

# מה גדלו מעשך

## Caring for Creation: Judaism and the Environment

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## Reason 3: Our World Compels Us to Wonder

As civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines. Such decline is an alarming symptom of our state of mind. We will not perish for want of information, but only for want of appreciation.

—Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man*\*

### L'Halakhah: Wonder Compels Blessing

The previous two chapters have made us think about the ways in which we ought to be cautious with how we treat the environment, lest we believe that somehow we are masters over the natural world. However, an equally important principle in our Jewish tradition is that our natural world should compel us to wonder.



### Why wonder? Wonder leads to action

Think of the last time you wondered about something. What did it cause you to do? When we wonder, we are compelled to explore and inquire. Fill in the following:

When I was little I always wondered about \_\_\_\_\_, so I \_\_\_\_\_

When I meet someone new I wonder if \_\_\_\_\_, so I \_\_\_\_\_

When I travel to a new destination, I wonder about \_\_\_\_\_, so I \_\_\_\_\_

When I'm faced with a dilemma I wonder \_\_\_\_\_, so I \_\_\_\_\_

When I see something beautiful, it makes me wonder about \_\_\_\_\_, so I \_\_\_\_\_

At first, this can seem like a very non-specific idea. How can you be compelled to experience something like wonder? Yet when we think about Jewish tradition, we should not be surprised that this becomes a part of our consciousness when it comes to the environment. Since God's creation is something that is considered infinitely good, then that very fact should compel a different type of relationship with the environment.

Returning to our creation narrative, consider the following Midrash about the wonder creation compels:

ויכולו השמים והארץ וכל צבאם...רבנן אמרי אפי' דברים שאתה רואה אותן שהן יתירה בעולם כגון זבובין ופרעושיין ויתושיין אף הן בכלל ברייתו של עולם הן, ובכל הקב"ה עושה שליחותו, אפי' ע"י נחש, אפי' ע"י יתוש, אפי' ע"י צפרדע.

"Heaven and earth were finished—all their array" (Bereishit 2:1). Our Rabbis said: Even those things that you may see as superfluous to Creation—such as flies, fleas, and mosquitoes—even they too were inherent in Creation; for through it all is God's purpose carried out—even through a snake, a mosquito, or a frog. (Midrash Bereishit Rabbah 10:7)

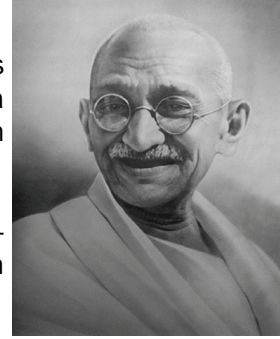
1. What does it mean for something to be "inherent in creation"?
2. In the previous chapter, our texts described the way in which all living things should make us modest about our relationship to the natural world. What type of emotion do you think this text is meant to evoke?

\* Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *God in Search of Man*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1955.

## L'Maaseh

For many people, the ideas above may seem obvious. After all, few of us would openly argue against the belief that we must treat all living beings in a certain way. However, the reality of how we live out that message is far from clear.

When he wrote about the topic, Mahatma Gandhi, (1869-1948) a strict vegetarian, connected the practical treatment of animals with the spiritual health of a society:



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**The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way in which its animals are treated.** I hold that the more helpless a creature, the more entitled it is to protection by man from the cruelty of man. I feel that spiritual progress does demand at some stage that we should cease to kill our fellow creatures for the satisfaction of our bodily wants. I do not regard flesh-food as necessary for us at any stage and under any clime in which it is possible for human beings ordinarily to live. I hold flesh-food to be unsuited to our species. (Mahatma Gandhi)

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While Gandhi argues that one ought to cease from eating animals in order to demonstrate compassion for them, he also raises a new idea that has great significance whether or not you agree with his argument, namely that how we treat animals says a great deal of our values.

## Kashrut and the Ethics of What We Eat

We can't talk about being kind to animals without discussing kashrut. Whether the mitzvah of tzar baalei chayim demands *shchitah* (or ritual slaughter) be done in a way compassionate to animals or whether *shchitah* teaches us the mitzvah of tzar baalei chayim, we cannot deny the association between Kashrut and the ethical treatment of animals.

Genesis Rabbah 44:1: "The purpose [of Kashrut] is to refine humanity"

1. **What does it mean to "refine humanity?" How does Kashrut do that?**
2. **How is what we eat an ethical choice? How does keeping Kosher make a statement? Why would one care to keep Kosher?**

Kashrut leads to daily Jewish choices and makes us holy in our everyday decisions to eat ethically. It allows us to make ethical, moral and spiritual food choices, gives us self discipline and reminds us that we are partners with God in helping improve the world by living ethically. Kashrut creates a relationship between the simple act of eating and God, and has helped unify Jews throughout time.

What exactly is Kashrut? Are we supposed to eat animals? How do we know? Or is it that Kashrut means that we're just supposed to eat them if they have been killed in a certain way (*Shchitah*/ ritual slaughter)?

for many years on this earth, we are reliant upon Creation perpetuating itself so that we will always have sufficient resources. (Isaac Abravanel on Devarim 22:6-7)

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1. **Although Abravanel is speaking about a different mitzvah in this commentary, how we can apply his ideas to the other mitzvot studied in this chapter?**
2. **Based on his commentary, how would you create a Jewish definition and rationale for the term “sustainability”?**

For Abravanel, we should interpret these mitzvot theologically, and understand them as being part of God’s vision for how to maintain the work on creation across generations.



## Shemittah- Good for the land, Bad for the Farmers?

In Israel, Shemittah laws are still practiced. While there are great advantages for letting the land “rest,” such as giving the land time to regenerate, there are also disadvantages. What would they be?

Example: how can we eat without agriculture? Can we take away farmers’ livelihoods and leave them with no source of income for a year? On the other hand, do we have the right to continue to overproduce and abuse our natural resources?

### Debate it:

Should we follow Shemittah laws in the U.S. and Canada? Is this one answer to our environmental concerns? Shemittah reflects how much a given society appreciates nature and its bounty, and allows the Earth time to regenerate. On the other hand, we need to eat and farmers need to work.



## Stretching Our Resources

*Sustainability and awareness of our limits*

You will need Silly Putty, a rubber band or any other rubbery, stretchy material for this activity.

Stand facing a partner. Each of you should grab on to the rubber band or silly putty. Pull it in opposite directions as you move further from each other. See how far you can stretch it before it breaks.

Discuss: What does this teach us about our own natural resources? Before you know it, we have stretched our resources beyond their limit and have destroyed them. How can we learn to stretch our resources so that they are not thinly spread and cannot be destroyed as easily?

In your pairs, come up with ways to sustain and preserve our resources.



# Environmental Symbols in the Jewish Tradition

When people cut down the wood of a tree that yields fruits, its cry goes from one end of the world to the other, and the sound is inaudible... When the soul departs from the body, the cry goes forth from one end of the world to the other, and the sound is inaudible. (Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer 34)

## L'Halakhah

The previous chapter described the way in which our Jewish tradition sees the natural world as endowed with divine sparks, in everything from the oceans to the trees to the rocks. As a result, it should come as no surprise that many Jewish texts attempt to explain the significance of core Jewish concepts through environmental symbols.

In this section, we are going to focus on four of those environmental symbols, namely trees, water, land, and air.

## Trees

Perhaps the most famous analogy to describe the Torah itself is that it is a *Tree of Life*. The phrase originates from the Book of Mishlei (Proverbs), with the original text found below:

<p>יֵד כִּי טוֹב סִתְּרָה, מִסֹּחֵר-כֶּסֶף; וּמְחַרֵּץ, תְּבוֹאֲתָהּ. טו יִקְרָה הִיא, מִפְּנִיִּים (מִפְּנִיִּים); וְכֹל-חֶפְצֵיָהּ, לֹא יִשׁוּ-בָּהּ. טז אַרְךָ יָמִים, בְּיַמֶּינָהּ; בְּשִׂמְאוֹלָהּ, עֵשֶׂר וְכַבֹּד. יז דְּרָכֶיהָ דְרָכֵי-נֶעֱם; וְכֹל- נְתִיבוֹתֶיהָ שְׁלוֹם. יח עֵץ-חַיִּים הִיא, לְמַחְזִיקִים בָּהּ; וְתַמְכִּיהָ מֵאֲשֵׁר.</p>	<p>14. Happy is the man who finds wisdom, and the man who gets understanding. 15. For the merchandise of it is better than the merchandise of silver, and its gain than fine gold. 16. She is more precious than rubies; and all the things you can desire are not to be compared to her. Length of days is in her right hand; and in her left hand riches and honor. 17. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. 18. It [Torah] is a tree of life to those who hold fast to it, and all of its supporters are happy. (Mishlei 3:14-18)</p>
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1. The final verse of this text describes the Torah as a “tree of life.” How does this image fit within the context of the entire text?
2. How does describing the Torah as a “tree of life” promote a certain way of living?
3. Why do you think the text chose a “tree” as the metaphor for describing Torah?



Just as trees are considered essential components to the fabric of our natural world, so too is the Torah an essential component of our natural world.

## The Calendar Cycle and its Ecological Significance at a Glance

See the boxes below as a reference to some of the other Jewish holidays and their agricultural names/connections.

### Tu B'shevat

Rosh Hashanah La'ilanot—The New Year for the Trees

A Jewish Earth Day

Tu B'Shevat is the Jewish Arbor day. On this day we acknowledge the human dependence on nature. In Temple times, fruit taxes were paid to the Temple at this time of year. Fruits provided by God were returned to God through Temple sacrifice. Today, many of us participate in what 16th century Kabbalists creatively concocted- a Tu B'Shevat Seder. Each fruit and nut eaten through this ritual has spiritual or physical symbolism, connecting our spiritual selves to the physical world. JNF Day: In Israel, Tu B'Shevat has become a day dedicated to reforestation and tree planting, a custom still prevalent today. Zionist visions of building and rebuilding the land are implemented through Tu B'Shevat customs,

**Pesach** (falls on the full moon following the Spring Equinox)

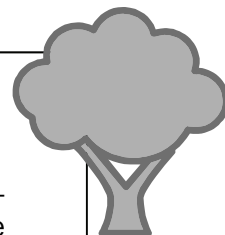
Chag Ha'aviv—*The spring festival*

Marks the new Spring season

### Shavuot

Chag He'katzir, Chag HaBikurim

The Harvest Festival- Festival of first harvest fruits



### Sukkot (falls on the full moon following the Fall Equinox)

Chag Ha'asif—The Festival of Gathering (of crops)

We recall that this was a busy harvest season for farmers, before the winter hit. Additionally, the "sukkot" or booths we dwell in, reminiscent of those built by the Israelites in the desert, provide us a chance to dwell in a natural surrounding, feel the elements and experience the changing season.

We bless the four "species" of lulav (palm), etrog (citron), hadas (myrtle) and arava (willow) as natural elements bound together and waved in all directions thanking God for providing our sustenance. We acknowledge our dependence on the cycles of nature by waving these bound natural products around in blessing. On Shmini Atzeret, the last day of Sukkot we specifically pray for rain.







## The Environment in Practice: The State of Israel and Eco-Zionism

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A time is coming... when the mountains shall drip with wine and all the hills shall wave with grain. I will restore My people Israel. I will plant them upon their soil. (Amos 9:13-15)

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### L'Halakhah

At this point in the sourcebook, it may seem like many of these environmental precepts are too small. While each of us can obviously do a great deal to change our individual, family and communal behaviors (something we will discuss later), meaningful environmental change will occur when entire societies engage in the practice of protecting their piece of the natural world.

For us, our Jewish values for the environment maintain a special significance in relationship to the State of Israel, because Israel is the only place in the world where Jewish values can become the mainstream model for a healthy society. Whether in the religious, social or political realm, Israel gives us a chance to see our Jewish values put into societal practice, and the environment is no exception.

The Torah describes the type of land which the Israelites will enter:

<p>ז כִּי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ, מְבִיאֲךָ אֶל-אֶרֶץ טוֹבָה: אֶרֶץ, נַחְלֵי מַיִם--עֵינַת וַתְּהַמַּת, יִצְאִים בְּבִקְעָה וּבְהָר. ח אֶרֶץ חֲטָה וּשְׁעָרָה, וְגִפְנוֹ וַתְּאִנָּה וְרִמּוֹן; אֶרֶץ-זֵית שָׁמֶן, וְדָבָשׁ. ט אֶרֶץ, אֲשֶׁר לֹא בְּמִסְכַּנְתַּת תֹּאכַל-בָּהּ לֶחֶם--לֹא-תַחְסֵר כָּל, בָּהּ; אֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲבַנֶּיהָ בְּרֹזָל, וּמִהַרְרֵיהָ תִחְצַב נְחֹשֶׁת. י וְאָכַלְתָּ, וּשְׂבַעְתָּ--וַיְבָרַכְתָּ אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ, עַל-הָאֶרֶץ הַטֹּבָה אֲשֶׁר נָתַן-לָךְ.</p>	<p>7. For the Lord your God brings you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths that spring out of valleys and hills; 8. A land of wheat, and barley, and vines, and fig trees, and pomegranates; a land of olive oil, and honey; 9. A land where you shall eat bread without scarceness, you shall not lack any thing in it; a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you may dig bronze. 10. When you have eaten and are full, then you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land which he has given you. (Devarim 8:7-10)</p>
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1. How is the land of Israel described in this passage?
2. What is the connection between the quality of the land of Israel and the need to thank God for the goodness given to the Israelites?
3. Look at verse 10 carefully. Do you recognize this verse from a familiar prayer?

In the previous passage, the land of Israel is described as a clean and luscious place, full of natural goodness given to the Israelites from God. In modern times, the final verse in this passage is the textual support for reciting the *Birkat Ha-Mazon*, or the Grace After Meals. Each time we thank God for the food we are given, we are acknowledging that food comes from a land that is meant to remain whole and holy.