



JEWISH TEXTS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Exploring Judaism: Eco-Shabbat special

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Greta Thunberg^a

You say you hear us and that you understand the urgency. But no matter how sad and angry I am, I do not want to believe that. Because if you really understood the situation and still kept on failing to act, then you would be evil. And that I refuse to believe. You are failing us. But the young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you. And if you choose to fail us, I say: We will never forgive you.

Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13

At the time of humanity's creation, God led Adam around the Garden of Eden and showed him all of the trees there, and said: "See how beautiful and amazing is the world that I have created – created for you! Be aware, then, that you must not damage or destroy My world – for if you damage it, there will be nobody to come after you and put things right."

בשעה שברא הקב"ה את אדם הראשון
נטלו והחזירו על כל אילני גן עדן ואמר
לו ראה מעשי כמה נאים ומשובחין הן
וכל מה שבראתי בשבילך בראתי, תן
דעתך שלא תקלקל ותחריב את עולמי,
שאם קלקלת אין מי שיתקן אחריך.

PREDICTING THE FUTURE

Sforno to Genesis 6:13, 10:25

I will destroy humanity alongside the earth – God is resolving to destroy the earth's climate and atmosphere. This is why human lifespans dropped immediately after the flood: the climate was no longer suitable. The generation of the Flood was punished with disruption to their ecosystem and sudden changes to their atmosphere.

אשחיתם יחדיו עם הארץ – שאשחית
מזג הארץ והאוויר ... ולכן נמעטו שני חיי
המין האנושי תכף אחר המבול, כי לא היו
עוד המזגים ... על שלמותם הראשון ... זה
היה חטא בני הפלגה וענשם, שקלקל
מזגם מהשתנות הפתאומי מאויר לאויר.

^a Speech to the UN Climate Action Summit, 23 September 2019: <<https://www.npr.org/2019/09/23/763452863/transcript-greta-thunbergs-speech-at-the-u-n-climate-action-summit>>

BIODIVERSITY

Joseph ibn-Kaspi (14th century)^b

One of the reasons why the Giver of our Torah decided to command us to have mercy even for animals was, in my view, to teach us that we – humanity – are extremely close relatives of theirs, and that we share a common Parent. We are the same. And this was not enough for the Giver of our Torah: we also had to be taught that we are all simply organisms. We have to understand that we and the vegetables – cabbage and horseradish – are brothers, and that we share a common Parent. Our Torah is about the attributes of compassion and humility, teaching us – until it is always before our eyes – that we are just like the donkey and the mule, and even like the cabbage and the pomegranate... and even like the lifeless stone.



אחת מהסיבות שהביאו לנותן תורתנו
לצוותנו על חמלת שאר בע"ח ... לפי
דעתי, ללמדנו, כי אנחנו בני אדם
קרובים להם מאוד ואנחנו והם בני אב
אחד, כי סוגנו הקרוב אחד ... ולא
הספיק זה לנותן התורה בכלל מצוותיו,
עד שהודיענו בכלם שאנחנו צמח, עד
שנדע, שאנחנו והירקות כמו הכרוב
והחזרת אחים, ואבינו אחד ... תורתנו
[זו על] תכונת הענוה והשפלות, עד
שנדע ויהיה בין עינינו תמיד, כי אנחנו
כחמור ופרד, גם ככרוב ורימון, גם
כאבן דומם.

^b Mishnah Kessef (1905 Pressburg edition): vol 1 p 35 and vol 2 p 294.

REGULATION

Rabbi Jonathan Romain^c

A variety of biblical and Talmudic laws indicate that whilst the land was to be used for the benefit of humanity, it had to be treated responsibly. Thus the Torah prohibits an army besieging a city from destroying fruit-bearing trees. From this, the Talmud derived the principle that all other instances of wasting resources were forbidden, including food, water and all things that might be of use to others.

Safety standards were also enjoined. They ranged from disposal of domestic rubbish, for instance broken glass which should be buried in one's own land rather than scattered in the public domain, to the effects of 'industrial' activity, for instance a threshing floor was prohibited within 50 cubits of the city lest the chaff was carried by the wind and affected the health of city dwellers, while no furnaces were allowed in Jerusalem because of the fumes.



^c Rabbi Jonathan A Romain. *Faith and Practice: a guide to Reform Judaism today* (London: Reform Synagogues of Great Britain, 1991): 230-232.