

Judaism responds to the environmental crisis

We live in the midst of a massive anthropogenic ecological crisis. While science provides us with accurate information about the scope and depth of the crisis, it has failed to mobilize humanity to act. World religions must join the global scientific and political discourse about how to respond to this crisis because religions provide a moral lens through which humans view worldly challenges, and hence can mobilize people to action. Judaism, although a numerically small religious tradition, has played a profound role in shaping Western attitudes toward nature. Although some have charged that the Bible is responsible for the ecological crisis because it commands humanity “to be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth and subdue it, have dominion over [...] every living thing” (Genesis 1:28), it is mistaken to think that the Bible gives humanity license to exploit the Earth’s resources. Rather, the Bible commands humanity “to till and protect” the Earth (Genesis 2:15), and the Jewish tradition spells out how to behave responsibly toward the natural world so that the Earth will remain fecund. The Bible, and the rabbinic tradition that elaborated it, articulate an environmental ethics of responsibility: human beings are responsible for the well-being of the created world and are responsible to God for their actions.

Scripture spells out how humans should treat land, water, plants, animals and other humans so as to protect the integrity and fecundity of God’s created world. For example, Scripture commands giving to God the first portion of the land’s yield so as to ensure the land’s continuing fertility and the farmer’s sustenance and prosperity. Scripture also recognizes the goodness of biodiversity and prohibits the mixing of

different kinds of species of plants, fruit trees, fish, birds and land animals (Leviticus 19:19). Scripture puts limits on human consumption of animals by differentiating between “clean” and “unclean” animals, thereby greatly reducing human impact on the animal kingdom. Scripture also shows concern with the perpetuation of the life of non-human animals, and commands humans to treat animals (especially domestic animals) with compassion and care (Deuteronomy 22:6–7). After the canonization of the Bible, rabbinic Judaism further elaborated biblical environmental legislation. For example, the biblical prohibition on destruction of fruit-bearing trees in time of siege (Deuteronomy 20:19) was interpreted very broadly to prohibit all sorts of wanton destruction of nature. Under the principle of ‘Do Not Destroy’ (*bal tashchit*) rabbinic Judaism forbids cutting off water supplies to trees; overgrazing; unjustifiably killing animals or feeding them noxious food; hunting animals for sport; species extinction and the destruction of cultivated plant varieties; pollution of air and water; overconsumption of anything; and the squandering of mineral and other resources.

Similarly, on the basis of Deuteronomy 22:6 the rabbis prohibited the affliction of needless suffering on animals (*tza’ar ba’aley hayyim*) on the grounds that cruelty toward animals leads to other forms of cruelty. Although rabbinic ethics is anthropocentric, the rabbis often presented animals as moral exemplars and recognized special animals as “animals of the righteous,” who live in perfect harmony with their Creator. While the rabbis were not environmentalists *per se*, rabbinic ethics is environmentally meaningful: virtues such as humility, modesty, moderation,

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self-control, generosity and benevolence are conducive to proper treatment of the environment, whereas vices such as arrogance, greed, or profligacy are environmentally harmful.

The most distinctive feature of Jewish environmental ethics is the causal connection it sees as holding between the moral quality of human life and the vitality of God’s Creation. This insight is evident in the biblical laws of the Sabbatical year (*Shemittah*) which extend Sabbath rest to the Earth and to domestic animals. During the Sabbatical year it is forbidden to plant, cultivate or harvest grain, fruit or vegetables; in the sixth year it is forbidden to plant in order to harvest during the seventh year. Crops that grow untended are not to be harvested by the landlord and should be left ownerless for all to share – including the poor and animals. On the seventh year, debts contracted by fellow countrymen are to be remitted. In other words, Judaic social justice is intrinsically ecological, and ecological justice requires the just treatment of human beings. The rabbis both expanded the laws of the Sabbatical years and changed it to adapt Judaic life to the changing socio-economic situation in the Land of Israel under Roman control. After the loss of Jewish sovereignty, the Land of Israel was increasingly viewed as a Holy Land, and the laws of *Shemittah* became even more detailed and numerous, even though they were not applicable to Jewish life in the Diaspora. When modern Zionism revived Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel, an intense debate about the validity of the ancient laws engulfed world Jewry. Today there are religious Jews who practise it, and the environmentally minded among them argue that the principle of sabbatical

year should be adopted by all as a global response to the environmental crisis.

Since the 1970s, Jewish environmentalism has emerged as a distinctive voice within contemporary Judaism. In the Diaspora, where Jews are a tiny minority, Jewish environmentalism is engaged in the recovery, retrieval and reconstruction of the Jewish tradition in light of the values and attitudes of contemporary environmentalism. Jewish environmentalism has generated eco-theology that draws on many intellectual traditions, both Jewish (*e.g.* Kabbalah and Hasidism) and non-Jewish (*e.g.* shamanism, Buddhism, ecofeminism and process theology). Jewish environmentalism has also transformed communal practices, making Jewish institutions more environmentally aware and actively engaged in environmental advocacy (*e.g.* through recycling, alternative energy use, waste reduction and urban farming). A key value that provides coherence to numerous environmental programmes in Judaism is *Eco-Kashrut* – the Eco-Kosher movement – according to which food is ritually unclean if produced by the unjust exploitation of people or the environment. The New Jewish Food Movement and numerous Jewish environmental organizations thus continue the Judaic tradition of linking ecojustice with social justice. In the State of Israel, where Jews are the majority, secular environmental legislation is implemented on municipal and governmental levels but it is not justified by appeal to Judaism. However, some Israeli environmental organizations do ground their activism in religious sources and values. Whether religious or secular, Jewish environmentalists are actively responding to the environmental crisis through advocacy, education and legislation. ■

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