

A Meaningful, Jewish Response to Global Warming

“Once Honi was walking along the road when he saw a man planting a carob tree. Honi asked “How long before it will bear fruit?” The man answered, “Seventy years.” Honi asked, “Are you sure that you will be alive in seventy years to eat from its fruit?” The man answered, “I found this world filled with carob trees. Just as my ancestor planted for me, so shall I plant for my children.” (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Ta’anit 23a)

Trees in this story are symbolic of eternity. They outlive us, and yet by caring for them we achieve eternity. They are the gift we give our children, and their children.

Tu Bishvat, the Jewish Arbor Day, or “New Year of the Trees” fell this year on Shabbat Shira, January 28-29. Originally, in Talmudic times, this was a day for calculating the “birth” of trees for the purposes of tithing. In Israel, the sap in the trees begins to rise, an early step in the formation of fruit. Tu Bishvat over the centuries became a day to celebrate our connection to the land of Israel. More recently, it has become a day for study and reflection about our global, natural environment. Even when Tu Bishvat does not fall on Shabbat, it is a day of harmony with nature, when the normal antagonism between humans and nature is set aside.

We live in an age of air pollution, acid rain, global warming, ozone depletion, water contamination, species extinctions, and massive poverty and undernourishment. We are destroying our world and sickening ourselves not just through wars or epidemics, but through the “normal” activities of industrial production and modern life.

Many realize that there are rich Jewish traditions about personal ethics, the life of the intellect, economic relationships, prayer, Kashruth, and Shabbat. But there is a widespread misconception that Jewish religion is indifferent to the fate of nature. In fact, the theological beliefs, moral values, and legal norms of Judaism contain many teachings to promote sane, sustainable stewardship of our natural environment.

First, the most fundamental concept in Judaism is that G-d created the universe. Only G-d has ownership of, and mastery over, Creation. “The Earth is the Lord’s and its fullness, the world, and all that dwell therein” (Psalm 24:1). As a corollary, human beings do not have license to use Creation in any way because it does not belong to them.

There is also a natural order in the world, which the Rabbis called “Seder Brei’sheet,” the order of Creation. That order is harmonious, and a product of G-d’s supernal intelligence and beneficence. Because humans are created “B’Tzelem Elohim,” in G-d’s image, we have special capacities and special responsibility to partner with G-d in realizing G-d’s purposes in creation. Our moral decisions have immediate and long-term practical effects on the health of G-d’s creation.

Because of this great responsibility, the Rabbis encouraged the scientific study of nature: “When people observe G-d’s work and G-d’s great and marvelous creatures, they see from them G-d’s wisdom that is without estimate or end, and immediately they will love G-d, praise G-d, and long with a great desire to know G-d’s great Name...and when a person thinks about these things they draw back and are afraid and realize that

they are small, lowly and obscure, endowed with slight and slender intelligence, standing in the Presence of a G-d who is perfect in knowledge.” (Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws Concerning Fundamentals of the Torah 2:1-2).

The study of Creation through science should fill us with a sense of awe and love at the grand order of the universe. With that sense, we are inspired also to live in a fashion which is reverent, and humble. We see the universe as majestic, not simply a resource to preserve or exploit.

Jewish rituals and laws also inspire love and responsibility toward the natural world. On the Shabbat, one day out of every seven, we limit our use of resources. We study, walk, and sing, and avoid traveling and shopping. Prayer also reminds us that everything that we use, manufacture, or consume is from G-d. Jewish life is punctuated by blessings. We have special blessings to say before we eat; drink; study; smell fragrant herbs, spices, fruits, shrubs or trees; see natural phenomena from meteors to rainbows; behold very beautiful people, behold very strange looking people; encounter an outstanding Torah Scholar or an outstanding secular scholar; donate a garment; hear very bad news; hear very good news; and much more. By pausing for prayer, we remind ourselves that all creation is a blessing.

Jewish Halacha , or law, also from Sinai on has dozens of Mitzvot and categories to sustain creation, from the prohibition of wasteful consumption to kindness to animals, to the preservation of unique species, to the strict control of waste and polluting emissions, to sumptuary laws limiting extravagance, even in religious celebrations, to the Sabbatical year, to equitable food distribution, and much more.

Recently, Kane Street was privileged to be selected as a participant in the Jewish Greening Fellowship 2013-14, a program supported by the UJA-Federation of New York and Camp Isabella Friedman. With other metropolitan Synagogues, day schools, JCCs, summer camps, and social service organizations, we will be receiving guidance and training to become a green leader, reduce our environmental impact, and help develop meaningful, Jewish responses to global warming and other environmental threats. As a Synagogue, we will join together in study and in taking practical steps to become a more ecologically responsible institution. Our member Ariel Krasnow has been critical in securing this fellowship and will be serving as our Greening Fellow. Please see her announcement in this issue about our new Greening Fellowship.

“When G-d created the first human beings, He led them around the Garden of Eden and said “Look at my works! See how beautiful they are—how excellent! For your sake I created them all. See to it that you do not spoil and destroy My world, for if you do, there be no one else to repair it.” (Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1)

This coming year, like Honi in the Talmudic story, let us together learn and inspire others to use the world in a way which benefits all of it species today, and all those of future generations tomorrow.

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