



## A Jewish Perspective on Sustainable Development

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*"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! For your sake I created them all. See to it you do not spoil and destroy My world; for if you do, there will be no one else to repair it." -- Kohelet R. 7:13*

Today, after the end of the Cold War, we are less concerned that the world will end through sudden nuclear holocaust. Sudden destruction is easy to fear and can easily motivate us. But destruction can come in other forms: slow and subtle. Through over-consumption of the earth's resources, we are destroying God's works not through war but through the normal activities of modern life. As Jews we must understand how this process is occurring and call upon our best ideas and values to produce a Jewish version of what is called "sustainable development."

At the close of the Twentieth Century, the nations of the world are struggling to develop a vision for a future much less plagued by the ills of industrial society than we are at present. The growth of human population and the increase in human consumption of natural resources have caused alarming degradation of the biosphere: the thinning of the protective ozone layer, global warming, the loss of biodiversity, and the increase of toxins in the earth, air and water. And while human consumption continues to grow, there has been no major alleviation of human poverty. The major developed countries of the Northern Hemisphere have one-fifth of the world's population while producing and consuming four-fifths of the world's resources. In this context, the international community strives to develop a strategy to maintain the many benefits of industrial development and bring all of the world's people out of poverty while dramatically reducing the unwanted byproducts of modernity.

Most of the visions for addressing this complex of ills come under the rubric of "sustainable development," a basic concept which embodies ethical values which are core to our Jewish tradition:

**Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.**

It contains within it two key concepts: the concept of "needs," in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs. This broad conception is widely embraced. Yet there are many

"See my works, how fine and excellent they are! All that I created, I created for you. Reflect on this, and do not corrupt or desolate my world; for if you do, there will be no one to repair it after you."

*Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13*

routes to achieving this goal -- and critical ethical issues involved, about which the Jewish tradition has much to say.

In 1992, the nations of the world gathered in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, for the 1992 Earth Summit (formally called the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, or UNCED) to develop *Agenda 21*, a comprehensive document calling for binding agreements for international action to achieve sustainable development. As a result of *Agenda 21*, President Clinton in 1993 created the President's Council on Sustainable Development which offered the following in its 1996 vision statement: "A sustainable United States will have a growing economy that provides equitable opportunities for satisfying livelihoods and a safe, healthy, high quality of life for current and future generations."

What has caused the idea of "sustainable development" to become such a widely accepted framework for environmental policy? It attempts to deal with several important socio-economic dynamics by bringing together all sectors of society -- government, business, and public advocacy groups -- to formulate environmental and development policy. A wide variety of goals, policies, and strategies -- emerging from many different governmental and non-governmental sources -- are defined as "sustainable development." In some of its more popular articulations among governmental and business leaders, sustainable development is conceived as redressing the imbalance of wealth between developed and developing nations without requiring the developed world to significantly lessen its level of material comfort. It seeks to achieve a developed nation standard of living in developing nations without compromising the ecological health of the earth -- today, and for future generations.

Is this a plausible goal? Is it possible that the earth can sustain the twelve billion people expected by the middle of the next century at even half of the current level of consumption in the developed nations? While the overall concept of sustainable development is surely worthy, prevailing articulations of it are often unrealistic.

According to a report by the World Watch Institute called *State of the World 1997*, since the Earth Summit in 1992 the earth's population has grown by 450 million people, annual emissions of greenhouse gases have continued to climb, large tracts of old-growth forest have been cleared, wetlands and coral reefs have declined and thousands of species of plants and animals have become extinct. In addition, despite growing economies in the developed countries, an estimated 1.3 billion people living in developing countries are in such poverty that they do not have adequate food or shelter.

While progress has been made on specific environmental problems such as the reduction of ozone destroying gases, there has been a failure by the world's governments to integrate environmental and economic policy. International agencies and programs which were expected to promote sustainable development have seen their budgets cut. While 117 nations had, by 1996, formed national commissions devoted to developing national sustainable development programs, most of the reports produced have had little substance and have produced few tangible results.

### **What should be the Jewish community's response to sustainable development?**

To date there has been no comprehensive community response. The rest of this essay will suggest some theological values and their ethical corollaries upon which we may build a Jewish vision of sustainable development.

Sustainable development has two ethical obligations in time and space: one horizontal and one vertical. The horizontal obligation is to all humans and to all life living in the present: We must live equitably within the boundaries of what the earth can sustain. The vertical obligation is to extend that process into the future: In other words, a commitment to generations of humans and non-humans still unborn.

These ethical obligations suggest the following Jewish theological assumptions upon which we can build a Jewish response to sustainable development. First of all, our tradition holds that the earth and all it contains is a creation of God. This world was not brought into being by human endeavor, nor does it exist only for humans (cf. Maimonides *Guide*, 456). For whatever reason, God created earth and the life upon it; it all belongs to God, and we are temporary dwellers upon this planet (cf. I Chronicles 29:11-15). Viewing this idea from the perspective of geological time, we are, in fact, latecomers to the world. The speeches of God to Job out of the whirlwind (chapters 38-41) remind us that we are not the only objects of God's concern.

Secondly, creation has an order, a *seder b'reshit*. This order is, according to classical texts such as Psalm 148, hierarchically structured with its focus towards God. But it is also horizontally structured to remind us of the interdependence of all life. This is the emphasis that we should now give this concept: That we are united with all life in a community of worshippers of God. Our tradition has also warned us against the disruption of this order. We, as creatures with free will, are the only elements of the order that can do this. The result of our not respecting this order can be a return to primordial chaos.

The idea that we are created in the image of God also comes into play. While this idea shows that we have been given a special role in the order of creation, it is not a license for uncontrolled or selfish abuse. The *Torah* calls on us to be wise stewards of creation because, if not, we could face destructive consequences. And it also calls upon us to respect every other human being as also being created in the divine image.

Finally, the idea that God makes covenantal commitments becomes an important concept here. From God's perspective, there are a series of covenants: With all life in Genesis 9:8-17; with humanity in Genesis 1:28-30; and with Israel in Exodus 20; etc. These covenants are not limited in time -- they exist throughout the generations (Deut. 30:14-15).

Two ethical values can reflect these theological assumptions: humility and moderation. Humility calls upon us to recognize our place in the order of creation. "Why were human beings created last in the order of Creation?...So they should not grow proud, for one can say to them, 'The gnat came before you in the Creation!'" (Sanhedrin 38a & Gen. R. 8:1). God called to Job from out of the whirlwind, "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations?" (Job 38:4) Indeed, all of God's speeches to Job in chapters 38-41 raise Job's vision from an anthropocentric world view to an understanding that Creation does not exist for humanity alone. As we learn in Psalm 104, God's concern is for the whole of life. While we do have the power to manipulate Creation, that power must be exercised carefully since we are dependant upon and interconnected to the rest of Creation. "Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai said: Three things are equal in importance: earth, humans and rain. Rabbi Levi be Hiyata said: And these three each consist of three letters to teach that without earth, there is no rain and without rain earth cannot endure; while without either, humans cannot exist." (Gen. R. 13:3) Humility calls upon us to understand that our actions have long term consequences upon the earth, to "tread lightly upon the earth," and not to act out of the arrogance of power. Humility also means that we understand that justice requires a fairer distribution of resources amongst humanity.

Moderation implies a self limitation on our consumption. We learn moderation from the rabbinic concept of *Bal Tashchit*. Our tradition teaches us not to commit wanton destruction -- to be careful about what we consume, not to consume more than we need, and not to waste what we have without regard for other people or other life. Yet moderation is not only expressed as a prohibition but also as positive value that can enhance our appreciation of life. "Who is rich? One who is happy with his portion." (*Pirkei Avot* 4:1) One of the great Jewish texts on moderation is the *Eight Chapters* of Maimonides, an introduction to his commentary to *Pirkei Avot*. Chapter 4 describes the path of moderation between two extremes as the definition of virtue. And while Maimonides was especially concerned with showing how extreme asceticism is not a virtue in itself but only as a means to an end, we can use his basic principle of understanding how destructive extreme behavior can be to the human psyche. Today, undoubtedly, Maimonides would decry our rampant consumerism as unhealthy

extravagance. While our tradition has never exalted poverty and has always seen material welfare as a blessing and a reward from God, it can nonetheless be argued that unlimited acquisition of wealth is not considered a virtue. Such a course of life can pervert our spiritual values. Rashi, in his commentary to Num. 32:16, speaks disapprovingly of how the tribes of Gad and Reuben had more concern for their cattle and wealth than their children. During the middle ages, many Jewish communities had sumptuary laws which included limitations upon extravagance in dress and as well as limitations on the amount of spending at a *brit milah* or a wedding.

Those of us who live in the developed countries consume as much as twenty average people in India or Mexico. We also consume roughly twice as much as Europeans do, though their living standards are quite comparable. Though our numbers as Jews are not great, because of the consumption patterns of the countries in which many of us live, we constitute significant consumers from an environmental perspective. Thus the Jewish population of six million in North America, for example, which is one-thousandth of the world's population, probably consumes more like one hundredth of the world's resources -- making our "consumption population" more like 60 million. It is not ecologically possible for everyone on Earth to consume like North Americans. Thus we must learn to exercise care in our consumption if we wish our lives to conform to our tradition's call for justice and if we wish to maintain any semblance of the life we now lead for future generations of Jews.

In this season of awe and thanksgiving, *Sukkot* has become a new symbol of our connection to the earth. We call the festival *Zman Simchatynu*, the time of our joy, because we celebrate the abundance of God's gifts to us. Sitting in a *Sukkah* is a powerful and joyful way to reestablish our links to the natural world. But we should also remember that the *Sukkah* is also a symbol of humility, a reminder that we come from a wandering people of little wealth and no land. Our ancestors celebrated life in a state that we would consider today to be abject poverty. The *Sukkah* reminds us that they felt that life was worth celebrating, that God can be thanked in a humble hut.

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