

***Lo Alecha ha-M'lacha Ligmor:* Theology and Climate Change**

by Paul Solyn

I used to think the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate change. I thought that with 30 years of good science we could address those problems. But I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy.... And to deal with those we need a spiritual and cultural transformation — and we scientists don't know how to do that.

Gus Speth

No stream of Judaism denies the reality of climate change, but do we hear much about it in our synagogues? And as educators, what do we teach our students — not necessarily about science, but about God and Jewish thought, to help them make sense of it?

One reason we may not hear much about climate change in the synagogue is that most of us accept the science: outright denial is more likely to stem from political allegiance than from conflict with Judaism. Another, more subtle, reason is that we have little sense of what to do, and grim prognostications without ideas for action do not make good sermons. In addition, many rabbis speak primarily about the weekly *Torah* portion, and while some *parashot* contain springboards for speaking about climate change or the environment more generally, most do not.

When we consider the effects of climate change — those that scientists consider “inevitable” or “highly likely” over the next 250 years — it is apparent that climate change constitutes an emergency that Judaism, and all religions, should address.

Christian clergy do not speak very much about climate change, either. Fear of dissent within the congregation is likely a major consideration, just as it is in Jewish settings, but so is the lack of Biblical starting points. According to a study conducted by Lifeway, a Christian non-profit organization, most Protestant pastors address environmental issues of any kind, not specifically climate change, only once a year, if that often; eleven percent never speak to their church members about the environment at all.

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When we consider the effects of climate change — those that scientists consider “inevitable” or “highly likely” over the next 250 years — it is apparent that climate change constitutes an emergency that Judaism, and all religions, should address:

- ◆ Climate chaos: bigger storms, droughts, deserts, wildfires, habitat loss
- ◆ Sea level rise, 25–40+ feet
- ◆ Sixth mass extinction
- ◆ End of the era of fossil fuels

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- ◆ Chemical and nuclear wastes
- ◆ World population decline to less than one billion
- ◆ Deterioration of infrastructures and mass migrations of peoples
- ◆ Deterioration of industry.

Although predicting the effects of climate change and describing ways to mitigate them is not the work of theologians or religious educators, our society has made climate change into a religious problem. In particular, public discourse makes it a theological issue in the United States, and if we do not speak about it as a Jewish issue, there is room for ideas coming from other belief systems to invade our thoughts.

Furthermore, mainstream Jewish tradition is somewhat alienated from nature. We learn in Genesis that Esau was “a man of the field,” while Jacob “stayed in tents.” According to midrash, Jacob needed not just one tent to sleep in, but also a second tent in which to study. In other words, the *midrash* makes Jacob into our first *yeshiva bocher*! Jewish tradition strongly prefers Jacob over Esau.

Beyond that, we have been trained to think of Judaism as existing “in history,” but outside of nature. This has been unfairly described as “Heschel on steroids,” but it did not originate with Rabbi A. J. Heschel, whose idea of “radical amazement” should attune us to nature. Rather, it derives from the 19th-century *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, “science of Judaism,” movement, which sought to apply the tools of secular learning to Judaism. At that time, anthropology and sociology, which could have contributed much, were not well-developed in secular academia, but history and philology were available — and when historiography is the principal tool available, everything looks like history.

Finally, for many centuries we have been an urban people. While both Zionism and Jewish environmentalism have exerted influence in recent times, most of us live in or near urban centers; both still are perceived as marginal.

THINKING JEWISHLY ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE

This is what Judaism needs to think Jewishly about climate change and to act appropriately:

- ◆ A corrective for counterproductive religious views.
- ◆ A Jewish context for understanding environmentalism and climate action.
- ◆ A theological framework that promotes understanding, action, and compassion.
- ◆ An idea of what to teach our students about God, Judaism, and life.

The starting point, as with everything in religious Judaism, is the *Torah*. Rabbi David Seidenberg writes,

One Biblical concept that every Bible reader and every Jewish denomination can affirm without controversy is the idea that Creation, in its totality, is inherently good. The idea is embedded in the Creation narrative: “*Elokim* saw all that He made, and here/behold: it is very good” [Genesis 1:31].

Indeed, Christians who speak about climate change often find “Creation Care” to be a productive approach. This term is not as helpful in Jewish environments, because many of us would think immediately of “creation science.” While “Creation Care” does embody an assumption that the universe was created, it does not specify the mode of creation — as commonly used, “God’s creation” denotes only the world as we know it.

It has strong support from Maimonides, arguably the most important Jewish philosopher of all time, who explains that the phrase “very good” intimates the intrinsic value and purpose of all of Creation, which is independent of humanity:

[A]ll the other beings too have been intended for their own sakes and not for the sake of something else... If you consider the *Torah*, the notion that we have in view will become manifest... For with reference to none of the things created is the statement made in any way that it exists for the sake of some other things. He only says that He brought every part of the world into existence and that it conformed to its purpose. This is the meaning of the saying: “And God saw that it [is] good.” About the whole, it says: “And God saw everything that He had made, and, behold, it [is] very good.”

For a perspective that makes sense in contemporary Judaism, we might look at three ways of interpreting the world:

Anthropocentrism: a belief that humans are the goal and purpose of creation. Support for this concept in Judaism might come from the first creation story in Genesis, because humans are the last thing created on the sixth day. In opposition to this, we should note that as this chapter tells it, God first creates the habitats for life forms and only then the life forms themselves. We could read this story as teaching not that humans were the purpose of creation, but that human life had to be created last because it could not exist without all the other forms of life created before it.

Anthropo-archism (*weak anthropocentrism*): a belief that the rest of creation exists for the benefit of humans. This is more tenable in Jewish thought; while it places humans at the top of a pyramid of existence, it also implies a duty of stewardship

of the earth and all its other life forms. This duty is a starting point for Jewish environmentalism, but not necessarily sufficient for dealing with the climate crisis.

Biocentrism: a belief that all living things have intrinsic moral standing. As Rabbi Seidenberg puts it, “there is hardly an idea that could be more compatible with ancient Jewish tradition,” and it is the view that is most productive for environmental understanding and action.

There is, however, some opposition within Judaism to a biocentric view of the universe. For example, Hava Tirosh-Samuelsan writes, “From a Jewish perspective, ‘biocentrism’ is just another form of paganism that must result in idolatrous worship of nature.”

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A belief that all living things have equal moral standing might, in truth, be incompatible with Jewish practice, and probably also with human existence, but it is hard to see how belief that all life has some moral standing constitutes paganism or idolatry.

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Do we need a new Jewish theology? Before considering any changes in or additions to Jewish theology, we should review (in the order of their formal statement) the widely-held Jewish theologies of the present.

Rationalism — propounded in the early Middle Ages by Maimonides, and expanded by Yehuda ha-Levi and Rabbi Moses Mendelssohn, it derives from philosophy. It holds that God is pure rationality and that human reason is the image of God within us; that the *Torah* is rationally true; that reason and revelation differ only in terminology; and that if science and Judaism appear to conflict, it is only because our understanding of them is incomplete. Its acceptance of science is productive for Jewish environmentalism.

Neo-traditionalism — associated with Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch in the Nineteenth Century and Rabbi Norman Lamm in the Twentieth, it derives predominantly from tradition. It holds that God is the God of the *Torah*, who literally spoke to Moses; that *Torah* consists of both a written component (“the *Torah*”) and an oral one (the *Talmud*). While it has no particular interest in science, its expression in contemporary Orthodox Judaism accepts science by treating science and

religion as separate spheres of knowledge.

Experientialism — associated especially with the works of Rabbi A. J. Heschel, it understands God to be present in nature, *Torah*, history, and sacred deeds; to be present in the world; and to be concerned with the world. It holds that God wants certain acts from humans, including care of the world. Its authority is the *Torah*, but with “a minimum of revelation and a maximum of interpretation.” It has no quarrel with science, and its appreciation of nature supports environmentalism. It can accommodate theological and halachic innovation.

Existentialism — drawing on both philosophy and mysticism, it tends to emphasize “belief in” over “belief that.” Originating in the twentieth century, it is especially associated with the

works of Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig in Germany and Rabbi Eugene Borowitz in the United States. It views God as existing in relationship with the people of Israel, and the *Torah* as the response to, rather than the direct content of, revelation. Authority stems from individual choice. It has no quarrel with science or environmentalism, but while its emphasis on individual choice allows the development of new *mitzvot*, it does not readily facilitate their spread and adoption.

Naturalism — propounded especially by Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, it derives primarily from the sciences, both natural and social. It sees religions as natural creations of human societies, revelation as a process of discovery, and Jewish religion as secondary to Jewish peoplehood. It finds authority in community. It is the most favorable to environmentalism, in particular because it avoids “otherworldliness,” the expectation of Divine intervention, and thus demands collective human action.

Although these theologies align more or less with specific streams within contemporary Judaism, it is possible to adhere nominally to one stream while holding views more directly associated with others, and that is the situation of many Jews today.

While certain of these theologies — Heschel’s experientialism, because of its appreciation of nature and its understanding of *mitzvot*, and Kaplan’s naturalism, because of its full engagement with science — are especially productive for climate action — none is antithetical to it.

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None, however, provides a complete toolkit for a Jewish eco-theology, and to create one, it is helpful to consider a definition of religion suggested by the Rev. Michael Dowd, a Protestant clergyman best known for his embrace of the theory of evolution and currently very active in the climate movement.

Dowd defines religion as “the control mechanism of stable (sustainable) societies,” with these essential components:

1. All benefits and real wealth come from the living biosphere (God).
2. God/Reality will continue to dispense these benefits and wealth only if life’s critical order (essential integrity, or “Way”) is honored and preserved.
3. The fundamental role of religion (life-ways) is to ensure that the future is never compromised by the present — by fiercely preserving the integrity of the ecosphere and the “critical order of the cosmos” (the Way).

Dowd’s use of “the Way” is especially striking in a Jewish context because it is a literal translation of *halachah* (although “the way” might also be translated as *ha-derech*).

A comprehensive eco-theology of Judaism would:

- ◆ Be in accord with Jewish sources
- ◆ Be fully engaged with science
- ◆ Promote a healthy relationship with reality
- ◆ Embrace, not defy, reality.

It probably would not be primarily otherworldly (so it might be closer to Kaplan than, say, to Heschel).

It would value all life for itself, not for instrumental value to humans, which is consistent with the way Maimonides interpreted *Genesis 1*, and it would define and teach limits. Now, Judaism is above all a religion of limits, but Jewish eco-theology would require limits not prescribed in *Torah* and *Talmud*.

SUPPORT FOR JEWISH ECO-THEOLOGY

In accord with Jewish sources: there is more than adequate support for Jewish eco-theology in Jewish texts. We might begin in *Deuteronomy*, in a passage that constitutes the second paragraph of the *Shema* in traditional liturgy (Reform practice omits it):

If, then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, loving the LORD your God and serving Him with all your heart and soul,
I will grant the rain for your land in season, the early rain and the late. You shall gather in your new grain and wine and oil — I will also provide grass in the fields for your cattle — and thus you shall eat your fill.

Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods and bow to them.

For the Lord’s anger will flare up against you, and He will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce; and you will soon perish from the good land that the Lord is assigning to you

Deuteronomy 11:13–17

We tend to read “the commandments that I enjoin upon you” as pertaining solely, or chiefly, to those given explicitly in the *Torah*. However, we could also choose to read it as including all the laws of nature, to all kinds of actions and their consequences.

In addition to this passage, we might look at some of the Psalms, such as this section of *Psalms 148*:

Praise the Lord, O you who are on earth, all sea monsters and ocean depths,
fire and hail, snow and smoke, storm wind that executes His command,
all wild and tamed beasts, creeping things and winged birds,
all kings and peoples of the earth, all princes of the earth and its judges,
youths and maidens alike, old and young together.
Let them praise the name of the Lord, for His name, His alone, is sublime; His splendor covers heaven and earth.
He has exalted the horn of His people for the glory of all His faithful ones, Israel, the people close to Him.
Hallelujah

Psalms 148:7–14

Understanding this literally rather than only as metaphor: if sea monsters, wild and tamed beasts, creeping things, and birds, not to mention fire, hail, snow, smoke, and wind, can be commanded to praise God, it follows that all must have moral standing, the central requirement of a biocentric approach. Thus, all deserve human consideration.

Or we might consider this statement attributed to the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism: “Everything is by Divine Providence. If a leaf is turned over by a breeze, it is only because this has been specifically ordained by God to serve a particular function within the purpose of creation.”

The idea that God is active in all things, all the time, is called *hashgacha pratit*, often if misleadingly translated as Divine providence. Its relevance to eco-theology is its conclusion that everything that exists matters, and nothing is dispensable.

Reb Nachman of Breslov states this more fully:

[I]n every thing there is the will of *Hashem* (the Blessed Name): so it is in the whole of Creation/*k'lal ha-briyah*... and so in the details of Creation/*pratey ha-briyah*, in each and every individual thing... since the Blessed Name desired that this thing would be thus, with this appearance/*t'munah*, with this power, and with this nature... And the righteous person searches out and seeks continually... to attain and to know the will of God in every thing.

Rabbi Seidenberg takes this a step further:

Ultimately, fundamentally, the *Torah* is about sustainability, as it says here: "Set these my words on your heart... in order that you may increase your days and the days of your children upon the face of the ground... like the days of the skies over the land" [Dt 11:18–21], or more generally, "Choose life, in order that you will live" (*Deuteronomy* 30:19).

human threats to sustainability did not exist in ancient times. Not only was technology much less advanced, but the human population was much smaller. Furthermore, Judaism as most of us have been taught seems to have little to do with sustainability.

Kashrut provides a telling illustration. Before the discovery of the book of *Deuteronomy*, meat in the Land of Israel could be eaten only when offered as a sacrifice, in a way that honored the *nefesh* (soul) of the animal by recognizing its own holy status. In addition, the animals that could be eaten were grazing and foraging animals that could subsist on land not suitable for cultivation, without being fed much of the grain that, in an arid climate, was also scarce. It was a system that maximized the resources available to support human life by regulating their use.

Climate activists in the United States have called for a drastic reduction in the consumption of both meat and dairy products,

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With support from Jewish sources, the obvious question is what, beyond good intentions, should eco-Judaism prescribe? Mark Wallace, a professor of religion at Swarthmore College, asks how, if all beings are sacred, we can set a limit on what actions are permissible? Wallace concludes that any guideline or policy should ensure

the health and dynamism of the life cycle rather than protect the interests of added-value beings (such as human beings) whose inner life is more complex....

Thus green spirituality is able to make highly nuanced and sophisticated practical judgments about use and value, but it does so in biocentric rather than anthropocentric terms.

In other words, some utilization of resources, to the extent necessary to maintain human life and civilization, is acceptable, but only to the extent that it does not irremediably undermine the life of the biosphere as a whole. This is not totally unlike Rabbi Hillel's dictum, "What is hateful to you, do not do to another," when "another" is the population of any living thing, except that when we endanger the entire biosphere, we endanger ourselves.

Seidenberg's claim that the *Torah* is ultimately about sustainability may come as a surprise. Indeed, the major

or for a completely vegan diet. The grasslands of the American prairies that once supported innumerable bison did so without irrigation, but, as farmland, they require unsustainable inputs of water and energy. Also, some northern regions may be more productive for raising dairy animals than for growing crops, if the animals can prosper primarily through grazing. Thus, it is possible that eco-*kashrut* might severely limit the eating of meat — perhaps to *Shabbat* and *Yom Tov* — without prohibiting it entirely.

Another example of a *Torah* law that promoted sustainability is that of the *shemita* (sabbatical) year, when no land in Israel was to be cultivated: leaving land fallow for a time helps to preserve and regenerate fertility. However, modern agricultural science holds that a plan of rotation (which may include keeping some fields fallow each year) is more productive. On the other hand, the proscription of interplanting unlike crops is not well-supported by science or by experience, at least in North America. The famous "three sisters" crops of Native American agriculture — corn, beans, and squash, which grow productively together — would not be allowed if this law had to be followed. Eco-*kashrut* might mandate sustainable agriculture, appropriate to the setting, in accordance with current science.

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WHAT WE SHOULD TEACH

What we should teach: for us as educators, that is the overriding question. First and foremost, we should teach from a perspective of *Torah* and tradition, yet avoid teaching anything that a later teacher would find necessary to “unteach.”

Second, we need neither deny science nor object to science as it appears in the *Torah*. In fact, the science in the *Torah* is good science for its time, but the *Torah* is not a science book. For younger students, much should be taught as story, sacred myth, not as scientific or historical fact. When a first-grader retells the plot of a movie or television show, the first-grader knows that it’s fiction, not fact, but the distinction doesn’t matter. For older students, it can be productive to discuss not whether a story is true, but why the *Tanakh* presents it in the way it does.

Third, we should not gloss over the “earthen” roots of the *Torah*. Even in communities that do not adhere to areas of *halachah* such as *kashrut*, learning about them helps to inculcate a sense of Judaism as a religion of land and body, not only of intellect and spirit. We might choose to teach about the sacrifices detailed in Leviticus not as something that has no meaning for us, but as a way of managing the conflict between human needs and the rights of other beings.

Fourth, we should teach according to the needs and readiness of the students. With young students, this may mean drawing more of our teaching about God from Heschel than from Kaplan, even if that is not our personal theology. That’s OK. Until about the sixth grade, children have little capacity to appreciate metaphor, and we should not try to teach a more sophisticated understanding than a student is ready for.

Especially in students of middle-school or high-school age, we may encounter despair over climate change very similar to what we saw a decade or so ago, when young people so feared nuclear annihilation that some expected not to survive into adulthood. A reaction of despair is typical in children and young teenagers because they are not as invested as adults might be in “things as they are,” and because they feel powerless to influence the future. Very few of our young people see themselves as a potential Greta Thunberg, so one of our goals should be to help them feel capable of influencing change and empowered to do so.

In adults, on the other hand, denial is far more common than despair. This is a natural and predictable phenomenon, because any understanding of climate change should produce overwhelming anxiety, and we are not wired to cope well with anxiety. Activism is another possible way of coping with

anxiety, but even climate activists are likely to be practicing some degree of denial.

We should also teach compassion, both for adults in the most severe denial and for all living things that are endangered by climate change. There is a strong measure of social justice involved, because all environmental problems fall more heavily on the poorest in society, and can serve as a gateway for teaching Jewishly about the problem.

In our own lives, we must be guided by the dictum of Rabbi Tarfon in chapter 2 of *Pirke Avot*:

לא עֲלִיף הַמְּלָאכָה לְגִמּוֹר, וְלֹא אֲתָהּ בֶן חוֹרִין לְבַטֵּל מִמֶּנָּה.

Lo alecha ha-mלאּכּה li-gmor, v'lo atah ben chorin li-batel mi-mena.

It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to do none of it.

The steps we can take as individuals have only small impact, but what would be the outcome if almost everyone took them? The possibility, even the probability, that they will not be sufficient is no justification for not taking them. These might include reducing energy consumption, using non-carbon energy sources, eating less meat, building community awareness, and social and political activism, in whatever combination you can undertake. For any of the possible measures that you don’t feel able to take, let your reply be Franz Rosenzweig’s: “Not yet.”

In conclusion: Jewish sources support theological adaptation for understanding climate change and working to mitigate it. Some actions that would further the mitigation are permitted by *halachah* but beyond its scope, and it would be desirable to consider extending *halachah* to encompass them. Teaching about God and *mitzvot* should emphasize interpretations that further understanding and action.

Endnotes:

1. Kelly, Mark, “Lifeway Research Studies Global Warming Beliefs among Protestant Pastors” (2009), no longer available, but cited in Schade, Leah D., *Creation-Crisis Preaching: Ecology, Theology, and the Pulpit*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2015, 1.
2. Seidenberg, David Mevorach, *Kabbalah and Ecology*, 15. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015, 15.
3. *The Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1963, 3:13.
4. Seidenberg, Op. Cit., 9.
5. Tirosh-Samuels, Hava, “Nature in the Sources of Judaism,” in *Daedalus* (Fall 2001), 116.
6. This taxonomy draws on the work of Rabbi Neil Gillman in *Sacred Fragments: Recovering Theology for the Modern Jew*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990, but he bears

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no responsibility for any misrepresentation or reductionism here.

7. Dowd, Michael, *Thank God for Evolution: How the Marriage of Science and Religion Will Transform Your Life and Our World*. Tulsa: Council Oak Books, 2007, rpt. Plume, 2009.

8. Dowd, "Ecology as Theology: Inspiring Science for Challenging Times" (2018), at <https://youtu.be/s1pAmGHRJZU>, accessed August 30, 2020.

9. For other Jewish texts supporting the belief that all beings have moral standing, see Gendler, Everett, "A Sentient Universe," *Parabola* 32:3 (Fall 2007), 88–94; reprinted from Bernstein, Ellen, *Ecology & the Jewish Spirit: Where Nature and the Sacred Meet*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1998, pp.58–68.

10. Liquey Moharan 1:17 (New York: R' Eli'ezer Shlomo Breslover, 1965), 48–9; cited in Seidenberg, Op. Cit., p. 40.

11. Seidenberg, Op. Cit., p. 128.

12. Wallace, Mark I. *Finding God in the Singing River*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005, Kindle edition location 2184.

13. It is noteworthy that reducing product packaging is acceptable to more people than is abstaining from meat, but one year of complete veganism would limit carbon emissions as much as eleven years of keeping packaging to an absolute minimum. See "Think You're Making Good Climate Choices? Take This Mini-Quiz" at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/08/30/climate/climate-footprint-quiz.html> (viewed August 31, 2020).

14. Both Jewish environmental groups and major environmental organizations include climate change in their agendas. One that focuses exclusively on climate change is the Citizens Climate Lobby, <https://citizensclimatelobby.org/>.