

## Jewish Artist Lab Source Sheet for March 17 Building a Jewish Legal Framework for Environmentalism

### Beginning with a Blessing

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם פּוֹקֵחַ עֵינַיִם

Praised are You, Lord our God, who opens the eyes of the blind.

בראשית כ"א:י"ט

וַיִּפְקֹחַ אֱלֹהִים אֶת־עֵינֶיהָ וַתֵּרָא בְּאֵר מַיִם וַתִּלְךָ וַתִּמְלֵא אֶת־הַחֲמַת מַיִם וַתִּשָּׂק אֶת־הַנְּעָר: (יט)

Then God opened her [Hagar's] eyes and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water, and let the boy drink. (Genesis 21:19)

### Review

- When the Holy One Blessed Be He created the first man, He took him and warned him about all the trees in the Garden of Eden, saying: 'See My works, see how beautiful and perfect they are, and all I created - I created for you. Beware lest you spoil and destroy my world, for if you will spoil it, there is no one to repair it after you.'  
(*Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13*)
- If a man is planting a tree and the messiah appears, he should finish planting the tree before going to greet him (*Avot d'Rebbe Natan 31b*).
- One day as Honi was walking along he saw a man planting a carob tree. Honi asked him "how many years until it will bear fruit"? The man answered: "not for seventy years". Honi asked him, "do you really believe you'll live another seventy years?" The man answered: "I found this world provided with carob trees, and as my ancestors planted them for me, so I too plant them for my descendants."  
(*Taanit 23a*)

## Jewish Law and the Environment

### Mitzvot from the Torah

- "Six years you shall sow your land, and gather in its yield; but in the seventh you shall let it rest and lie fallow. Let the needy among your people eat of it, and what they leave let the beasts of the field eat..." (*Exodus 23:10-11*)
- Six years you may sow your field, and six years you may prune your vineyard, and gather in the yield. But in the seventh year the land shall have a sabbath of the Lord: you shall not sow your field, nor prune your vineyard. You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your untrimmed vines; it shall be a year of complete rest for the land. But you may eat whatever the land during its sabbath will produce - you, your male and female slaves, the hired and bound laborers who live with you, and your cattle and the beasts in your land may eat all its yield." (*Leviticus 25: 3-7*)
- The land must not be sold forever: for the land is Mine: for you are strangers and residents with Me. Throughout the land you possess, you must provide redemption of the land. (*Leviticus 25:23-24*)
- When you besiege a city for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them. You may eat from them, but you shall not cut them down. Are the trees in the field human, that they should be besieged by you? Only the trees that you know are not trees for food you may destroy and cut down, that you may build siegeworks against the city that makes war with you, until it falls. (*Deuteronomy 20:19-20*)

## Commentary on the Torah's Mitzvot

- "The rules of *Shmitta* and Jubilee... some deal with mercy and amnesty for human beings... others with increasing crops and strengthening the land while it rests... some are about mercy on slaves and poor people - such as debt remission and releasing of slaves. Some of the rules deal with regulating the economy in such a way that the land shall never be sold in perpetuity, but that a man's property shall be kept for him and his descendants so that they shall eat its crops..." (Maimonides, *Guide to the Perplexed*)
- It is forbidden to cut down fruit-bearing trees outside a besieged city, nor may a water channel be deflected from them so that they wither. Whoever cuts down a fruit-bearing tree is flogged. This penalty is imposed not only for cutting it down during a siege; whenever a fruit-yielding tree is cut down with destructive intent, flogging is incurred. It may be cut down, however, if it causes damage to other trees or to a field belonging to another man or if its value for other purposes is greater. The Law forbids only wanton destruction. Not only one who cuts down trees, but also one who smashes household goods, tears clothes, demolishes a building, stops up a spring, or destroys articles of food with destructive intent transgresses the command "you must not destroy." Such a person is not flogged, but is administered a disciplinary beating imposed by the Rabbis. (Maimonides Mishneh Torah Laws of Kings and Wars 6:8-10)
- "The Sabbatical is a real must for the Nation and the Land! A year of peace and quiet... a year of equality and tranquility when the soul can reach out to the righteous God who feeds all life ... there is no private property ... and coveting of wealth, which is stimulated by commerce... And man returns refreshed to his natural self, to the stage where he does not need medication for illnesses that are due mainly to the ruining of life's natural equilibrium..." (Rav Kook, *Shabbat Haaretz*)
- [In reference to environmental crises such as the pollution of the Kishon River and air pollution in Haifa] "Leaders cannot say: 'Our hands did not shed this blood and our eyes did not see...'" (Deut. 21:7) (Rabbi Bakshi Doron, Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel, 2002)

## **Bibliography**

Gerstenfeld, Dr. Manfred. *Judaism, Environmentalism and the Environment-Mapping and Analysis*.

Safran Foer, Jonathan. *We are the Weather. Eating Animals*.

### Action websites

TIME: <https://this-is-my-earth.org/>

This Israeli NGO is unique in its approach to education and to a democratic approach to solving problems and including young people in its mission.

*Le'ovda Uleshomra* (To Till it and Tend it): <http://www.heschelcenter.org>

This organization was founded by The Heschel Center for Environmental Study and Leadership "to increase environmental awareness and activism in the Israeli national religious public."

## A Final Thought

### Where do we stand?

By Rabbi Daniel Nevins

The Gemara teaches:

**When the Holy One, Blessed be He, sought to bring a flood into the world, He took two stars from Pleiades and brought the flood upon the world. And afterward, when He wished to fill the void, He took two stars from Ursa Major and filled the void with them. --Berakhot 59**

Why, the rabbis ask, did God not simply return the stars taken from Pleiades? Because “the prosecutor may not become the defender” — in other words, that which caused harm cannot rescue from harm. Since the stars from Pleiades caused the flood, it can’t be the stars from Pleiades that end it.

... the rabbis weave together a cosmos consisting of biblical texts, observations of natural phenomena, and assessments of human conduct. When humans misbehave, God may respond by rearranging the stars, unleashing misfortune on earth. When the people of Israel suffer, God weeps two tears into the ocean, leading to an earthquake felt throughout the world. These fantastic claims are “proven” by biblical exegesis. This mythological worldview establishes a deep connection between human conduct and divine response.

We may read such rabbinic legends as quaint, just like myths from other ancient cultures that sought to explain phenomena now well understood by scientific inquiry. However, this ancient perspective has much to offer modern people, and may be a corrective to the arrogance and myopia that have characterized the modern human attitude toward nature. We have stopped up rivers, burned forests, split atoms, polluted lands, and changed the chemistry of our atmosphere and waters — all with little concern for the consequences. We are only belatedly realizing that human conduct can have global effects, just as the ancients believed.

The rabbis extend this point further... We are taught that when seeing a mighty river, one says the blessing: **“Blessed is the maker of creation.”** But what if the river has been bridged or diverted? The rabbis disagree on what to do. One opinion says the blessing is recited only when viewing the river in its natural state. Another opinion says one can recite the blessing even from a bridge.

The rabbis recognized both the distinct value of the world as made by God and the fact that humans affect the nature of the world and even the cosmos — and not only through obvious interventions like the diversion of rivers and the building of bridges. Human conduct affects the moral fabric of the world too, causing the creator to rearrange the stars and reshape the earth.

In other words, humans are part of nature. It is impossible to filter out their impact. But by paying close attention to the indirect consequences of our conduct, we may come to take greater responsibility for the direct ones too — and ultimately find new ways to introduce blessing to the world.

*Rabbi Daniel Nevins is the dean of The Rabbinical School at The Jewish Theological Seminary.*

