

Judaism's Perspective on Trees and Ecology

Sources for Rabbi Dr. Zvi A. Yehuda's Class

הקדמה: בבלי ברכות מג:ב:

One who goes out to the plant fields during the month of Nisan – or any other season – and observes blooming trees, says: ‘Barukh Atta Hashem’ – ‘I thank You Hashem, Source of all my plenty’ – ‘Who missed nothing in His universe, and created there worthy creatures and beautiful trees, to bring enjoyment to human beings’ – thus creating a fixed and steady natural environment.

[א] וּמָלְאוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וּכְבֹשֶׁהָ. בְּרֵאשִׁית אֶ:כּו, כה; ב:טו:

The Torah indicates that it is the human role to protect and preserve the natural environment – for each one is a part of G-d's universe and responsible for it.

G-d said: let Us (Me) make Adam in Our (My) image and likeness, to rule over all the animals (fauna), and G-d wished humankind well, charging it to propagate, settle Earth and cultivate it. Some non-Jewish views maintain that 'רדו', 'rule', in the imperative, orders humankind to exploit and subdue the natural environment. Contrarily, the Rabbinic view is that humans, as G-d's partners, are tasked to value and guard the environment – neither to exploit it nor to worship it.

[ב] וְהָיָה מִסְגֵּיךָ קְדוֹשׁ. דברים כג:יג-יד:

The Torah teaches that we shall keep the environment distinguished and clean. You should have an assigned place outside your dwelling quarters for private relief. The Biblical law stems from the lack of proper sanitation in antiquity. In the Talmudic period only the rich had their toilet close to the dining table. It is indicative that the Torah and later the Jewish Codes deal openly and starkly with the laws of the Toilet. This topic is a significant part of biological reality, and the Torah is not esoteric but realistic and practical. Also, it sharply illustrates Judaism's interest in ecology, and its purpose to keep the natural environment sanitary and pure, ritualistically as well as hygienically.

[ג] בְּזֵי אֻקְלִין מִסְכּוֹת קִטְנוֹת מִסְכַּת דֶּרֶךְ אֶרֶץ פֶּרֶק דְּהַלְכָה א

Torah teaches to show respect for food and not abuse it. Besides being a religious demand – to express thankfulness to G-d and show appreciation of His flow of goodness – it is concurrently an environmental concern. It instills and fortifies our self-sense that we are not to act as uncaring users of food, but rather as dependent

on nutrition, and should feel responsible to protect the nourishing ecological environment. In addition to Scriptures' emphasis on G-d's nourishing attribute, our Sages insisted on showing special respect to bread (pat; פַּת) in particular, not throwing it in the garbage, and if found on the floor, raising it. Also, the Sages instructed to eat in a respectful manner. Torah scholars do not eat or drink while standing.

[ד] לֹא־תִשְׁחִית דְּבָרִים כִּי־ט-כ:

'Do Not Destroy!' – It is our duty to preserve useful trees and not destroy anything beneficial to the environment and to human need.

When you blockade a city for many years – יָמִים רַבִּים ('many days') – to fight over it and capture it, do not destroy – לֹא־תִשְׁחִית – its [edible] tree-plant, striking it with an axe, for from it you eat, do not cut it down – וְאַתּוֹ לֹא תִקְרַח. Is the tree of the field like a human person that can hide from you when it is besieged?! However, a tree-plant you know to be nonedible – you may destroy and cut down, to build a siege around the warring city – אֶתּוֹ תִשְׁחִית – until the city is vanquished. It does not have to be physically overcome; preferably, it can make peace. Do not combat defenseless and non-involved people.

The premise of the rhetorical question about trees and persons is that it is immoral to combat the defenseless and the non-involved. 'Vanquishing' means subjection of the enemy, not necessarily its annihilation. Peace is the goal.

Destructiveness is a threefold offence:

- A Against G-d, showing disregard to His illustrious Creation.
- B Against oneself, indulging in wanton conduct.
- C Against the environment, not caring to cherish and preserve it.

To be an environmentalist is to follow a significant aspect of Torah's teaching.

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Preface:

בבלי ברכות מג:ב [בעברית]:

אמר רב יהודה: היוצא בימי ניסן – וכן בעונה אחרת – ורואה אילנות מלבלבים אומר: ברוך אתה השם א-להינו מלך העולם, שלא חסר בעולמו כלום, וברא בו בריות טובות ואילנות טובים להנות בהם בני אדם.

One who goes out – to the plant fields – during the month of Nisan – or any other season – and observes blooming trees, says: ‘Barukh Atta Hashem’ – ‘I thank You Hashem, Source of all my plenty’ – ‘Who missed nothing in His universe, and created there worthy creatures and beautiful trees, to bring enjoyment to human beings’ – thus creating a fixed and steady natural environment.

We will endeavor together to explore some of Torah's teaching on the human obligation and responsibility towards the natural environment.

[א] ומלאו את-הארץ וכבשה.

The Torah indicates that it is the human role to protect and preserve the natural environment – for each one is a part of G-d's universe and responsible for it.

בראשית א:כו, כח; ב:טו:

(כו) ויאמר א-להים געשה אדם בצלמנו כדמותנו וירדו בדגת הים ובעוף השמים ובבהמה ובכל-הארץ ובכל-הרמש הרמש על-הארץ. (כח) ויברך אתם א-להים ויאמר להם א-להים פרו ורבו ומלאו את-הארץ וכבשה, וירדו בדגת הים ובעוף השמים ובכל-חיה הרמשת על-הארץ. (ב:טו) ויקח השם א-להים את האדם, וינחהו בגן עדן לעבדה ולשמרה:

Explanation: G-d said: let Us (Me) make Adam in Our (My) image and likeness, to rule over all the animals (fauna), and G-d wished humankind well, charging it to propagate, settle Earth and cultivate it. Some non-Jewish views maintain that 'רדו', 'rule', in the imperative, orders humankind to exploit and subdue the natural environment. Contrarily, the Rabbinic view is that humans, as G-d's partners, are tasked to value and guard the environment – neither to exploit it nor to worship it.

[ב] וְהָיָה מִחֲנִיף קָדוֹשׁ.

The Torah teaches that we shall keep the environment distinguished and clean.

דברים כג:יג-יד:

וְיָד תִּהְיֶה לָּךְ מִחוּץ לַמִּחֲנֶה וְיֵצְאתָ שָׁמָּה חוּץ. וְיָתֵד תִּהְיֶה לָּךְ עַל אֲזֵנֶיךָ וְהָיָה בְּשִׁבְתְּךָ חוּץ וְחִפְרְתָהּ בָּהּ וְשָׂבַת וְכִסִּיתָ אֶת צִאְתָּהּ. כִּי הַשָּׁמַיִם אֱלֹהֶיךָ מִתְהַלֵּךְ בְּקֶרֶב מִחֲנֶה, לְהַצִּילְךָ וְלִתֵּת אֵיבֶיךָ לִפְנֵיךָ, וְהָיָה מִחֲנִיף קָדוֹשׁ, וְלֹא יִרְאֶה בָּהּ עֵרוֹת דָּבָר וְשָׁב מֵאֲחֵרֶיךָ.

Explanation: You should have an assigned place outside your dwelling quarters for private relief. The Biblical law stems from the lack of proper sanitation in antiquity. In the Talmudic period only the rich had their toilet close to the dining table. It is indicative that the Torah and later the Jewish Codes deal openly and starkly with the laws of the Toilet. This topic is a significant part of biological reality, and the Torah is not esoteric but realistic and practical. Also, it sharply illustrates Judaism's interest in ecology, and its purpose to keep the natural environment sanitary and pure, ritualistically as well as hygienically.

רמב"ם משנה תורה הלכות מלכים ו:יד:

(יד) וְאָסוּר לְהִפְנוֹת בְּתוֹךְ הַמִּחֲנֶה, אוֹ עַל פְּנֵי הַשָּׂדֶה בְּכָל מְקוֹם; אֲלֵא מִצְוֹת עֲשֵׂה לְמִקְוֵה דָרָךְ שֶׁם מִיִּחְדָּת לְהִפְנוֹת בָּהּ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמָר 'וְיָד תִּהְיֶה לָּךְ מִחוּץ לַמִּחֲנֶה' (דברים כג:יג). (טו) וְכֵן מִצְוֹת עֲשֵׂה לְהִיּוֹת יָתֵד לְכָל אֲחֵד וְאֲחֵד תְּלוּיָה עִם כְּלֵי מְלַחְמָתוֹ, יֵצֵא בְּאוֹתָהּ הַדֶּרֶךְ, וְיִחַפֵּר בָּהּ, וְיִפְנֶה, וְיִכְסֶה. שֶׁנֶּאֱמָר 'וְיָתֵד תִּהְיֶה לָּךְ עַל-אֲזֵנֶךָ' (דברים כג, יד). וְבֵין שְׁנֵי עֲמֻקֵּי אֲרוֹן, בֵּין שְׁאִיִן עֲמֻקֵּי – כָּךְ הֵם עוֹשִׂים תָּמִיד, שֶׁנֶּאֱמָר 'וְהָיָה מִחֲנִיף, קָדוֹשׁ'.

Translation:

It is forbidden to relieve oneself within the army camp or in the open fields anywhere. It is a 'Do it' precept, מִצְוֹת עֲשֵׂה, to fix a way to an assigned location (Devarim 23:13), 'You must have a 'site' יָד outside the camp. It is also a religious requirement, מִצְוֹת עֲשֵׂה (ibid, 23;14) to carry a spike to dig the hole and afterwards cover it. This is required always, even when the Aron is not in the camp. It says: 'Your camp shall be distinguished'. In addition to the clear theological reason, the ecological one is clear: 'Do not pollute your environment!'

[ג] בְּזוּי אוֹכְלִין

Torah teaches to show respect for food and not abuse it. Besides being a religious demand – to express thankfulness to G-d and show appreciation of His flow of goodness – it is concurrently an environmental concern. It instills and fortifies our self-sense that we are not to act as uncaring users of food, but rather as dependent on nutrition, and should feel responsible to protect the nourishing ecological environment.

מסכתות קטנות מסכת דרך ארץ פרק ד הלכה א
תלמיד חכם לא יאכל מעמד ולא ישקה מעמד.

Explanation:

In addition to Scriptures' emphasis on G-d's nourishing attribute, our Sages insisted on showing special respect to bread (pat; פת) in particular, not throwing it in the garbage, and if found on the floor, raising it. Also, the Sages instructed to eat in a respectful manner. Torah scholars do not eat or drink while standing.

[ד] לא־תשחית

The Torah instructs: 'Do Not Destroy!' – It is our duty to preserve useful trees and not destroy anything beneficial to the environment and to human need.

דברים כ:ט-כ:

(ט) כִּי־תצור אֶל־עיר יָמִים רַבִּים לְהִלָּחֵם עָלֶיהָ לְתַפְשָׁהּ, לֹא־תִשְׁחִית אֶת־עֵצָהּ, לְגִדּוֹחַ עָלָיו גִּרְזוֹ, כִּי מִמֶּנּוּ תֹאכַל, וְאֵתוֹ לֹא תִכְרֹת. כִּי הָאָדָם עֵץ הַשָּׂדֶה לִבָּא מִפְּנֵיךָ בַּמְצוֹר! (כ) רַק עֵץ אֲשֶׁר־תִּדְעֶה כִּי לֹא־עֵץ מֵאֲכֹל הוּא, אֵתוֹ תִּשְׁחִית וְכָרְתָּ, וּבְנִיתָ מְצוֹר עָלֶיהָ עִיר אֲשֶׁר־הוּא עֹשֶׂה עִמָּךְ מִלְחָמָה - עַד רִדְתָּהּ.

Translation:

When you blockade a city for many years – יָמִים רַבִּים (lit., 'days') – to fight over it and capture it, do not destroy – לא־תִשְׁחִית – its [edible] tree-plant, striking it with an axe, for from it you eat, do not cut it down – וְאֵתוֹ לֹא תִכְרֹת. Is the tree of the field like a human person that can hide from you when it is besieged?! However, a tree-plant you know to be nonedible – you may destroy and cut down, to build a siege around the warring city – אֵתוֹ תִּשְׁחִית – until the city is vanquished. It does not have to be physically overcome; preferably, it can make peace.

Concepts:

Do not combat defenseless and non-involved people.

The Deuteronomic corpus of moral and social laws concludes with a condemning passage on Amalek (26:17-19): 'Remember what Amalek did to you on the way, when you were leaving Mizraim; he met you on the way by chance, and attacked your 'tail', those who were trailing behind at the rear of the camp, while you were tired and exhausted and he – Amalek – did not fear God.

The segment on Remembering Amalek has a purpose. It illustrates the antithesis of Jewish morality. The Torah upholds law and order. Amalek represents cowardly wickedness. At the conclusion of its legal-moral charter, the Torah instructs us to

‘Remember Amalek’ – to consider how despicable is his conduct, and erase any vestige of Amalek’s traits from our way of life.

רש"י:

כי האדם עץ השדה לבא מפניו במצור?! – הרי 'כי' משמש בלשון 'דילמא' – שמא האדם עץ השדה, להכניס בתוך המצור מפניו, להתנסר ב'סורי רעב וצמא פאנשי העיר? למה תשחיתנו?!

Explanation:

Rashi comments that the Torah’s usage of ‘days’ instead of ‘years’ yields a Midrashic interpretation (Sifrei 203) that no siege be layed around cities of other nations, less than three days before Shabbat. Also we learn that a way of peace is to be opened two to three days before starting a war, as David acted in Ziklag – Tel Shera north of Beer-Sheva; Shemuel II 1:1. Scripture deals here with a non-obligatory war. The premise of the rhetorical question about trees and persons is that it is immoral to combat the defenseless and the non-involved. ‘Vanquishing’ means subjection of the enemy, not necessarily its annihilation. Peace is the goal.

רמב"ם משנה תורה הלכות מלכים ו:ז, י:

(ז) כשצריך על עיר לתקפה, אין מקיפין אותה מארבע רוחותיה אלא משלוש רוחותיה, ומניחין מקום לבורח, ולמי שרוצה להמלט על נפשו. שונאמר 'ויצבאו, על-מדין, פאשר צוה ה', את-מש' (במדבר לא, ז) – מפי השמועה למדו, שבפך צוהו. (י) ולא האילנות בלבד, אלא כל המשבר פלים, וקורע בגדים, והורס בננו, וסותם מעין, ומאבד מאכלות דרך השקמה, עובר ב'לא-תשחית' (דברים כ, יט).

Translation:

(7) When we blockade a city to capture it, we do not surround it on its four sides, but only on its three sides, thus we leave the option for the escapee and for whoever wants to run for his life. As it says (Bemidbar 31:7), on the retaliatory war against Midian: They surrounded Midian following the order of G-d to Moshe. According to tradition, this was the order.

(10) Not just destroying trees is forbidden, but whoever brakes utensils or tears garments or destroys a structure or halts a streaming well or ruins food – in a destructive intent – breaks the law of ‘Do Not Destroy’ – Lo Tashhit – 'לא-תשחית'.

Destructiveness is a threefold offence:

- A Against G-d, showing disregard to His illustrious Creation.
- B Against oneself, indulging in wanton conduct.
- C Against the environment, not caring to cherish and preserve it.

To be an environmentalist is to follow a significant aspect of Torah’s teaching.