Jewish Perspectives on Climate Change and Environment

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Jewish texts and values rarely point in just one direction; like other great faiths, this is a gloriously wide-ranging tradition, shaped in different eras and cultural environments. Still, most who have studied the relevant material agree: the overwhelming weight of this sacred tradition points us toward an environmental ethic far more intense than what our society now practices, and undergirds an urgent response to the threat of climate change. Jewish values can help correct the excesses of modern life which got us into today's climate crisis, and they can help us address it by bringing us back into loving connection with Creation. We consider here six areas of traditional Jewish thought, and how they inform today's ecological challenges:

* To start at the very beginning, the creation story demands much from us as enlightened stewards of Creation. In this tradition, the famous command from Genesis 1:28 to “fill the Earth and subdue it” is the opposite of license to destroy – ‘dominion’ is what thoughtful rulers (including God) practice over the subjects whose well-being is of great concern, and even what parents exercise over the children they love more than anything. In Jewish tradition, there are three key ways to understand this challenging verse from Genesis.

  Our ‘rule’ over the Earth is entirely conditional. As Rashi (a key 11th century French commentator who cites here an even earlier midrashic source) explains, dominion is dependent upon our right actions: “if we merit it, then we rule; but if we don't merit it, we fall.” The implications in light of climate science are clear – we are failing modernity's Divine litmus test on stewardship of Creation, just when the stakes are highest. In the Jewish interpretive understanding, humans are indeed central, so long as they deserve to be; their privileged position hinges entirely on their thoughtful actions.

  Furthermore, the call to subdue the Earth is understood as a statement, not an order; as descriptive, not prescriptive. The 12th century philosopher and legalist Maimonides says clearly that
“the Earth was not created for our sake” (Guide to the Perplexed 3:13), then goes on to comment that “Genesis 1:28 comes merely to inform us about the human nature with which the Holy Blessed One has created us” – as if to say “yes humans, you are uniquely able to reshape the Earth in your image; I’m saying that right at the beginning, so we can be clear who’s really the boss!” This connects with Deuteronomy 30:19 which explains how God has endowed us with free will and enabled us to choose between “life and death, blessing and curse” – in modern parlance, to choose between relatively small immediate adjustments to our economy and society, or catastrophic ones which will be foisted upon us if we do not act now – and God has urged us in the same breath to “choose life, that you and your descendants may live.”

And, context is critical. In the very next verses, Genesis 1:29-30 prescribe a vegetarian diet as the original ideal, suggesting that biblical ‘dominion’ involves a very high standard of concern for the rest of Creation. And then Genesis 1:31, which often is misconstrued as if God declared humanity “very good”, actually tells us that just after creating humans in isolation, God withholds judgment entirely, not even uttering ‘good’. Only when “God looked at all that God had created”, at the interconnected whole of which we are a humble part, was the complex totality declared “very good.” Viewed out of relationship to the rest of Creation, God considers humanity and withholds praise. But viewed in right relationship, it’s all excellent. As those most capable of wreaking havoc and also of setting things aright, humans must work assiduously to keep Creation whole.

* Two: A recurrent theme in Jewish tradition is that God, not humanity, is the ultimate owner, the boss. We see this in Leviticus 25, describing the Sabbatical and Jubilee years, in which environmental and social concerns are addressed side-by-side. It’s in Deuteronomy 11, which is incorporated into Jewish daily liturgy as the second paragraph of the Shema, explaining that our tenure on the good land is dependent on our following the right and holy path – and warning us that if we turn away and serve false gods (perhaps today suggestive of the idolatry of materialism, greed, and growth for growth’s sake?), then God “will shut up the heavens; the rain will no longer come in its season; the ground will no longer yield its produce; and you will speedily be evicted from the good land that God is giving you.” And it is most pithily pronounced in Psalm 24 – “the Earth is God’s, and the fullness thereof” – a sacred rallying cry for social justice and environmental movements alike. This is hardly an anti-business stance; Judaism evinces great respect for private property, entrepreneurship, and commerce, though always with the commonwealth uppermost in mind. Judaism is fine with ‘private equity’, but puts public equality much higher in the Divine scheme of things.

These and many other texts bid us to be humble in relation to Creation. This is perhaps the core religious teaching for people of faith to emphasize in the
modern world. If we remember that what surrounds us is not truly ours, then we will question the hubris with which we now spew our carbon, sprawl our settlements, and slice through what remains of the wilderness and jungle and reefs where Creation is most diverse and glorious. Humility, a great personal virtue in Jewish thought, is now what our species most needs to learn and embody.

* Three: the Jewish legal tradition frames an entire environmental ethic around Deut. 20:19, the commandment known as "bal tashchit" or "thou shalt not waste." The German 19th Century Orthodox Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch deemed this directive to be "the first and most glorious call of God." It became the great yardstick of righteousness in the medieval Sefer HaChinuch (530), which explains how "righteous people of good deeds are aghast at any wanton waste, and do all in their power to stop it," while "the wicked are not thus; they delight in destroying the world even as they destroy themselves."

Bal tashchit is derived from a law forbidding the Israelite army from destroying the enemy’s trees in wartime, even when doing so might be tactically useful or help end a siege (and in so doing perhaps to minimize casualties). But the text reminds us that trees, like other elements in the natural world, have moral and legal standing; if destroyed, they too must be considered casualties. From this martial ethic comes a larger approach to protection of natural resources, guided by the
assumption that peacetime protections should be at least as strong as those in place during times of war. Some classic texts try to monetize the value of natural resources, and declare that *bal tashchit* applies only when the short-term value of a felled tree or other newly-lost object is less than its long-term value (of course we now know to consider the many non-commercial yet vital “ecosystem services” that intact forests render as well). Other texts emphasize the inherent worth of the tree, even humanizing or anthropomorphizing natural resources, as if they had feelings which must be taken into account.

This law engenders a careful balancing act between short-term and long-term interest, and between our own desires and the needs of the rest of Creation. It ends up allowing us to consume, but only wisely, and minimally. Rav Zutra (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 67b) got so specific on the implications of *bal tashchit* that he mandated different approaches to combustion for various fuel sources, so as to burn as the least possible quantity of oil or naphtha. In other words, seventeen hundred years ago, *halacha* (the normative Jewish legal tradition) already addressed the carbon emissions of its day, and compelled its followers to use the best available technology and knowledge in order to burn fuel as efficiently as possible. A redoubled commitment to energy conservation, of course, is the “low-hanging fruit” of any possible solution to the climate crisis; it is also part of Jewish law.

* Four: Many other commandments point toward ecological sensitivity, as well: *tza’ar ba’alei chayim* (compassion for animals), rooted in respect for *seder beresheet* or the order of Creation, asks us to privilege the experience of our non-human neighbors, whose habitats and prospects we are shrinking daily, as we continue to exacerbate climate change even in the face of its already-visible effects. *Yishuv Eretz Yisrael* (making 'The Land' as habitable and sustainable as possible), and numerous agrarian laws that include crop rotation and letting the land lie fallow (in tandem with social concerns like the poor and the stranger partaking of gleanings and corners of fields), point to the need for sustainability in how we approach the land itself, as well as the material riches that come from it. There is even a rule that sages cannot live in a town that has no greenery. Such examples abound.
Specific to the juggernaut of climate change, the central commandment of our time may lie in the unlikely injunction from Deuteronomy 22:8 – "when you build a house, put a parapet [low railing] around the roof". This text forms the basis of what ecologists call "the Precautionary Principle," reminding us that public safety and health must take precedence over private profits. It may be inconvenient to build that railing, and it will measurably add to the project cost and thus affect the bottom line, but this minor expenditure is utterly worthwhile since it may just save a life. The text does not brook compromise: railings are required even where the roof is sharply pitched or access is difficult and rare, since the possible saving of a life is worth it "just in case."

And the text most certainly does not require reasonable precautions only once a statistically significant number of children have already fallen to their deaths off of unprotected roofs of this specific design in this particular neighborhood, clear to all, beyond the obfuscating reach of industry-funded studies!

Deuteronomy has us base public policy not on the convenience and profit margin of the housing industry, but on the clear if marginal danger that experts and laypeople alike have long understood – and the text expects us to take reasonable precautions against the possible ill-effects of unprotected roofs. How much more should this apply to the giant uncontrolled science experiment which humanity is now conducting
with the biosphere as a whole, as we reset the global thermostat with little consideration and less recourse? We must apply the precautionary principle for the sake of all who come after us, per the great Jewish expression l’dor vador, from generation to generation.

* Five: Jewish liturgy reminds us daily that we experience God through Creation, and that all of Creation is part of one huge chorus of praise (Psalms 98, 148, 150, etc). This core teaching suggests a modern imperative to protect the glories of Creation from the current ravages of climate change, in order to enable ourselves and others to fully relate to God. There is thus a theological imperative to curbing our carbon use, conserving energy, and reordering the industrial economy into a sustainable set of systems.

Furthermore, going back to the creation story, we humans are “created in the Image of God.” Thus our liturgical language emphasizing how God is compassionate and merciful, the Creator and the Sustainer – “the awesome One who casts the prideful down, and lifts the lowly, who sets the captive free, and saves the humble, and who helps the poor” (emet v’yatziv prayer) – these are affirmations too of what we ourselves can and should do. God’s attributes are there for us to study and emulate, so that we may truly “walk in God’s ways.” To walk Divinely is to avoid trampling the poor, the future, and the rest of Creation underfoot. Walking Divinely, today,
requires rethinking all the unintended consequences of our daily decisions; it requires that we address climate change head-on.

Notice that the most famous list of God’s attributes, the thirteen of them shown to Moses on his second ascent up Mount Sinai (Exodus 34:6-7), points explicitly to intergenerational concern. God does not simply wipe the slate clean, but will “pass the iniquity of the parent onto the child and grandchild, even to the third and fourth generation” – just as the carbon we emit today continues to affect the global climate for a century, four generations or so. And on the positive side, God “extends loving-kindness to the thousandth generation”, meaning that theological time is on a geological scale. Aldo Leopold bade us to “think like a mountain”; Torah asks us to emulate the Maker of mountains, the One whose thought and compassion unfold on mountain time.

And note as well that these core descriptions of God each center on God’s compassion for all, especially those least able to stand up for themselves. The core command to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18) is itself a central text in assessing a Jewish stance on climate change – we must love not only our immediate neighbor, but everyone with whom we share today’s ‘global village’. And since we also experience God through the Other, we must emulate God’s special concern for those most structurally disadvantaged, for the poor and the weak and the old. Jewish tradition asks not only for a robust defense of Creation, but for solutions which expect those who are most privileged to give up more – and which simultaneously advance the interests of poorer individuals and regions and nations.

As theologian-of-relationship Martin Buber (1878-1965) wrote, “finally, love of the Creator and love of that which God has created are one and the same” – you simply can’t be rightly ‘religious’ without loving your human, and your non-human, neighbor.

* Finally, the very Jewish calendar itself is replete with weekly and annual hints of our interconnectedness, and our profound responsibility. The Jewish calendar, whose months are lunar months (like the Muslim) but whose periodic “leap month” keeps it linked to solar cycles (like the Gregorian/Christian), ensures that Jews remain ever mindful of the sacred cycles of light, day and night. The great annual festivals are all placed around harvests – Passover in early spring, Shavuot in late spring, and Sukkot in autumn – marking sacred cycles of rain and growth and life. Our holidays connect us not just with history, but explicitly with nature; they remind us of our own vulnerability, and our dependence on the natural world.

Above all, the weekly cycle lifts up Shabbat, the Sabbath – that most special day, on which traditionally Jews neither produce nor consume, but rather appreciate and enjoy – as a striking antidote to all that is wrong about today’s society, economy, and polity. It is “a time of being rather of doing” (per Abraham Joshua Heschel’s magisterial 1951 The Sabbath). While continued growth in the material realm
comes at some marginal environmental cost, the social-communal-spiritual realm of Sabbath can grow without limit. Judaism’s most sacred day, whose influence is meant to extend over and to influence its six siblings, is devoted to such replenishable sources of meaning as fellowship, rest, song, prayer, and study. By so setting up the weekly rhythm of Jewish life, Shabbat calls us to sacred sustainability.

In short, a strong environmental ethic emerges from Jewish tradition. This ethic insists that we do much more to protect what’s left of Creation, and inject humility and sustainability into the impact that our one species is having on the rest of the world. It is deeply concerned for human advancement, but with a clear emphasis on the long-term over the short-term, and on the good of the many over the good of the few. It has an empirical thirst and a healthy respect for science, and has proven itself over millennia to be ready to embrace the implications of each new and peer-reviewed data set. It tells us to halt climate change for social, ecological, and intergenerational reasons alike. It directs anyone who is paying attention to help the upcoming 18th gathering of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Conference of Parties to be a true turning point, when our world slows its further destabilization of its climate and both mitigates and adapts to the climate change we’ve already caused.

Many initiatives in the Jewish world are moving in these very directions, and offer further resources. They include the umbrella national Jewish environmental group www.coejl.org; the new eco-Jewish portal www.jewecology.com which includes great text materials from www.CanfeiNesharim.org; sustainable food and “Jews on Bikes” via www.hazon.org; green Jewish education at www.tevcenter.org; progressive perspectives from www.shalomctr.org; and important efforts within each major denomination (Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist, Reform, Renewal) as well.

An ancient midrash condemns a boat passenger who began to drill under their seat, and tried to ‘justify’ it in the name of private property, since he had paid for that seat (Vayikra Rabbah 4:6). The text reminds us “yes, you have rights to your money and possessions and livelihood, but those rights are not unlimited; care for others must factor centrally into every decision.” Judaism insists that as passengers on a small boat, or on a large-yet-fragile Spaceship Earth, we’re all in this together. We must act decisively, and quickly, as shomrei adamah, defenders of Creation. Tradition is on our side, but time is not. As the Talmudic sage Hillel asked, at the end of a restatement of the Golden Rule: “If not now, when?”