

The Jewish ‘Earth Day’

By: Candace Nachman

Nearly 38 years ago, the first Earth Day was observed in the United States. Twenty million people, 2,000 colleges and universities, 10,000 grammar and high schools and 1,000 communities mobilized for the first nationwide demonstrations on environmental problems. The response was nothing short of remarkable, and the modern American environmental movement began.

Long before the beginning of the environmental movement, Torah Judaism recognized our moral and ethical obligation to protect the Earth. On Tu b'Shevat, the New Year of the Trees, let's look at some of the Jewish teachings related to the environment.

The most basic understanding of this obligation comes from the fact that G-d created the universe. Hashem is the one who created all the flora and fauna that we use for our existence. In Bereshit chapter 2 verse 15, it states, "G-d took the man and placed him in the Garden of Eden to work it and watch it." This is our first clue that the land is not ours. The Torah uses the word shamra from the root of shomer to watch or to guard. We are merely leasing this land from G-d. The specific type of lease we have on the Earth is that of a sho'el, a borrower.

According to the Shulkhan Aruch, 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 (See, e.g. Shulkhan Arukh, Hoshen Mishpat 291, 292). The modern day sustainability criterion used in natural resource management and economics follows very closely with the idea first put forth by the Rabbis. The modern criterion requires that resource use by any generation should not exceed a level that would prevent future generations from achieving a level of well-being at least as great. Environmental protection is required so as not to destroy G-d's Earth.

The rabbis of the mishnaic and Talmudic era understood Hashem's role in providing us with nature's wonders. They developed blessings for seeing a rainbow, upon experiencing a natural disaster, at the sight of a mountain, or hearing a clash of thunder. The Talmudic sages are the ones who first added the ritual of Kiddush Levanah, a blessing for the renewal of the moon. All this once again reaffirms the notation that Judaism's worldview is theocentric and not anthropocentric.

Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai said, three things are of equal importance: earth, humans, and rain. Rabbi Levi ben Hiyyata 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). We exist in a very intricate balance with the Earth. Any disturbances cause major upsets as can be seen in today's world. Category 4 and 5 storms have doubled in the last 30 years, and according to the NOAA Weather Service, this cycle of severe storms is predicted to continue for many years to come.

A healthy environment in turn allows for healthy humans. The great sage Maimonides, who was also a physician, saw the ill effects environmental degradation could have on human health, and he proposed regulations to counter them in his Treatise on Asthma. Rabbi Yitzhak ben Sheshet of the early fourteenth century wrote responsa on the topic of noise pollution and its effects on urban dwellers. These are all topics which can be seen in environmental court cases in this country over the last century.

We are losing Earth's greatest biological treasures just as we are beginning to appreciate their true value. Rainforests once covered 14% of the earth's land surface; now they cover a mere 6% and experts estimate that the last remaining rainforests could be consumed in less than 40 years. Experts estimate that we are losing 137 plant, animal and insect species every single day due to rainforest deforestation. That equates to 50,000 species a year. As the rainforest species disappear, so do many possible cures for life-threatening diseases. Currently, 121 prescription drugs sold worldwide come from plant-derived sources. While 25% of Western pharmaceuticals are derived from rainforest ingredients, less than 1% of these tropical trees and plants have been tested by scientists (<http://www.rain-tree.com/facts.htm>).

We cannot allow this destruction to continue. And, more importantly, we cannot sit back and do nothing to change our current path. I would like to share a midrash from Parashat Noach with you. "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 Tankhuma, Parashat Noach). We hear and see the warnings of destruction today-global warming, overfishing, drought and famine-yet we do not fight for change. We ensure that we are alright, that we have enough to eat and that our homes are safe from the storm, and then call it a day. In this way we are no different from Noah.

The task of repairing the environment and returning it to a completely healthy state certainly cannot be achieved overnight. However, this should not be a free pass to do nothing. As Rabbi Tarfon says, "We are not obligated to complete the task; neither are we free to abstain from it" (Pirke Avot, 2:21). But this is not an easy task ahead of us. So where do we begin? In Hilchot Teshuva, Maimonides states the following regarding preparing for the High Holidays: "As one approaches the Days of Awe, one should consider the entire world as if it were exactly balanced between acts of righteousness and evil. The very next action you take, therefore, can save or condemn the world."

Only buy as much as you need. Don't waste. Reuse and recycle the products you do buy. Turn off lights and appliances when you are not using them. Educate yourself on the

issues by reading books and articles and watching documentaries. Then, take what you learn and tell it to others. On a bigger scale, you can commit to supporting a project that is working to improve life in a place suffering from poverty and environmental degradation. Another option is to become an environmental vegetarian or environmentally conscious consumer. More than 70% of the grain grown in the US goes to feed livestock. The livestock flesh, in turn, will feed far fewer people than the feed that went into it. If all the grain grown for livestock were consumed directly by people, it would feed five times as many people as it does when fed to animals (S.V. Tahl). Only buy sustainable seafood. Do not consume species of fish that are overexploited. Support organic farms. Their crop production is far less harmful to the environment.

I am not suggesting that you can change the world tomorrow, and I certainly do not want anyone to believe that you must go the road alone. Judaism is a religion based on community. We come together for a bris when a boy is born. We need a minyan to pray. Even in death we come together as a community to console the mourners. Why then can we not make protecting the environment a communal Jewish effort as well?

As it says in Midrash Kohelet Rabbah: "When G-d created the first human beings, G-d 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 that you do not spoil and destroy My world; for if you do, there will be no one else to repair it.'"

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This article is printed as part of the Canfei Nesharim's Sixth Annual Tu b'Shevat Learning Campaign. Canfei Nesharim provides Torah-based resources about the importance of protecting the environment, and maintains a full resource library of articles, programs, and suggested actions at www.canfeinesharim.org.