



# ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

In 1967, historian Lynn White contended that Biblical theology stood at the root of the ecological crisis. Citing G-d's command to "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule... every living creature that moves on the ground" (Bereishit 1:28), White asserted that this mindset prioritized human needs and encouraged the exploitation of the natural world. Many environmentalists suggested alternative world-views that advocated "biocentrism," which promoted egalitarian claims to all living organisms – human, animal or plant.

Many Jewish (and Christian) thinkers retorted that the Biblical attitude to the environment, while decidedly anthropocentric, was much more nuanced and accountable. They further asserted that anti-religious claims would only harm the environmental agenda since the Biblical view imposed many on humans many caretaking responsibilities for the planet.

The Biblical view of nature assuredly differs greatly from ancient mythologies which, as Umberto Cassuto noted, identified different parts of the universe with various deities. In contrast, the Bible promotes the idea that G-d transcends nature and has dominion over all of its resources. This stature gives G-d the power to grant humans their unique traits as well as entitlements to the world.

Yet as Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik argued, a careful read of the Creation story reveals that Biblical theology also sees humans as members of the organic world, bearing important similarities to animals and plants. Humans have

unique privileges, but also the responsibilities of stewardship over the Earth, as exemplified by the command to "work and preserve" life within the Garden of Eden (Bereishit 2:15). Rabbi Baruch HaLevi Epstein understood this verse as an imperative to toil the Earth and benefit from its resources, but also to contribute back to its preservation. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch viewed it as a mandate to use natural resources wisely, toward their role in the broader service of G-d performed in the universe. Indeed, a survey of Jewish medieval interpretations of Bereishit by Professor Jeremy Cohen found not a single commentary that displayed a dispensation for the Earth's exploitation or destruction.

Jewish law backs this nuanced theological worldview, with an attempt to help humans understand their duty to toil the Earth responsibly and regulate their shared use of its resources. The Bible, for example, ordains that agricultural lands lie fallow every seventh year not only to provide rest for workers (Shemot 23:12) but also to remind us that G-d is the Master of the Earth. The Sages ordained several civic decrees intended to preserve the quality of drinking water, the sharing of public space, the proper disposal of waste and plumbing, and the regulation of noise and air pollution.

While these commandments and regulations provide limited assistance in determining 21st-century environmental policies, they teach basic values regarding the necessity of preventing human productivity from becoming destructive.

The most significant Biblical commandment regarding the conservation of natural resources stems from a directive regarding wartime behavior. When laying siege to a city, we are commanded not to destroy fruit-bearing trees: "You must not destroy its trees... Are trees of the field human to withdraw before you into the besieged city?" (Devarim 20:19-20). The Sages derived from these verses a general prohibition of wanton destructive behavior, colloquially known as *bal tashchit*. Jewish law regularly permitted the consumption of resources when it was necessary or beneficial for human needs. Yet it nonetheless provided a serious reminder that even when the consumption of a resource is beneficial, its use must be balanced with the broader value of preserving our resources for the next generations.

Jewish environmental ethics thus seeks to provide an antidote to what conservative philosopher Roger Scruton has deemed the greatest cause of environmental degradation – "the propensity of human beings to take the benefit and to leave the costs to someone else, preferably someone far away in space or time, whose protests can be safely ignored." It rests upon a mandate from G-d to both work and preserve the Earth while demanding intergenerational responsibilities – between those who are living, those who are dead and those who are yet to be born.

**Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Brody** is the co-Dean of the Tikvah Online Academy, a columnist at the Jerusalem Post, and the author of the award-winning *A Guide to the Complex: Contemporary Halakhic Debates*.