Jewish Beliefs on Environmental Responsibility

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I am so pleased to be here with you today.

The Jewish view on environmental responsibility begins with the land and humanity's relation to it. The starting point is Creation, or *Bereshit* in Hebrew, and that G-d created the land and G-d "owns" it. Humankind enters the picture on the sixth day of Creation. In Genesis 1:28, humankind is enjoined: "Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth."

The commandment to "master and rule" might be seen to give humankind unlimited license to exploit the land and all upon it. However, like almost everything, the Jewish view is to consider the whole and not just a single word, phrase, sentence, or paragraph in isolation. Thus, we are obligated to consider the entirety of the *Torah* (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible or the Five Books of Moses as it is often referred to), the rest of the Hebrew Bible, its interpretations, and its commentaries by sages and our Rabbis. With 613 commandments (or *mitzvot* in Hebrew*)* in the *Torah* alone, there is much to consider.

In Leviticus, there is a section referred to as the "Holiness Code" or the "Blessings and the Curses". In that section of the *Torah*, G-d promises Israel that if G-d's laws and commandments are obeyed, G-d will, among other things, bring peace and prosperity to the land, provide safety from wild beasts, enable the population to increase, and assure the land is abundantly productive. In Leviticus 26:3-4, G-d promises: "If you follow My laws and faithfully observe My commandments, I will grant you rains in their season, so that the earth shall yield its produce and the trees of the field their fruit." This is amplified upon in Deuteronomy 11:13-17, which is incorporated into the *Shema* prayer that is recited in virtually every Jewish service.

Judaism reminds us that our ownership of the land is not permanent. We are trustees and our stewardship must be tempered by restraint and self-control. Another central tenet is derived from the injunction in Deuteronomy 20:19-20 proscribing acts of vandalism in wartime including the razing of an enemy's fruit trees. Referred to as *ba'al taschit*, it has been enlarged upon by our Rabbis who seek to balance the demands of economic interest against the biblical obligations to act responsibly in preserving nature's integrity. Maimonides, the great 12th century Jewish scholar, philosopher, and physician, included within *ba'al taschit's* scope smashing dishes, tearing clothes, demolishing buildings, and stopping up wells. He and others of our great Rabbis have linked *ba'al taschit* to the prohibition against self-harm, reasoning that if we harm our environment then we harm ourselves.

The Hebrew adage *Kol Yisrael arevim zeh le-zeh* (meaning "All of Israel is responsible for one another") has become a cornerstone for the Jewish environmental movement. This adage has been the focal point for such organizations as the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, which is generally recognized as the first, broad-scale Jewish environmental group that was supported in its birth in 1993 by then Vice President Al Gore and scientist Carl Sagan. Many other Jewish environmental organizations have formed since, representing all major branches within the Jewish faith such as Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Judaism.

Judaism tells us, then, how humankind must understand its relation to nature; that our physical and moral survival is dependent on preserving the ecosystem of which we are a part; that we are custodians of nature's abundance, in effect, partners with G-d, not sole proprietors; and that treatment of the natural world we inhabit should be guided by self-restraint and humility — that our behavior when it comes to nature should be eco-centric not ego-centric.

Yes, not only is all Israel responsible for one another, we are all responsible for one another.

Shalom – peace.