

## Formulating Jewish Responses to Environmental Crisis

By Robert Rabinowitz

The epigram of Ben Bag Bag, 'Delve endlessly into it [the Torah], for everything is in it' (Ethics of the Fathers, 5:26) is almost as an expression of ecstasy, recalling the wonderful feeling one experiences as a Biblical or rabbinic text opens up in all its multiplicity and hints at an infinity of possible interpretations. But it also has a peculiar temptation - reinforced by insular trends in Jewish intellectual history - of suggesting that there is nothing worth learning for its own sake outside the realm of traditional Jewish texts. This temptation is particularly dangerous in times of dizzying change, for it might lead us to believe that the solutions to the unprecedented challenges that we face lie ready-formed in Biblical or rabbinic literature if only we would delve with sufficient persistence.

Consider the example of the world's worsening environmental crisis. Despite some significant victories in protecting particular species or geographical areas, the overall rate of land-use, species extinction, resource depletion and pollution is still increasing. Climatologists claim that humanity has already made irreversible changes to Earth's climate and that we have lost many irreplaceable species, each a precious and unique sample of divine handiwork. What sort of contribution can Judaism make in responding to that crisis? It is in answering this question that the temptation of Ben Bag Bag's motto can lead us astray.

Judaism has a multitude of teachings of great diversity and depth on which one can draw in formulating "Jewish" responses to the environmental crisis. Many of these teachings, despite being stirring and insightful, lack integration into the overall web of Halakhah. An example of this is the Midrashic admonition that humanity should care of the world because there is no other world to which we could resort if it were to become despoiled (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13). Similarly, the commonly cited principle of *Lo Tash'chit*, which prohibits needless destruction, cannot alone provide a firm basis for arguing against the depletion of the planet's natural resources. Indeed, a director of Maxxam Corporation was reported as citing Maimonides' ruling that should the value of a tree's timber exceed that of its fruit, it may be felled without violation of *Lo Tash'chit* to justify Maxxam's highly controversial logging policies in Headwaters Forest.

Even the most central Jewish institutions that express humanity's ultimate lack of ownership of the world and the limits on our right to exploit it - the Sabbath, the Sabbatical year and the Jubilee - stand in need of "reality testing." The most celebrated case of rabbinic pragmatism may be Hillel's decision to circumvent the Biblical injunction that all debts are to be canceled come the Sabbatical year after witnessing the difficulty of the poor in obtaining credit as the Sabbatical year approached (B.T., Gittin, 36a-b). Global cessation of agriculture and remission of debts every seven years would bring economic disruption and starvation.

Such considerations lead me to think that if Ben Bag Bag's epigram is to have any contemporary meaning, then the process of 'delving endlessly' into the Torah ought not to be modeled on rummaging around in a gift-box to find ready-made items hidden among the protective packing. All of the teachings cited above, along with many others, have a role in generating Jewish responses to the world's growing environmental crisis but they need to be placed within a broader framework adapted to a world of global markets unimaginable to Biblical Israelite and Talmudic rabbi alike. It seems to me that the central principle around which to construct such responses is that of "covenant," which Rabbi Irving Greenberg depicts as the process by which God and humanity partner to bring the world from imperfection to its ultimate, redeemed, messianic state.

Below are five key aspects of the covenantal principle:

### 1. Global Responsibility

The covenant is dynamic. Responsibility is shifted from God to humanity as the relationship evolves. As human power increases, so does human responsibility for perfecting the world. The Bible records a process of divine withdrawal from unmediated intervention in history. This process takes a quantum leap in the Talmud, with the rabbis taking unto themselves vast power to legislate on behalf of God. We are blessed to live in an era of unprecedented human power and affluence, in which our population growth and technological capacities are threatening both our own existence and that of other species. With this emerging global power comes new, global responsibility and the need for another quantum leap as we determine how to play what is now a senior role in bringing the world to perfection.

### 2. Pragmatic Idealism

Although the Jewish tradition contains powerful voices for absolute standards, the covenant is deeply pragmatic, favoring incremental progress without giving up on the dream of perfection. The abolition of slavery, the improvement in the status of women and the abandonment of the ideal of animal sacrifice were gradual historical processes. On this model, Jewish responses to environmental crisis must be imbued with a deep pragmatism, even at the cost of great pain at ongoing environmental injustice and the destruction of habitats and species. Nevertheless, the dream of perfection, the prophetic voice as it were, needs ongoing support, pushing humanity towards higher and higher standards, assuring that pragmatism does not become too accommodating. One important aspect of the pragmatic approach is that it takes careful cognizance of where the power to affect change lies. This suggests a special focus on working with business. In addition to the sacred aspect of wealth creation - as a means for meeting humanity's material needs - business has huge financial and legislative power and is a dynamic, innovative and problem-solving sector of society.

### 3. Open Conversations Across Boundaries

The covenant is not only a partnership between God and humanity. It is also the deepest mode of relationship between people. It calls for mutual responsibility and respect for each person in his or her full individuality. Covenantal consciousness thus requires deep engagement with contemporary realities and an understanding of the life experiences of all humanity. Covenantal conversations about the environmental crisis need to cross existing boundaries, especially those that traditionally have divided business people from environmentalists. An open conversation is also one in which there is no final resolution. The discussion must continue as conditions change. The Babylonian Talmud, with its often digressive and inconclusive discussions is a powerful model for this sort of conversation.

Open conversation across boundaries is also crucial because the environmental challenge that we face is unprecedented. It is, in Ron Heifetz's terms, an "adaptive challenge," and solutions to adaptive challenges can only emerge from the unpredictable and dynamic process of such conversation.

Our civilization was created through unrestricted resource depletion and waste production. Although we have some pretty good clues, we do not yet really know what the sustainable alternative will look like. Adaptive work can only take place if these conversations include those who understand ecology, those who actually run the businesses and those who can draw on traditional Jewish texts.

### 4. Personal Growth and Social Improvement

A distinctive feature of the covenant is its twin concern for personal and social salvation. The covenant is a method for achieving individual, as well as global perfection. Thus any Jewish responses to the world's environmental crisis must draw on the unique religious strengths of ritual and narrative to combine a personal, spiritual way in life with a global, ethical vision of perfection. In this way, the environmental crisis is not just an external problem to be fixed but is also an opportunity for spiritual growth.

### 5. Cautious Optimism

Maimonides' final principle of faith holds that though the arrival of the perfect world may seem a remote prospect, yet we should still await its arrival in faith. However overwhelming the global environmental crisis may seem at times, it will not be solved without faith in humanity's ability to fulfill its role in the covenantal partnership. This does not justify relaxed confidence, but a cautious optimism that humanity can create a better world. As the Worldwatch Institute report, *Vital Signs 1999*, noted, a new energy economy based on renewable or non-polluting resources is emerging. Such optimistic signs are needed to avert the resignation consequent upon unremitting pessimism.

In contrast to the insular interpretation of Ben Bag Bag's epigram, the covenantal approach does not pre-suppose that answers to the adaptive challenges we face are just lying there waiting to be uncovered. This is not to say that traditional Jewish texts have nothing to contribute to the discussion. For surely the conversation will be precisely about how to apply the underlying values and principles which those texts express in an unprecedented situation. The covenantal conversation is a process of delving endlessly into the Torah, but it is a Torah that we will be writing as we delve.