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“AND YOU SHALL SUBDUE THE EARTH”
Is Judaism Environmentally Friendly

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Over the past four decades, environmental concern has become a mainstream issue in Western society. Its central question is: how can humanity, in order to ensure its survival, prevent the depletion of the world's resources? To describe this desire the phrase 'a sustainable world' has been coined. In the partly scientific, partly populist debate this expression is often used interchangeably with 'sustainable development'.

Among the numerous definitions of this concept, the one which has become dominant is that used by the United Nations' World Commission on Environment and Development.¹ In 1987, it published its report in book-form under the title: *Our Common Future*. Its definition of 'sustainable development is: "... development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."²

Other definitions of sustainable development stress elements such as ongoing satisfaction of human needs; the improvement of the quality of human life; the ongoing survival of elements of the biosphere, and protection and preservation of the natural environment.³

Within the sustainability discourse, a number of motifs have become important. These concern issues such as population growth; maintaining bio-diversity; attitudes toward resources; preventing conspicuous consumption; recycling and geo-chemical cycling; dematerialization; the durability of goods, and providing adequate resources for subsequent generations. The phrase 'inter-generational equity' is often used for the latter.

¹ This commission was named after its chairperson, Gro Harlem Brundtland, who was at that time the Norwegian Prime Minister.

² The World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987, p. xi.

³ Ortwin Renn, Anja Knaus & Hans Kastenzholz. *Wege in eine nachhaltige Zukunft*. In: Birgit Breuel, ed. *Agenda 21: Vision: Nachhaltige Entwicklung*. Frankfurt: Campus, 1999, p. 17. [German]

Sustainability and the Jewish tradition

Analyzing the Jewish tradition we find that classical Judaism reflects a specific view as to why the Jewish people in particular, and humanity in general, survive. Many dispersed texts in Jewish literature relate to the elements of what seems an ultra-modern, if not post-modern, scientific debate. Most of the basic motifs of the sustainability discourse – usually considered secular – are addressed in the Halakha, the narratives of the Tanakh and the Midrashic literature.

Central, and frequently stressed, is the belief that the long-term sustainability of human life depends on obeying God's commandments and behaving according to His wishes. This motif may be called 'religious sustainability'. We encounter it first in the Paradise narrative, when God forbids Adam and Eve to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. Their expulsion from the ideal sustainable society, the garden of Eden, is a direct result of their disobedience: "*Because you ...ate of the tree about which I commanded you, "You shall not eat of it", cursed be the ground because of you; by toil shall you eat of it all the days of your life...*"⁴

The Torah story of the separation of Abraham and Lot is a paradigm of the religious sustainability motif. They have too many flocks, herds and tents for the carrying capacity of the land.⁵ Lot chooses grazing grounds in the Jordan valley, prime land because of its abundant water sources. However, he pitches his tents near Sodom whose inhabitants are so wicked that God destroys the town.⁶ Lot and his daughters thereafter survive by following His instructions. Lot's wife which disobeys them is turned into a pillar of salt.⁷

This narrative is one among many indicating that moral factors are even more important for sustenance than economic or environmental ones. A key Biblical motif connected to this is that the endowment or withholding of rain depends on whether the Israelites fulfill God's commandments: "*If you follow My laws and faithfully observe My commandments, I will grant your rains in their season, so that the earth shall yield its produce and the trees of the field their fruit.*"⁸ The same view is repeated time and

⁴ Genesis 3:17.

⁵ Genesis 13:5-13.

⁶ Genesis, chapter 18.

⁷ Genesis, chapter 19.

⁸ Leviticus 26:3-4.

again in the Torah. God makes the proper functioning of nature explicitly dependant on the Israelites' obedience to His laws.⁹

Halakhic approaches

The Jewish tradition also endeavors to assure the continued availability of natural resources. Several *halakhot* refer to issues we would now consider as 'resource policies'. One Biblical commandment – known as *bal tashkhit* – forbids the Israelites to destroy fruit trees when laying siege to a city.¹⁰ This prohibition is later discussed in considerable detail in rabbinical literature, which extends it to all wanton destruction, including one's own possessions. The Talmudic sage R. Zutra, in a minority opinion, considers it forbidden to make uneconomic use of fuel.¹¹ Maimonides states that it is preferable to give clothes to the poor than to put them with the dead in the grave.¹²

The laws of the sabbatical and jubilee years prescribe rest for the land, which the Tanakh says belongs to God and thus is not man's full property.¹³ This view that the main resource for human sustenance is divinely owned is also expressed in the narrative of the rejection of Cain's sacrifice. The land's Owner merits the best, but his offering is defective and incomplete.¹⁴

The Torah makes it clear that the availability of the land is conditional upon obeying His commandments. If the *shemita* laws are not kept they will have to be paid back: "*For the land shall be forsaken of them, making up for its sabbath years by being desolate of them, while they atone for their iniquity; for the abundant reason that they rejected My rules and spurned My laws.*"¹⁵ Later in Tanakh, it is said that this was indeed the case: "*Those who survived the sword he exiled to Babylon, and they became his and his sons' servants till the rise of the Persian kingdom, in fulfilment of the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, until the land paid back its sabbaths; as long as it lay desolate it kept sabbath, till seventy years were completed.*"¹⁶

⁹ Deuteronomy 11:17; 1 Kings 8:35-36; Isaiah 5:5-6; Zekhariah 14:17.

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 20:19-20.

¹¹ Bavli Shabbat 67b.

¹² Maimonides, *Code, Laws of Mourning* 14:24.

¹³ Leviticus 25:23-24.

¹⁴ Genesis 4:3-5.

¹⁵ Leviticus 26:43.

¹⁶ II Chronicles 36:20-21.

Conspicuous consumption

In the environmentalist` view, hedonism and excessive consumerism endanger the world`s sustainability. At the end of the 19th century, the American economist Thorstein Veblen coined the phrase ‘conspicuous consumption’, defining this as consumption beyond subsistence needs and physical efficiency. He pointed out that it is mainly a status symbol.¹⁷

Several classical Jewish sources view conspicuous consumption in a negative light. The Torah says that it may lead to idolatry or forgetting God: *“When you have eaten your fill, and have built fine houses to live in, and your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold have increased, and everything you own has prospered, beware lest your heart grow haughty and you forget the Lord your God – who freed you from the land of Egypt, the house of bondage...”*¹⁸

Similar motifs appear in the Mishnah. Ben Zoma says: *“Who is rich? The man who is happy with what he has.”*¹⁹ Hillel denounces gluttony: *“The more flesh, the more worms.”*²⁰ The Talmud considers it particularly inappropriate for sages: *“The rabbis said that the end of a sage who overindulges in elaborate meals everywhere will be that he destroys his house, turns his wife into a widow, makes his children orphans, forgets his studies, and quarrels abound around him.”*²¹

Dematerialization and durability

Dematerialization is another key motif in the sustainability discourse. Against this background, one gains an additional perspective on Judaism`s radical religious innovation. Thus the invisible God who speaks to Abraham is non-material. It is even strictly forbidden to represent Him in any material shape. The Ten Commandments forbid graven images.²² While Judaism is generally against destruction, idols must be annihilated; for this reason, the golden calf is ground down and thrown away.²³

¹⁷ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Original edition published in 1899. Reprinted in 1965 by arrangement with The Viking Press. For a further discussion on this issue, see Manfred Gerstenfeld, *Environment and Confusion*. Jerusalem: Academ, 1994, pp. 235f.

¹⁸ Deuteronomy 8:12-14; see also Deuteronomy 31:20, 32:15-18; Isaiah 2:7-9, 22:12-14.

¹⁹ Pirkei Avot 4:1.

²⁰ Pirkei Avot 2:7.

²¹ Bavli Pesahim 49a.

²² Exodus 20:4; Deuteronomy 5:8.

²³ Deuteronomy 9:21.

Sacrifices are abundant in pagan traditions. However they are concentrated in Judaism. The Israelites are told that they may bring them to one and only one location: the Temple in Jerusalem. The Tanakh adds many times over that such offerings are not only ineffective but are considered odious, if they are not accompanied by obedience to God.²⁴ After the destruction of the Second Temple the religious dematerialization intensifies: prayer replaces animal sacrifice. The Talmudic sage R. Elazar says that prayer is greater than sacrifices.²⁵ Another important motif – durability – also emerges in the narrative of the Torah. It is stated, for instance, that the Israelites' clothing and footwear did not wear out while crossing the desert after the Exodus.²⁶

Geo-chemical cycling and recycling are other important elements of the contemporary sustainability debate. These themes also recur in the Tanakh.²⁷ God tells Adam that he is dust and that he will eventually return to the earth,²⁸ thus making his body available once more as a natural resource. We see material recycling in the building of the tabernacle in the desert: religious objects are made, *inter alia*, out of the Israelites' recycled jewelry.²⁹

Relations between generations

Inter-generational equity is a central element of the modern sustainability discourse. The Jewish tradition views the relations between generations differently. There are many references in the classical texts, including in the Ten Commandments, to the relative wellbeing of successive generations.³⁰

Ancestral moral value influences future generations. The merits of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs are frequently mentioned in pleas for mercy in the Tanakh and Talmud.³¹ In the Talmud, later generations are often considered less meritorious than earlier ones.³² Maintaining biodiversity, another important element of the modern sustainability discourse, is a frequently recurring motif in Jewish sources. Such a concern may be indicated by God's bringing all animals to man in Paradise to be given a

²⁴ I Samuel, Chapter 15; Isaiah 1:11-13; Amos 5:22-25.

²⁵ Bavli Berahot 32b.

²⁶ Deuteronomy 8:4, 29:4; Nehemia 9:20-21.

²⁷ See Psalms 22:16, 30:10; Job 10:9, 30:19, 34:15; Ecclesiastes 3:20.

²⁸ Genesis 3:19.

²⁹ Exodus 35:20-29.

³⁰ Exodus 20:5-6; Deuteronomy 5:9-10.

³¹ Jeremiah 31:15-17.

³² Bavli Eruvin 53a; Bavli Yoma 9b.

name.³³ Through this ‘due diligence’ action of taking an inventory of all creatures and giving them names their identity and specificity are recognized.

The tale of Paradise shows that animals were not threatened by the first humans, who were vegetarian.³⁴ The narrative of Noah who, upon Divine instruction, gathers specimen of all animal species into the Ark, is a further paradigm of biodiversity.³⁵ Neither will man and animals threaten each other in the Latter Days.³⁶ According to the Talmud, all creatures have a function in God’s world, irrespective of whether they are of use to man.³⁷

Reading the above texts together with many others illustrates how classical Judaism – in the framework of its theo-centric world view – relates to important elements of behavior and thought which reappear in the modern sustainability discourse. This review of a small number of texts may demonstrate that Judaism has much more to say about a major contemporary concern than is commonly known.

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³³ Genesis 2:19-20.

³⁴ Genesis 2:15-16.

³⁵ Genesis, chapter 6 & 7.

³⁶ Isaiah 11:7-8; Hosea 2:20.

³⁷ Bavli Shabbat 77b; Bavli Avoda Zara 3b.