



"Each of us should learn to think of [them]self as though [they] were a cell in some living organism -- which, in a sense, [s/]he actually is -- in [their] relation to the universe or cosmos." ...the world "is more than nature; it is nature with a soul. That soul is God." (Mordecai Kaplan, Ira Eisenstein, Eugene Kohn: intro, first Recon Siddur, 1945 – see James Lovelock & Lynn Margulis' Gaia Hypothesis)

**Kaplan thought this for a long time:**

see Dec. 8, 1904 diary entry (discovered thanks to Mel Scult!)

“One of the questions to be treated in a theology of Reconstruction is the relationship of nature to the Torah. There is no doubt that in this respect the Biblical Israel had much saner views than post-Biblical Israel.

With the former nature is the handiwork of God which has never passed out of his control [Ps civ]. The fixedness of the laws calls for admiration. They are God’s laws and therefore are the laws of the Torah. But in the Bible the anthropocentric view had not yet developed. Nature is unquestionably looked upon as greater than man, so great as to make the fact of his being deserving of any particular signs of God’s grace an anomaly.

The laws given to nature are therefore greater than those given to man.”

[Mel adds:] Very characteristically Kaplan finds the roots of a respect for nature in the Torah – ecology, long before it was fashionable. By the way, I want to call attention to Kaplan’s use of the term Reconstruction with a capital R, long before Dewey’s book *Reconstruction in Philosophy* which appeared in 1920.

How [else] might ECOLOGY and KAPLAN rhyme?!

(And does *anything* rhyme with RECONSTRUCTIONISM?!)

All these influence my work and life, decades later...

- 1, theology – a Gaian approach; naturalism (to a point); etc
- 2, community – interconnectedness; “mycelium”; the web of creation – along with universalism in rejecting all hierarchies, with no people or species being ‘chosen’
- 3, evolution – see Kaplan’s intentional borrowing of that bio/eco metaphor, ala *etz chayim hi...*
- 4, taking the long view – both in the civilizational model, and in intergenerational solidarity...
- 5, *Shitah*, “Reconstructionism is a method, rather than a series of affirmations” (*Questions Jews Ask*, 1956): inspiration to ever integrate justice and sustainability, society and ecology; to keep a constant focus on environmental racism and climate justice...

- 6, *Shitah*, more broadly: insistence on grappling with mythic truths, and applying their lessons selectively and universally to the challenges of our day. See expanding liberation theology...
- 7, Mussar – Kaplan almost centered Luzzatto within Recon; we still can! (“Reconstructionist thought IS mussar” -- affirmed by Rabbi Manny Goldsmith, z”l)
- 8, Reconstructionist Judaism writ large – *tachlis* initiatives by our movement & shuls (e.g. JRC in Evanston, the first-ever LEED-gold house of worship, most sustainable congregation ever)
- 9, \_\_\_\_\_ Eager to hear your thoughts...
- 10, *Tze v’avod* – go and do, go and serve!

A word about the movement: clearly Kaplan was focused, for most of his career, on ideas over institutions -- but with changing circumstances (or rather, *slow-to-change* denominations), and with help fromh Manny Goldsmith and Ira Eisenstein et al, he evolved. Now there exists a unique set of (varyingly) neo-Kaplanian institutional voices, with which I believe it remains helpful to be maximally engaged.

Even though the 20<sup>th</sup>-century denominational structure may be a dinosaur in the 21<sup>st</sup> – and even though few will fully and always agree with their own [per Yitz Greenberg, “I don’t care what denomination you’re affiliated with, as long as you’re embarrassed by it!”], for such is the nature of all coalitions – for as long as denominations persist, one with these values and this history in its DNA should remain in the mix.

And beyond theory or theology, it’s a matter of collective impact and power: see recent RJ & RRA resolutions calling for more ambitious eco-action at every level, from the individual and communal, to the national and global.

My top takeaway is: the analogy between people and peoples in a *social* system, and species biodiversity in an *eco* system. Perhaps more than any other Jewish thinker, Kaplan married deep universalistic outlooks and global truths, and a full and respectful celebration of what makes *each* people unique and irreplaceable and holy, with a profound focus and set of insights on *our own*. Kaplan’s legacy includes collective *anavah*, humility, on behalf of a people; let us now extend his *chiddush* to humility on behalf of all people, relative to the millions of other species with whom we share our one interdependent, holy, resilient yet ever-more-fragile world.

So, after burning perhaps 60 watt-hours of electricity to watch this webinar: what concrete actions will be your Kaplanian-obligation-carbon-offset !?!?

# Jewish Environmental Ethics

Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb ([www.adatshalom.net](http://www.adatshalom.net), [www.coejl.org](http://www.coejl.org))



Jewish texts and values rarely point in just one direction; it's a gloriously wide-ranging tradition, shaped in different eras and cultural environments. Still, writ large, Judaism suggests an eco-ethic far more intense than what our society now practices. Jewish values can correct modern excesses, and bring us back into loving connection with Creation. Consider:

\* The creation story demands much from us as **enlightened stewards of Creation**. In this tradition, "fill the Earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1:28) is **conditional**. Rashi (11<sup>th</sup> century commentator citing an earlier source) explains, "if we merit it, *then* we rule; but if we don't merit it, *we* fall." To subdue the Earth is also a statement, not an order; it's descriptive, not prescriptive. After 12<sup>th</sup> century philosopher/legalist Maimonides says that "the Earth was *not* created for our sake" (*Guide* 3:13), he adds: "Gen. 1:28 comes merely **to inform us** about the human nature with which the Holy Blessed One has created us" – as if to say "yes humans, you *are* uniquely able to reshape the Earth in your image; I say so right at the start, so we can be clear who's really the boss!" Gen. 1:29-30 prescribe a vegetarian diet as the original ideal, and 1:31 reminds us that while humans in isolation aren't even called 'good', **the interconnected whole** of which we're a humble part is in fact 'very good.' We must **keep it whole**, per Gen. 2:15 – **לַעֲבֹדָה וּלְשָׁמְרָה** – "to serve & to guard the land".

\* A recurrent theme is that **God, not us, is the ultimate owner, the boss**. Leviticus 25 (describing the Sabbatical and Jubilee); Deuteronomy 11 (incorporated into our daily liturgy); Psalm 24 ("the Earth is God's and the fullness thereof," a rallying cry for social justice and environmental movements alike); and other texts remind us to **be humble in the face of Creation**. This is perhaps the core religious teaching to emphasize today, against the hubris with which we spew our carbon, sprawl our settlements, and slice through what remains of the wilderness and jungle and reefs where Creation is most diverse and glorious. **Humility**, a great virtue in Jewish thought, is what our species most needs to embody today.

\* The Jewish legal tradition frames a whole environmental ethic around Deut. 20:19, "*bal tashchit*" or "**thou shall not waste**." It is, for German 19th Century Orthodox Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, "the first and most glorious call of God." It's the great yardstick of righteousness in the medieval Sefer HaChinuch (530): "righteous people of good deeds are aghast at any wanton waste, and do all in their power to stop it," while "the wicked are not thus; they delight in destroying the world even as they destroy themselves." The Talmud (Shabbat 67b, Rav Zutra on oil versus naphtha fuel for lamps) even applies *bal tashchit* to carbon emissions, compelling us to use the best available technology and knowledge to burn fuel as efficiently as possible. **Rules and regulations** are holy tools – and **conservation** is a core Jewish practice.

\* Many other **commandments point toward ecological sensitivity**, as well: *tza'ar ba'alei chayim* (compassion for animals); *yishuv Eretz Yisrael* (making 'The Land' as habitable and sustainable as possible); and agrarian laws that cover crop rotation and letting the land lie fallow, in tandem with social concerns like saving gleanings and corners of fields for the poor and the stranger. Other laws are naturally applied to today's environmental crisis, such as Deuteronomy 22:8 – "when you build a house, put a parapet [low railing] around the roof" – the biblical basis for what ecologists now call "the **Precautionary Principle**," insisting that public safety and health come before private profits.



\* In Jewish liturgy and text, **we experience God through Creation** – all of Creation, imbued as it is with holiness and significance, forms one huge chorus of praise (Psalms 98, 148, 150, etc). If so, then we must protect all the glories of Creation in order to fully relate to God. As theologian-of-relationship Martin Buber (1878-1965) wrote, "finally, love of the Creator, and love of that which God has created, are one and the same." To be religious is to **love your human and non-human neighbor**. And it is to be concerned *l'dor vador* -- like God (Ex. 34:6-7), "**unto the thousandth generation**".

\* The Jewish calendar (solar like the Gregorian/Christian, *and* lunar like the Muslim), links us to sacred cycles of light. Our great annual festivals, all around harvests (Pesach, early spring; Shavuot, late spring; Sukkot, autumn), mark **sacred cycles of rain & growth & life**. The weekly cycle's Shabbat -- when tradition has us neither produce nor consume, but rather appreciate and enjoy – is a striking antidote to all that ails today's society, economy, and polity. "A time of being rather of doing" (A. J. Heschel, *The Sabbath*, '51), **Shabbat calls us to sacred sustainability**. While acquiring more "stuff" involves at least marginal environmental cost, the social-spiritual-communal rest and joy of Sabbath (and of *shmita* / sabbatical) can grow without limit.



In short, a strong environmental ethic emerges from Jewish tradition, insisting that we **do much more to protect what's left of Creation**, and inject humility and sustainability into what our one species is doing to the rest of the world. Many initiatives in the Jewish world are moving in just this direction – for more, see the national Jewish environmental coalition [www.coejl.org](http://www.coejl.org); the eco-Jewish portal [www.jewcology.org](http://www.jewcology.org); great text materials from [www.CanfeiNesharim.org](http://www.CanfeiNesharim.org); sustainable food, "Jews on Bikes", shmita, and more via [www.hazon.org](http://www.hazon.org), plus green Jewish education at [hazon.org/teva](http://hazon.org/teva); Israeli environmentalism at [www.iued.org.il/english](http://www.iued.org.il/english) & [www.heschel.org.il](http://www.heschel.org.il); great resources via each major denomination (e.g. <http://rac.org/advocacy/issues/issueenv/>); plus key **interfaith** at [www.interfaithpowerandlight.org](http://www.interfaithpowerandlight.org) & [www.NRPE.org](http://www.NRPE.org)...

Judaism reminds us that we're all in this together (as in the parable of a boat passenger who began to drill under their seat and 'justified' it in the name of 'private property', condemned in Lev. Rabbah 4:6). We must act strongly as *shomrei adamah*, defenders of Creation. And per Dr. King's "fierce urgency of now", we must ask with Hillel: "**If not now, when?**"

## Why Be a Jewish Environmentalist?

(R. Fred Scherlinder Dobb, COEJL, 2014)



First, **the state of Creation affects all of us**. Particulates and pollutants don't discriminate. All our good work on Jewish continuity and security, on Israel and world Jewry, on justice and democracy, threatens to be (literally) washed away by the threat of climate change, among other looming ecological challenges. It's in our own long-term interest to work on these issues. It's in *everyone's* long-term interest.

Second, from **community relations** we learn that we must cultivate allies in the larger society, and remain both relevant and credible, partnering in shared efforts. Others are likelier to support our particular agenda – support for Israel, religious liberty, funding of local initiatives -- if we have proven ourselves as solid coalition partners, genuinely concerned with the common good. Ecological issues are the ultimate 'common good', carrying special weight for younger folks in a generation with whom we need to build and maintain strong ties. Environmental justice issues, of particular concern for communities of color and low-income groups, are also a vital arena for ongoing connections with the Jewish community.

Third, our passion for **Jewish continuity** orients us toward environmental protection. Jews, especially younger and less-affiliated, share the growing social consensus behind ecology. Our community and its institutions must develop greener thought and take greener action in order to remain relevant and resonant to this and subsequent generations. Many under-affiliated Jews, of all ages, deeply 'get' the ecological crisis and its urgency, and will give no credence to any Jewish teaching or institution that isn't actively making green connections. We owe it to them, and to efforts at continuity, to reach out in sustainable ways that can keep them 'in.'

Finally (and foremost), **ecology is "a Jewish issue"** -- the depth of Jewish values, sacred text, and communal experience all point us toward an ethic of Creation care (see other side of this sheet), just as 'Jewish' as prayer, kashrut, or Shabbat... To say that we care for Creation, of course, does not automatically imply support for any particular initiative or strategy or piece of legislation; we must remain humble, even as we must apply Jewish values toward public policy in defense of Creation. Our holidays track nature's seasonal cycles, rooting us in the outdoors and in the larger world; our holy books bid us to preserve and protect God's good world, both halachically and aggadically (in law and lore); we are to avoid waste, observe Shabbat and sabbatical cycles, honor Creation, privilege future generations, respect animals, and more. These, with abundant other examples, establish **environmental efforts as an authentic, "organic" outgrowth of Jewish teaching and tradition** – and show how Jewish values can both align with, and help to drive, real social change.



## Why Be a Jewish Environmentalist?



First, there are many good reasons to be a **religious environmentalist**, via any faith tradition:

(a) Most Americans (and global citizens) identify as 'religious,' and all great religions address Creation care. So using religious language & imagery (and showing religious sensitivity) can help bring a **majority toward environmental protection**. And: if faith is yours, however strong (or weak) it may be, use it – **authenticity**, and **connection**, are key factors in bringing about enduring positive change.

(b) Every great social and political movement in our history, from independence to abolition to suffrage to civil rights, has **invoked religion**; every sustained justice effort has seen religious institutions and leaders play central roles. Environmentalism is no different; to succeed like these others, it too will be informed and partly led by faith communities.

(c) Against the slings and arrows and epicycles of political engagement, which can so easily overwhelm or disempower us, **we are sustained by faith** – as with Dr. King's enduring notions of the Beloved Community, and of the long moral arc of the universe bending toward justice. We must be in it for the long haul. [Jewish resources: Arthur Waskow's 1968 'aha moment' described in *Godwrestling*; Marge Piercy's powerful poem "The Art of Blessing the Day"].

And **Judaism**, specifically, offers key contributions to current social/political/eco- discourse:

(a) Every human, bar none, is uniquely created *b'tzelem Elohim* / in the Divine image – so a Jewish environmental outlook will evince real **concern for every person**, with special focus on those who are least advantaged. While mainstream ecological analyses too often leave out the people, ours will consider the human and the economic with the ecological, and consistently apply an '**environmental justice**' mindset.



(b) Consumerism is ingrained even within liberal & environmental circles; talk of living with less is counter-cultural. But Judaism is counter-cultural! **Shabbat**, and **shmita**/sabbatical, are a **profound critique** of the rat race of production and consumption, and a reminder that our best and holiest times are those when we enjoy rather than make – "being, not doing" (Heschel). And while sustainability may require **sacrifice**, that's not negative; it's **sacred** (*korban* / *karov* / close).

(c) Voluntary efforts, by industry or individuals, won't bring the swift dramatic changes demanded by the science. Only **law** and **regulation** can do that. Against American individualism, Judaism's communitarian spirit is desperately needed. Paul was half-right: Judaism *is* a religion of **law**; through law, **love** is made sustainable [H. Bialik].

(d) Divine concern is not measured in quarterly earnings reports or biannual electoral cycles, but in epochs; it's to the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> and even 1000<sup>th</sup> generation (Ex. 34:7). The Jewish community must bring its values, with this kind of **long-term thinking**, into contemporary ecological discussion. Doing so is truly a life-and-death matter, for us & for those who follow ("choose life, that you *and your descendants* may live," Deut. 30:19). **L'dor vador**, from generation to generation, let's be among those who defend Creation.

