

What Does Judaism Teach about Tikkun Olam, the Environment & Sustainability?

By Terry Gips, President, Alliance for Sustainability

www.afors.org Terry@Afors.org

Copyright May 2, 2021 Terry Gips (May be reproduced with full acknowledgement)

Tikkun Olam

The concept of Tikkun Olam (Hebrew for “world repair”) has become widely associated with social justice and healing the earth. Its origins come from the classical rabbinic Mishnah (codified circa 200 C.E.) and in the Lurianic Kabbalah, a major strand of Jewish mysticism. The Lurianic account of Creation addresses how God contracted the Divine self to make room for Creation, with the Divine light contained in special vessels which shattered. Some of the light attached to the broken shards and are the basis for the material world. In this account, there is a need to repair the world by gathering the shards. Today it more generally refers to acts of social responsibility and action to fix what is wrong in the world.

Sustainability

While Judaism and every spiritual tradition has teachings regarding the care for all of Creation, the term “sustainability” was developed in the early 1980s by various groups like the Alliance for Sustainability (www.afors.org). The Alliance defined sustainability as being “ecologically sound, economically viable, socially just and humane, embodying our highest values in terms of how we treat people, animals and the planet.” All four legs are needed. The Alliance sees it as holistically embracing and integrating all aspects of life while providing a clear yet ever-evolving North Star and vision of what is possible. Sustainability is a broad, welcoming umbrella that incorporates a range of powerful, cutting-edge approaches, from regeneration and resilience to circular economy, the Natural Step, Permaculture and the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Judaism and Environmental Stewardship

According to Jewish teachings by those who wrote the Talmud, when God created Adam, God led him around the Garden of Eden and said to him: “Behold my works! See how beautiful they are, how excellent! All that I have created for your sake did I create it. See to it that you do not spoil and destroy my world; For if you do, there will be no one to repair it after you.”¹ In other words, each of us is responsible for caring for Creation. Furthermore, while the commandment in Genesis 1:28 providing humans with dominion over the fish, fowl, cattle, and all the earth often has been misused as a pretext for exploitation, Jewish oral law has never permitted such an interpretation.²

Bal Tashchit

To the contrary, ecological concerns are heavily emphasized through various Torah restrictions such as: “When in your war against a city you have to besiege it...you must not destroy its [food-bearing] trees ...You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down.” (Deuteronomy 20:19) This and other provisions form the basis of the Jewish law of “Bal tashchit” (“do not destroy”), an ancient and sweeping series of Jewish environmental regulations forbidding everything from over-grazing and destruction of cultivated plant varieties to the waste of resources and the pollution of the air and water.³ They are rooted in the notion that, “The earth is the Lord’s with all that it holds.” (Psalm 24:1).

“Carcasses, cemeteries and tanneries [which emit foul odors] must be kept at least 50 cubits [75 feet] distance from a town. A tannery can only be set up on the east side of a town [because the east wind is gentle and will not carry the fumes to town].”⁴

¹ *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 7:13

² Ehrenfeld, David and Bentley, Philip J. “Nature in the Jewish Tradition: The Source of Stewardship,” undated draft manuscript, p. 20.

³ Freudenstein, Eric G. “Ecology and the Jewish Tradition,” in *Judaism and Human Rights*, M. Konvitz, ed. (New York: Norton, 1972), pp. 265-74. Helfand, Jonathan I. “Ecology and the Jewish Tradition: A Postscript,” *Judaism*, 20(3), 1971, pp.330-35.

⁴ Mishna *Bava Bathra* 2:9, 24b

Bal tashchit is broadened in rabbinic law to include any gratuitous act of destruction: "Not only one who cuts down food trees, but also one who [purposely and impulsively] smashes household goods, tears clothes, demolishes a building, stops up a spring, or destroys food violates the command, 'You must not destroy.' (Deuteronomy 20:19)"⁵ Bal tashchit even prohibits the destruction of something that can be useful to others: "One should not be trained to be destructive. When you bury a person, do not waste garments by burying them in the grave. It is better to give them to the poor than to cast them to worms and moths. Anyone who buries the dead in an expensive garment violates the negative command of *bal tashkhit*."⁶

There is also a mystical level of bal tashchit. Among many mystically inclined Jews, all Creation reflects God's will so it must be regarded reverently. Israel's first Chief Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook said he "always took great care not to pluck—unless it were for some benefit—anything that could grow, for there was no plant below that did not have its *mazal* [literally, constellation but also understood as 'guardian angel'] above. Everything that grows says something, every stone whispers some secret, all creation sings."⁷

Yishuv Ha-aretz and Yishuv Ha-olam

Jewish law also contains a positive set of environmental regulations "yishuv ha-aretz" and "yishuv ha-olam," or "settling the land" in a manner balancing the environment and human survival.⁸ "It is forbidden to live in a city that does not have a garden or a greenery."⁹ "A Torah scholar should not live in a city without these items: Tzdek fund (to sustain the needy), synagogue, public bath, sewage disposal, and elementary school"¹⁰

Jonathan Helfand has concluded that Jewish laws: "Do not offer unquestioning protection to the natural environment; nor do they offer an immutable schedule of priorities to guide the actions of humans. They do, however, enunciate an important legal and moral principle: the environment, like man, has certain unalienable rights, and these rights are endowed to it by the Creator--and, as a result, they may not be summarily dismissed or violated. It is the obligation of society to respect and protect these rights with the same procedures, institutions, and legislative initiatives that are employed to guarantee and protect the rights of humans."¹¹ The Hasids sum up the importance quite simply: "Planting is so important that if a sapling were in your hand, and you were told that the Messiah had come, first plant the sapling, then go out to greet the Messiah."¹²

Cycles and Holy Days

In the well-known section of Ecclesiastes (3:1) we are taught, "To everything there is a season and a time." According to Ecclesiastes (1:5-9), "The sun also arises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it arose. The wind goes toward the south and turns about to the north, it whirls about continuously and the wind returns again according to its circuits. All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full. Unto the place where the rivers come, they return again. The thing that has been; it is what shall be; And that which is done is that which shall be done." This reflects an incredibly holistic and interconnected view of the world by our ancestors far before current science has come to the same conclusion.

As Rabbi Arthur Waskow so clearly demonstrates in his essential *Seasons of Our Joy*¹³, Judaism is based on cycles of life that interweave with the cycles of nature, from the cycles of the sun and moon which sets our calendar to the original four pilgrim festivals that coincided with the four seasons: **Pesach (Passover)** near the Spring Equinox, which brings the emergence of flowers and the ripening of barley; **Shavuot (The Feast of Weeks)** close

⁵ Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, "Laws of Kings," 6:10

⁶ Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, "Laws of Mourning," 14:24

⁷ Aryeh Levin, *Lahai Roi*, p. 15-6

⁸ Helfand, *Op.Cit.*

⁹ Jerusalem Talmud, *Kiddushin* 12:12

¹⁰ Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 17b

¹¹ Helfand, Jonathan. "The Earth is the Lord's: Judaism and Environmental Ethics," in *Religion and the Environmental Crisis*, ed. Eugene C. Hargrove, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), p. 47-48.

¹² Avot deRabbi Natan B, Ch. 31 in Fisher, Adam. *Seder Tu B'shevat: The Festival of Trees*, p. 39.

¹³ Waskow, Arthur. *Seasons of Our Joy: A Handbook of Jewish Festivals* (New York: Summit Books, 1982).

to the Summer Solstice at the onset of nature's abundance and the first wheat harvest; **Sukkot (The Feast of Huts)**, near the Fall Equinox after the harvest in the fall; and **Sh'mini Atzeret (The Eighth Day of Assembly)**, the far less well known and celebrated festival which occurs just at the end of Sukkot and celebrates the onset of the first rains and winter.

Most Jews are not aware that Judaism has four New Years. In addition to Rosh Hashanah and Passover (each six months apart), there are two lesser-known New Years, one for trees and one for animals. Tu B'Shevat, the New Year for the Trees, originally served as the tax tithing time for fruit trees (when there is blossoming and no fruit) and was expanded by the Kabbalists into a mystical seder meal celebrating the "Tree of Life" through which divine energy flows through the universe. In the 20th century it became celebrated as Israel's Arbor Day as school children have the day off to plant trees. The concept has grown into what has become a Jewish Earth Day and a time for families and congregations to experience a spiritual and eco-educational Tu B'Shevat Seder.

Rosh Hashanah LaBehemot, The New Year for Animals, was originally specified in the Mishnah as the tax tithing time for animals (when few animals are born). It coincides with Rosh Chodesh Elul, the New Moon for the month of Elul, one month before Rosh Hashanah. Since 2009 it has been revived by Jewish animal protection advocates to raise awareness about Jewish laws requiring the humane treatment of animals (Tza'ar ba'alei chai'im).

The Sabbath

But perhaps the most important of all Jewish holy days is the Sabbath. It is a unique Jewish creation and completely unlike any other festivals because it is tied to time, a seven-day cycle. Its practice reflects the commemoration of the Creation, as well as the escape from slavery in the Exodus from Egypt. The Sabbath is tied to God's gift of "manna", the miracle "bread from heaven" that sustained the Israelites in the desert for forty years (Exodus 16:4-35). God commanded that each person gather only as much as they needed to eat and no more. The manna could not be accumulated and the supply controlled because the manna deteriorated within a day. No markets could be created for profit. Because everyone's needs were met with none having too much or too little, I feel it was perhaps one of the greatest, most egalitarian times in the history of the world.

Through Sabbath rest we have the opportunity to appreciate Creation and freedom from all forms of slavery. Rabbi Mordecai Liebling noted that "The Sabbath is the paradigm for the Jewish relationship to the environment—spiritually, socially and environmentally."¹⁴ Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said in his classic book *The Sabbath*, "To set apart one day a week for freedom, a day on which we would not use the instruments which have been so easily turned into weapons of destruction, a day for being with ourselves, a day of detachment from the vulgar, of independence of external obligation, a day on which we stop worshipping the idols of technical civilization, a day on which we use no money—is there any institution that holds out a greater hope for human progress than the Sabbath."¹⁵ It is perhaps God's greatest gift and example of sustainability.

Sabbatical Year (Schmitah)

God commanded Moses that, "the seventh year shall be a sabbath of rest unto the land,"¹⁶ with no sowing, pruning, reaping or gathering. God's commandment of a sabbath for the land every seventh year (Exodus 23:10-11) not only prescribes for healing the land, "in the seventh year you shall let it lie fallow," but also requires the owner to let the land "provide food for the poor of your people." The prescription goes even further and calls for the remission or cancellation of all debts at the end of every seventh year (Deuteronomy 15:1-2). In other words, "It is a basic human right to have regularly a fresh chance to succeed, without being forever weighed down by the past."¹⁷ At the same time, Deuteronomy 15:7-11 requires tithing and other acts so that the disadvantaged not be neglected in the time between the Sabbaths. The purpose of these provisions might be

¹⁴ Liebling, Mordecai. Talk given at the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot, Breckenridge, CO, June 21, 1990.

¹⁵ Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), p. 28.

¹⁶ *The Holy Bible, Op.Cit.*, Leviticus 25:4, p. 125.

¹⁷ Gendler, Everett. "The U.S. Bicentennial and the Biblical Jubilee: The Right We Must Reclaim," *CCAR Journal* (Central Conference of American Rabbis), Summer 1975, p. 85-86.

understood as "the redistribution of accumulated wealth, so that more widespread sharing and greater human equality would result."¹⁸

Jubilee Year (Yovel)

The concept of the Jubilee Year (Leviticus 25:8-10) specifies that after seven sabbaths, humans should "hallow the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof...and ye shall return every man unto his possession."¹⁹ The Torah acknowledges the notion of ancestral land and requires that anyone who had to sell or give up their land for any reason can take the land back without cost. Leviticus 25:23-31 specifically forbids taking land permanently from those who originally owned and worked it and permits them to take it back sooner than fifty years through proper payment.

According to eminent Jewish scholars, the Sabbatical and Jubilee Years together "represent a unique Israelite attempt to combat the social evils that had infected Israelite society and to return to the idyllic period of the desert union when social equality and fraternal concern had prevailed."²⁰ A similar balance of control can be found in Isaiah 5:8, which forbids the concentration of large blocks of land in a few hands.

Humane Treatment of Animals

Tza'ar ba'alei chai'im ("suffering of living creatures") is a Jewish law that bans causing unnecessary suffering of animals. It is a Talmudic requirement that stems from the Biblical law requiring people to assist in unloading heavy burdens from animals. According to Jewish tradition, the prohibition against inhumane conduct against animals is one of the seven commandments given to the sons of Noah, and therefore is binding on all humanity.²¹ Animals are to share the Sabbath rest with humans, and although no work is permitted on the sabbath, exceptions are made if the purpose is to relieve the suffering of an animal. In fact, kindness to animals is one of the few virtues that the Jewish tradition specifically associates with the promise of heavenly reward.²²

In Ecclesiastes it is written: "For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth the beasts. Even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath, so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast."²³ In fact, the Torah not only calls for the respect of all living things, but requires humans to learn from all other life. God spoke to Job and commanded: "But ask now the beasts, and they shall teach thee; and the fowls of the air, and they shall teach thee: Or speak to the earth, and it shall teach thee."²⁴

Kashrut and the Concept of Eco-Kosher

The first reference to what later in the Torah become the laws of kashrut can be found in Exodus (22:30): "And ye shall be **holy** people unto Me; therefore ye shall not eat any flesh that is torn of the beasts of the field." It establishes the clear purpose and goal of the Kosher laws as holiness, not health.²⁵ So, what does it mean to live a holy life?

Many Jews have sought to answer this by examining a range of ancient Jewish teachings, including kashrut, caring for the earth (Bal taschit), respecting animals (Tza'ar ba'alei chai'im), protecting one's own body (Sh'mirat haguf), not oppressing workers and customers (Oshek), the sharing of food, money and work-time with the poor (Tzedakah), eating consciously (B'rakhah and Kedushah) and the Sabbath and Jubilee years of rest for the land

¹⁸ Gendler, *Op.Cit.*, p. 86.

¹⁹ *The Holy Bible*, p. 125.

²⁰ "Sabbatical Year and Jubilee," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. (Jerusalem: MacMillan Company, 1977), p. 578.

²¹ Steinberg, Milton. *Basic Judaism*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1947), p. 100.

²² Ehrenfeld & Bentley, *Op.Cit.*, p. 15.

²³ *The Holy Bible*, Ecclesiastes 3:19, p. 614.

²⁴ *The Holy Bible*, Job 12:7-8, p. 504.

²⁵ Dresner, Samuel H.; Siegel, Seymour; and Pollock, David M. *The Jewish Dietary Laws, Revised and Expanded Edition* (New York: The Rabbinical Assembly of America and the United Synagogue Commission on Jewish Education, 1982).

and from deliberate economic use of it (Schmitah and Yovel).²⁶ These teachings were incorporated by Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalomi into the concept of “eco-kosher”, a range of practices to properly respect the earth, ourselves and all other life.

So what is eco-kosher? Most often, it's answered by the ancient Jewish practice of asking another question. For example, are grapes that have been grown by exploiting farmworkers and spraying hazardous pesticides 'kosher' to eat at a Synagogue wedding reception? Is a Jewish newspaper made by chopping down ancient forests 'kosher'? Is it 'kosher' to use toxic cleaning products and pesticides in the synagogue? Is it 'kosher' to have retirement funds invested in companies that utilize child and sweatshop labor? Is it 'kosher' to use inefficient, incandescent light bulbs that cause more polluting coal burning? How about driving an SUV? Rabbi Arthur Waskow and his Shalom Center have further developed the concept through the Eco-Kosher Project (see www.shalomcenter.org), which is enunciated at <https://theshalomcenter.org/node/1284>.

Conclusion

Both ancient and contemporary Jewish teachings provide a profound guide or greenprint for how we can live in a way that brings about Tikkun Olam, protects our environment and creates a world of sustainability. These teachings invite, even require, us to co-create a healthy future for ourselves, our children and future generations of all of Creation. May we all awaken and respond. God is counting on us.

²⁶ Waskow, Arthur. *Down-to-Earth Judaism—Food, Money, Sex, and the Rest of Life* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1995), p. 121-129