



ecojudaism
OUR FAITH IN THE PLANET

This resource has been generously shared by:

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This resource is being used to support the following Audit question Section 2 Prayer and Teaching Q3.

“Special Sermons about environmental issues are delivered in our synagogue”.

This article contains extracts from the teachings of Rabbi Lord Sacks zt”l and is reproduced with permission from the United Synagogue’s book “Rabbi Sacks and the community we built together” (More on this book [here](#))

We welcome resource contributions in this section from all of our registered community Rabbis.

A MULTI-FACETED ENVIRONMENTALISM...

Much has been made of Tu Bishvat – the New Year for Trees – (originally mentioned in the Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:1) in Jewish schools and chadarim around the world. In Israel it is widely observed and has become synonymous with tree-planting and environmental projects and lessons.

The word environment in Hebrew is “svivah” – which means, quite literally, surroundings. Our environment, our awareness of it and relationship to it, exists in different facets –the ecological environment, the spiritual environment, the moral environment.

I have long argued and preached in my own sermons that whilst traditional environmental concern is a Jewish value, so is concern for the moral and spiritual environment. This dual concern is echoed in Rabbi Sacks’ work in several places where he writes passionately about both facets.

One thing all these facets have in common is that the seeds we sow today may not yield fruit for a long time, possibly only in future generations. The Chumash and Talmud prepare us for this possibility:

The Torah teaches that “man is [like] the tree of the field” (Devarim 20:19). To grow a tiny seed into a flourishing tree takes patience and effort. In life, too, we who often toil hard and long may despair of ever seeing the fruits of our labours.

As the Talmud relates in Tractate Taanit 23a:

It once happened that Choni the Circle Drawer was walking along, and he saw an old man planting a young fruit tree. Choni asked the man how long until the tree would bear fruit.

‘Seventy years,’ the old man answered.

‘Do you really think you will be alive for another seventy years to enjoy the fruit from this tree?’ Choni asked in wonder.

The man replied, ‘Just as I was born into a world with fully grown fruit trees that were planted by my ancestors, so I plant a tree for my children.’

The word used in Avot – Ethics of the Fathers – 1:1 to describe the transmission of Torah from Moses to Joshua, and to subsequent generations is not to teach, or to pass on, but “masar” – from “limsor” – to hand over, intact. When we express observing Shabbat, or kashrut, or mitzvot, we use the word “shemirat shabbat”, “shomer mitzvot” not just to keep shabbat but to preserve and guard it intact. These phrases are deliberate and allude to not just our own observance but the need and desire to preserve the integrity and vibrancy of our Torah to pass it on to the next generation effectively and to preserve it and be its stewards for future generations, just like the physical trees we plant.

It takes a long-term view and a lot of patience!

I would like to further explore two facets of Rabbi Sacks’ work which deal with environmental issues.

The physical environment – In Genesis 2, God creates Adam, in the Garden of Eden “to work it” (le’ovdah – literally to serve it) and “take care of it” (leshomrah – to guard it on behalf of another).” Rabbi Sacks points out the significance of these two verbs: “We do not own nature...We are its stewards on behalf of God, who created and owns everything. As guardians of the earth, we are duty-bound to respect its integrity.”

There is an incredible Midrash Rabbah on Ecclesiastes (7:13) (“Consider God’s doing! Who can straighten what He has twisted?”).

The Midrash relates that God showed Adam around the Garden of Eden and said, “Look at my works! See how beautiful they are – how excellent! For your sake I created them all. See to it that you do not spoil and destroy My world; for if you do, there will be no one else to repair it.”

In his work compiled just prior to his passing and released for Tu Bishvat this year, R' Sacks writes about what he refers to as the Stewardship Paradigm.

“The choice is ours. If we continue to live as though God had only commanded us to subdue the earth, we must be prepared for our children to inherit a seriously degraded planet, with the future of human civilisation at risk.

If we see our role as masters of the earth as a unique opportunity to truly serve and care for the planet, its creatures, and its resources, then we can reclaim our status as stewards of the world and raise our new generations in an environment much closer to that of Eden.”

Next the moral and spiritual environment – to quote Rabbi Sacks “Wars are won by weapons but it takes ideas to win a peace.”

Rabbi Sacks frequently contrasts the concern for our physical environment with the lack of concern for our moral and spiritual foundations.

Regarding the human environment, R Sacks writes “There have been protests... against the erosion of the natural environment... but there has been no equivalent protest at the erosion of our human environment, the world of relationships into which we bring our children. How, I have often asked, can we devote our energies to saving planet earth for the sake of future generations while neglecting our own children who are our future generations?” (Faith in the Future p. 25)

On the environment of thought: “Just as we are concerned at the purity of the air we breathe and the water we drink, so we should care about the clarity of the words we speak. Debase language and you erode the very environment of thought.” (From Optimism to Hope p. 107)

On the moral environment: “As well as a physical ecology, we also inhabit a moral ecology, that network of beliefs, relationships, and virtues within which we think, act and discover meaning. For the greater part of human history, it has had a religious foundation. But for the past two centuries, in societies like Britain, that basis of belief has been profoundly eroded. And we know too much about ecological systems to suppose that you can remove one element and have the rest unchanged. There is, if you like, a God-shaped hole in our ozone layer. And it is time that we thought about moral ecology too.”

So, what is the solution?

Education, education, education! It is a fitting testimony to the life of Rabbi Sacks that one of his greatest legacies is the explosion of Jewish day schools during his tenure as Chief Rabbi. Without Jewish Education there is no future.

In the Jonathan Sacks Haggadah, Rabbi Sacks writes that “Education means teaching a child to be curious, to wonder, to reflect, to enquire. The child who asks becomes a partner

in the learning process, an active recipient. To ask is to grow.” As Rabbi Sacks put it, the greatest nachas and pride for a Jewish parent is not when the teacher calls up the parent and says, “your son or daughter gave a great answer today” but rather “they asked a great question in class”.

I saw first-hand how much Rabbi Sacks loved children. At my own induction in Liverpool in 2011 Rabbi Sacks told the story which Dayan Binstock later told so movingly at R Sacks’ levaya, about the only time he had ever pulled rank as Chief Rabbi to give out sweets to the children and ruin the decorum in shul!

So much of Rabbi Sacks’ teachings deal with the environment but not just the physical environment, but the spiritual and moral environment in which we live and in which we raise our children. As Rabbi Sacks makes clear, the two are indivisible, it makes no sense to have one without the other. Just as we strive to increase awareness and concern (and rightly so) for the physical environment and the ecological state of this earth, so we should also strive to improve the society and the moral and spiritual environment around us, to invest in education and our children for their future.