

Jewish Environmental Ethics

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A little more than thirty-five years ago, I served as a rabbi in India. When one went to India at that time, of course, one went to Nepal. So I took a week off and went to Katmandu. It was an absolute paradise. From this ancient, beautiful city, one could see the Himalayas covered in snow against pure blue skies. Running through the city was a pristine river called the Bagmati. It is a holy river, where people bathed. The waters were so limpid and pure, you could drink them. The city was small and you could take a bicycle and ride eight or ten kilometers out to the surrounding, even smaller townships. These were ancient townships with gorgeous temples such as Badgaon. I thought then that if there is a *Gan Eden Alei Adamot*, —a garden of Eden on earth—this would be it. If I wished to live in a land outside of Israel, it would be Katmandu. I was offered very attractive jobs there. At that time, very few Europeans were in this part of the world.

A little over a month ago, my wife and I were invited to an international conference in Katmandu on conservation. It was planned by two organizations, the World Wildlife Fund, which is a massive well-known global organization, and the Alliance of Religions for Conservation (ARC), which consisted of representatives of twelve major religions, each trying to demonstrate that his respective religion had a clear interest in conservation and ecology. It was not the sort of conference in which participants tried to persuade one another of the higher ethical principles inherent in their respective religions. Instead, we were united in our goal of dealing with the challenges and dangers to the planet that we all inhabit.

The earth is, at least so far, the only home we have. I am reminded of the *midrash* about a ship in which many people were sailing. When one of the passengers started to drill a hole underneath his seat, the others began to protest: “What are you doing? You’re making a hole in

the bottom of the ship.” He replied, “Well, it’s only under my seat.” And so when I came to Katmandu, I came back to a completely different place. You couldn’t see the sky. It was overcast, darkened by dirty, smelly clouds. The Bagmati was a cesspool and very much smaller than I had known it to be previously. It had shrunk to a size smaller than the Jordan and it reeked. When you walked through the streets, you could smell the kerosene being used for cheap fuels in cars. My wife bought a *pashmima*— which is apparently what one has to get when one goes to this part of the world—and it smelled of paraffin. It had to be rinsed out. You couldn’t see the mountains at all. You didn’t realize that you were in the valley of Katmandu, surrounded by the highest and the most beautiful mountains in the world. You had to go out of the valley and climb another thousand meters or so in order to be able to see the actual mountains.

The city is now a huge, sprawling metropolis of over two and one-half million souls. Over a quarter of the population of Nepal is now concentrated in this urban sprawl. Those little townships ten miles away that I used to visit by bicycle are all a part of the same city. They are linked up with no boundaries to demarcate borders. The roads are rutted. People walk around with cloth masks around their faces. If there was an ideal venue for an international conference to discuss conservation and ecology, this was it. Katmandu is now an example of how you can ruin the house in which you live, the garden you’re meant to be enjoying.

It is very clear to me that this is an issue that we as Orthodox Jews have to relate to. I do not know what the situation is here in the United States, but in Israel the conservationists, the Greenpeace people, are seen as political leftists, anti-religious people who have created an alternative religion. Theirs is not a theocentric faith, but a geocentric one; it might be called geotheism, the

Earth as god, a god dictating to us how we must live. Orthodox Jews are not involved in this enterprise, for they identify these movements with non-religious, even anti-religious, elements and automatically reject them, ascribing to them no value whatsoever. They recognize that “*Ladonai ha-arets u-melo’ah*” (Ps. 24:1) but stress its counterpoint: “*Ha-arets natan li-venai adam.*” (Ps. 115:16; see *BT Berakhot* 35a) In other words, humanity is the pinnacle of creation and the world is there for us to use and even exploit. The materials that are available to us are for our own pleasure and benefit. If one is a religious person, one could even say that the earth is given to humanity to serve its higher spiritual needs. Because of this perspective, the idea that we have to be concerned about the only home that we have is a notion that doesn’t seem to have penetrated the Orthodox community.

Nevertheless, some segments of the community are beginning to involve themselves in these issues. I’d like to talk not on the practical level, as does Dr. Schwartz¹, but on the theoretical, ideological level. He mentioned, albeit parenthetically, *kile-ahar yad*, a very important concept. He spoke of “stewardship.” I see the first chapter of Genesis, the story of creation, as a very deep and penetrating message to all Jews, particularly all Orthodox Jews. The picture of *Gan Eden* (paradise) that Genesis presents us with is a picture of an ideal ecological state of affairs. Scripture mentions fresh air, pure water, rivers going out in different directions; gefilte fish available to whoever wanted to take it! This was an ecologically balanced framework. In many ways this is the Torah’s ideal vision. One did not have to labor in order to obtain what one wanted. One picked one’s fruit, one ate it, the animals lived harmoniously with the few human beings that were to be found there. Man is placed in a framework of ecological harmony and balance, in which all his needs are readily met. It appears that everything is there to serve him: the trees to feed him; the leaves to clothe him. But this can lead him to the foolish notion that he is actually the owner, the lord of the manor, the person who’s in charge, the person who has dominion over the entire world in which he finds himself. To offset this possible misunderstanding of man’s position within the framework in which he’s been placed, God tells him that there’s something—one

tree, one fruit—that he’s not to partake of. The *midrashim* offer various suggestions as to what it is: wheat, olives, vine. But its identity doesn’t matter; the point is that something was unavailable for man’s personal use. This limitation was meant to teach that man is not the master. Somebody—Something—else is the master; man is only a steward. His mandate is “*le-’ovdah u le-shomrah*” (Gen. 2:15), to tend the Garden and to preserve it, to look after it and to keep it. He is a “gardener,” neither the owner, nor the master. He has no dominion.

Adam sinned when he thought that he could take over everything for himself. When he used that which had been forbidden to him, he denied his stewardship and expressed his sense of absolute dominion over the whole of his realm. That was the reason that he had to be expelled. Upon his expulsion, the whole ecological balance was subverted and a new imbalance arose: *qots ve-dardar* (Gen. 3:18), weeds and thorns were to grow. One now has to labor hard in order to get one’s food. It becomes very, very evident that man is no longer master, no longer in absolute control, and that one has to live in accord with certain rules and regulations that have been given by the One who is above man. By keeping to them, one will be able to survive at a certain minimal level.

The biblical text describes how this continued for a number of generations but that people again became egotistical. They began to think, “Yes, well, we really are masters. We can take things over.” The concept of property, of ownership, of personal responsibility, doesn’t really exist in a totally hedonistic and egotistical ideology. One takes whatever one can get. *Kol de-alim gevar*: Whoever is stronger will take and own things. Nature is no longer something one has to preserve. One can modify it. One can change it. One can do genetic engineering. The Torah tells us that “*vatimallei ha-arets hama*” (The earth was filled with *hama*. Gen. 6:11). Rashi explains “*hama*” as the loss of the concept of duty regarding another’s ownership rights. One takes what one can, gets what one can, owns what one can. It doesn’t matter how one gets it; it all must be possessed. “*Ki hishbit kol basar et darko al ha-arets*”. (“All flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth.” Gen. 6:12). Rashi says

¹ See accompanying article.

that they started *kil'ayim*, improper cross-fertilization of certain species. In other words, they began to change the laws of nature—possibly through genetic engineering. They thought, “It’s all in our hands. We can do with it as we wish.” In their view, *homer be-yad ha-yotser, anu yotserim*: We are the people who are in charge. We can alter things. We can change things according to our own vision and our own path. But the Torah tells us that there ensued what in modern terms is called an eco-disaster: a flood. As soon as these basic values were done away with, were abolished, ceased to be a part of the mandate that man was meant to keep, a disaster fell upon mankind. These messages, which might sound like *drush*, are not. They are very basic to Judaism and they reverberate throughout the whole of the *halakhah*.

Let us consider just one simple example, *shemittah*, the sabbatical year. This year is a *shemittah* year, and it has much to teach us. It functions on three levels. First is the strictly agricultural level. It is impossible to exploit the earth without pause. The soil cannot generate crops year after year without losing its nutrients. You have to let the earth, the soil, rest – “*az tirtseh ha-arets et shabbetotehab*”. (“Then shall the land be paid her sabbaths”. Lev. 26:34). We know that in the medieval era, the feudal system divided parcels of land into three fields, one of which would be left fallow at any given time. This made for a double *shemittah*, as it were. It similarly appears that fields in the Land of Israel in rabbinic times were similarly left fallow once every three years, and not merely in the seventh, as reported in *Yerushalmi Shevi`it*. The earth had to gather its strength, had to re-charge its batteries in order to be able to produce crops and to remain fertile.

The second level, beyond the agricultural, is the sociological. What distinguishes the classes of society from one another is wealth and possessions. In a rural, agricultural society, wealth equals property. People thought that they owned their own fields. They were more powerful because they had authority and control over the earth. But every seventh year, there was an equalization, a quasi-socialist whittling away of the classes. It was a sort of mystical, almost Marxist solution in which everybody had equal right to take from the land and there was no absolute ownership on the part of any one person. This was reinforced by the annulment of debts at the same time, so that what makes a person poor—his debt to someone else—is suddenly cancelled. Likewise,

slaves are freed. These sociological implications of *shemittah* are clear and understandable.

Of course, the most important but also the simplest lesson this teaches is that we do not own the lands we think we own. We work it. We’re its stewards. We’re its guardians. We use it for six years and we come to think of it as our own land. We have absolute rights over it. We can do with what we want with it. But the seventh year teaches us that this is not so. Suddenly the land becomes no longer ours. Anybody can come and take from it as much as he wishes, (subject only to some limitations). Hence the concept that the land on which we live, *Erets yisrael*, is a place given to us *le-ovdah u-le-shomrah*, to work and preserve. We are guardians over it, not masters over it. This is very clearly implied in the *halakhot* of *shevi`it*.

Bal tashbit, the prohibition of wasting resources, is one of the basic mandates of the conservationists. Yet *bal tashbit* teaches us something else: One does not have the right to destroy things that are in one’s possession.

Similarly, there is a prohibition against harming oneself bodily: *ve-nishmartem me`od le-nafshoteikhem* (Deut. 4:15). So, too, you cannot take something that belongs to you and randomly destroy it. From the point of view of the laws of ownership, *hilkhot kinyanim*, I can take anything I own and destroy it, throw it away. Why not? It is mine. Yet from the point of view of *bal tashbit*, I may not do so. It is not permitted because what we think is ours, is not ours. We are all tenants. We must be aware of that and we must think also of the future.

We all know the very famous story of Honi Ha-Magel, who saw an old man planting a carob tree said to him, “How long does it take until you get carobs?” “Seventy years,” the old man replied, “but I came to the world and I found carob trees that were planted by my grandparents. I am planting trees for my grandchildren.” So we dare not think only of ourselves and of our immediate benefit. We must think ahead precisely because there is a mandate of *horashah*, of bequeathing: a person must transmit what he has received to coming generations. Because it is not yours, you do not have the right to decline to pass it on to the next generation. In *Erets Yisrael* we fight to keep every meter of land. We destone the hills. We have *hitnahaluyot* and, at the same time, we’re planning a transnational highway, which is going to have a dire ecological effect upon the whole

country. The whole of our coastal plain is becoming an urban sprawl at the expense of agricultural land. If it continues this way, Haifa, with its industrial complexes, oil refineries, *qiryat ha-peladah*, may become, Heaven forbid, something like Katmandu is now. One won't be able to see the skies and one won't be able to see Mount Carmel. Even now, it's not particularly pleasant to walk around the docks. If you blow your nose, your handkerchief - or whatever you use - will become grey.

You have been introduced to a number of directions of a practical nature, of how to face some of these challenges. The challenges are enormous and cannot be dealt with by a single individual or even a single government. They can only be dealt with at the global levels. The problems are even more complex than I have suggested here. As I said, Orthodoxy in Israel has not yet involved itself in these issues, nor has it even come to realize that these are problems it must face or should face.

One of the great challenges of the present world is population growth. Dr. Schwartz mentioned the problem of food, i.e. how much food has to be produced in order to feed the global population. The population is growing exponentially. When I was in India, there were four hundred million people there. Now there are over a billion. It has not been a long time, only a generation and

a half. China then had less than one billion and now it has more than two billion. These countries are not large areas as a percentage of the globe. Population control may be one of the answers, but Jewish religious people don't like to talk about that issue because it's problematic. It doesn't really pertain to us because we're a small nation that recently lost an enormous portion of its membership. And yet this is another reason why we push these issues aside and we blind ourselves to what's going on around us. We must find solutions, but before we search for solutions we have to realize that there exist problems and there exist challenges. They are probably the most important challenges that are facing the global community, and we are part of that community. We cannot make a hole in the boat beneath our own seats and claim it affects only us. The time has come—indeed the time came long ago—when Orthodox Jewry, or Modern Orthodox Jewry, or Jewry in general needs to wake up to the need to confront these issues.

These are issues that are of a basic Jewish religious spiritual nature. The message from our classic texts is clear. I cannot say that the answers are simple, but the warnings are blatant. If we develop sensitivity to these challenges, and if we collectively seek solutions within our communities and our congregations, we will surely find those solutions.