

AOS 2.3:
Jewish Ethical Issues
Related to the Environment

RASNET Teachers
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Acknowledgments

- First, we acknowledge the original custodians of this land on which we live and work.
- We gather today as educators in a spirit of co-operation, believing that two key roles of religions are to help to build a safer and more harmonious world, and to take care of the earth entrusted to our hands, to pass it on in good order to generations after us we will never know.

Shared Traditions

- CG Weeramantry, an international jurist, published a book in 2009 collecting environmental laws and teachings from 5 major faith traditions.
- Not surprisingly we share a great many.



What makes Issues Related to the Environment Ethical Ones?

- Every decision we make or action we take relating to the environment affects not only us but also others.
- Examples: to leave litter, or to recycle waste, to reuse or seek to repair, to eat meat or to reduce meat, or to try to buy local produce, or to walk or drive, or to fly abroad on holiday or travel locally by train.
- Faced with any decision involving environmental ethics, we should ask how each of the ethical principles - also known as ethical norms – of justice, sufficiency and solidarity can be applied to the situation at hand? Paraphrased from <https://www.scu.edu/environmental-ethics/short-course-in-environmental-ethics/lesson-three/>

A quick note about 'God'

- I believe we too readily use the term 'God'.
- For many, 'God' is understood (as ancient texts often do) as 'an old man with a beard on a cloud', ready to punish or reward us.
- Not surprisingly, many people no longer believe in a 'human-form', divine interventionist being, and so reject this 'God'.
- I see God as 'the spirit of the universe' – as the source of courage, insight, love, justice and kindness which we can all draw upon.

The first weekly portion of the Torah is the Creation Story

- The beginning of the Torah: '*B'reshit bara elohim et hashamayim v'et ha'aretz*'. '*B'reshit* - In the beginning - God created the heavens and the earth. *Genesis 1: 1*
- Light, sky, land, seas, vegetation, seed-bearing plants, fruit trees, sun, moon and stars, sea creatures, birds, cattle, creeping things, wild beasts, and finally humanity - *Genesis 1: 1-27*
- Humanity - fill the earth '*v'khivshuha*' – root *K'B'Sh* (rare, meaning uncertain, perhaps '*tend*', '*dominate*' or '*protect*'?). *Genesis 1: 28*

Ethical question

- Of course we don't take the legendary creation account literally. But it raises some crucial questions:
- At the end of the first 5 days of creation, God (ie the human authors) consider it '*tov*', Hebrew for 'good'.
- Only after the final act of creation, Humanity (by the way, male and female, God created them – in the same moment, Gen 1:27), does it receive an A+, '*tov m'od*', 'very good', rating! (Gen 1:31)
- Does that mean humans are 'better' or more worthwhile than the rest of nature. Does it allow us to save humanity even at a cost to nature?

IT'S IN OUR HANDS

- ◉ When God created humanity... God told us: Everything has been created for your sake. **Do not corrupt the world**, for if you do, there will be no one to set it right after you.
- ◉ *Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah (app. 1400 years ago).*



The second portion is Noakh

- ◉ 'And God saw that humanity had done wickedly' (Gen.6:12)
- ◉ God regretted making humanity, and decided to wipe out the world (Gen 6:13, 17).
- ◉ Only *Noakh* and his family were brought into the ark, with pairs of animals to breed, to save them from the flood (Gen 6.18-20).

A Question about God

- If God made humanity to look after creation, and considered it the pinnacle of creation, and '*tov m'od* – very good, but now God regrets it and chooses to start again, then did God make a mistake?
- If 'God knows everything in advance', then how can God make a mistake?
- In the classic film 'Oh God', God says 'give me a break, most things I got right!'

But the Rabbis say...

- ⦿ Since humanity became wicked, and God chose to start again with Noakh, the rabbis wonder ‘Would it have been better if humanity had not been created?’
- ⦿ They discussed this over two and a half years, and concluded that it would have been better had humanity not been created – but having been created, we should examine our actions (ie do the best we can).
Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 13b

Who is responsible?

- The flood is depicted as God's punishment for human evil – not taking care of the world and each other.
- But in one verse (Gen 8:21) God promises that 'Never again will I bring doom upon the world' (ie another flood).
- That does leave open the possibility that we human beings ourselves could cause another humanity-destroying flood.

A reflection from our prayer book

The Rainbow

SHAFTS of bright sun,
haze of mist
and there again
a perfect bow —
God's palette;
the spectrum of promise:
never again will God bring a flood
to end humanity,
to start anew.

We have left it late to awaken.
The sun still shines, the haze of mist
and there again — no need for human hand —
the perfect bow God gave.

But roll back the scroll,
read the black fire again
carefully; read the white,
the unwritten.
Our task: to take care
of God's world.
Between the letters,
the warning of our failure.
God will not flood the earth.
But we, who thought our tiny
choices
would have no effect on this
world . . .

(Mishkan T'filah WU Edition, P.417)

'Turn It and Turn It for All is in It'

Ben Bag-bag, 1st Century CE, Saying of the Sages, Chapter 5

- ⦿ Our tradition teaches that every time we read Torah, we learn new things from it.
- ⦿ I believe our generation can see a new and worrying truth in it for the first time:
- ⦿ The first portion of the year, *B'reshit*, sets humanity up to take care of God's creation.
- ⦿ The second week's portion, *Noakh*, warns of what will happen if we fail.

Key question

- Should we rely on 'the Spirit of the Universe' to intervene and sort things out and secure our safety and our future?
- Or should we urgently be taking all the personal and collective, practical and political actions we possibly can to 'look after God's creation' to protect the future?

Fruit trees

- ◉ When you besiege a city, you must not destroy its fruit trees – eat from them, but do not cut them down. For are trees human beings who can run into the city?
- ◉ *Deuteronomy 20:19-20*
- ◉ This is the basis for our environmental principle – ‘*Bal Tash’khit* - **Do Not Waste**’.
- ◉ Unnecessary destruction is prohibited.
- ◉ *Talmud ~500 C.E.*

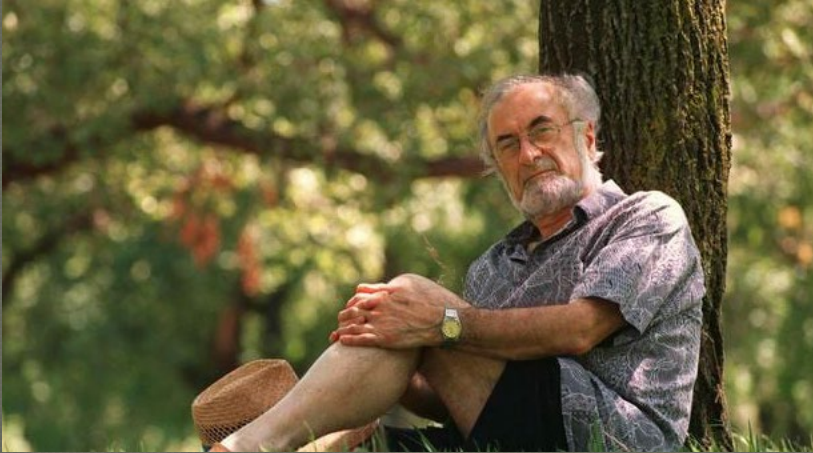
DO NOT WASTE – Can we choose?

- Should we cut trees down to avoid fire?
- Maimonides (who was born in Spain but had to flee from persecution by the Almoravides and ended up living in Egypt) said 'A person should not be buried in a coat, even if they asked to be, since it can be used by someone else who needs it (~1250 CE).
- Do we believe avoiding waste should be above personal choices?

More recent responses

- ‘The statutes relating to environmental protection represent the principle that ‘the same regard which you show to humans you must also demonstrate to every other creature, to the earth which bears and sustains all, and to the world of plants and animals.’ (Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, 19th Century)
- Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks (1948 - 2020) says that these rules are ‘a kind of social justice applied to the natural world: ‘They ask you to regard all living things as God’s property. Destroy none; abuse none; waste nothing; employ all things wisely ... Look upon all creatures as servants in the household of creation.’

Two Jewish Environment Ministers



Left: Moss Cass (1927-2022), a doctor and politician, and Australia's first Minister for the Environment, in Prime Minister Gough Whitlam's government

Right: Sergio Bergman, an Argentinian Rabbi, social activist and Argentinian Minister for the Environment, is now the President of the World Union for Progressive Judaism



Taking action

- Practical action
- Decisions we take about:
 - Purchasing and eating foods
 - How large our homes are
 - How and how much we heat and cool our homes
 - How much 'stuff' we buy - do we repair or replace
 - How and where and how often we travel
 - If and how many children we have
 - Where our money (banks, superfunds) is invested
- Write to banks, multinationals, politicians
- Demonstrate our concerns

Climate Action March, Melbourne



What good is demonstrating?

- ◉ Does Judaism say that we have an ethical imperative to do all we can, eg participate in demonstrations which block the streets and stop the traffic, and inconvenience people? (I believe so!)
- ◉ Does Judaism say we should take Fridays off school to support the School Strikes for the Climate? (I believe so!)

Blowing the Shofar (horn) to sound the alarm for the climate



A particular Jewish question

- ◉ Josh Frydenberg is Jewish. He could be the next leader of the Liberal party. But not if he loses his seat.
- ◉ Should Jews speak out against his party's weak record and stance on the climate?
- ◉ Should we work to get a more responsive candidate elected (though not Jewish)?

Should religions be political?

Political but balanced - not party-political



**From Prayer
to Action**

Leo Baeck Centre

F I D E L I T Y R E S P E C T V E R I T Y

Balwyn North Uniting Church and the Churches of North Balwyn, and the Leo Baeck Centre for Progressive Judaism in East Kew invite you to

meet the

kooyong candidates

1 - 2pm on Sundays

Political conversations in the context of faith



March 27th

Piers Mitchem,
Greens
(at NBUC)



April 3rd

Dr Peter Lynch,
Labor
(at LBC)



April 10th

Dr Monique Ryan,
Independent
(at LBC)



April 24th

Josh Frydenberg,
Liberal
(at NBUC)

NBUC North Balwyn Uniting Church: 17-21 Duggan St, Balwyn
LBC Leo Baeck Centre for Judaism, 31-37 Harp Rd, East Kew

If you have a questions you would like to ask, please email:

NBUC Minister@nbuc.org.au LBC Rabbi@bc.org.au



Moral Responsibility to Speak

- ◉ Climate change increases injustice.
- ◉ It makes the poor poorer.
- ◉ It reduces the availability of fresh water
- ◉ Rising sea levels affect the salinity of the water table, and are already forcing people from their land and homes
- ◉ Increasing frequency of catastrophic weather – droughts, fire and floods.
- ◉ Religions have a moral obligation to speak out clearly about these matters.

We have only one earth



- It is up to us to take care of it together!
- *Im lo achshav, eimatai*
- If not now, when? (Hillel, Avot)



Jewish texts (up to 3000 years old)

- ◉ The land must not be sold in perpetuity, as it is Mine – you are but resident visitors with Me. Throughout the land that you hold, you must allow for its redemption.

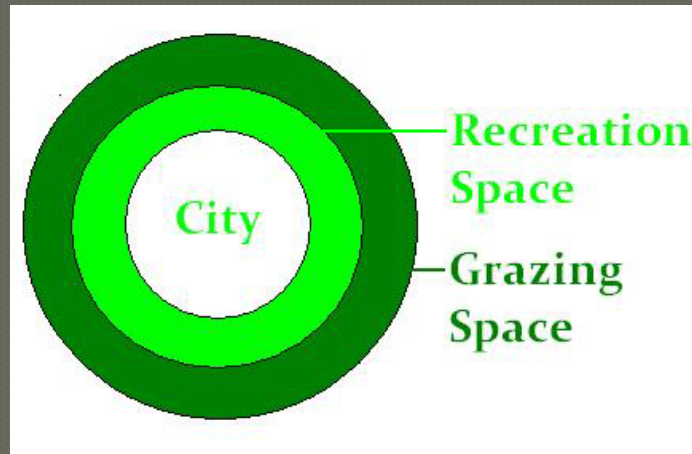
- ◉ *Leviticus 25:23-4*

- ◉ The earth and all it contains belongs to God

- ◉ *Psalms 24:1*

GREEN BELTS

- All cities must have a migras (open space) that surrounds them. The inner 1000 cubits (approximately 500 meters) shall be for open space and the outer 1000 cubits for grazing animals - *Numbers 35:2-5/Maimonides*



URBAN GREEN SPACES

- It is forbidden to live in a city that does not have a garden or greenery.

Mishnah, Kiddushin 4:12 (1800 years ago)



INDUSTRIAL NUISANCE

- Carcasses, cemeteries and tanneries must be kept at fifty cubits' distance from a town.
- A tannery can only be set on the east side of town to carry the smells away from town.

Baba Batra, Mishnah 2:9, Talmud 24b

Just follow the laws!

- From examples like these, and others in the other faiths, Weeramantry concludes that ‘the law of civilized countries’ already incorporates these principles.
- All we have to do as individuals and countries is to follow and apply them!
- If they had had the word, each religion would always have been thoroughly committed to sustainability!

Collective Voice of Faith

- The Australian Religious Response to Climate Change
- ARRCC – as in Noah's ARK



ARRCC

Australian Religious Response to Climate Change

Current Major Campaign



Outside Josh Frydenberg's Office when Minister of the Environment



Living the Change

- ◉ We need action NOW
- ◉ We urgently need action on a nationwide and worldwide scale.
- ◉ But we also need to act as individuals.
- ◉ That's why we are running the 'Living the Change campaign'.
- ◉ Each of us can 'Live the Change', and make a difference, and every bit helps!