

Tu B'Shevat

THE
NEW
YEAR
FOR
THE
TREES



A Guide to Judaism and Jewish Sources on the Environment

We are a part of the Earth...

Environmentalism runs deep within our Biblical tradition. We learn this from “the beginning,” from the story of our creation and our connection to the Earth. In the beginning, God planted two trees in Eden. The tree of Eternal Life: a symbol of the abundance of nature, an Eternal source of sustenance for all of us who live in this garden we call the earth. But, God planted there also the tree of Knowledge of Good and of Evil and therein lies the challenge. From knowledge we have learned to love. From knowledge we have learned to bend the laws of nature to our will and to draw ever more valuable resources from our earth. Through knowledge we have created a world which can provide for us in an abundance which shames Eden for its fruitfulness.

And yet it is a forgetful knowledge which we have learned. A knowledge unconnected to the source of these blessings which have been placed in our knowing hands. A forgetfulness of the God who creates and sustains this earth, day by day, despite our abundant calls upon its resources. And we have forgotten, too, our link to the land, our tie to this earth, and our common cause in the preservation of this source of all the blessings in our lives.

The tree of knowledge bears fruits, both of good and of evil. Sustainable development means nothing more than eating of the fruits of goodness without tasting from the fruits of evil which spawn a forgetfulness of the source of all that is good. The lessons we can learn from the sacred text of our people and all peoples who look out upon the stars, who feel the sands slip through their fingers, who

recognize the wonder of our world in many ways, all these lessons come to teach us of our kinship with all human life and our connection to the Creator who has brought us forth unto life.

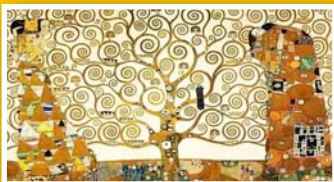
Adam, the first human being, was drawn by God’s own hands from Adamah, from the earth herself and God charged us to guard and protect her. We are of this earth, not apart from it, and whatever we do to this planet we do to ourselves.

...not apart from it.

Then the LORD God formed Adam, [the first human being] out of the dust of Adamah [out of the earth herself], and breathed into its nostrils the breath of life; and Adam became a living soul.

– Genesis 2:7

Torah Study @ The Temple



Gustav Klimt, the Tree of Life, 1909

MIDRASH: A LEGEND OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE

“God led Adam around all the trees of the Garden of Eden. And God said to Adam: ‘See My works, how good and praiseworthy they are? And all that I have created, I made for you. [But] be mindful that you do not spoil and destroy My world—for if you spoil it, there will be no one left to repair it.’” (Midrash Kohelet Rabbah 7:13)

The Beginnings of Jewish Environmentalism

Making War Against the Trees?

Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra (1093-1167)

What is the reasoning behind saying, 'Don't cut down a fruit tree since it is not like person who can run away from you?' In my opinion, we have no need for all this. But this is the meaning: 'For you may eat them and you shall not cut it down, for the tree is a person,' i.e., the tree of the field is the life of a human being... Behold, one may not destroy the fruit tree which is life for a human being, it is permitted only to eat from it.

Isaac Abarbanel (1437-1508)

There are two interchangeable reasons. The first reason is that the phrase 'for you will eat from it' is a great promise that they will conquer the city and eventually eat the fruit of these trees, and therefore it is not appropriate to destroy them, for it is not right that a person should damage that which will benefit him.

The second reason is in the Torah's saying 'it you will not cut down for man is the tree of the field,' by which it means, 'it is not appropriate to make war on trees, only on people,' for it is not right that the mighty should exercise force to wage war against the weak, and this is why it says 'it you will not cut down,' for it is a tree, and it has no hands to fight.

Moses Maimonides

This is the law not only for trees, but anyone who breaks containers, tears clothes, destroys a building, stops up a well, or wastes food violates the prohibition of *baal tashchit*, 'do not destroy.'



- Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings 6:10

כִּי-תִצּוּר אֶל-עִיר יָמִים רַבִּים לְהִלָּחֵם עָלֶיהָ
לְתַפְשָׁהּ, לֹא-תִשְׁחִית אֶת-עֵצָהּ לְנֹדֶם עָלֶיהָ
גְּרוֹן--כִּי מִמֶּנּוּ תֹאכַל, וְאַתּוֹ לֹא תִכְרֹת: כִּי
הָאָדָם עֵץ הַשָּׂדֶה, לֶבֶא מִפְּנֵיךְ בַּמִּצּוֹר.

"When in your war against a city you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy its trees, wielding an ax against them. You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down. Are trees of the field human to withdraw before you into the besieged city?"

- Deuteronomy 20:19
(JPS Translation, based on Rashi's Interpretation of the verse.)

Jacob ben Isaac Ashkenazi (1550-1625)

The Torah compares humans to trees] because, like humans, trees have the power to grow. And as humans have children, so trees bear fruit. And when a human is hurt, cries of pain are heard throughout the world, so when a tree is chopped down, its cries are heard throughout the world.

- Tze'edah u-Re'edah

Rabbi Judah Loew, The Maharal, of Prague

For man is a tree of the field,' and his branches are in heaven, for the head, which is the root of a man, faces upwards, and this is why man is called a 'tree of the field' planted in heaven, and through his intellect, he is planted in his place, which, if all of the winds were to come and blow, they would not move him from his place."

- Sefer Gur Aryeh, Genesis 9:21

[The reference to the ineffectual force of the winds refers back to and inverts an early comment by R. Eleazar ben Azariah: Those whose deeds outweigh their learning are like a tree with fewer branches than roots.

For The Maharal, wisdom served as one's roots. This theme is also expressed in a later comment that identifies the fruit of the trees with human speech; ideas, not children, are a human's true offspring. Seeing speech as intellectual produce would also explain how Rabbi Loew could refer to the intellectually rooted person as secure, but a person lacking wisdom, a non-fruit bearing tree, could be uprooted or destroyed.]

