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Jewish Wisdom for Our World

by Evonne Marzouk

While the modern environmental movement has done much to raise awareness of environmental challenges and to find technological solutions, the movement has done little to change the culture of Western society. Western society tends to focus on a glorification of the physical, on quick “soundbites” versus wisdom, on instant gratification over patience, and on consumption rather than restraint. This focus has, in part, caused today’s environmental challenges. The Jewish tradition, on the other hand, presents a time-tested philosophy that *can* help us address today’s problems – if we can listen to it.

Our environment is severely threatened today. We face the breakdown of major systems on our planet, systems that all human beings rely on for basic elements such as food, clean air, and clean water. More than half of the world’s major rivers are seriously depleted and polluted. Nearly 1.8 million people die worldwide each year due to urban pollution. Thirteen thousand species are listed as threatened or endangered with extinction or as species of concern under the Endangered Species Act, more than 100 times what we understand to be normal rates of species extinction. Large predatory fish in our oceans have been reduced to a mere 10% (by mass) of pre-industrial levels. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, a recent study of worldwide ecosystems, concluded that we are destroying our natural resources at a rate that will leave a seriously depleted world for our own children.

The problem is even more severe in Israel, where more people die from air pollution in metropolitan areas in Israel than from traffic deaths in all of Israel in a given year. Water scarcity has caused nearly all of the rivers in the land of Israel to become polluted or depleted, though efforts since 1993 are working to restore the major rivers in Israel.

The Physical and the Spiritual

Judaism has a deep tradition for protecting what is now known as the environment. Reading our sources with an eye for environmental sensitivity, we find a wealth of connections and teachings that encourage us to protect our resources, care for our health, prevent unnecessary damage to our neighbors, show concern and respect for other creatures, and avoid unnecessary waste. These teachings can help us find solutions to some of the grave environmental threats that we face today. At the same time, bringing Jews together on an issue of common concern such as the environment can provide important opportunities for Jewish unity.

The *Torah's* teachings on our environmental responsibility begin in Genesis, when we are given two separate explanations for our role on the earth:

“Be fruitful and multiply, fill the Earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the Earth.”¹

“And the Lord God took the man and put him into the Garden of Eden, to cultivate it and to protect it.”²

In *The Lonely Man of Faith*,³ Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik discusses two different conceptions of man based on these verses. The first instruction calls to the physical person, who works the earth and uses it for his physical needs. This person relates to the earth and uses it in a physical way, to get what he needs to survive. This function might be called “subduing the earth,” and Rav Soloveitchik sees this as a holy endeavor, part of our human responsibility and part of what makes humanity great.

The second instruction calls to the spiritual side of man: the person who wants to know, understand, and connect to God. This person looks at the universe and wonders. This person is given the instruction to cultivate the land and to protect it. This person wants to connect to the land that we've been given. In the second story, which includes this instruction, Adam also goes around and names the animals. He establishes a relationship with the earth.

Rav Soloveitchik considers both aspects – the subduing and the protecting – as essential parts of a human being. Looking at this from an environmental perspective, we can see that *Hashem* created the land for us to use. But we also have a responsibility to temper our instincts to build and subdue. There must be a balanced relationship with the earth. We are permitted to use the earth -- but we must use it wisely. This balanced view is the *Torah* perspective on the environment, and we can see this balance running through our tradition whenever we are interacting with the world.

Responsibilities

One example of our traditional wisdom regarding protecting resources comes in an unlikely place: in a discussion of laws that relate to protection of privacy in the *Talmud*.⁴ These ancient laws read like modern day laws preventing pollution. For example, the *Talmud* required that certain industries be kept at a distance from the town so that those living in the town would not be afflicted by the bad smells. Maimonides follows this example and prevents individuals from building certain technologies, such as threshing floors, on their property unless they are done at a distance where the particles of earth or dust will not reach his neighbor. He says that it must be done at a distance that the wind will not carry the particles to his neighbor. He considered this in the same category as doing damage with arrows. The *Shulchan Aruch* also describes a law requiring us to protect our neighbor's drinking-water sources.

We can see from these references that one of the major categories of what is now called “environmentalism” was included in our sources, and simply understood as part of our responsibilities to our neighbors. But to what extent do our “environmental” actions today ensure the health and comfort of our neighbors? When we drive our cars and idle them in school parking lots, do we think of the impact on our neighbors’ children who may have asthma? When we wash our cars, fertilize our lawns, or pour chemicals down the drain, do we think of the impact on our neighbors’ water sources? Perhaps we should revisit these sources in the context of our modern environmental challenges.

Even more important than our responsibility to protect our neighbors is our responsibility to protect our own health and that of our families. The *Torah’s* teaching, “But you shall greatly beware for your souls”⁵ requires us to be especially careful in protecting our health. We all should take a moment to reflect on how well we are taking care of our bodies in light of this major obligation. We must also remember that many actions that are today called “environmental” can have a significant impact on our health and especially on the health of our children. Some products that we use in our homes include carcinogens that could, God forbid, affect our families. Some pesticides being used on our lawns (or those of our children’s schools, or being used as pesticides on our food) can cause significant threats to our children.

Another category of Jews laws relates to our responsibility to other creatures. We have a *mitzvah*, *tzaar baalei chaim*, not to cause animals needless pain, based on two verses in the *Torah*⁶ that tell us we must help even our enemy unload his donkey. One common example of this *mitzvah* is the process of *shechita* – severing the jugular using a knife with no nicks, to avoid pain while recognizing that we need food to eat.

Further, a commandment in Deuteronomy is seen by the great commentator Nachmanides as including multiple responsibilities to other animals:

“If a bird’s nest happens to be before you on the way, in any tree, or on the ground, whether [it is filled with] young ones, or eggs, and the mother bird is sitting upon the young, or upon the eggs, you should not take the mother bird with the young. But you should surely let the mother go, and [then] take the young, so it will be good for you and you will prolong your life.”⁷

Nachmanides explains that this *mitzvah* is related to the prohibition against slaughtering an animal and its kid in one day, and gives two reasons for these prohibitions: our responsibility to protect the feelings of the mother animal and that even though ritual slaughter of an animal may be permitted, “the *Torah* should not permit us to destroy and uproot a species... One who kills a mother [animal] and her children in one day or who takes them... it is as if he annihilates that species.”

These commandments demonstrate that although human beings have guardianship of the world, we are not to take lightly the needs of other creatures. We have a responsibility to keep the world, and this includes other species, as well. Other commandments, such as *bal tashchit* (do not destroy),⁸ encourage us to avoid waste of all kinds, an astonishing thought given the extraordinary waste in our current society.

The Work of *Canfei Nesharim*

One organization teaching the Torah's wisdom on the environment is *Canfei Nesharim*, an organization that is working to inspire the Jewish community to understand and act on the relationship between traditional Jewish sources and modern environmental issues. *Canfei Nesharim* ("the Wings of Eagles") is the only organization that focuses on environmental education specifically within the Orthodox Jewish community, while also providing programs and resources to the entire Jewish community. Since its inception in 2003, *Canfei Nesharim* has implemented environmentally-focused programs for Jewish holidays and the *Sabbath* in dozens of communities worldwide. In 2007, the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA), a body of nearly 1,000 Orthodox rabbis that serves as the rabbinical authority of the Orthodox Union, passed a resolution supporting Torah-based environmental learning and action, and recognizing the work of *Canfei Nesharim*.

All of *Canfei Nesharim*'s programs provide education about the relevance of *Torah* wisdom to the environment, and help Jews address modern environmental concerns from within the context of Jewish tradition. In 2008, *Canfei Nesharim* embarked on several new initiatives reaching out to the Jewish educational community by providing series of seminars in San Francisco for Jewish educators on Jewish environmental wisdom, based on a set of teachings about each weekly *Torah* portion. The pilot project consists of seven half-day seminars on Judaism and the environment for over 100 Jewish educators from across the denominational spectrum. Each three-to-four-hour seminar provides participants with resources for translating the material into sermons, learning activities, lesson plans, workshops, educational programs, and community action initiatives. *Canfei Nesharim* is seeking additional communities to replicate this highly successful program in 2009.

Canfei Nesharim is also currently developing a Strategy for Environmental Engagement in Orthodox Day Schools, beginning with a series of educator focus groups in summer 2008. At present, few environmental education resources are written from an Orthodox perspective; those that exist (some of which are in Hebrew) are not in common use in North America. Orthodox Jewish day school administrators and educators have indicated to us that they are interested in innovative and compelling new *Torah*-based ideas, and that they would welcome the opportunity to teach a modern high profile issue, such as the environment, from a *Torah* perspective. Working with educational partners, *Canfei Nesharim* is in the process of organizing three focus groups (in New York City; Washington, D.C.; and Boston) to discuss challenges and strategies for introducing environmental education into the Orthodox community. The focus groups will also serve to engage educators whose schools are prospective hosts for a 2009

pilot program. The strategy will identify the best ways to introduce education about environmental challenges, and the Jewish teachings that address them, to the Orthodox day school community.

In addition, *Canfei Nesharim* is beginning a program series for local synagogues to promote awareness and action based on Jewish wisdom about the environment. During the pilot phase of the project, the organization is designing and launching activities focused on *Torah* and the environment in five Orthodox synagogues (communities that have expressed interest include Los Angeles, CA; Englewood, NJ; New Rochelle, NY; Riverdale, NY; Washington, DC; and Potomac, MD). The program series is a four-part, year-long series of activities, focusing on themes including environmental responsibility, energy conservation, healthy homes, and connection to Israel, and including activities such as Sabbath and holiday programs, weekly *Torah* talks, seminars, and nature walks. Each program will be structured around traditional Jewish concepts and will provide scientific information on environmental issues to help participants connect the environment to their values and concerns. The long-range goal of the program is to bring about attitude shifts, behavioral changes, and activism on behalf of the environment.

Canfei Nesharim offers a wealth of resources about *Torah* and the environment via its searchable web-based resource library, its weekly *Torah* commentary on the environment, and its first publication, *A Compendium of Sources in Halacha and the Environment*, which includes articles by rabbis about the connections between *Torah* and protecting the environment.

One would not imagine that our sages could have imagined the environmental problems that we face today. And yet, the *Torah* includes teachings for every type of challenge that we face. We conclude with this remarkable insight from the *Midrash*:

At the time when God created Adam, He took him around the trees of the Garden of Eden, and He said to them, "Look at My works! How beautiful and praiseworthy they are. Everything that I have created, I created for you. Take care not to damage and destroy My world, for if you damage it, there is no one to repair it after you."

Take One Action at a Time

Maimonides teaches us to see each action we take as tipping the balance for good or bad, in our own lives – and for the whole world. Applied to the environment, we can see that we need to begin with our personal environment and change just one action. It will make a difference. And in time, it will lead to the next action: a *mitzvah* leads to another *mitzvah*.¹⁰

There are many initial actions that we can take that will improve our own lives and also protect the world:

- To save energy, we can turn of the lights when leaving the room, use cold water in the washing machine, change the thermostat a few degrees to reduce heating and air conditioning costs, and choose to walk when we can instead of driving.
- We can make the air in our homes cleaner by investing in eco-friendly cleaning products, reducing air fresheners and aerosols, and ensuring that our home has a Carbon Monoxide detector.
- To reduce chemicals in our home, we can begin to buy organic. (The most important 12 fruits and vegetables to buy organic are apples, bell peppers, celery, cherries, imported grapes, nectarines, peaches, pears, potatoes, red raspberries, spinach, and strawberries. For an exploration of this issue visit www.canfeinesharim.org and search “organic.”)
- To reduce waste, we can recycle, buy recycled paper with the highest “post-consumer waste” percentage available, stop buying bottled water and use tap water (with filter, if needed), and use real dishes and cloth napkins rather than disposable.

Any of these actions would help us begin on a path toward healthy and sustainable living. Choose one to start with, and when you have mastered that, it will be time to choose another.

More information about Canfei Nesharim’s resources and programs can be found at www.canfeinesharim.org. Canfei Nesharim has volunteers in 20 cities, including Washington, DC; New York, NY; Sharon, MA; Los Angeles, CA; Milwaukee, WI, and San Francisco, CA. To find a partner school or synagogue near you (or to create a new partnership with Canfei Nesharim), send an e-mail to info@canfeinesharim.org.

Endnotes:

1. Genesis 1:28.
2. Genesis 2:15.
3. Soloveitchik, Yosef Dov (Joseph B.). *The Lonely Man of Faith*. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
4. *Bava Batra*.
5. Deuteronomy 4:15.
6. Exodus 23:5 and Deuteronomy 22:4.
7. Deuteronomy 22:6-7.
8. Deuteronomy. 20:19-20.
9. *Kohelet Rabba* 7:28.
10. *Pirke Avot* 4:2

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