

L'ovdah U'lshomrah; To Till It and To Guard It, A Jewish Environmental Ethic
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I absolutely love autumn. Without a doubt, the comfortable temperatures and the emergence of a colorful palate of nature is just glorious. Even here in Texas, we can appreciate this change from intense heat to refreshing, crisp autumn temperatures. At the carpool line at Levine Academy where Jasmine and my daughter Mia go to school, everyone was kvetching about how cold it's been these past few mornings. But I love it—it just feels great. The truth is that it's always Sukkot that invigorates my love of nature. I have to tell you that each year the day or two after Sukkot is over, it feels strange to eat inside! It does. After breakfast, lunch, and dinner in the Sukkah for an entire week, sitting at the kitchen table again requires a bit of recalibrating. After so many meals outside, under the stars, or in the middle of the day, I feel a refreshed connection to the natural world—and I believe that is one of the goals of that festival. It is our yearly reminder not to take the natural world for granted as we dart from our cars to our offices to our garages to our homes to the market to the mall, and on and on.

The Midrash tells us that once God finished this glorious work of Creation, which God Himself thought was rather impressive, while showing Adam and Chava all the trees, the flora and fauna of the Garden of Eden, God said to them, “See My handiwork, how beautiful and choice they are...Be careful not to ruin or destroy my world, for if you do, there is no one to repair it after you.”

Those lines are stirring and could be addressed to each one of us today as poignantly as they were to Adam and Eve. We live in a world of profound beauty. We live in a world rich with fertility and swarming with life. We live in a world that is so striking the Psalmist couldn't help but say: *Ladonai ha'aretz um'loah, teivel ve'yosh'vei vah...* God's presence fills the entire world—the land and all that inhabit it. The psalmist was in awe of our planet, of creation, of the world's bounty. And so am I! And so, I hope, are you. These first verses of our Torah contain an empowering statement: God says to Adam and Eve about our world and its creatures: subdue it, have dominion over it...What do these words imply? What exactly does it mean to subdue nature, or to have dominion over it? Certainly one could argue that it means we can do whatever we want with it. We can exploit it and manipulate it and use it entirely to our own benefit. To subdue or dominate means to have unrestricted control. But is that really what the biblical text means to teach us? Consider that in the very next verse, the very next words, Adam and Eve are presented with their menu in the Garden of Eden. And what is on the buffet line in this idyllic, perfect world: Only the plants; the seed and fruit bearing trees (save one!)—but NONE of the animals. This has led many a promoter of vegetarianism to suggest that this is the ideal way to eat. But however you feel about tofu or textured soy products, the lesson seems clear to me: To subdue does not mean to exercise unscrupulous control. With our dominion comes limits and responsibilities. Yes you are the guardians of nature, but you can't simply use it unwittingly. Genesis 2:15 goes on to

teach us that God placed man in the Garden not just to chase butterflies and smell the roses, but *l'ovdah u-l'shomrah*—to till it and to guard it.

Judaism furthers this sacred principle by extending its meaning to incorporate the entirety of the animal kingdom. We are forbidden from *za'ar ba'alei chayim*, causing needless pain to animals. For heaven's sake the Fourth Commandment, insisting that we take a much needed break on Shabbat, also demands that we give our animals a break as well! A stronger animal may not be yoked together with a weaker animal that wouldn't be able to keep up; a farmer can't muzzle an ox during the threshing period, preventing it from eating the grain that's right before its eyes! Sympathy must be extended to a mother bird, when taking its eggs—the mom must be shooed away, seemingly to be merciful to her. And of course central to the laws of Kashrut is the minimizing of pain during the slaughtering process. And as we all know, Jews don't hunt for sport. In a possibly apocryphal story the German Jewish industrialist Walter Rathenau said to his friend Albert Einstein, “When a Jew says that he hunts for pleasure, he lies!”

The other great Jewish environmental principle is *bal tashchit*—meaning do not destroy. It comes from a rather unsuspecting source: When Deuteronomy discusses issues of warfare, Israel is instructed not to adopt any version of the scorched earth policy we know from the Vietnam War era, but that in fact it is forbidden to destroy [*tashchit*] any trees in the process of laying siege to a city. The rabbis readily jumped on this and extended its application to include any wastefulness or unnecessary destruction of anything that could be useful to another person—that includes clothing, edifices, food, vessels and the like.

On Simchat Torah morning, we heard the magnificent cadence of the Creation story once again. On Thursday morning, Jasmine read this chronicle again. Each time I hear the thoughtfulness, the consciousness, the wisdom with which our world unfolded, I am drawn back to that Midrash that begs us to care for our world. Former Vice President Al Gore has produced a movie that I plan to bring to Beth Torah for a community screening. In the film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, explores the stark and scary extent of human neglect for these fundamental biblical principles. Consider that at least 279 species of plants and animals have responded to global warming, by migrating from their natural habitats to locations closer to the poles. Consider that Malaria has moved to higher altitudes, to places like the Columbian Andes, 7,000 feet above sea level. Consider that the flow of ice from glaciers in Greenland has doubled only in the past decade. Consider that the number of category 4 and 5 hurricanes has doubled only in the past 30 years. Consider that widespread deforestation and the burning of huge amounts of fossil fuels has dramatically increased the amount of carbon dioxide in the earth's atmosphere. If the current trends continue global sea levels could rise by more than 20 feet, devastating coastal areas throughout the world. We could be looking at more frequent and intense heat waves, as well as droughts and wildfires. And over a million species worldwide could be driven to extinction by 2050. “See My handiwork, how beautiful and choice they are...Be careful not to ruin or destroy my world, for if you do, there is no one to repair it after you.” My friends, we have a religious, not to mention moral, obligation to take action. If we neglect this great planet, we could bequeath to our

children widespread natural disaster. Neglecting the concern for our natural world is tantamount to neglecting any other sacred teaching in our Torah. And acting for the benefit of our natural world is nothing less than a mitzvah—a religious obligation. Let me suggest a few simple steps you can take in your life—not grandiose, change the world kinds of things, but things you can do in your own home to respond to this growing environmental crisis:

1. After Shabbat, change a light bulb. It's as simple as that. Replacing one regular light bulb with a compact fluorescent bulb will save 150 lbs. of carbon dioxide a year...Just one bulb!
2. Recycle more. If you don't live in a community that recycles, at least load up your newspapers and drop them off here at Beth Torah. You can save 2,400 lbs. of carbon dioxide per year by recycling just half of your household waste.
3. Check your tires. Did you know that keeping your tires properly inflated you can improve your gas mileage by more than 3%!
4. Adjust your thermostat. Moving your thermostat just 2 degrees in the summer and 2 degrees in the winter—just 2 degrees—can save 2,000 lbs. of CO₂/year!
5. Turn off electronic devices—simply turning off your TV, DVD player, stereo, and computer when you're not using them can save thousands of lbs. of CO₂/year.
6. Drive less. Walk, bike, carpool, or take mass transit more often. For every mile you don't drive, you'll save a lb. of carbon dioxide.
7. Avoid products with a lot of packaging. If you cut down your garbage by just 10% you can save 2,000 lbs. of CO₂.

These are not grandiose adjustments. These are not unreasonable requests. But if each one of us thought that turning off the TV when you're not watching it is a mitzvah, if each one of us considered recycling a commandment, if you and I were more conscious about how we use our resources because we considered ourselves guardians of God's creation, then we could indeed make a major impact. Thank God, we still have a chance to stem the tide of environmental devastation. Let us remember and act on the words God so lovingly spoke to the first human family, "Be careful not to ruin or destroy my world, for if you do, there will be no one to repair it after you."

Shabbat Shalom.