

Message and Study Guide from Meryll

Last week I anticipated that it would be very hard to refrain from hugging each of you on Tuesday. I've missed you and our discussions. Alas, circumstances have dictated that we can't hug and can't meet but Robyn and I have found a way we can study. We do this with hope that next month, God willing, we will be together in person.

You can follow the study guide alone or you can skype, call, or visit with another lab member and work through the sheet. Anyone who wants to get together with me in a small group or virtually, contact me (pagemeryll@gmail.com or 651 434 9370), and we'll see if we can arrange it. If you choose not to engage in this month's study, we'll fold you back into our learning the next time. Torah learning is not canceled due to an abundance of caution. In fact, it may help us to move through this difficult period.

Introduction to this month's lesson

We move from the second paragraph of the Sh'ma where God promised that if we don't obey his laws, he will withhold rain in its season, etc. We can understand this literally or figuratively or dismiss the idea altogether. If we think about a law code as the embodiment of a society's value system, we need to begin with Jewish law to understand our basic relationship to the natural world. This lesson will help you take a look at some of laws within that Torah that are linked to the environment. One can easily see that the natural consequence of not following those laws would have a deleterious impact on the environment.

Before you begin, you'll need....

- Your journal
- Writing/sketching tools
- Optional—a partner from the list of our artists

Study Guide

Before glancing at the source sheet, sketch any image that comes to your mind when you hear legal framework or the Hebrew term, *halakha*.

Read through the laws on the source sheet (mitzvot from the Torah) and answer the following questions. It would be helpful to write a few words in your sketchbook/journal so we can return to this when we're back together as a group.

- How do these laws seek to manage humans within the natural environment?
- What would be the consequence to the environment if these laws were not followed?

- Do you think these laws go far enough for the time in which they were written?
- Can you think of a modern law you'd propose that's an outgrowth of one of these mitzvot?

Read through the Commentary on the Torah's mitzvot and respond to the following questions.

- Do any of the commentators help you understand the laws better? How?
- Do any of the commentators offer you a more contemporary understanding of the Torah mitzvot? How?
- What do you think of Rabbi Doron's pronouncement? Do you think he stands within the halakha?

And finally,

Sketch an image of that comes to your mind when you hear the term legal framework or halakha now that you've examined the sources.

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

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 *Shmita* 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."