

Respect for God's World: The Biblical and Rabbinic Foundations of Environmentalism

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ABSTRACT

The ancients faced many of the same environmental issues that society is facing today. This paper demonstrates that the Bible and the Talmud are the ideal starting points for those interested in raising moral standards for business and society when it comes to the environment. Issues of concern to the ancients included conservation of resources, waste, pollution, animal rights, beautifying the environment, and appreciating the world and improving it.

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Environmentalists work to protect and improve the quality of life and are concerned with issues that include conservation of resources, pollution control and prevention, protecting endangered species, and control of land use. Many environmental issues that society is confronting today were faced by the ancients. The Pentateuch (The Five Books of Moses, the Torah) is an ideal starting point for those interested in raising moral standards for business and society when it comes to all kinds of issues, including the environment.

Jewish oral law elaborates on the written law contained in the Pentateuch. The Talmud is the compilation of Jewish oral law and consists of the Mishna, originally an ancient oral tradition, compiled and redacted by Rabbi Yehuda the *Nasi* (President of the Sanhedrin), approximately 1,900 years ago; and the Gemara, commentaries and discussions on the Mishna, completed about 1,500 years ago. The Talmud often uses a case-method approach as a means of illustrating a particular problem or a proposed solution. There were two academies, in Israel and Babylon, independently studying the Mishna. Thus, there are two versions of the Talmud: the Jerusalem Talmud, a product of the academies in Israel, and the Babylonian Talmud, a product of the academies in Babylon. The Babylonian Talmud is considerably larger than that of the Jerusalem Talmud, and it is more authoritative. References to the Talmud without qualification are usually to the Babylonian Talmud.

The Talmud is mainly concerned with *halacha* (Jewish law) but also provides a detailed record of the beliefs of the Jewish people, their philosophy, traditions, culture, and folklore, i.e., the *aggadah*

(homiletics). The Midrash, a separate scripture, recorded the views of the Talmudic sages and is mainly devoted to the exposition of Biblical verses.

Although the world of several thousand years ago was a time when individuals mainly lived in an agricultural society, many of the ideas of the Pentateuch and the Talmud can be easily extended to our modern industrial society. It is likely that pollution was not a serious problem in Biblical times. Despite this, the Bible contains many laws that demonstrate the importance of caring for the environment.

Conservation of Resources

The Bible prohibits soldiers from cutting down fruit trees even when conducting a siege of an enemy's city (Deuteronomy 20:19). In the words of the Bible: "When you besiege a city a long time, in making war against it to take it, do not destroy [*tashchit*] its trees by swinging an axe against them."

The Talmud extends the prohibition of not destroying fruit trees to any type of wasteful destruction and considers wasteful destruction of any kind a violation of Torah law (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbos 129a; Babylonian Talmud, Bava Kama 91b). This is known as the principle of *bal tashchit* (literally meaning "do not destroy"), a prohibition against unnecessary destruction or waste. Schwartz (1997) shows how more recent rabbinical authorities have applied the principle of *bal tashchit*. This paper, however, will be concerned with the ancient rabbinic traditions of the Talmud and Midrash.

The Talmud allows one to rend his or her garment for a dead person as a sign of mourning. Rabbi Elazar asserts, however, that "one who rends his garments too much for a dead person violates the commandment of *bal tashchit*" (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Kama 91b). Rabbi Chanina declared that his son Shivchat died because he cut down a fig tree before its time, i.e., while it was still productive (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Kama 91b). The Talmudic sages found homiletic support to demonstrate the seriousness of unnecessary destruction. King David suffered from a rare illness when he was old. His

body and his clothing could not provide him with necessary warmth and he was always cold. The only way he could find warmth was by having a young woman, Abishag the Shunammite, serve as his attendant and lie next to him (I Kings 1:1-4). The Midrash claims that King David contracted this unusual disease as a divine punishment for cutting King Saul's garment years back. David covertly cut Saul's garment while the latter was relieving himself in order to prove to Saul that he could have killed him, had he so desired (I Samuel 24:5). The Talmud declares: "Whoever treats garments in a disgraceful manner will in the end derive no benefit from them" (Babylonian Talmud, Berachos 62b).

Jacob crossed the Jabbok River with his family and his possessions in his attempt to run away from his brother Esau. The Bible states (Genesis 32:25): "And Jacob was left alone." It is not clear why Jacob was alone if he had crossed the river with his entire family. The Talmud's reason is that Jacob went back for some small jars. Even though he was fleeing for his life he did not want to abandon his property. The Talmud notes that righteous people are very careful with their possessions because they work hard and everything they acquire is via honest means (Babylonian Talmud, Chullin 91a). Leaving even small items behind would have been considered unnecessarily wasteful.

The Talmud does not only prohibit wasteful consumption, but requires that individuals treat food with respect since it sustains life. The Talmud prohibits people from throwing food around; using food as a support for some object; using food as a covering; using food in lieu of cutlery to eat food (Babylonian Talmud, Soferim 3:14). The Talmud has special rules to ensure that bread – the staff of life – is treated with great respect. Four rules regarding the use of bread are: one should not place raw meat on bread, full cups should not be passed over a piece of bread since one might accidentally spill something on the bread, bread should not be thrown, and bread should not be used to support or bolster a dish (Babylonian Talmud, Berachos 50b). Moreover, the Talmud warns that individuals who are not careful and step on food crumbs will be punished with poverty (Babylonian Talmud, Chullin 105b). One individual who ate bread on the grass was so careful about not stepping on crumbs that he used a shovel to dig up the area

and threw everything into the river (Babylonian Talmud, Chullin 105b).

Voluntary simplicity is an idea that is alluded to in the Talmud. As a matter of fact, there is an opinion in the Talmud that: “an individual who can eat barley bread but eats wheat bread is guilty of transgressing the law of *bal tashchit*. Rabbi Papa states: one who can drink beer but drinks wine instead is guilty of transgressing the law of *bal tashchit*” (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbos 140b). The Talmud concludes, however, that the prohibition of *bal tashchit* does not apply when the “waste” is for the body’s gain, i.e., for health reasons. It would seem that excessive consumption that is not beneficial to one’s health would not be condoned.

In Talmudic times, people believed that the proper and dignified way of clothing the dead was to dress the corpse in expensive garments. The cost became so prohibitive that the expense of burying the deceased was “harder on the relatives than the death itself.” Rabbi Gamliel, who was the *Nasi* (President of the Sanhedrin) changed this wasteful custom by disregarding his own dignity and ordering that he himself would be buried in flaxen garments. After the people saw how Rabbi Gamliel, their leader, was buried, the custom became that all Jews are buried in shrouds made of flax. Rabbi Papa noted that in his day the universal custom had become to bury people in canvas shrouds that merely cost a *zuz* (Babylonian Talmud, Moed Katan 27b).

The sages of the Talmud believed that every creation has a purpose and “Of all that God created in His world, He did not create one thing that is useless” (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbos 77b). This idea is evident when one reads the story of Noah. God instructed Noah to save all species (Genesis 6:19): “And of every living thing, of all flesh, two of every sort shall you bring into the ark to keep alive with you; they shall be male and female.” All species would be saved, as all were useful and each had its own place in the universe.

The Bible prohibits one from taking both the mother bird and the eggs or chicks; one is obligated to send away the mother bird before taking the eggs or chicks (Deuteronomy 22: 6-7). This law is similar

to the one in Leviticus (22:28) that forbids one from slaughtering an animal from one's herd or flock and its offspring on the same day. One reason for these laws is to symbolize that one should not destroy an entire species. Slaughtering both the mother and its offspring is similar to obliterating a species altogether (Nachmanides, Deuteronomy 22:6).

The Talmud demonstrates how snails, flies, hornets, gnats, snakes, spiders, and scorpions have a purpose. The Midrashic interpretation of the verse (Ecclesiastes 3:11) "He [God] made everything beautiful in its time" is that everything God made in His world provides a benefit (Midrash Yalkut Shimoni, I Samuel 21: 131). The Midrash has David saying to God that everything in the universe has a purpose. David, however, did not understand the reason for the existence of insanity. God answered David that he would one day need insanity to save his own life. This is indeed what happened. David had to run away from Saul and go to the land of Gath, a city of the Philistines. David feigned insanity and, even though he was recognized as an Israelite warrior who had slain many of the Philistines, he was left alone (I Samuel 21:11-16). Another version of this ancient story has David asking God what benefit is derived from wasps and spiders. God arranged for both of these creatures to help David when he was running away from Saul (Bialik and Ravnitzky, 1992, 779-780).

The Talmud demonstrates the value of all living creatures by showing that people can learn from them. The Talmud states (Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 100b): "If the Torah had not been given, we would have learned modesty from a cat, not stealing from an ant, sexual chastity from a dove, and conjugal manners from a rooster." A similar idea is expressed in Proverbs (6:6): "Go to the ant, you sluggard; see its ways and be wise."

Harming and Polluting the Environment

The Bible states clearly how God felt about the world after the creation. The verse states

(Genesis 1:31): “And God saw all that He made, and behold it was very good.” Everything created in this world is “good” and one therefore has an obligation to take care of this world and treat it with respect. The Bible makes it clear that the purpose of mankind is to take care of this world. Indeed, the verse states (Genesis 2:15): “And the Lord God took the man [Adam] and placed him into the Garden of Eden, to work it and to protect it.” Humankind has been bestowed with an obligation to settle the world and to protect it from any harm.

God did indeed bless Adam and Eve and say to them (Genesis 1:28): Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that creeps upon the earth.” The meaning of the phrases “have dominion” and “subdue” does not allow us to harm the environment. Adam and Eve were caretakers and their job was to *protect* the land, not to harm. The Midrash (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13) makes this quite clear: “When God created Adam, He took him and led him round all the trees of the Garden of Eden, and said to him, “See My works, how beautiful and praiseworthy they are! Now all that I have created, I created for your benefit. Be careful that you do not ruin and destroy My world; for if you destroy it there is no one to repair it after you.”

The Bible commands the farmer to give the land a complete rest in the seventh year (Leviticus 25:1-7). The purpose of the Sabbatical year may have been to protect the land from depletion. The land must be treated with respect and not abused.

Soldiers are instructed by the Bible to designate a special place outside the camp to be used as a latrine. In addition, soldiers must carry a spade with their weapons and use it to cover their excrement after relieving themselves (Deuteronomy 23:14-15). These laws were not given for purely hygienic reasons (although this may have also been a reason). The reason given is: “Therefore shall your camp be holy; so that He see no unseemly thing in you.” Polluting the scenery with bodily wastes is an improper way to behave.

The Talmud has numerous laws dealing with disposing of wastes. For instance, the Talmud states that an individual who pours out water into public property is liable for any damages that result from this action. Similarly, individuals who hide thorns or broken glass in public property are also liable (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Kama 30a). The Talmud discusses the ideal way of disposing of thorns and broken glass: “The pious people of earlier generations used to hide their thorns and broken glass in their fields and would place them three handbreadths below the surface so that the plow would not be impeded by them” [or so that the plowing would not bring them back to the surface] (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Kama 30a).

Other related laws discussed in the Talmud include the principle that threshing floors must be kept at least 50 cubits from a town (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Bathra 24b). The reason for this is because the chaff produced by the winnowing might harm the townspeople. Graves and tanneries must be kept at least 50 cubits from towns because of the foul odors (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Bathra 25a).

The Talmud states that “an individual who desires to be pious should be very careful in matters of damages.” (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Kama 30a). This means that pious people (and socially responsible corporations) should be especially careful in the area of waste disposal and pollution. The Talmud quotes a popular saying (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Kama 92b): “Into the well from which you have drunk, do not throw any stones.” This idea certainly should be applied to our entire planet.

Humane Treatment of Animals

Respect for God’s world also includes the humane treatment of animals. Animals owned by Jews were supposed to rest on the Sabbath (Exodus 20:10). The Talmud declares that causing pain to animals is a violation of Biblical law and therefore various rabbinical enactments (considered to be of lower stature than Biblical pronouncements) are set aside when the result is that an animal suffers discomfort

(Babylonian Talmud, Shabbos 128b).

The Bible contains several laws dealing with the minimization or avoidance of animal suffering. The Biblical prohibition against eating flesh (or blood) taken from a living creature (Genesis 9:4-5) is listed by the Talmud as one of the seven Noachide laws (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 56a-b). These seven laws are the basic laws of civilization that all humankind is obligated to obey. Thus, all humankind has an obligation to ensure that animals do not suffer needlessly. The Bible states (Deuteronomy 11: 15): “And I will give grass in your fields for your cattle, and you shall eat and be satisfied.” Using this verse, the Talmud derives the law that one is prohibited from eating before providing food for his or her animal (Babylonian Talmud, Berachos 40a).

The Bible forbids the muzzling of an ox [or any animal] when it is working the field (Deuteronomy 25:4) because this causes the animal to suffer. The animal sees the grain but cannot eat it. Similarly, the Bible prohibits one from plowing a field with different species (Deuteronomy 22: 10). The reason is that different kinds of animals (The Bible’s example is an ox and a donkey) do not work as a team since one is bigger and stronger than the other and this causes undue suffering for them (see commentary of Ibn Ezra on this verse). Similarly, sending away the mother bird before taking its fledglings or eggs is a way of minimizing the pain of the mother bird (Deuteronomy 22:6).

The Talmud tells a story to explain why Rabbi Yehuda the *Nasi*, known as Rebbi, suffered for thirteen years with kidney stones and scurvy. His pain was so great that his cries of pain when he went to the bathroom were heard miles away.

There was once a calf being taken to the slaughter. It went and hid its head under Rebbi’s garment and cried. Rebbi said to it: Go! For this you were created. They said [in Heaven]: Since he has no pity, let us bring suffering upon him. The suffering departed because of another

incident. One day, Rebbi's maidservant was sweeping the house. Some weasels had been cast there and she was about to sweep them away. Rebbi told her: Leave them alone. It is written (Psalms 145:9): 'and His mercy is over all His works.' They said [in Heaven]: Since he is so compassionate, let us show compassion to him (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 85a).

Beautifying and Appreciating the Environment

Taking care of this world does not only mean that individuals should not harm the environment in any way but also means that people should do everything possible to protect and beautify the environment. The Bible informs us (Genesis 21:33): "And Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beer Sheba and called there in the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God." At first glance, this verse seems redundant and out of place. The Bible is showing us how much Abraham loved the land. He planted trees to beautify the land and this is one of many ways in which he showed his devotion to the Lord. Jacob, Abraham's grandson, was a shepherd. He was known for doing something quite unusual, so remarkable that a town was named after his deed. The Bible says that (Genesis 33:17): "for his cattle he made *succoth*, (booths or huts) therefore the name of the place is called Succoth." Jacob cared for his animals and built *succoth* to protect them from the elements. Obviously, this was a rarity, an individual who was so concerned about the discomfort of the cattle that he built shelters for them. This is not surprising given the Patriarch's great love for the land.

The Israelites were commanded to provide the Levites with 48 cities in lieu of inheriting a share of land like the other tribes. These cities were supposed to have open spaces of 1,000 cubits around them

(Numbers 35:1-6). The purpose of the open and undeveloped space was to beautify the towns (Babylonian Talmud, Arachin 33b). This may be one of the earliest laws dealing with control of land use. The Talmud has various rules that were enacted to preserve the beauty of the towns. For instance, trees had to be kept a distance of 25 cubits from a town (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Bathra 24b). The ancient towns preferred having an open space in front of them.

Human beings are expected, even required, to appreciate the beauty of nature and thank God for providing a world filled with beauty. In ancient times, Jews brought their first fruits to the Temple in a basket and thanked God (Deuteronomy 26:1-11) by reciting a prayer. The prayer contains the following verse (Deuteronomy 26: 9): “And He brought us to this place, and has given us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”

The sages of the Talmud, therefore, enacted various blessings to thank God, not only for every type of food, but also for the scents of fragrant trees, fruits, and herbs. For instance, the blessing over smelling a fragrant tree is: “Blessed are you, O God our Lord, king of the Universe, who creates fragrant trees.” (Babylonian Talmud, Berachos 43b). The blessing upon seeing fruit trees in bloom is: “Blessed are you, O God our Lord, King of the universe, who has made His world lacking in nothing, and he created in it good creatures and good trees, to provide pleasure to humankind” (Babylonian Talmud, Berachos 43b). There are blessings to recite if one sees towering mountains, seas, colossal rivers, and deserts (Babylonian Talmud, Berachos 54a).

The sages of the Talmud had a great love for their land, the Land of Israel. The Talmud relates how Rabbi Abba kissed the cliffs of Acre and Rabbi Chanina smoothed out and fixed the roads of Israel. Rabbi Chiya b. Gamda demonstrated his great love of the land by rolling in the dust of Israel, since the verse says (Psalms 102:15): “For Your servants take pleasure in its stones and love her dust” (Babylonian Talmud, Kethubos 112a-12b). The Lord Himself demonstrated His great love for the physical Land of Israel by referring to it as the “land flowing with milk and honey.” When Moses encounters God in the

burning bush, he is told (Exodus 3:8): “And I shall come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey.” This description of Israel as a Land Flowing with Milk and Honey is used many times in the Bible.

The following parable in the Talmud demonstrates the great love and appreciation one should have for nature:

A man was journeying in the desert and was hungry, tired, and thirsty. He found a tree with sweet fruits, pleasant shade, and a stream of water flowing beneath it. He ate from its fruit, drank from its stream, and sat in its shade. When he was ready to leave, he said: Tree, tree, with what shall I bless you? Should I say to you, ‘May your fruits be sweet?’ Your fruits are already sweet; ‘That your shade be pleasant?’ Your shade is already pleasant. ‘That a stream of water flow beneath you?’ A stream already flows beneath you. Therefore, ‘May it be God’s will that all shoots planted from you should be just like you’ (Babylonian Talmud, Taanis 5b-6a).

There is even a Jewish mini-holiday for the trees known as *Tu B’Shvat* (the 15th day of *Shvat*, the Hebrew lunar month that occurs in the winter). In the Talmud this day is known as the New Year for Trees (Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashonah 2a). In Talmudic times this had implications for the calculation of tithes. Today, the tradition is for Jews all over the world to eat various fruits from trees on this day. There is also a tradition to plant trees on this day.

The following story, which may be the basis of the Rip Van Winkle legend, makes one wonder

whether Choni Hamagel was punished for not appreciating the importance of planting trees for future generations. Choni Hamagel lived more than 2000 years ago and was known as a miracle worker and as an individual whose prayer was effective. Therefore, during periods of drought, he was the one people asked to pray to God on their behalf (Babylonian Talmud, Taanis 23a).

One day, as Choni Hamagel was traveling along the road, he saw a man planting a carob tree. He said to him: How long will it take for this tree to bear fruit? The man replied: Seventy years. Choni said to him: Are you sure that you will be alive in seventy years? He replied: When I came into the world I found a carob tree; just as my forefathers planted for me, so too I am planting for my children. Choni sat to eat some bread and fell asleep. A grotto formed around him while he slept, and hid him from sight and he slept for seventy years. When he awoke, he saw someone gathering carob from the tree. Choni asked him: Are you the person that planted this tree? He said: No, the tree was planted by my grandfather. Choni said: Apparently, I have slept for seventy years. He noticed that his donkey had given birth to herds of donkeys. He went to his own house and asked: Is the son of Choni Hamagel alive? He was told that the son was no longer living but the son's son was alive. He then said: I am Choni Hamagel but no one believed him. He went to the academy and heard the sages saying that the law is as clear to us as it was in the days of Choni Hamagel; in those days, whenever he came to the academy he clarified any difficulties that we had. Choni said: I am Choni. They did not believe him and they did not treat him with the

proper respect. He was hurt and prayed for his death and died
(Babylonian Talmud, Taanis 23a).

Humankind's responsibility to "replenish and subdue" the earth is the basis of the concept of *tikkun olam*. *Tikkun olam* is the philosophy that people are obligated to repair and perfect the world (in Hebrew, *tikkun* means repair and *olam* means world). Humankind, which has an obligation to imitate God (Leviticus 19:2), was given dominion over the entire earth (Genesis 1:26) for a reason. We are the caretakers of this planet and have to continue God's work of creation by improving the world.

Oleynu is one of the oldest of Jewish prayers (some claim that it goes back to the time of Joshua making it more than 3,000 years old) and it concludes all congregational services. One phrase in this prayer deals with *tikkun olam*, and describes the ideal society "when the world will be perfected under the reign of the Almighty." The concept of *tikkun olam* includes alleviating such world problems as poverty, racism, oppression, and doing everything to improve the environment.

The sages of the Talmud used the principle of *tikkun olam* to enact various laws to help society (e.g., Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 32a, 34b, 40b, 41b, 45a,b). More recently, *tikkun olam* was a major part of the cabala of Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534-1572). Indeed, Rabbi Luria once remarked that the reason for so many problems in the world was because God needs humankind's "help" in repairing the world. God gave humanity free choice and people can allow things to remain in disrepair or they can perfect the world. All of humankind has a responsibility to work on such issues as human rights, the proper treatment of animals, poverty, and the environment and thereby do everything possible to improve the world.

The Talmud also uses the legal principle of *yishuv ha-aretz* (settling the land) to enforce laws that protect the land of Israel from ecological harm. Thus, one was not permitted to use the wood from grape vines and olive trees as pilings for the Temple altar (Babylonian Talmud, Tamid 29a-29b). Helfand (1971) demonstrates how this principle was extended by later Rabbinic sources to protect the environment

anywhere in the world. Helfand states: “*Yishuv ha-aretz* requires man to evaluate his acts and to direct his efforts toward creating a properly balanced environment suitable for human survival and development. Furthermore, it gives man the right and the obligation, through the judicial system, to interfere and even dispense with individual needs and rights in order to achieve this goal.”

Isaiah’s vision of the future of the world is an idyllic, rustic world filled with beauty and peace:

The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat; the calf, the lion cub, and the fatling [will feed] together, and a small child will lead them. A cow and bear will graze together and their young will lie down together. The lion will eat straw like the cattle. An infant will play over a viper’s hole, and a newly weaned child will stretch forth his hand over an adder’s den. They will do no harm or damage anywhere in all of My holy mountain; for the earth will be filled with knowledge of God, as water covers the sea (Isaiah 11:6-9).

Conclusion

The Bible makes clear that “And the land shall not be sold in perpetuity for the land is Mine; for you are sojourners and residents with Me” (Leviticus 25:23). The Psalmist thanks God for the wondrous and beautiful world he created (Psalms 104: 10-14):

He sends the springs into the streams, they flow between the mountains.
They water all the beasts of the field, they quench the wild creatures’
thirst. Over them dwell the birds of the sky, from among the branches

they give forth song. He waters the mountains from His upper chambers, from the fruit of Your works the earth is sated. You cause grass to sprout for the cattle, and vegetation for the labor of man, to bring forth bread from the earth.

The Psalmist concludes (104:24): “How manifold are your works O God! All were made with wisdom; the earth is full of Your possessions.”

Humanity has an obligation to treat the world with respect and not defile it. Individuals and corporations must respect and beautify the environment; practice the three R’s of managing wastes: recycle, reduce, and reuse; and do everything to keep the environment safe.

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