Torah Judaism, Modern Environmentalism

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Evonne Marzouk of Silver Spring MD is Founder and Executive Director of Canfei Nesharim, an organization that provides Torah-based resources about the importance of protecting the environment. This article appears in issue 2 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

When I speak to Torah Jews about the environment, I often find that they expect me to speak about hugging trees. In some communities, the environment is thought of as a friendly topic, one that will be interesting to children, perhaps at camp. In other communities, the environment is a topic that has hardly been broached at all. Our community is uninformed about the environmental challenges we face, the Torah view, and our own responsibilities to our families, our communities, and our world. It is my hope that this article will begin to cast light on these issues, to help our community learn and act.

Our environment is severely threatened today. We face the breakdown of major systems on our planet; systems that all human beings rely on for basic elements such as food, clean air, and clean water. More than half of the world's major rivers are seriously depleted and polluted. Nearly 1.8 million people die worldwide each year due to urban pollution. Thirteen thousand species are listed as threatened or endangered with extinction or as species of concern under the Endangered Species Act, more than 100 times what we understand to be normal rates of species extinction. Large predatory fish in our oceans have been reduced to a mere 10% (by mass) of pre-industrial levels. The Millenium Ecosystem Assessment, a recent study of worldwide ecosystems, concluded that we are destroying our natural resources at a rate that will leave a seriously depleted world for our own children.

The problem is even more severe in Israel, where more people die from air pollution in metropolitan areas in Israel than from traffic deaths in all of Israel in a given year. Water scarcity has caused nearly all of the rivers in the land of Israel to become polluted or depleted, though efforts since 1993 are working to restore the major rivers in Israel.

While the modern environmental movement has done much to raise awareness of environmental challenges and to find technological solutions, the movement has done little to change the culture of Western society. Western society tends to focus on a glorification of the physical, on quick "soundbites" versus wisdom, on instant gratification over patience, and on consumption rather than restraint. This focus has, in part, caused today's environmental challenges. We will not succeed at protecting our environment by using the same methods that caused the problems we face. The Torah, on the other hand, presents a time-tested philosophy which *can* help us address today's problems – if we can listen to it.

The Torah has a deep tradition for protecting what is now known as the environment. Reading our sources with an eye for environmental sensitivity, we find a wealth of connections and teachings that encourage us to protect our resources, care for our health, prevent unnecessary damage to our neighbors, show concern and respect for other creatures, and avoid unnecessary waste. These teachings can help us find solutions to some of the grave environmental threats that we face today.

Building awareness of our Torah responsibility to protect the environment allows us to strengthen our understanding of the Torah's perspective on modern issues. In so doing, we can engage in these issues while remaining true to a Torah approach. Meanwhile, the Torah wisdom on the environment has much to offer our troubled Western society, which is struggling to address environmental issues within the paradigms that created them. Ultimately, bringing Jews together on an issue of common concern such as the environment can provide important opportunities for Jewish unity.

The Torah's teachings on our responsibility to Hashem's world begin in Bereishit, when we are given two separate explanations for our role on the earth:

"Be fruitful and multiply, fill the Earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the Earth." (Bereishit 1:28)

"And the L-rd G-d took the man and put him into the Garden of Eden, to cultivate it and to protect it." (Bereishis 2:15)

In "The Lonely Man of Faith," Rav Soloveitchik discusses two different conceptions of man based on these verses. The first instruction calls to the physical person, who works the earth and uses it for his physical needs. This person relates to the earth and uses it in a physical way, to get what he needs to survive. This function might be called "subduing the earth," and Rav Solovetchik sees this as a holy endeavor, part of our human responsibility and part of what makes humanity great.

The second instruction calls to the spiritual side of man: the person who wants to know, understand, and connect to Hashem. This person looks at the universe and wonders. This person is given the instruction to cultivate the land and to protect it. This person wants to connect to the land that we've been given. In the second story which includes this instruction, Adam also goes around and names the animals. He establishes a relationship with the earth.

Rav Solovetchik considers both aspects – the subduing and the protecting – as essential parts of a human being. Looking at this from an environmental perspective, we can see that Hashem created the land for us to use. But we also have a responsibility to temper our instincts to build and subdue. There must be a balanced relationship with the earth. We are permitted to use the earth -- but we must use it wisely. This balanced view is the Torah perspective on the environment, and we can see this balance running through our tradition whenever we are interacting with the world.

One example of the Torah's wisdom regarding protecting Hashem's resources comes in an unlikely place: in Bava Batra, in a discussion of laws that relate to protection of privacy. These ancient laws read like modern day laws preventing pollution. For example, the Talmud required that certain industries be kept at a distance from the town so that those living in the town would not be afflicted by the bad smells. The Rambam follows on this example and prevents individuals from building certain technologies, such as threshing floors, on their property unless they are done at a distance where the particles of earth or dust will not reach his neighbor. The Rambam says that it must be done at a distance that the wind will not carry the particles to his neighbor. The Rambam considered this in the same category as doing damage with arrows. The Shulchan Aruch also describes a law requiring us to protect our neighbor's drinking sources.

We can see from these sources that one of the major categories of what is now called "environmentalism" was included in our sources, and simply understood as part of our responsibilities to our neighbors. But to what extent do our "environmental" actions today ensure the health and comfort of our neighbors? When we drive our cars and idle them in school parking lots, do we think of the impact on our neighbors' children who may have asthma? When we wash our cars, fertilize our lawns, or pour chemicals down the drain, do we think of the impact on our neighbors' water sources? Perhaps we should revisit these sources in the context of our modern environmental challenges.

Even more important than our responsibility to protect our neighbors is our responsibility to protect our own health and that of our families. The Torah's teaching, "But you shall greatly beware for your souls" (devarim 4:15) requires us to be especially careful in protecting our health. We all should take a moment to reflect on how well we are taking care of our bodies in light of this major obligation. We must also remember that many actions that are today called "environmental" can have a significant impact on our health and especially on the health of our children. Some products that we use in our homes include carcinogens which could, G-d forbid, affect our families. Some pesticides being used on our lawns (or those of our children's schools, or being used as pesticides on our food) can cause significant threats to our children.

Once a person begins to recognize the breadth of the environmental problem, the next reaction is often to feel completely overwhelmed. There are so many other things to do. How can we protect the environment too? But as Torah Jews, we are familiar with taking actions that are consistent with Torah. We've all stopped buying a favorite product when it lost its heksher, or passed up a concert because it happened during the Three Weeks. We know how to do the right thing, even when it is difficult. This restraint is part of the wisdom of our tradition.

How do we choose the more difficult path? By taking one action at a time. In fact, we have a teaching from the Rambam that helps us focus this way. The Rambam teaches us to see each action we take as tipping the balance for good or bad, in our own lives – and for the whole world. Applied to the environment, we can see that we need to begin with our "daled amot" (the four spaces around us) and change just one action. It will make a difference. And in time, it will lead to the next action: a mitzvah begets another mitzvah.

There are many initial actions that we can take which will improve our own lives and also protect the world.

- To save energy, we can turn of the lights when leaving the room, use cold water in the washing machine, change the thermostat a few degrees to reduce heating and air conditioning costs, and choose to walk when we can instead of driving.
- We can make the air in our homes cleaner by investing in eco-friendly cleaning products, reducing air fresheners and aerosols, and ensuring that our home has a Carbon Monoxide detector.
- To reduce chemicals in our home, we can begin to buy organic. (The most important 12 fruits and vegetables to buy organic are apples, bell peppers, celery, cherries, imported grapes, nectarines, peaches, pears, potatoes, red raspberries, spinach, and strawberries. For an exploration of this issue visit www.canfeinesharim.org and search "organic.")
- To reduce waste, we can recycle, buy recycled paper with the highest "post-consumer waste" percentage available, stop buying bottled water and use tap water (with filter, if needed), and use real dishes and cloth napkins rather than disposable.

Any of these actions would help us begin on a path toward healthy and sustainable living. Choose one to start with, and when you have mastered that, it will be time to choose another.

The Torah's wisdom on the environment is being taught today by Canfei Nesharim, an organization which is working to inspire the Jewish community to understand and act on the relationship between traditional Jewish sources and modern environmental issues. Since its inception in 2003, Canfei Nesharim has implemented environmentally-focused programs for Jewish holidays and the Sabbath in dozens of local communities worldwide.

Canfei Nesharim ("the Wings of Eagles") is the only organization that focuses on environmental education specifically within the Orthodox Jewish community. In 2007, the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA) passed a resolution supporting the Torah-based environmental movement and recognizing the work of Canfei Nesharim, urging "every Jew to join its cause." The RCA called upon its members to "educate themselves and their constituents both scientifically and halakhically about the environmental challenges we face." Canfei Nesharim has also been recognized as one of the fifty most

innovative Jewish non-profit organizations in North America by 21/64 (Slingshot), a division of The Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies.

In 2008, Canfei Nesharim embarked on three new initiatives. The first is a strategy for environmental engagement in Orthodox day schools, beginning with a series of educator focus groups in summer 2008. The second is a series of seminars for San Francisco educators on Jewish environmental wisdom, based on a set of weekly Torah commentary resources. The third is a program series for local synagogues, called *Daled Amot & Beyond*. In addition, Canfei Nesharim's executive director will present two sessions at CAJE's upcoming conference. All of Canfei Nesharim's programs provide education about the relevance of Torah wisdom to the environment, and help Jews address modern environmental concerns from within the context of Jewish tradition.

Canfei Nesharim offers a wealth of resources about Torah and the environment via its searchable web-based resource library, its weekly Torah commentary on the environment, and its first publication, *A Compendium of Sources in Halacha and the Environment*, which includes articles by rabbis about the connections between Torah and protecting the environment, and has been distributed to approximately 500 rabbis, educators, and families. More information about Canfei Nesharim's resources and programs can be found at www.canfeinesharim.org.

Canfei Nesharim has volunteers in 20 cities, including Washington, DC; New York, NY; Sharon, MA; Los Angeles, CA; Milwaukee, WI, and San Francisco, CA. To find a partner school or synagogue near you (or to create a new partnership with Canfei Nesharim), send an email to info@canfeinesharim.org.

One would not imagine that our sages could have imagined the environmental problems that we face today. And yet, the Torah includes teachings for every type of challenge that we face. We conclude with this remarkable insight from the Midrash:

At the time when G-d created Adam, He took him around the trees of the Garden of Eden, and He said to them, "Look at My works! How beautiful and praiseworthy they are. Everything that I have created, I created for you. Take care not to damage and destroy My world, for if you damage it, there is no one to repair it after you." (Kohelet Rabba 7:28)