



SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT  
IN JUDAISM

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*"One generation goes, another comes, and the earth remains forever..."*  
(Eccles. 1:4)

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Sustainability in Jewish Sources

Renewed Jewish Concern with  
Sustainability

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**Cover:** Tree of Knowledge, section of a wall mosaic by Lev Syrkin, entitled *Day and Night in the Garden of Eden* (With permission of the artist)



*The Lord God took the man and placed him in the Garden of Eden, to till it and tend it.*

(Genesis 2:15)

*When the Holy One Blessed Be He created the first man, He took him and warned him about all the trees in the Garden of Eden, saying: 'See My works, see how beautiful and perfect they are, and all I created – I created for you. Beware lest you spoil and destroy my world, for if you will spoil it, there is no one to repair it after you.'*

(Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13)

Twenty years after the historic assembly of world leaders, in Stockholm, for the Conference on the Human Environment, world leaders met once again, in Rio de Janeiro, in 1992. There they decided on Agenda 21: The Earth Summit – Strategy to Save Our Planet. There, too, the term "Sustainable Development" became part of the mainstream of world debate. In this congress, the participants expressed their fear of the damage caused to the environment by economies racing in the direction of enrichment and understood that what is done by one part of the world influences other parts; they resolved that economic activity must be subject to continuous evaluation regarding the influence of such activity on the environment. It became clear that a healthy environment and a healthy economy are not parallel tracks and that the world must enact "sustainable development" if it wishes to remain intact.

Daniel Sitarz, editor of the official publication of Agenda 21, explains that basically "the concept of Sustainable Development deals with two central questions. First, is it possible to increase the basic standard of living of the world's expanding population, without unnecessarily depleting our finite natural resources? And second: can humanity collectively step back from the brink of environmental collapse and, at the same time, lift its poorest members up to the level of basic human health and dignity?"





Agenda 21 also states its concern for future generations in the preamble: "Agenda 21 addresses the pressing problems of today and also aims at preparing the world for the challenges of the next century".

"Sustainability" and "Sustainable Development" are relatively recent terms, yet these issues have been a part of Jewish thought and Jewish legislation for millennia. Though sustainability lies at the basis of Jewish thought, no focused environmental Jewish Codex has ever been written. The logical reason is that world Jewry has been confronted by hostile powers for the past 2000 years, and Judaism had to deal with issues of survival rather than with environmental ones. Moreover, since most of the laws relating to the physical environment of the Land of Israel were not relevant in the Diaspora, Jewish environmental legislation and jurisprudence did not develop. The commandments and laws dealt with by the Jewish sages were mainly of a "religious" character (*Shabbat* – the Jewish Sabbath, *Kashrut* – the dietary laws, etc.). It can hardly be expected of a nation living in continuous exile, to understand the concept of "Not In My Backyard"; the backyard was simply not theirs to care for. Even today, 54 years after the establishment of the State of Israel, orthodox Jewry in the country has not yet understood that sustainability is a very basic part of Jewish thought and law. Environmental awareness is still very low on the agenda of the orthodox and ultra-orthodox communities in Israel. These communities are, however, beginning to understand that environmental awareness is an innate part of Judaism.

Jewish classical legal writings, such as the Babylonian *Talmud* (Commentaries on the Oral Law) did not deal with many of the laws relevant to the Land of Israel. Thus, a part of the *Mishna* (Oral Law), *Seder Zeraim*, was almost not contemplated in the Babylonian *Talmud*

and also not in later books of Jewish law, which were based on the Babylonian *Talmud*. In fact, the "Israeli brother" of the Babylonian *Talmud*, the Jerusalem *Talmud*, does examine issues that deal with the physical environment of the Land of Israel. On this source, Maimonides (1135 - 1204) based the laws of *Shmitta* and Jubilee Year (the Land Sabbatical and the *yovel* year after seven Sabbaticals) in the first codex of Jewish law ever written, the *Mishne Torah*.

The global rise in environmental awareness from the 1960's onwards, also strengthened awareness in Israel. Environmental crises, such as the construction of the Trans-Israel Highway, awakened the orthodox community to ask, for the first time, *Halachic* (Jewish Law) environmental questions. This led to the publication of several books on Jewish attitudes, law and thought regarding environmental issues. *Environment – philosophical and legal aspects in Jewish sources* (1993) was the first of these books and is, perhaps, the most methodical. It was written by Prof. Nachum Rakover, then Deputy Attorney-General and recipient of the Israel Prize for Rabbinical Literature. A second book, *Judaism, Environmentalism and the Environment – Mapping and Analysis* by Dr. Manfred Gerstenfeld, was published in 1998. This book deals more specifically with the interaction between Jewry and the environment.





## SUSTAINABILITY IN JEWISH SOURCES

**Genesis** (*Bereshit*), the first book of the Bible, is considered by many to be the book of Mythology of the Nation of Israel. The Sages teach us, however, that the book of Genesis is the ethical basis for the laws which follow in the next four books of the Pentateuch.

The *Midrash* (commentary) of Rabbi Acha (*Bereshit Rabbah*, chapter 60, paragraph 8), which relates to the length of the biblical story about the conversation of Eliezer, servant of Abraham, with the parents of Rebecca, as compared to the short laconic language of commandments of the utmost importance, stresses the importance of the book of Genesis as an outline for the moral (ethical) laws found in the next books.

After the description of the creation, the book of Genesis deals with the relationship between Man and his Creator, and emphasizes that the Creator instructed the first man "to till it" – to develop the land and the environment in which he has been placed – but also "to tend it" – not to overexploit it. In an unequivocal manner, the Creator warns Man that he will be responsible for his deeds, i.e. negative action – negative result, "for if you spoil it, there is no one to repair it after you". In modern terms we could say that the Creator instructed his creatures to develop the world subject to Sustainable Development; to develop the environment by natural resources, while preserving them and preventing their destruction.

This *Midrash*, which deals with the new world just created and given to the first man, who "will rule with strength" (Genesis 1:26), is important for understanding the Jewish ethical attitude towards Sustainable Development.

Rabbi Akiva Wolff, former director of research of the Center for Judaism and the Environment, states in an article devoted to the questions of Judaism and Sustainability that "this *midrash* shows remarkable foresight – having been recorded long before mankind had the technological prowess to seriously impact the entire planet. As this *midrash* illustrates, Judaism believes

that the natural world was created for man's benefit, and that, concurrently, man must exercise self-restraint in his exploitation of these resources."

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Ha'Cohen Kook (Chief Rabbi of Eretz Israel, 1921 – 35), in his well known article "Vision of Vegetarianism and Peace" (*Chazon Hatzimchonut Veha-shalom*), also emphasizes that ruling over god's creatures is by no means intended as license for their destruction. "No rational person can doubt that the Bible, when it commands people to 'rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky and all living things that move on the earth', does not envisage a cruel ruler who exploits his people for his own desires – God forbid that such a detestable law of slavery (be attributed to God) who 'is good to all, and his tender care rests upon all his creatures'" (Psalms 145:9)

The above quotes demonstrate that the Jewish sages and philosophers understood the possibilities of sustainable development. Earth is clearly given to man to "rule", but such rule should not be cruel. Man is also warned that he will suffer the results of his









own action: *Beware lest you spoil and destroy my world, for if you will spoil it, there is no one to repair it after you.*

**B**ut where, in Jewish thought, can we find the concept of responsibility for future generations, which is one of the principles of Agenda 21?

**R**abbi Wolff cites a *Midrash* that deals with this issue. It appears in the *Talmudic* tractate *Ta'anit*, which relates the story of Honi *hame'agel* (Honi the circle-maker): *One day as Honi was walking along he saw a man planting a carob tree. Honi asked him "how many years until it will bear fruit"? The man answered: "not for seventy years". Honi asked him, "do you really believe you'll live another seventy years?" The man answered: "I found this world provided with carob trees, and as my ancestors planted them for me, so I too plant them for my descendants."*

**"T**he story of Honi illustrates what would today be called "sustainable" thinking – and acting – in order to provide for future generations," concludes Wolff.

**A**genda 21 deals with sustainability in a variety of fields, such as agriculture and finance. It states that "in promoting sustainable agriculture and rural development, the commitment of national governments and the support of the international community are crucial. Economic conditions must be created which are supportive of sustainable agriculture and rural development." In the section dealing with activities to enhance sustainable agriculture, the Agenda states that "specific and easy-to-understand information on crop rotation, organic manuring, reducing the use of chemicals, agricultural waste recycling and other similar topics is vital to increase sustainable farm yields." As to questions of fi-

nance, the Agenda states that "external indebtedness has emerged as a main factor in the economic stalemate in the developing countries. For many developing countries, the acceleration of development will not take place without an early solution to the problems of external indebtedness. The burden of debt payments on these countries has imposed severe restrictions on their ability to accelerate growth and eradicate poverty."

**T**en years ago, while attending a conference on Microbial Ecology, I listened to a "round-table" debate dealing with Sustainable Agriculture. One of the speakers mentioned that in some places grazing land is abandoned every few years to let the grass grow and to enhance nitrogen assimilation on the roots of legumes by *Rhizobacteria*, thus increasing productivity in the following years. Given permission to speak, I pointed out that the Jewish law of *Shmitta*, the Sabbatical Year, provides exactly such orders for the Jewish farmer.

**B**ut *Shmitta*, in fact, is much more than a tool for sustainable agriculture. The fact that this law appears in the weekly portion (of the Bible reading) that deals mainly with social

Tree of Knowledge  
(Genesis 2:17).  
From a wall mosaic  
by Lev Syrkin, entitled  
*Day and Night in the  
Garden of Eden (night)*





Courtesy NECT MEDUPPI, the Bialik Landscape Reserve in Israel

Hillside terraces

commandments (freeing of slaves in the *Yovel* (Jubilee) year; remission of debts in the *Shmitta* year; prohibition to take interest; and prohibition of fraud of any kind) proves that this law does not deal merely with issues

of sustainable agriculture. The *Shmitta* is a physical and social break, which every seven years calls for a stop to the consumerist race, so characteristic of today's western economy.

*Six years you shall sow your land, and gather in its yield; but in the seventh you shall let it rest and lie fallow. Let the needy among your people eat of it, and what they leave let the beasts of the field eat... (Exodus 23:10-11)*



*Six years you may sow your field, and six years you may prune your vineyard, and gather in the yield. But in the seventh year the land shall have a sabbath of the Lord: you shall not sow your field, nor prune your vineyard. You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your untrimmed vines; it shall be a year of complete rest for the land. But you may eat whatever the land during its sabbath will produce – you, your male and female slaves, the hired and bound laborers who live with you, and your cattle and the beasts in your land may eat all its yield* (Leviticus 25: 3-7)

Rabbi Isaac Breuer (1883 – 1946), a Jewish philosopher and lawyer, explains (in his book *Nachliel*), that the laws of *Shmitta* relate specifically to the Land of Israel, ensuring that the land rest after six years of tilling. He personifies the land and equates it with the person who has to rest after six days of work, and the slave who must go free after six years of servitude.

Maimonides, in his book, *Guide to the Perplexed*, defines the ideas behind *Shmitta*: "The rules of *Shmitta* and Jubilee... some deal with mercy and amnesty for human

beings... others with increasing crops and strengthening the land while it rests... some are about mercy on slaves and poor people – such as debt remission and releasing of slaves. Some of the rules deal with regulating the economy in such a way that the land shall never be sold in perpetuity, but that a man's property shall be kept for him and his descendants so that they shall eat its crops..."

Maimonides regards the *Shmitta* and Jubilee rules as rules fostering sustainability in many fields. Letting the land rest for a year strengthens it and lets it provide a better yield in the following years. But he reminds us that *Shmitta* is not only a year of relief for the land, but also for human beings. In biblical times a thief could pay off his debt (twice the value of the theft) by "selling" himself into slavery. Contrary to practice in other societies at the time, he was released after six years, but even if he chose to stay on, he was released in the Jubilee year, when slaves were freed nationwide. Another important event of the Jubilee year was the return of all lands to their original owners. Maimonides explains that the observance of these rules had an educating effect "the virtue of generosity shall be obtained with the understanding that money has no intrinsic worth since it belongs to the Almighty... because most of the corruption in the towns can be attributed to the running after property and greediness for money".

Another social aspect of *Shmitta* is the ban on trading in agricultural produce. The yield of the *Shmitta* year is free for anyone to eat, including the animals. "And you shall not trade in the yield of the Sabbatical." (*Mishne Torah* by Maimonides, Rules of *Shmitta* and Jubilee, Chapter 6, Rule 1).

Breuer quotes Maimonides and explains: "When the Creator, blessed be He, gives his orders as the sole owner of the land, then for a whole year the yield of the land is only for consumption, without trade placing itself between the crops and the consumer. For one whole year, the Sabbatical reminds the Jews that the Creator has not grown its yield for profiteers to become rich, but that he 'brings forth bread from the earth', bread to revive every living soul, bread and not merchandise." The Sabbatical also applies to animals: ...and your cattle and the beasts in your land may eat all its yield. (Leviticus 25:7)





Courtesy NEOT REDUPIN, the Biblical Landscape Reserve in Israel



Olive Branch

Rabbi Kook sums up the *Shmitta* rules in his introduction to *Shabbat Haaretz* (the Sabbatical of the Land): "The Sabbatical is a real must for the Nation and the Land! A year of peace and quiet... a year of equality and tranquillity when the soul can reach out to the righteous God who feeds all life ... there is no private property ... and coveting of wealth, which is stimulated by commerce... And man returns refreshed to his natural self, to the stage where he does not need medication for illnesses that are due mainly to the ruining of life's natural equilibrium..."



## RENEWED JEWISH CONCERN WITH SUSTAINABILITY

It is clear that Judaism preaches sustainability. But do the Jewish people in Israel and abroad go back to their sustainable roots? The simple answer would have to be NO, but orthodox and conservative Jewry are taking an increasing interest in the overlapping values of Judaism and Modern Environmentalism.

Manfred Gerstenfeld states that the analysis of Jewish attitudes toward modern environmentalism and environmental matters is important. There is significant *halachic* literature in this field and the Jewish people, as part of society at large, for whom the environment is a major concern, should participate in discussing and solving the problems.

It is the writer's opinion, as opposed to Gerstenfeld's, that understanding the laws that dealt with the physical environment, and which were adhered to by the people of Israel whilst in their Land, is part of the normalization process of a nation returning to its heritage and land.

In a conference organized by "Life and Environment", the umbrella organization of the Israeli environmental NGO's, and under the auspices of the Knesset Committee on Internal Affairs and the Environment, Chief Rabbi Bakshi Doron said that there is no doubt that responsibility for a sane environment lies on the shoulders of the leaders of the community and that the rabbis are responsible for awakening the public's awareness of environmental issues. He also emphasized that issues of environmental protection fall within *Dinei Nefashot* (laws of life and death) and therefore are of great significance.

While mentioning environmental crises such as the pollution of the Kishon River and air pollution in Haifa, Rabbi Bakshi Doron said leaders could not say: *Our hands did not shed this blood and our eyes did not see...* (Deut. 21:7)

There exists in Israel a nucleus of NGO's which deal with various issues of sustainability and Judaism.

One such organization is *Le'ovda Uleshomra* (To Till it and Tend it). This organization was founded by The Heschel Center for Environmental Study and Leadership "to increase environmental awareness and activism in the Israeli national religious public." (<http://www.heschelcenter.org>)

*Le'ovda Uleshomra* represents a unique attempt to develop a religious environmental language and context for action that will accomplish two things: first, it will enable religious engagement with crucial social-environmental issues that have not generally been high on the list of priorities of the national religious public. In theory and in practice, *Halacha* and theology have not yet seriously begun to grapple with the current environmental crisis, and it is imperative that they do so. But this is not only so that the religious public can 'catch up' to any predefined environmental position. *Torah* tradition and a deeply religious sensibility have a wealth of environmental wisdom to contribute; and these are voices rarely heard in the Israeli environmental movement. And so the second goal of *Le'ovda Uleshomra* is to create a channel of expression precisely to infuse a religious orientation into current environmental discourse, such as the





responsibility to preserve Creation, a critique of materialist consumerism, reinforcement of communal structures and mutual commitment to the common good. *Le'ovda Uleshomra* publishes a quarterly called *Eretz Israel* (Land of Israel).

**A**nother group, headed by Dr. Manfred Gerstenfeld works under the auspices of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs and publishes a monthly called *Jewish Environmental Perspectives*. (<http://www.jcpa.org>).

**A** program, based on a combination of charity and environment has been initiated by *Mifal Chaim* (Life Work) ([www.mifalchaim.org](http://www.mifalchaim.org)). This NGO, established in 2000 by the ultra-orthodox couple Dudi and Rivka Zilberschlag, consists of two main charitable activities: *Me'ir Panim* and *Koach Latet*. *Me'ir Panim* (A Friendly Face) is a chain of soup kitchens that provide food for the needy in a friendly atmosphere; *Koach Latet* (The Power of Giving) is a national aid center that collects various second-hand items, repairs and distributes them to those in need.

*Mifal Chaim* has recently also initiated an environmental section with two complementary aims: to raise the level of awareness of the importance of environmental protection among the ultra-orthodox communities; and to create a nation-wide project of recycling for charitable purposes. The combination of the ideas of charity and the prohibition of wanton destruction, which are two important principles in Judaism, should facilitate the introduction of sustainable environmentalism into these communities.

**A** more local NGO, the Committee for Life Quality of the neighborhood of Har Nof in Jerusalem, is active mainly at the local level and focuses on projects such as the recycling of water from *Mikvaot* (Ritual Baths) and the neighborhood's campaign for saving the nearby Jerusalem Forest.

**T**he Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL) was founded in 1993 to promote environmental education, scholarships, advocacy and action in the Jewish community of the United States. COEJL is sponsored by a broad coalition of national Jewish organizations and has set up regional affiliates in communities across North America.



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