

Torah Tree Hugging!

By

Rabbi Edward L. Nydle /B'nai Avraham

In the hour when the Holy one, blessed be He, created the first man,

He took him and let him pass before all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to him:

"See my works, how fine and excellent they are! Now all that I have created, for you have I created.

*Think upon this and do not corrupt and desolate My World, For if you corrupt it, there is no one to set it right after you." (**Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:28**)*

The Scripture commands us that even when conducting a war, we must not destroy the trees of the city that is being warred upon. The sages of Yisrael extended this prohibition to include the destruction of any object of benefit to people. They also stressed that one should not waste resources or use more than one needs. Our western consumer based economy contradicts that Torah based command. Our present society focuses only upon profit without regard to the environment and the planet's resources. Corporations spend millions upon advertising telling us we need a certain product and that this product will fulfill our desires. The real cause of our destruction of the environment is our total preoccupation with wealth and comfort. To the extent that science and technology have become the handmaidens of profit instead of truth, they have become part of the problem and need now to be redirected to being part of the solution. Torah never grants us a license to unlimited freedom of consumption and does not promote the conquest of nature. Rather, Torah teaches us to protect and work with nature *le'avdoe ule'shmroe*.

Since the earth and creation are filled with the glory of YHWH nothing is to be treated lightly or dismissed as expendable. The earth does not belong to us. No human being has a right of ownership nor do humans have the right to dispose of the planet as they choose. The earth has a special relationship with the Creator and belongs to Him. The law of gleaning shows us that a landowner does not have exclusive right to his harvest. Elohim commands that part of the harvest belongs to the poor.

We are only stewards over what has been given to us and our right to is contingent upon our obedience to YHWH. Even Yisrael can lose their claim upon the Land if they fail to keep the Covenant that YHWH made with them. This principle applies to the human race. We face extinction in the next few hundred years if we continue to rape the earth and its resources. Before a person says a *b'racha* (a blessing), before he acknowledges the Creator's ownership of the land and its products, then "*the earth is YHWH's*"; after a person has said a *b'racha*, acknowledging YHWH's ownership and that we are stewards to see that YHWH's works are properly

used and shared, then "*the earth He has given to the children of man*" (**B'rachot 30:5**). Property is a sacred trust given by Elohim; it must be used to fulfill YHWH's purposes. No person has absolute or exclusive control over his or her possessions. The concept that people have custodial care of the earth, as opposed to ownership.

- *And six years thou shalt sow thy land, and gather in the increase thereof, but the seventh year thou shalt let it rest and lay fallow, that the poor of thy people may eat; and what they leave, the beast of the field shall eat. In like manner thou shalt deal with the vineyard, and with thy olive yard.*(**Exod. 23:10-11**)

The Torah outlines the blueprint for saving the planet. YHWH established the *Sabbatical* year when the land would lay fallow every seven years. This was for the earth to replenish itself and rest from pollutants and man's efforts to dominate it. The Talmudic sages spoke with great concern about preserving the environment and preventing pollution. They state: "*It is forbidden to live in a town which has no garden or greenery*" (**Kiddushin 4:12; 66d**). Threshing floors had to be placed far enough from a town so that it would not be dirtied by chaff carried by winds (**Baba Batra 2:8**). Tanneries had to be kept at least 50 cubits from a town and could be placed only on the east side of a town, so that odors would not be carried by the prevailing winds from the west (**Baba Batra 2:8, 9**). The rabbis express a sense of sanctity toward the environment: "the atmosphere (air) of the land of Israel makes one wise" (**Baba Batra 158b**).

It is becoming increasingly clear that our planet is facing environmental threats. Almost daily there are newspaper and television reports related to acid rain, the greenhouse effect, ozone layer depletion, erosion of topsoil, destruction of forests and other habitats, pollution of air, water, and soil, and toxic wastes. If not checked, many of our current practices put at risk the future that we wish for society and the plant and animal kingdoms, and may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know. Fundamental changes are urgent if we are to avoid the chaos our present course will bring about.

Torah values must be applied toward the solution of current environmental problems. This means, for example: an energy policy based not on dangerous energy sources, but on conservation and renewable energy, consistent with Torah teachings on preserving the environment, conserving resources, creating jobs, protecting human lives, and considering future generations. A spiritually attuned person will recognize that every creature is essentially bound up with every other creature, and that we share a collective destiny. Thus, our most fundamental attitude should be one of compassion, not acquisitiveness or aggression. If we love humanity, then we must now act to save it from ourselves. We need to devote ourselves to the elimination of material excess in our lives, in our homes, in our offices, in what we eat, and in the technology which we utilize so wastefully. Only such a reorientation, in which material excess is replaced with deep spiritual awareness of the ultimate

partnership between humanity and the Earth in the achievement of the Creator's goals, can lay the foundation for a new and healthier relationship between us and our environment.

- **Rabbi Moshe Cordovero of Safed** : *"One's compassion should extend to all creatures, and one should neither despise nor destroy them; for the Supernal Wisdom [i.e. divine wisdom that brings all existence into being] extends to all of creation -- the "silent" or mineral level, plants, animals, and humans. This is why our sages have warned us against treating food disrespectfully. Just as the Supernal Wisdom despises nothing, since everything is produced there -- as it is written, 'You have formed them all with wisdom' (Psalms 104:24) -- a person should show compassion to all of the works of the Holy One, blessed be He."*