

HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY FOR GOD'S CREATION IN JEWISH TEACHING AND PRACTICE

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1. Introduction

Jewish teaching is based first and foremost on the Bible and its interpretations. The oldest sources of interpretation are the *Talmud* and the *Midrash*. These sources in their turn have been interpreted and reinterpreted and continue to be interpreted. In order, therefore, to give an idea of Jewish teaching on ecology today it is necessary to cite both ancient and modern sources.

"If you are busy planting a tree and someone comes and tells you that the Messiah is on his way, finish planting first and only then go and meet the Messiah." This saying is attributed to Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, who lived at the time of the siege of Jerusalem by the Romans in the year 70. It expresses well the basic attitude of Judaism towards nature. The protection of nature is more important than the Messiah.

Many other such sayings can be found in Rabbinic literature. Here are just two more examples:

First, a scene with Honi, a miracle-worker:

One day Honi, the Circle-Drawer, was journeying on the road and he saw a man planting a carob tree. He asked him: 'How long does it take for this tree to bear fruit?' The man replied: 'seventy years.' He then further asked him: 'Are you certain that you will live another seventy years?' The man replied: 'I found ready grown carob trees in

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the world; as my forefathers planted these for me, so I too plant these for my children' (*Taanith* 23a)¹.

The second text is a conversation with emperor Hadrian:

Hadrian, (his bones be ground to dust!), once passed along the paths leading to Tiberias and saw an old man standing and digging trenches to plant shoots of fig tree. Said he to him: 'Greybeard, greybeard! If you had got up early to do the work you would not have had to work late!' He answered him: 'I have worked early and am working late, and let the Lord of heaven do as it pleases Him.' Said he to him: 'By your life, old man! How old are you this day?' 'A hundred years old', he answered. He said to him: 'So you are a hundred years old, and yet are standing and digging trenches to plant shoots of fig trees! Do you ever hope to eat of them?' He replied: 'If I am worthy I shall eat, and if not, then as my forebears have worked for me so will I work for my children.' He said to him: 'On your life! If you are privileged to eat of them, let me know.'

In the course of time the trees produced figs. Said he: 'Now it is time to let the king know.' What did he do? He filled a basket with figs and went and stood at the gate of the palace. He was asked: 'What is your business here?' He answered: 'I want to come before the king.' When he came in, the latter asked him: 'What is your business?' He answered him: 'I am the old man whom you passed by as I was digging trenches to plant shoots of fig trees, and you said to me: 'If you are privileged to eat of them let me know.' Lo, I have been so privileged and have eaten of them, and these figs are some of the fruit.' Thereupon Hadrian exclaimed: 'I command that a chair of gold be set down and that he may sit upon it.' He further said: 'I command that you empty this basket of his and fill it with denarii.' His servants said to him: 'Will you show all this honour to that

¹*Taanith* is a tractate of the Babylonian *Talmud*. The Babylonian *Talmud* contains traditions from the first century BCE until about the end of the fourth century CE.

old Jew?' He answered them: 'His creator honours him, and shall not I honour him too?' (*Lev.rabba* 25,5)².

2. Creation

The specificity of Jewish tradition and teaching is the interpretation of Bible citations. This also applies to the teaching on ecology. The commentaries on the creation story are most relevant for our theme. One of the key verses is Gen 1:26: "God said: Let us make man in our own image, in the likeness of ourselves, and let them be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven, the cattle, all the wild beasts and all the reptiles that crawl upon the earth." The famous commentator Rashi gives an interesting interpretation to this verse. He says that the Hebrew word used here for dominion may imply real 'dominion', but it also means 'descending'. Therefore, if man is worthy he dominates over the beasts and cattle; if he is not worthy he will sink lower than them and the beasts will rule over him. Hillel Avidan comments on this: "In other words human dominion over animals is granted by God on condition that no abuse is involved. If humans become unworthy of the trust placed in them by the creator, then they will sink to a level lower than that of any animal"³.

The same idea is expressed in a discussion between R.Chanina and R.Jakob from Kefar Chanin in *Gen.rabba* 8,12 on Gen 1:28: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it and rule over the fish of the sea and the fowl of heaven and every beast that creeps upon the earth." "R.Chanina said: If he is worthy - 'rule', and if not - 'sink'. R.Jakob said: He who is in his image - 'rule', he who is not in his image - 'sink'. He who is in our image will come and he will rule over him who is not in our image." Just as God rules creation, so man, created in God's image, rules the earth. Humans are expected to image God in their dealings with the

²*Midrash Rabba* is a commentary on the Tora, the five books of Moses, and on the five *Megillot*, those books, which are read during the synagogal prayer on some festivals. It was probably edited in Israel in the fifth century, but contains much older materials.

³Hillel Avidan, "Caring for the Creation: A Jewish Perspective", *SIDIC*, Vol.XXII- 3 (1989), 2-4.

rest of creation and as God is just and merciful, so should they be just and merciful.

The Talmud interprets dominion (Gen 1:26) as the privilege of using animals for labour. Thus it is asked whether "And rule over the fish of the sea" (Gen 1:28): does not mean that the fish should serve as food. The reply is that it refers to toil, since Rachabah discusses the question whether driving a wagon with a goat and a fish involves the transgression of the law. This implies that fish can be used for toil. Similarly for the fowl of the heaven, they too may be used for toil, but not for food, since R. Jose b. R. Judah discusses the problem of threshing corn with geese or cocks in connection with the prohibition 'Thou shalt not muzzle the ox when he treadeth out the corn' (Deut 25:4) (Cf. *Sanh* 59b).

Umberto Cassuto [1883-1951], an Italian historian and biblical scholar who settled in Israel in 1939, comments on Gen 1:26-28: "You are permitted to use the animals and employ them for work, have dominion over them in order to utilise their services for your subsistence, but must not hold their life cheap nor slaughter them for food. Your natural diet is vegetarian."

Similarly Rashi interprets Gen 1:29 f. : To you it shall be for food and to every beast of the earth - "Scripture places cattle and beasts on a level with human beings (that is, it places all alike in the same category) with regard to food, and did not permit Adam to kill any creature and eat its flesh, but all alike were to eat herbs. But when the era of the 'Sons of Noah' began, He permitted them to eat meat, for it is said, (Gen 9:3) 'every moving thing that lives should be for food for yourselves ... even as the herb', that I permitted to the first man, so do 'I give to you every thing'."

Francis Landy⁴ concludes that if humans were vegetarians at the outset and had no right to kill animals for food, then verse 28: "Let them be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven, etc. can only be understood symbolically. In a vegetarian world the animals, including

⁴Francis Landy, "The Sixth Day" From *Martin Buber House* 3 April (1983), 10-13.

birds and fish, are outside man's domain; he can do nothing with them except admire them.

Most texts point to the superiority of humans over nature and the animals. However, in the *Midrash Genesis Rabba* the rabbis discuss why Adam, the first human, was created last, and their answer is, that he was created after the flea so as to humble him by denying him illusions of pedigree. Rabbi Tzvi Marx comments:

This rabbinical interpretation points to reality-centred consciousness where reality has its own existence not contingent upon man's presence. Nature and the environment are not projections of man, rather man is only one of the projections of nature. Creation consciousness restores man to a healthy and sane view that he must contend with and learn to live in an ecosystem that preceded his appearance. He must overcome his infantile yearning to concentrate, perceive and absorb all reality through the nipple⁵.

On the other hand many other texts stress the point that humans, having been created in the image of God are superior to the rest of creation. Thus we read in the *Talmud*.

Our Rabbis taught: ... Six things are said of human beings: in regard to three, they are alike the ministering angels, and in regard to three, they are like beasts. 'In regard to three, they are like ministering angels': they have understanding like the ministering angels; and they walk erect like the ministering angels and they can talk in the holy tongue (Hebrew) like the ministering angels. 'In regard to three, they are like beasts': they eat and drink like beasts; and they propagate like beasts, and they relieve themselves like beasts (*Chag* 16a).

However, this superiority consists more in duties than in rights. Humans are responsible for nature.

⁵Rabbi Tzvi Marx, "Creation and Ecology", From *Martin Buber House* 3 April (1983), 22-29.

Modern interpretations of Gen 2:15 tend in the same direction. The command of Gen 1:28 that man should become ruler and owner of nature must not serve to overshadow the other command which we find in the second creation account and which enjoins humans to "cultivate the soil and preserve it", to serve and protect it (Gen 2:15). Humans have the responsibility of at the same time developing natural resources and preserving them. Marx says explicitly:

The dual function of working and preserving the land captures the nature of our modern dilemma. The naive idea that we will turn back the technological clock and restore man to a former idyllic preserve on the earth is too impractical to deserve refutation. The unqualified abuse and exploitation of our environment in working it without due consideration of the need to preserve its restorative ability is how we came to the present impasse.

According to R.Schilli⁶ 'cultivate the soil and preserve it' means that man receives the mission to extract from the whole of nature food and all else which is necessary for his subsistence, on condition however of respecting the order of nature as it was established by the divine creator.

Rabbi Guigui⁷ adds: These terms signify expressly that this garden is someone else's property. It belongs to God and not to man. We therefore, have the duty of handing it over to our children in a perfect state so that they in their turn can bequeath it to posterity.

R.Marx calls our attention to the fact that according to the Bible (Gen 2:15), man is the guardian of that which is not his essentially. Thus in discussing the sense of God's having endowed man with the loan of nature, the talmudic rabbis say that, whoever consumes without reciting a benediction is considered to have stolen from God.

⁶Grand Rabbin Henri Schilli, *Regards sur le Midrach*, Preface par M. Jacob Kaplan, Grand Rabbin de France; Introduction Par le Rabbin Alain Goldmann, Keren Hasefer ve Halimoud, 1977, 102-104.

⁷Rabbin A.Guigui, "La fete des arbres, ou Bible et ecologie", *Libre Belgique*" (2.2.1988).

Nehama Leibowitz writes in her commentary on Genesis:

Assisting nature has been praised by our sages on many occasions: Rabbi Yizhak expounded the text (Gen 26:24) 'I have blessed him' as encouraging man to work with his own hands and sow his field since 'blessing only rests on the work of human hands.' Another rabbinic dictum says the same thing, even more explicitly, in its exposition of the text (Deut 14:29): 'The Lord thy God bless thee in all the work of thy hands which thou shalt perform' - 'If a man works, he is blessed; otherwise he is not blessed.'

There are numerous dicta praising manual labour, industry and agriculture scattered throughout our literature. With regard to the processing of the raw material provided by the creator, we have the statement of the *Midrash (Gen rabba 11,6)*: 'Whatever was created during the six days of (God's) handiwork requires working on'⁸.

3. The Covenant with Noah

Just as Gen 1, the creation of Adam, was a new beginning, so also was Gen 9, God's covenant with Noah. However, if we compare Gen 1:28-30 and Gen 9:1-3 we discover three differences.

To Noah and his sons God says: "Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth", whereas Adam is also told to "conquer it", to subdue the world. To explain this difference Leibowitz cites Rambam:⁹ "The Almighty entrusted mankind with power and dominion over the earth to do as it desired with the animal kingdom, to build and uproot and plant, to mine copper from the hills and the like". She then goes on to explain that the "process of conquering nature through technical achievement made great strides through the ingenuity shown by the descendants of Cain, as is related, in the building of cities and forging of articles of daily use, including death-

⁸Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Bereshit (Genesis). In the Context of Ancient and Modern Jewish Bible Commentary*, Translated and adapted from Hebrew by Aryeh Newman, Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1981, 951 f.

⁹Moses ben Nachman or Ramban, also called Nachmanides, a twelfth century Spanish *Talmud* and *Kabbala* scholar who later went to Israel.

dealing weapons and the erecting of gigantic towers for the sake of immortalising human prowess. The Noah blessing therefore does not include "subdue it", since mankind had more than fulfilled the mission entrusted to them in this sphere and even abused their trust"¹⁰.

A second difference is the relationship between Adam and Noah on the one hand and the animals on the other. The first humans are to be "masters" of the animals, whereas Noah and his sons are to be "the terror and the dread of all the wild beasts and all the birds of heaven ... they are handed over to you." Between Adam and the animals, there is a harmonious relationship, which is replaced by fear and dread in the blessing to Noah.

Why this fear? The answer is the third difference which we already encountered in Rashi's interpretation of Gen 1:29 f., where grass is the food both for humans and animals, whereas in Gen 9:3 this is enlarged to include everything living. The permission is given to Noah's descendants to slaughter animals for food. According to Leibowitz:

Some commentators regard this as marking the setting up of a complete barrier between animal and man. Man, in spite of the enormous difference between him and the animal kingdom, in spite of his being created in the image of God, had descended from his pinnacle and narrowed the gap and even intermingled with his brutish fellow creatures. Consequently the animals were given up to man for food in order that man should know his unique place in creation as separate and above them"¹¹.

Cassuto comments on Gen 1:27: Apparently the *Torah* was in principle opposed to the eating of meat. When Noah and his descendants were permitted to eat meat, this was a concession conditional on the prohibition of the blood. This prohibition implied respect for the principle of life ('for the blood is the life') and an allusion to the fact that in reality all meat should have been prohibited. This partial prohibition was designed to call to mind the previous total ban.

¹⁰Leibowitz, *Studies in Bereshit*, 75 f.

¹¹Leibowitz, *Studies in Bereshit*, 76.

According to Hillel Avidan the consumption of flesh was allowed as a concession to human weakness. Even so, the species of animals, birds and fish which may be consumed by an observant Jew are severely restricted by the laws of *Kashrut* and animals must be slaughtered in a very special way in order to spare them pain as far as possible.

Rav Kook, the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of modern Israel, has different explanation for the permission given to mankind after the Deluge to be carnivorous: Since the land had become filled with violence and man had given free rein to his worst instincts, it no longer seemed possible to ask him to make the supreme moral exertions required to forego the slaughter of animals. It was far more important that he should, at least, utilise what moral fibre he still possessed in refraining from killing his own kind and respecting the life of his neighbour.

However, as Leibowitz remarks:

This permission is temporary in deference to mortal frailty, till a 'brighter era' is reached. It is in force only till the time comes: 'When they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord'; for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them' (Jer 31:33). In the latter days when: 'Nation shall not lift up sword against nation neither shall they learn the arts of war any more' (Is 2:4), then man's compassion will extend to the animal kingdom as well, and the injustice done to them will be rectified"¹².

Similarly the prophet Joel describes the messianic era: "O soil, do not be afraid; be glad, rejoice, for the Lord has done great things. Beasts of the field, do not be afraid; the pastures of the earth are green again, the trees bear fruit, vine and fig tree yield abundantly" (Joel 2:21 f.).

4, Prohibition to Destroy

In the context of warfare against towns the book of Deuteronomy has a most meaningful prescription which has led to numerous interpretations:

¹²Leibowitz, *Studies in Bereshit*, 77.f..

"If, when attacking a town, you have to besiege it for a long time before you capture it, you must not destroy its trees by taking an axe to them: eat their fruit, but do not cut them down. Is the tree in the fields human that you should besiege it too?" (Deut 20:19).

The *Talmud* transmits an interpretation of R. Jochanan:

What is the meaning of the verse: 'For is the tree of the field human?' (Deut 20:19). Is then man the tree of the field? This can only be explained if we connect the verse with the words immediately following it, where it is written: 'Trees which are not fruit-trees thou shalt destroy and cut down' (Deut 20:20). How is this to be explained? If the scholar is a worthy person, learn (eat) from him and do not shun (cut) him, but if he is not, destroy him and cut him down (*Taanith* 7a).

Ibn Ezra, a famous twelfth century Bible commentator and philosopher, understands the verse as meaning that the life of man depends on the trees of the country. Trees provide humans with diverse vital and useful things. It is therefore unjust to ill-treat them by felling them indiscriminately. Trees are an inestimable good for our well being.

The Book on the *Commandments Maimonides* comments on the fifty-seventh negative commandment, "destroying fruit trees during a siege" thus:

By this prohibition we are forbidden to destroy fruit trees during a siege in order to cause distress and suffering to the inhabitants of the besieged city. It is contained in His words (exalted be He), 'Thou shalt not destroy the trees thereof by wielding an axe against them; for you mayest eat of them, but thou shalt not cut them down' (Deut 20:19). All needless destruction is included in this prohibition: for instance, whoever burns a garment, or breaks a vessel needlessly, whoever obstructs the flow of streams, rivers, etc. in order to cause distress to the inhabitants of a besieged city, contravenes the prohibition 'Thou shalt not destroy', and is liable to whipping.

Further, anyone who destroys fruit trees not only during a siege, but in any circumstances or who destroys food for simply destructive reasons transgresses the commandment.

At the end of the *Talmud* tractate *Makkoth*, Rabbina demurred: 'Why not include (in the list of those who should be whipped) also one who cuts down 'good trees' (i.e. fruit trees) whilst proceeding with the plough. The admonition against this action is contained in the words of Scripture: 'For thou mayest eat of them, but thou shalt not cut them down' (Deut 20:19) (*Mak 22a*).

A discussion on the *Mishna* of not planting a tree too close to the neighbour's field is transmitted in the *Talmud* tractate of *Baba Bathra 26a*:

Raba, son of R.Hanan, had some date trees adjoining a vineyard of R.Joseph, and birds used to roost on the date trees and fly down and damage the vines. So R.Joseph told Raba, son of R.Hanan, to cut down his date trees ... Said Raba: I will not cut them down, because Rab has said that it is forbidden to cut down a date tree which bears a kab of dates, and R.Hanina has said, 'My son Shikhath only died because he cut down a date tree before it was dead'. You, Sir, can cut them down if you like.

In a newspaper article a modern author, David Banon, comments:

This law which touches the centre of human preoccupations today aims at conserving the environment and sets up numerous prohibitions such as the diversion of a river or the filling in of a spring in order to drain cultivation or woods. This condemnation of wanton destruction, of damaging, is expressed in order to protect the ecologic system and to preserve its equilibrium, for it is this which assures the possibility of life.

Hillel Avidan writes in the same strain:

Acceptance of God as master and man as servant encourages conservation of the earth's precious resources and clarifies Jewish responsibility towards the earth and its flora and fauna ... From this

prohibition (Deut 20:19 f.) were drawn many others which in sum total serve to prevent wanton destruction of anything useful to humanity ... Judaism condemns, and Jews should seek to prohibit, all acts likely to further damage our planet.

Rabbin Shilli enumerates those things which are not to be destroyed wantonly just for the pleasure of doing so, even if they belong to the enemy. For instance not to cut down a fruit tree in order to use its wood, since this tree has a higher destination, and there are other trees at our disposal whose wood we can use. This applies to all other objects animal or vegetable and more especially to foodstuff which must not be used for other purposes.

He continues in giving examples of wrong use of foodstuff such as the transformation of a foodstuff like milk in order to manufacture plastic material, transforming flour into a manufactured object which is not food, or the use of foodstuff such as coffee, for instance, to heat a steam engine.

Although the prohibition obviously has a practical aim, according to Schilli, it is also a means of showing our submission to the will of the creator. Besides, on a psychological level, it has a significance for man himself. For, it implies that man should not act like an animal destroying blindly, but on the contrary should remain human by respecting both humans and objects. Finally, for the believer, all the good which nature offers belongs to the creator and it is only according to his will that we may use that which was created from the beginning.

This is equally the significance of the Sabbath and the jubilee years (Ex 23:11; Lev 25:2-13) during which all agricultural activity must cease. However, Maimonides (*Guide* III,39) also sees practical reasons for these laws. According to him, they are not, on the one hand to assure the compassion and liberality towards humans in general (Cf. Ex 23:11), to inspire benevolence towards slaves and the poor as also the remittance of debts. On the other hand through these laws, forbidding the farmer to cultivate his land every seventh year, the land becomes more fertile and the soil will thus produce a richer harvest in the six working years. This last explanation however, is not accepted by all.

Thus Abravanel, a fifteenth century Portuguese Jew, compares the Sabbath year and the jubilee year with the Sabbath. Just as on the Sabbath one rests from the continuous tension and fatigue of the six work-days and devotes oneself to the development of one's moral and religious faculties, thus also during the Sabbath and jubilee years. In the productive years - in youth and maturity - men and women must be industrious in order to care for their livelihood if they want to survive. But the time comes when they should concentrate on more noble ideals and must cease to pursue materialistic benefit and worldly pleasures. Instead they should devote themselves to the realization of their innate desire for holiness and fear of the Lord¹³.

R.Marx says that the ideal behind the Sabbath of the land, regarding which the laws of the sabbatical year were commanded (Lev 25); is that humans should let go their hold on land, space, air, etc., so that their necessary dependencies on those resources do not become the cause of obliteration by over-use and misuse.

A talmudic discussion on the Sabbath year (Pes 52b) brings us to a further interesting agricultural prescription.

Rabbi Elai cut down date-berries of the sabbatical year (i.e. before they ripened and were fit for food). How might he do thus: the Merciful One said, (it ... shall be) for food (Lev 25:6), but not for destruction? And should you answer that is only where it has reached the stage of fruit (i.e. when it is ripe), but not where it has not reached the stage of fruit, - surely R.Nachman said in Rabbah b.Abbuha's name: The calyxes (which surround the date in its early stage) of orlah are forbidden, because they became a guard for the fruits.

The Hebrew word *orlah* literally means uncircumcised or closed, but is used here in the sense of 'that which is to be rejected.': during the first three years after its planting the fruit of a tree is prohibited. A whole tractate of the *Mishna* treats this subject. In other words Rab Nachman interprets Lev

¹³R.Abraham Chill, *Die Mizwot. Die Gebote der Tora*, Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1991, 135.

19:23-25: "Once you have entered this land and planted a fruit tree of any sort, you are to regard its fruits as its foreskin ..." as an injunction meant to protect trees from being over-exploited during the first three years.

The commentators give diverse reasons for this law. According to Ibn Ezra: It was prohibited to eat the fruit of a tree during the first three years of its growth, because it is not beneficial to eat such a young fruit. Similarly for Nachmanides: All the victuals which the *Tora* forbids, including fruit from trees within the first three years after they have been planted, may not be eaten, because they are considered as unhealthy.

Alschech, a sixteenth century talmudic scholar in Israel, on the contrary is of the opinion that during the first three years after the planting of a tree one must let nature take its course. In the fourth year the Almighty impresses his seal of approval by letting the fruit ripen and become edible. He rewards the farmer for not eating the ripe fruit of the fourth year, but giving it to the priest, by blessing the crops of the tree in the following years with a good and rich harvest"¹⁴.

On the other hand the beginning of the citation (Lev. 19:23) contains an injunction to plant fruit trees as soon as one establishes oneself in a country. Thus the *Midrash (Lev.rabba 25,5)* interprets: During the forty years that Israel were in the wilderness the manna fell, the well came up for them, the quails were at hand for them, the clouds of glory encircled them and the pillar of fire led the way before them. When Israel were about to enter the Land, Moses said to them: 'Let every one of you take up his spade and go out and plant trees.' Hence it is written, "When ye shall come into the land, ye shall plant." This verse is also interpreted as an allusion to the Tree of the *Tora*. On arrival in a new country, the first thing Jews should do is to establish institutions for studying the *Tora*.

5. Prohibition to Mix

This prohibition is based on two verses: "Ye shall keep my statutes. Thou shalt not let thy cattle gender with a diverse kind; thou shalt not sow thy field with two kinds of seed, neither shall there come upon thee a

¹⁴Chill, *Die Mizwot*, 255.

garment of two kinds of stuff mingled together" (Lev 19:19) and "Thou shalt not sow thy vineyard with two kinds of seed; lest the fullness of the seed which thou hast sown be forfeited together with the increase of the vineyard. Thou shalt not plough with an ox and an ass together. Thou shalt not wear a mingled stuff, wool and linen together" (Deut 22:9-11). These laws are still respected today by the very observant Jews.

Here again the reasons given are diverse. Nachmanides says: God created every plant and every creature on earth with traits and attributes peculiar to each. When a male and a female creature of two different breeds are mated or when two different species of plants are crossed the result is a completely new being. He adds that if the cross-breeding of a horse and an ass produces a mule, which is a miserable creature that cannot beget, so too when mixed species of trees are grafted, their fruit does not grow thereafter.

Maimonides commented on the prohibition for Jews to wear clothes made from a mixture of wool and linen, and gave as a reason for this prohibition the custom of heathen priests to wear clothes made of vegetal and animal substances. Since it was a part of the false beliefs of idolaters for whom it served as a specific symbol of fertility, Jews should avoid it (*Cf. Guide III,37*).

Rabbenu Nathan, a teacher in Israel in the eleventh century, gives an agricultural reason, that one species prevents the development of the adjacent one. Although it is difficult to say what the real reasons for these prohibitions were, it seems that as a result of the care taken by Jews in this matter, the fields were kept free of weeds and the purity of plant species was preserved.

Rabbin Guigui cites among the interdictions of the Talmud in this connection: In order to protect the environment it was forbidden to burn the wood of the olive tree, of the vine, of the date palm or of the fig tree on the altar of the Temple. As to the protection of the mineral resources, it was forbidden to let an oil lamp burn too quickly, since this entails wasting a precious and valuable natural good.

Several laws of *Kashrut* are based on the principle of not mixing different species. Dietary laws forbid the consumption of creatures which exhibit characteristics of more than one basic species, such as aquatic animals (Lev 11:9-12; Deut 14:9-10) or insects which both fly and crawl (Lev 11:20,42).

For the religious Jew caring for creation is a response to God's commandments according to Deut 11:13-15: "if you pay heed to the commandments which I give you this day, and love the Lord your God and serve him with all your heart and soul, then I will send rain for your land in season, both autumn and spring rains, and you will gather your corn and new wine and oil, and I will provide pasture in the fields for your cattle; you shall eat your fill." Thus Milgrom comments:

In this passage, and in many like it, aside from water and plants one finds the moral dimension that is the starting point for the entire scheme: the ecological system described here is dependent on moral behaviour - the Torah is dealing with a 'moral ecology' ...

It is precisely that natural factor of rainfall, seen by the Bible as an indication of constant divine blessing which also invites constant scrutiny and stricter standards than other lands ... 'You must keep my laws and my norms ... So let not the land spew you out for defiling it, as it spewed out the nation that came before you' (Lev 18:25,27)¹⁵.

6. Care for Animals

In commenting Lev 19:19 Ibn Ezra also says that the prohibition to put an ox and an ass together is motivated by the mercy of the Lord for all his creatures. Since the ox is stronger than the ass, to plough together would be too great a burden for both animals. Either the ox will be forced to carry the main load or the ass would overstrain itself by trying to keep up with the ox¹⁶.

¹⁵Jeremy Milgrom, "Some Comments on the First Monday and Tuesday", *From Martin Buber House*, 3 April (1983), 35-38.

¹⁶Chill, *Die Mizwot*, 255.

Avidan calls attention to the fact that Judaism has always displayed a rare sensibility in its concern for animal welfare:

Gen 24 relates how, when Eliezar went to Haran to find a wife for Isaac, he looked for a girl who would show kindness both to humans and animals. After Rebecca had drawn water for Eliezar and his men she immediately watered their camels. Later Jewish teaching insisted that it should be the other way around and so the Talmud states, 'A man may not sit down to his own meal before he has fed his animals' (*Ber* 40a).

Numerous texts of the Bible call on the care for animals, not only one's own, but even those of one's enemy (Prov 12:10; Ex 23:4 f.; Deut 22:4). According to the *Midrash*: "The children of Noah were enjoined concerning seven things: Idolatry, incest, murder, cursing the Divine Name, civil law (= obedience to the civil authorities) and a limb torn from a living animal. R.Chanina said: Also against concerning blood from a living animal. R.Leazar said: Also against cross-breeding" (*Gen.rabba* 34,8). Thus one of the *Noahide Commandments*, which are incumbent upon all human beings, not just Jews, prohibits cruelty to animals. Walter Jacob¹⁷ writes that the general theme of kindness toward animals appears with some frequency in the rabbinic literature sometimes in connection with the Noah story and sometimes in general discussion. Ex 20:10 teaches that animals must rest on the Sabbath day and the need for such consideration is repeated in Ex 23:12 and Deut 5:14.

In Lev 22:27 it is stated that a young domestic animal may not be separated from its mother till at least seven days old and in Lev 22:28 it is prohibited to kill an animal together with its young one, mainly in order to prevent the one witnessing the death of the other. Commenting on these two verses Maimonides wrote: "The pain of animals under such circumstances is very great. There is no difference in this case between the pain of a human and the pain of other living beings, since the love and tenderness of the mother for her young one is not produced by reasoning,

¹⁷Cf. Walter Jacob, "A Reform Responsum. - A Blessing for Pets", *Journal of Reform Judaism*, (Summer 1988).

but by feeling and this faculty exists not only in man but in most living things" (*Guide* III.48).

Deut 22:6 f. forbid the capture of a mother bird together with her young ones or her eggs. This thought is also developed further in the subsequent rabbinic literature. If the young ones or eggs are required, the mother must be absent when they are taken. In practice young fledglings were of little use to anyone; so the prohibition tended to protect both mother and young. Eggs were more likely to be taken, but here the bond with the mother was much weaker.

Deut 25:4 states, "You shall not muzzle the ox when he treads out the com." This prohibition extends to all work animals, for it was considered sheer cruelty to excite an animal's desire for food and then prevent the satisfaction of that desire.

According to Avidan much is written in Jewish post-Biblical literature about the need to spare animals from pain or stress.

The Talmud forbids gladiatorial shows and hunting (Av Z 18b), so that bull or cock-fighting and fox or big game hunting are quite abhorrent to the observant Jew. So too is the trapping of animals for such luxury items as fur coats or the merciless hunting of whales for the production of perfumes or pet foods. None may purchase an animal till he has purchased the food for that animal to eat (Yer Ket 4,8). The Sabbath may not be profaned to assist an animal in distress (*Shab* 128b).

It is also in order to spare the animal pain and to assure that no blood remains in the meat that the Jews have a special way of slaughtering. Avidan comments on this:

The *Shehitah* method renders an animal unconscious in about two seconds and it is doubtful if pain is registered in such a short time. If it is, it can only be momentary and is as nothing compared to the life-long suffering endured by so many farm animals in our day. 'Factory Farming' is an abomination, an affront to the creator, and as the Talmud demands that animals be spared pain at all costs (*BM*

31a-32b), the products of intensive animal husbandry are unsuitable for Jewish consumption. To deprive God's creatures of sunlight, fresh air and exercises is utterly sadistic and it is against intensive animal husbandry, rather than against particular methods of slaughter, that our efforts ought to be directed. Similar criticisms may be levelled by Judaism against research laboratories where millions of animals are yearly tortured to supposedly advance the frontiers of science.

Rabbi Schilli sums up: From the religious point of view the respect for animal or vegetable species is an expression of our unconditional submission to the creator. At the same time this respect strengthens in the human the feeling of solidarity which links human beings with the whole of creation. There exists a sort of inter-dependence and fraternity between humans on the one hand and animal or plant-life on the other, of which those persons living close to nature are very conscious. They feel very strongly that we are all part of the same divine creations, that we are all created by the same affectionate and loving will which called the world into existence. For all these reasons Judaism is grateful for all efforts which are made in order that the respect for nature be in the forefront of the daily preoccupations of our modern world.

7. Sabbath and Feasts

From its very origins the Jewish religion is intimately linked with nature. The most important Jewish feasts are agricultural, which is why the Jewish Calendar, although basically lunar like the Islamic, is adapted in such a way, that the feasts fall in the same period of the year.

Hareuveni¹⁸ calls our attention to the fact that it is suitable that the Sabbath, the most important of the Jewish feasts, is specially and profoundly linked to ecology and to nature in the land of Israel. These links are symbolised by the ritual elements of the ceremony of welcoming the Sabbath on Friday evening: two loaves of bread, a glass of wine and a couple of lighted candles. These symbols are the principal agricultural

¹⁸Cf. Nogah Hareuveni en collaboration avec Helen Frenkley, *Ecologie dans la Bible*, Neot Kedumim, Israel: 1974.

products of ancient Israel. "And it is most sure that if you faithfully obey the commandments I enjoin on you today, ... I will give your land rain in season ... so that you may harvest your corn, your wine, your oil" (Deut 11:13 f.). Grain, wine and oil are not only the most important products of ancient Israel, but they are also the most difficult to cultivate. Each one of these cultures requires a delicate and specific equilibrium between the amount of rain and of sun.

Marx comments:

The Deuteronomic decalogue (Deut 5:14) shifts the emphasis regarding the purpose of Sabbath: 'That your servant may rest as you do remembering that you were a slave in Egypt'. One may enslave man and severely restrict his free movement and living choices by eliminating his eco-options through the irresponsible transformation of his environment. The liberation of my fellow man on the Sabbath from my controlling grasp upon his life line must be understood to imply a comprehensive responsibility we hold one for the other in preserving each other's eco-prerogatives.

If doing exhausts man's mode of relating to his environment, then his doing becomes compulsive and is no longer an expression of a dignified will. In this exaggerated, obsessive form, it can lead to destruction and not conciliation. To step back and to discover that one's existence is worthwhile not only for its capability to produce, but for its capability to 'be with', for its capability to appreciate, to 'let be', to 'just be', this is to remove the danger of compulsion, of aggression, of fanatical achievement ... letting go of power.

The three pilgrimage festivals are linked with the agricultural seasons in Israel: Pesach the Spring festival, a feast of thanksgiving for the barley harvest. Shavuot in Summer, is thanksgiving for the wheat harvest, and Succoth in Autumn, is thanksgiving for the fruits, especially for the grapes.

Nogah Hareuveni has some interesting explanations of Succoth. In the Bible two names designate this feast: The Feast of the Harvest (Ex 23:16) and the Feast of Huts (Succoth-Tabernacles) (Lev 23:34). This feast is called Succoth (Feast of Huts-Tabernacles) on account of its

historic meaning. "...For seven days you are to live in shelters: all natives of Israel must live in shelters, so that your descendants may know that I made the sons of Israel live in shelters when I brought them out of the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God" (Lev 23:42 f.).

But besides this historical reason for living in huts during the feast, the huts, according to Hareuveni, also have an ecologic importance, since they are a special construction and symbolise the bond between man and the surrounding environment. This is especially true of the date-palms which always thrive close to water and yield fruits in the desert even where there is only very poor vegetation. The date-palm provides leaves which give shelter, dates which are highly energizing, the pods serve as food for the camels and from its fibres baskets and ropes can be woven. Since it needs water, its presence indicates an oasis. Since the Israelites, according to the Bible, camped several times near an oasis, Hareuveni presumes that they built huts for this. Thus today the Jews in building their Succoth recall not only the huts of their ancestors, but also express in a very symbolic way one of the fundamental ecologic truths of the Bible.

Besides the injunction of building Succoth, the Bible also mentions four plants which are part of the ritual of the feast. They are part of the agricultural aspect but, again according to Hareuveni, also symbolise some of the historic events which the feast commemorates. The first, the "most majestic" fruit (Lev 23:40) is according to the Sages of the *Talmud* the etrog, a citrus fruit. Hareuveni calls attention to the fact that this fruit has a unique botanical characteristic which, one finds in no other fruit, namely, the female part of the flower remains attached to the ripe fruit. Therefore, the etrog symbolises the hope of fertility and abundance for the new agricultural year which begins in Israel with the feast of Succoth. The lulave (palm) on the other hand symbolises the sojourn of the Israelites in the desert when the people used all the parts of the date palm for their daily needs. The willow-branch, because of its constant need for abundant water, is symbol for the prayers that God may spare the land barrenness by making the winter rains come. From the day after Succoth until Pesach the prayer for rain is said every day all over the world. From Pesach on the prayer is for dew, since this is what is needed for successful harvests in Israel. Finally, Hareuveni interprets the Hadass, the myrtle, as symbol for

the forests which covered the land at the beginning and therefore as symbol for the hopes of the farmers for a prosperous and abundant year.

8. *Tu b'Shevat*

Tu b'Shevat, the fifteenth day of Shevat, has been celebrated since talmudic times as the New Year of the trees. There was however a discussion, which the *Talmud Rosb Hashana* has transmitted, between the schools of Shammai and that of Hillel as to whether the feast should be celebrated on the first or the fifteenth of Shevat. Finally it was the school of Hillel that carried off the victory in this discussion. *Tu b'Shevat* marked the beginning of the separation of the tithes of fruit, the fruit which was to be brought to the Temple in sacrifice. This date was chosen, because most of the annual rain in Israel falls before the fifteenth of Shevat. During the long period of Diaspora living, *Tu b'Shevat* provided an emotional link between Jews and the land of Israel, thus it was and still is customary on this day to eat fruits that grow in the Holy Land.

Since the establishment of the agricultural settlements in Palestine in the last decades of the nineteenth century the feast acquired new significance; it now symbolized the revival and redemption of the land by the conquest of the desert. Today it is celebrated not only with songs and dances, but also with tree-planting ceremonies by kindergarten and school children, and has thus become the symbol of the reforestation of the land. As Rabbi Guigui formulates: This feast is above all a hymn to the protection of nature and the environment.

The concern for trees and the awareness of their importance is also evident in rabbinical teaching, as we have already seen in the course of this expose:

The Holy One, blessed-be-He, said to Israel: Even though you will find the land filled with all that is good, you shall not say, 'We will settle and not plant.' Rather you shall hasten to plant. Just as you entered the land and found trees planted by others, you too shall plant for your children. Let no man say: 'I am old; how much longer shall I live? Why should I labour for others who will enjoy the fruits of my work after I am dead?' Therefore, man should not refrain from

planting, but rather he should add to the trees that he found planted before his lifetime, even if he is old.

Israel's love for nature and trees was not only expressed in words by the prophets and rabbis; it was also visible in some very lovely customs. Thus at the birth of a boy a cedar was planted, symbol of height and strength; whereas at the birth of a girl a cypress was planted, symbol of tenderness and fragrance. On growing up the children care for their trees themselves and their branches were used for the "Chuppa" of the marriage ceremony.

9. Ecology Today

As we have seen the Bible contains a number of prescriptions which intend to protect nature and animals. These and other texts have been interpreted in Jewish tradition in the sense of human responsibility for nature. Such interpretations continue until today. Nogah Hareuveni interprets two texts from the Book of Genesis. The first text concerns Abraham and the Canaanites: Obedient to the order of the Eternal, Abraham took his wife Sarah and his nephew Lot and started off for a new country. "... They set off for the land of Canaan, and arrived there. Abram passed through the land as far as Shecehm's holy place, the Oak of Moreh" (Gen 12:56). Why stress the fact that Abraham camped "at the Oak of Moreh?" The answer can be found in the following verse; "At that time the Canaanites were in the land."

Abraham arrived in Canaan with "herds, silver and gold" (Gen 13:2). Hareuveni interprets that if he had established his camp near the Canaanite villages his herds would have damaged the local cultures. That is why he went and camped "near the Oak of Moreh." Oaks grew in the non-inhabited wooded regions and not on the cultivated land of the Canaanites. By pasturing his herds among oaks Abraham took care not to cause any damage to the agricultural lands. At the same time the Bible here gives us one of the first examples of the importance of ecology, the concern for equilibrium between agriculture and pastoral pursuits.

The second text is that on the partition of the land between Abraham and Lot (Gen 13:1-13). Abraham and Lot both had large herds of goats

and sheep and "the land was not sufficient to accommodate them both at once, for they had too many possessions to be able to live together" (Gen 13:6). Hareuveni calls attention to the fact that a fertile region of pastureland can rapidly become a desert if huge herds, especially of sheep and goats, who cut the grass very close to its roots, are let free to pasture on it. The Bible tells us that Abraham was conscious of this danger and that is why he said to Lot: "Part company with me: if you take the left, I will go right; if you take the right, I will go left" (Gen 13:9). Thus Lot chose the valley of the Jordan and installed himself near Sodom. Abraham took his herds in the other direction towards the Mount of Hebron, where once again by installing himself near the oaks of Mamre he takes care not to cause any ecologic harm (Cf. Gen 13:18).

Nehama Leibowitz interprets Gen 26:18: "Isaac dug again the wells made by the servants of his father Abraham and sealed by the Philistines after Abraham's death, and he gave them the same names as his father had given them." The *Midrash* comments: "Great are the righteous, since they occupy themselves with the habitation of the world." Today in the age of Jewish renaissance in the homeland where wells are being literally dug in the land of our forefathers, fructifying the desert areas of the Negev, we can appreciate the greatness of the Patriarchs, who combined their dissemination of the true faith with the practical reclamation of the soil by digging wells and watering the ground¹⁹.

Interesting is also Nogah Hareuveni's interpretation of the Menorah, which framed by two olive branches, a symbol of peace and the end of the dispersion, forms the emblem of the State of Israel. In Ex 25:31-36 the Menorah is described almost exclusively in botanical terms. The Menorah and the olive branch are already symbols of peace in the vision of the prophet Zachariah. He saw a Menorah flanked by two olive trees, which poured their oil into the seven lamps of the Menorah. In the seven flames of the Menorah seven words appear: "Neither by might, nor by force but by my spirit" (*Lo bekbayil ve'lo bekoakb ki im be'roukbi*, Zach 4:6). The vision of Zachariah is materialised when the Menorah flanked by two olive

¹⁹Leibowitz, *Studies in Bereshit*, 260.

branches became the emblem of the modern State of Israel, a symbol of peace and the end of dispersion.

A retelling of the Bible story by Naomi Graetz shows the concern of Jews today for ecology:

Noah, son of Lamech was detailing the responsibilities involved in caring for animals, large and small. 'We have a secluded oasis-like area which is ideal for grazing. Animals don't fear us and we don't harm them. We all live together in harmony.'

While Noah was describing his pastoral life, a young man with a straggly beard interrupted him. He cried out, pointing to Tuval-Cain, 'The end is near for you, oh son of Cain. You are doomed. The ancient curse is about to be carried out. Even your name, Hevel, conjures up vanity, mourning, nothingness, evil and woe!'

Tuval-Cain was offended by this diatribe. 'This is going too far!' He started to leave, but felt compelled to stop, for one of Noah's daughters had just begun to speak. She was an unusually attractive young woman, almost as striking as his sister Naamah. Her speech was very persuasive as she talked rhapsodically about their pastoral existence.

'Our life style dates back to the Garden of Eden. In Adam and Eve's time, one didn't have to work for one's bread. In these days we were in partnership with the earth. People, animals and the land did not compete with each other. Life was better and simpler in those ancient times.'

'That may be, but today there are too many people in the world for us to wait for fruit to drop from trees. The world has progressed and become more complicated. There is no going back,' Tuval-Cain said.

'But look at the consequences of competition, the concomitant inequality and poverty that exist. Those who are responsible for this state of affairs will be punished,' she insisted.

'Surely not our clan,' countered Tuval-Cain, 'for we are the purveyors of food, shelter and clothing to mankind. Society depends on our contribution.'

'But look at what you have done in the process: you have destroyed the natural resources around you by hunting and by uprooting trees and plant-life.'

This woman had hit a sore spot! It is true! The trees are not replacing themselves as fast as they used to, Tuval-Cain was forced to admit. Is there any truth to her claim? Is she living closer to paradise than I am? It was too complicated. He had no answer. He wondered about this forceful woman. She was more than his match...

Suddenly he was weary. Could it be that the vanity they had introduced to the world would erase the memory of their accomplishments? Tuval-Cain prayed that it would not be; that future generations would remember the family of Cain²⁰.

Hillel Avidan confirms this concern of Jews: During the past decade Jewish involvement in and support of environmental agencies such as Green-peace, Friends of the Earth, Survival International and the various Animal Welfare Societies has increased apace. There has been a Jewish presence at meetings of the International Whaling Commission, at the World Council of Churches consultation on 'Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation' and at the very important Catholic gathering at Assisi to mark the eight hundredth anniversary of the birth of St Francis.

The Reform Synagogues of Great Britain have produced radical resolutions calling for the banning of trade in exotic species of flora and fauna, the phasing out of such economic policies which result in beef and butter mountains in Europe together with famine and hunger in the world and the imposition of heavy penalties upon industries which continue to destroy or pollute the environment. The Reform Synagogues Social Issues Group has produced a comprehensive 'Jewish Guide to Ecologically

²⁰Naomi Graetz, *S/He Created Them. Feminist Retellings of Biblical Stories*, (1993), 17 f.

Aware Shopping', and in an article published in *Manna I* (Hillel Avidan) specified some twenty-seven ways in which my fellow Jews could help to save our air, soil, water, trees, animals and other resources from further harm or depletion.

10. Conclusion

Abraham Joshua Heschel has some very beautiful thoughts on the relationship of man and nature which may serve as a summary and conclusion of this paper:

To the biblical man ... the earth is his sister rather than his mother. Man and earth are equally the creations of God ... To think of God, man must hear the world. Man is not alone in celebrating God. To praise Him is to join all things in their song to Him. Our kinship with nature is a kinship of praise. All beings praise God. We live in a community of praise ... To the Biblical man, the beauty of the world issued from the grandeur of God; His majesty towered beyond the breath-taking mystery of the universe ... Modern man dwells upon the order and power of nature; the prophets dwell upon the grandeur and creation of nature. The former directs his attention to the manageable and intelligent aspect of the universe; the latter its mystery and marvel. What the prophets sense in nature is not a direct reflection of God but an allusion to Him. Nature is not a part of God, but rather a fulfillment of His will ... The Biblical man does not see nature in isolation, but in relation to God. 'At the beginning God created heaven and earth' - these few words set forth the contingency and absolute dependence of all of reality ... The world is a gate, not a wall... 'Lift up your eyes on high and see, Who created these' (Is 51:6)²¹.

²¹Abraham J.Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, Meridian Books and The Jewish Publication Society: 1963, 92-99.