



ecojudaism
OUR FAITH IN THE PLANET

This resource has been generously shared by:

Rabbi Mordechai Wollenberg, Rabbi of Woodford Forest United Synagogue.

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 first appeared on Rabbi Wollenberg’s website <https://rabbiw.wordpress.com/>

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

NOAH FOR THE 21ST CENTURY...

In the year 2019 the Lord came unto Noah, who was now living in London and said, ‘Once again, the earth has become wicked and over populated, and I see the end of all flesh before me. Build another Ark and save two of every living thing along with a few good humans.’ He gave Noah the digital designs, saying, ‘You have 6 months to build the Ark before I will start the unending rain for 40 days and 40 nights.’

Six months later, the Lord looked down and saw Noah weeping in his yard – but no Ark.

‘Noah!’ He roared, ‘I’m about to start the rain! Where is the Ark?’

‘Forgive me, Lord,’ begged Noah, ‘but things have changed. I needed Building Regulations Approval and I’ve been arguing with the Fire Brigade about the need for a sprinkler system. My neighbours claim that I should have obtained planning permission for building the Ark in my garden because it is development of the site, even though in my view it is a temporary structure.

We had to then go to appeal to the Home Office for a decision which took weeks.

Then the Department for Transport demanded a bond be posted for the future costs of moving power lines and other overhead obstructions to clear the passage for the Ark’s move to the sea. I told them that the sea would be coming to us, but they would hear nothing of it. Getting the wood was another problem. All the decent trees have Tree

Preservation Orders on them and we live in a Site of Special Scientific Interest set up in order to protect the spotted owl. I tried to convince the environmentalists that I needed the wood to save the owls – but no go!

When I started gathering the animals, the RSPCA sued me. They insisted that I was confining wild animals against their will. They argued the accommodation was too restrictive, and it was cruel and inhumane to put so many animals in a confined space.

Then the County Council, the Department for the Environment and the Rivers Agency ruled that I couldn't build the Ark until they'd conducted an environmental impact study on your proposed flood. I'm still trying to resolve a complaint with the Equal Opportunities Commission on how many ethnic minority carpenters I'm supposed to hire for my building team. The trades unions say I can't use my sons. They insist I have to hire only accredited workers with Ark-building experience.

To make matters worse, Customs and Excise seized all my assets, claiming I'm trying to leave the country illegally with endangered species. So, forgive me, Lord, but it would take at least 10 years for me to finish this Ark.'

Suddenly the skies cleared, the sun began to shine, and a rainbow stretched across the sky. Noah looked up in wonder and asked, 'You mean you're not going to destroy the world?' 'No,' said the Lord. 'The government beat me to it.'

Last week we read the account of Creation. There is an incredible medrash, an allegorical commentary on the book of Ecclesiastes that sounds like it was written by a present-day environmentalist. When G-d created Adam, he took him around the whole Garden of Eden, explaining how he made it so beautiful especially for him and his family. G-d then instructed Adam, saying: See My works how beautiful and balanced they are. And all I created, I created for you. But be careful that you don't damage or destroy My world for if you ruin it there will be no one to repair it after you.

Today we read the story of Noah and the flood. Surprisingly, we again find evidence of a concern and sensitivity for the Environment. Noah was instructed to build 3 floors on the Ark. The commentators explain that one floor was for humans, one for animals and the bottom floor was for rubbish. None of the commentators use the term 'storage' or anything similar; they all explain it was used specifically for rubbish.

Now, can you imagine that the world is being destroyed, there's nothing out there except for water. Besides that, what kind of rubbish did Noah have already? It certainly wasn't polystyrene, plastic or non-biodegradable stuff! It was leftover food and animal waste. Yet he didn't just throw it overboard but showed a concern for its proper treatment rather than polluting the water!

Since then, observant Jews have been concerned about the environment for centuries. Nowadays we are exhorted to leave our cars at home one day a week and switch off our electrics – we have been doing this since time immemorial, it's called Shabbos, when we reduce our consumption significantly for one whole day a week.

All of this is under the banner of "Tikun Olam" "Repairing the World". The phrase is often misunderstood nowadays but it comes from Aleinu which we recite three times a day. In it we speak of our obligation "to establish the world with G-d's Kingship". The Hebrew word for establishing is tikun which also means to fix or repair. Tikun Olam means fixing or repairing the world, making good that which is not. Whilst it derives from a religious imperative, it is a central theme of Judaism which propels many varieties of social activism in different spheres of life.

In broad terms, Tikun Olam means leaving the world in a better state than you found it. In Judaism the term Environment is a very broad one, encompassing not just the modern concepts of cutting down on waste, protecting nature and reserves, global warming, pollution and similar concerns, but also other types of pollution which may affect the family environment, the moral environment, the social environment, the economic environment and of course our spiritual surroundings. In Jewish terms, the environment means one's surroundings, in every sense of the word. People focus on what we normally understand as "THE environment" but it is worthwhile noting that Jewish law and tradition abhor any form of pollution, whether physical, moral or spiritual, and Judaism commands us to repair the world, to improve it in every aspect and to minimise such pollution.

In Pirkei Avos, the Ethics of the Fathers, our Sages tell us: "Whatever the Holy One, blessed be He, created in His world, He created only for His Glory, as it is said: "Everything that is called by my Name, was created for My glory; I have formed it, I have made it."

This source speaks for itself: everything in this world was created by G-d and therefore it is our responsibility to enhance and not destroy it. This is a precept no less worthy than all the others. Many people learn about the biblical prohibition against unnecessary destruction or waste- but perhaps there is a gap between the theoretical teaching and the need to enliven this learning with an awareness of today's problems and how to apply traditional concepts to solving them.

The Talmud also tells us "Of all that G-d created in His world, He did not create one thing that is useless." Everything has its place, its role in Tikun Olam, in fixing and enhancing the world, and when society wastes that which G-d has created we are acting against His purpose for our being.

As far as application of contemporary environmental concerns, Judaism has always taken a balanced, pragmatic view. On the one hand we are told that "the earth is the L-rd's and all that is in it" meaning it is only through His grace and concession that we are permitted to use any resources at all. It is for this reason that we have a custom of reciting a brocho before partaking of many different aspects of G-d's world, including eating, drinking,

smelling a pleasant scent, viewing natural phenomena, and much more. The rationale is that we are recognising the preciousness of the Created World and acknowledging that it is really only a concession that we are allowed to make use of it. This is in addition to the other biblical narratives, shows a profound concern for the world around us. Judaism teaches that with this proviso in mind, we can – and indeed should – use the world around us to fulfil our purpose in life. The key word is USE and not ABUSE. We are permitted to use resources in moderation for our day-to-day needs whilst being commanded not to waste anything — as well as being enjoined to seek responsible alternatives to protect the resources around us.

Indeed, Judaism does not provide a blanket endorsement to man's domination of nature for his own benefit. Judaism imposes numerous restrictions on how, when, and to what extent people can use the natural environment. Many of its ideas and principles either explicitly or implicitly evoke themes that are consistent with “green principles”.

But while Judaism may be consistent with many contemporary environmental values and doctrines, its teachings are not identical to them. Specifically, Judaism does not regard the preservation or protection of nature as the most important societal value; it holds that humans are not just a part of nature but have privileged and distinctive moral claims; it argues that nature should be used and enjoyed as well as protected. Jewish tradition is complex: it contains both “green” and “non-green” elements and as with everything else, sensible balance is required.

The Talmud relates that a certain righteous man once encountered another man planting a carob tree. “How long will it take to bear fruit?” he inquired. “About seventy years,” the man replied. “So you think you will live long enough to taste its fruits?” The man explained, “I have found ready-grown carob trees in the world. As my forefathers planted them for me, so I plant for my children.”

There is no question that the choices we make today in the environmental arena have long-reaching consequences for tomorrow. We can choose to plant for the future through care and sensitivity, or to destroy the future through our carelessness today.

I must confess I myself am not as green as I should be. We all tend to be cynical – one Rabbi told me that he presented his pleas for greater environmental concern to a conference of colleagues only to be met with silence. There is much work still to be done. That said, the building blocks are there in the Torah itself, as well as Jewish tradition, for a meaningful, resourceful relationship with the world around us, making the best use of it to serve G-d, repairing our environment, whilst utilising everything responsibly and with an eye on protecting the future.

The parshas we are reading teach us the fundamental concept of “tikun olam” of repairing and enhancing the world around us – and in an age when faith is often seen as being out of date it is encouraging that modern-day trends actually have their roots in our tradition.