally, with our humanity.

Knowing how arduous the process, how do we muster the courage and energy to begin the translation process? One helpful metaphor might be the image Maimonides discusses in *Hilchot Teshuvah*, in the context of a discussion of preparation for the High Holidays. As one approaches the Days of Awe, he writes, one should consider the entire world as if it were exactly balanced between acts of righteousness and of evil. The very next action you take, therefore, can save or condemn the world.

Imagine, then, if we were to set aside one day a year, perhaps *Tu B'shvat* or a new Jewish holiday created around Earth Day, as an environmental holiday of reflection. In preparation for that day, we would undertake a *heshbon*, a searching account, of the environmental consequences of our actions -- as individuals, as a community, as a nation. We would imagine the world's ecosystem balanced on a scale, would think of our next action in terms of how it might save or condemn. After this time of reflection, we could return, reinvigorated and renewed, to the task of the reformation of behavior -- and we could plan the changes in our educational efforts, in our life-styles, and in our advocacy work that such reformation requires of us. No more than a beginning, but at least a beginning, renewed each year just as we renew ourselves, our relationships, our devotion, each year. Nor need we wait for unanimity in the Jewish community before we take action -- one city's Jewish population, or one synagogue, or even one family could begin the task.

## **2. God's ownership and the terms of our lease**

How do we root our action plan in our Judaic tradition? First of all, by implementing our belief that this is God's world, not ours. To take seriously the notion that we are but leasing the planet from God is to provide ourselves with specific behavioral guidelines. One who leases is called, in general, a *shomer*, usually translated as a guardian. The specific type of lease we have on the Earth is that of a *sho'el*, a borrower. Borrowers may use any part of what they borrow -- but they must ensure that, at the end of the term of the lease, and at any given moment during the lease, the property is at least as valuable as it was at the beginning of the lease (See, e.g. *Shulkhan Arukh, Hoshen Mishpat* 291, 292). This is similar to the principle of *tzon barzel*, an arrangement whereby a husband may use some of his wife's property -- but only on the condition that it is never lowered in value.

Harvest a tree? Not without planting another. Farm the land? Not without allowing it periodic rest and rejuvenation. See to it that any degradation of the environment is accompanied by an equivalent restoration. Evaluate land use on the basis of how it improves or degrades the environment, so that, for example, agricultural practices that prevent soil erosion, crops that are easier on the land, requiring less irrigation and pesticides, and harvesting methods that preserve the integrity of the ecosystem are given strong preference. Attempt in each of our own lives to strike such a balance, conserving energy, supporting environmental causes, planting trees, as a path toward restoration of what we have used or abused.

While such efforts at balance are not required by present *halacha*, we should remember that the *Shulkhan Arukh* acknowledges this standard in regulating leases (See, e.g. *Hoshen Mishpat* 308, 324.).

## **3. The unity of Creation -- inescapable consequences and future generations**

Through our acceptance of the one Creator, we come to realize the unity of all creation. But if we truly believe in the unity and integrity of the universe, especially of the part of creation we know as the Earth, we must begin carefully to consider the consequences of our actions on that world. We need to realize that just as there is no action that is not recorded by *Shomer Yisrael*, the Guardian of Israel, so too is there no action without consequence to God's creation, the biosphere, no "elsewhere" to dump our garbage that will not, eventually, come floating back to haunt us.

Environmental costs were once labeled "externalities" by economists, for a *laissez-faire* doctrine does not weigh them in its working. But we have come to realize that these costs are not "external" at all, that they affect all of us. Since all aspects of our biosphere are woven together, any tearing of the fabric of life, the Zohar's "garment of the *Shekhina*," is likely eventually to begin unraveling humanity's own threads.

In essence, we need to start conducting "environmental impact statements" on our daily lives. What happens when we waste water or energy? How does that affect the biosphere as a whole? Our local ecosystem? Our own health and well-being?

But what if we cannot be certain of those consequences? Is the fact that our behavior *may* be hazardous to the planet's health sufficient to make change in that behavior a moral imperative?

Rabbi Jacob Ettinger (*Responsa Binyan Zion*, 137) proposes that in such circumstances, we ask three questions: First, how "unreasonable" is the hazard, with "unreasonableness" defined in this context as a hazard that any "a well-informed individual would willingly spend money to eliminate." Second, how reversible are the damages if they do occur? And last, how likely is it, in the view of the best experts, that this potential hazard will come to pass?

The question that Rabbi Ettinger does *not* include in this calculus may be even more telling than the three questions he does. He does not propose that we ask anything about the timetable of hazard, about *when* the feared consequence may unfold. That omission is conscious and fully in keeping with our tradition. Our sages, when regulating potential dangers in the public domain, or even in areas that might in the future become part of the public domain, always viewed the fate of future generations with utmost concern, always sought to avoid endangering future generations with the same zeal with which they sought to protect their own. For our covenant is not just "with those standing here with us this day," but also "with those who are not here with us this day," (Deuteronomy 29:13-14), that is, with *all* the future generations.

#### **4. *Tzedek, tzedek tirdof -- the pursuit of seamless justice***

Our actions should also be guided by a desire for seamless justice. The rabbis interpreted the repetition of the word *tzedek*, justice, in Deuteronomy's command "justice, justice shall you pursue" (16:20), as indicating that we must seek justice in both our means and our ends, both when it is to our advantage and when it is not (See, e.g., the commentary of Bakhya Ben Asher on this verse). Ends: No individual, group, or nation, should suffer disproportionately from environmental health hazards or ecosystem degradation. Means: As we work toward repairing ecosystems, solving environment problems, we need to ensure an equitable distribution of the costs of these solutions.

But does not a heightened concern for the health of the environment impose undue burdens on the poorer nations? In conscience, how can we, whose stunning economic development took place during a time of indifference to its environmental consequences, now turn to the poorer nations, seeking so desperately to escape their grinding poverty, and insist that they incorporate into their development plans a sensitivity to the environmental impact of those plans? Can we address the human needs of poorer countries even as we work toward the solution of global environmental problems?

First, we need to realize that long-term solutions to the latter problem often help solve the former. When the environment in third world countries is degraded, no one suffers more immediately or more severely than the poor. Conversely, when the environment is protected in a thoughtful manner, it often provides health and economic benefits to these same poor communities.

Furthermore, one can infer from Jewish sources that wealthier countries should subsidize environmental protection in poorer ones. The *Shulkhan Arukh* discusses the collections of taxes from a town in order to build a wall that benefits everyone in the town. If economic factors are equal, those close to the wall, who derive more protection from it, pay more -- but if economic factors are not equal, those who can afford to pay more do so, for the whole town benefits (*Hoshen Mishpat*, 163:3). By analogy, this entire globe is our "town"; the whole global community benefits when any country protects its environment -- and some countries are much more able to afford such protection than others. The same concern for seamless justice should guide our environmental work in the United States as well. We should pay particular attention to communities that have been disproportionately burdened by environmental health hazards and make sure that they have the necessary resources to turn their environment from a hazard to a source of health and joy.

#### **5. *Stewardship***

Lately, certain followers of "deep ecology" have subjected the notion of stewardship to harsh criticism. They ask, isn't it inherently and arrogantly hierarchical, placing humanity at the center of the universe? Doesn't it assume that the world cannot function without us, when evidence suggests, in fact, that ecosystems frequently work better without human interference? In the end, doesn't stewardship serve as a justification for domination and exploitation?

Understood in context, however, the Jewish notion of stewardship is a moral category, one that speaks of responsibility rather than of unlimited privilege, of a *theocentric* rather than *anthropocentric* universe. In Genesis 2:15, the first humans are commanded "to till and to tend" the Earth. This formulation hints at a kinship with the rest of creation that becomes even clearer when we look at the Hebrew more closely. *Avad* means not only to till, or even to work in a more general sense; it means also, and more powerfully, to serve or to participate in worship of the Divine. Thus, our "tilling" is more properly understood as service to God's Earth, a service that is not only a profound responsibility but a direct and critical part of our connection with and worship of God as well. And *shamar*, or "tend," means not only to tend, but more commonly, to guard or to watch over. What these meanings have in common is that the *shomrim* guard property that does not *belong* to them, but that is *entrusted* to them.

Good *shomrim* fulfill that trust, tending to the needs of that which they steward before tending to their own (see *Berakhot* 40a for examples). And all humans can indeed live in such a harmony with that which we serve and tend. But we also have the capacity -- some might say the tendency -- to destroy, merely by stepping outside the ordained relationship that assigns us stewardship rather than raw domination.

The urge to such domination, however, not only violates the insights and commands of our tradition, a tradition that goes so far as to interpret the very words "rule" and "subdue," in Genesis 1:26 and 1:28, as signifying limited stewardship (see, e.g., *Yevamot* 65b, *Genesis Rabbah* 8:12 and the commentaries of Rashi and Sforno on these verses.). It is also, in a word, stupid. For it is that urge, unencumbered by religious sensibility, unencumbered by responsibility for future generations, unencumbered by concern for our neighbors, that hastens the destruction of the very world we seek to master.

## **6. Communal responsibilities vs. individual rights**

The Jewish tradition has a strong communal orientation, one that has limited individual rights by placing them within the context of and subordinating them to communal responsibilities. For the good of the community, even "private property" could be taken, under the principle of *hefker bet din hefker*, literally, "what the court declares ownerless is ownerless," the Mishnaic version of "eminent domain." More generally, a community could both coerce its residents to take positive actions for the good of the community and prohibit them from actions held to be deleterious to the community. This prohibition went so far, for example, as to enable residents of a courtyard or sealed alley generally to prohibit any profession (excluding the teaching of Torah) from being performed in that area if it threatened, because of noise or noxious odors, to reduce the quality of life for the residents (See *Shulkhan Arukh*, *Hoshen Mishpat* 231:20, 161, 162, and 156 for a series of such regulations).

Such restrictions were even more stringent if a health hazard was suspected. In such cases, even if it could be demonstrated that a person's very livelihood might be lost, that bankruptcy might ensue, the practice of the endangering profession could nonetheless be prohibited. The general rule, set down by the Ribash, is that "a person is not permitted to save himself from injury by causing injury to his neighbor" (*Responsa*: 196).

What moral lessons can be inferred from these situations and applied to our contemporary global crisis? If we view the whole globe as a large community, whose citizens are as bound together through the connections of the biosphere as are residents of a courtyard, and if we factor in the undeniable health hazards of pollution, it can be argued that the community has the right, perhaps even the duty, to prohibit actions that degrade the environment -- even when such prohibition imposes significant costs on the actors.

What, then, are our communal responsibilities to the environment? In general, even when human activity requires some use of, and consequent damage to, natural resources, decisions should be made in favor of the least destructive method feasible (See, e.g., *Bava Kamma* 91b). A minority opinion in *Shabbat* 140b goes even further. According to this minority view,

when an individual chooses one type of food over another merely because of preference and not out of need, and when the "preferred" food is more costly to the environment, that individual is "wasting," and thus violating *bal tashchit* (the prohibition against waste), a violation that the community is entitled to prohibit. Perhaps it has come time to follow this minority opinion, to prohibit, for example, environmentally costly packaging that serves no purpose other than "convenience," or to limit consumption deemed extravagant by the community.

Many recent writers have begun to elaborate this into a principle they call "eco-kashrut," a set of guidelines for personal consumption. These guidelines ask questions such as: are fur coats "kosher?" What about styrofoam, or gas-guzzling autos? (See "The Spiritual Ecology of Kashrut" by Rabbi Weintraub in this section for an example of such thinking.)

### **7. Societal goals -- Sabbath Peace**

Our final guiding principle speaks in the broadest terms, as a reminder that all the while we are engaged in detailed policy debates and behavioral adjustments, we ought not, dare not, lose sight of our ultimate goal. How may that goal be defined? At the risk of intimidating the reader, is it really not time for us to speak candidly of the tension between our lives as consumers and our lives as fully human beings -- a little lower than the angels, if you will? And is it not time for us to seek, perhaps through our concern for the environment, a redirection of our own purposes and perceptions? Yes, the environment is at stake; so, also, are we.

One may prefer this economic theory or that, one may take what view one wishes of the question of "small is good" vs. "bigger is better." On virtually any reading, we in the industrialized world have allowed our appetites to outrun both our resources and our humanity (see *Pirke Avot* 2:7, 4:1, 4:21 and Maimonides' frequent teachings on the "golden mean," especially his *Eight Chapters*, for some of the many examples of calls for moderation in our tradition.). The acquisition of things becomes the measure of all value, and we are thereby diminished. More: In worshiping the idol of consumption, we do damage to the environment. More still: We do damage to our souls, to a society that might know *shalom*, might know contentment. And we have been given the first step to that *shalom* through Shabbat itself. With the pause of Shabbat, we become, as we read in Exodus (31:17), "re-ensouled" (*va-yinafash*). For the institution of Shabbat, of sacred self-imposed limits, of not working to create but of enjoying creation just as it is, helps bring us closer to peace and contentment.

Say "contentment," and some will think the very word subversive, for it suggests an end to acquisition. But this is neither an argument for asceticism nor even a deprecation of material goods. Our sages did not condemn materialism. Indeed, they wrote that without bread, there can be no Torah (*Pirke Avot* 3:21). But they were acutely aware, at the same time, of the need for balance, a balance we scarcely any longer recognize. Humankind does not, after all, live by bread alone.