

RABBI MARK GOLDSMITH, ALYTH SYNAGOGUE AND SHORESH CHARITABLE TRUST, MONDAY
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The Jewish Perspective on the Environment and Sustainable Development

Rabbi Mark Goldsmith, Alyth Synagogue, London, October 2017

The Torah, the Five Books of Moses, is the foundational text of Judaism from which all Jewish duties are derived. It is read in its entirety every year in every Jewish community throughout the world. Rabbinic interpretation finds within the Torah 613 *mitzvot*, duties which a Jew should perform in order to be true to their religion, behave properly towards other people and towards God.

The first of these *mitzvot* in the first chapter of the opening book of the Torah, Genesis (1:28), is addressed to Adam, the first human being, in Hebrew *p'ru u'r'vu*, "increase and multiply and fill the earth." This is the *mitzvah*, the Jewish duty, to develop, to grow, to build for the future.

Those words, though, are only the first half of the verse which inspires this *mitzvah*. The verse continues *v'civshuhah u'r'du*, dominate and rule over the earth. This is a tough verse to interpret. Does it mean that we can be irresponsible in the way that human kind uses the earth for our immediate benefit, or does it mean that we need to have a God-like eternal perspective, a sustaining perspective, on how the earth develops?

The direction of Jewish teaching has taken the latter path. If we are given the earth on which and by which to live, then we must do so in a sustainable manner, so that it can be given on from generation to generation. A *midrash*, an explanatory interpretation of the Torah from two thousand years ago, pictures God showing Adam around the Garden of Eden and saying, "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 will be no one else to repair it." (Kohelet Rabbah 7:13)

The requirement not to destroy the world is expressed as a *mitzvah* in itself, the *mitzvah* of *Bal Taschit*. As often in Judaism this *mitzvah* is derived from an extreme situation in the Deuteronomy rules of warfare. When a city is being besieged in a war even the aggressor must not destroy the fruit trees that are outside or inside the city, so that that future is sustainable. (Deuteronomy 20:19-20) How much more so, reasoned our Rabbis, should we conserve the resources that make our lives sustainable in peace time?

The Shabbat, the day of rest which is a *mitzvah* for all Jews and anyone who is in their household, mandates a day every week when we reduce our use of the earth's resources, pause from new creativity and cut down our impact on the world. Onwards from the Shabbat, the Torah also mandates a year of rest for the land, called *shmittah*, every seven years and a restoration of land to its ancestral holders every fifty years following a further year of rest for the land. Torah mandates that food and productivity must be shared with the disadvantaged in society, the poor, the orphan and the stranger. (Leviticus 19-25) Behind all of the *mitzvot* here is the essential concept in Judaism that humanity does not own the earth, God does, and our use of the earth is conditional on our respect for it and willingness to share it in a sustainable manner to the benefit of all humanity.

How is the Jewish perspective on the environment then put into practical action? Jews are a small people. There are only 14 million of us in the entire world. We are therefore well aware that any

Jewish contribution to sustainable development has to be done together with other peoples and other faiths.

Just under half of the world's Jewish population lives in the State of Israel, which is a highly developed Western style economy with low unemployment, good education standards and high consumption patterns. It is not always the best example of Jewish values put into action, but there are some very strong examples of sustainable development there such as the use of solar energy generation, both in Israel and by Israeli companies around the world, conservation of water resources and pioneering ways to enable fresh water to be as sparingly used as possible. Encouraging Israel to be an example of sustainable development through investments in the country in businesses and social enterprises which encourage the wellbeing of all, is open to Jews and others around the world.

Outside of Israel, Jews are strongly represented in the economies of the Jewish diaspora. They are investors, users of resources, professionals, members of governments, businesspeople. Most diaspora countries have a Jewish environmental concern network of some kind which encourages Jews to be good environmental citizens, examples include Hazon in the USA and the Big Green Jewish campaign and Eco-Synagogues in the UK. Though Jewish organisations are generally not as far advanced in this area as for example, Christian organisations, many have a faith consistent investment policy for their assets, such as development funds, education funds and burial funds which have to be held long term. These policies will typically discourage investment in environmentally or socially damaging industries according to Jewish ethics, encourage impact investment in social enterprise and best in class social and environmental performers and, in some cases, encourage micro-finance in order to fulfil the highest degree of Jewish charity, *tzedakah*, which is to enter into a partnership with a person to enable them to make their own living.

Judaism lives from generation to generation. Because we are such a small people and because our history includes several attempts to put an end to us as a faith and, in the Nazi Shoah, as a people, sustainable development of the world around us and of our own responsibility towards this is built into the Jewish psyche. The Jewish mission is expressed in a prayer recited traditionally three times per day: *l'taken olam b'malchut Shaddai*, that we are to be God's partners in repairing the world. We know that the world is broken and only sustainable development by as many of the world's people working together as possible can we have a hope to repair it to become the world that God intended Adam, humanity, to steward.

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