



Corruption and Destruction: Noah as an Environmental Parable

Parashat Noah, Genesis 6:9-11:32 | By Mark Greenspan

“**The Environment**” by Lawrence Troster (pp. 875) in *The Observant Life*

Introduction

According to Lawrence Troster, environmentalism is a relatively new concern. He writes that, “there is virtually no traditional Jewish environmental *halakhab*...still Jewish environmentalists and scholars have begun to draw on sources and ideas from our tradition, which can be used to create the seeds of a *halakbic* response to environmental theology and ethics.” Indeed, if Judaism is a way of life concerned with our relationship to every aspect of existence, then it should teach us how to safeguard not only our immediate environment but also the earth. What would such a *halakhab* of environmentalism look like? Would there be anything uniquely Jewish in the way we respond to the earth?

One does not have to search too far to find a connection between Jewish living and the environment. The story of the flood is a parable of ecological concern. It suggests that human corruption and divine destruction are directly connected to one another. This idea is expressed repeatedly throughout the Torah. When we recite the *Sh'ma* each day, we speak of the connection between obedience to God and the welfare of the earth: “*Take care lest you be tempted to forsake God...He will close the heavens and hold back the rain...*” (Deuteronomy 11:16-17). While we are troubled by the theology of such statements, they suggest that our behavior has a direct effect on the planet. There is an organic connection between human beings and the environment that is expressed in how we choose to live in the world.

The earth became corrupt (tishabeit) before God; the earth was filled with lawlessness. When God saw how corrupt (nishbatab) the earth was, for all flesh had corrupted (bishbit) its ways on earth, God said to Noah, “I have decided to put an end to all flesh, for the earth is filled with lawlessness because of them; I am going to destroy them (mashbitam) with the earth.”

- Genesis 6:11-13

Sources and Resources

- a. **The earth became corrupt:** They all steal from one another: The landowners steal from the sharecroppers by force, and the sharecroppers steal from the owners with guile. Consequently, the land gives all of its fruits to thieves. **I am going to destroy them with the Earth:** for I will damage the climate of the earth and air, by turning the angle to the sun... Therefore, immediately after the Flood, the years of Humanity are diminished, because the climate and fruits weren't up to their original wholeness. Because of this, the human race was permitted [to eat] animals after the Flood.
- Rabbi Ovadiah S'forno's Torah Commentary
- b. **And God saw the earth and behold it was corrupt.** (Genesis 6:11) Rabbi Hiyya adduced the following text: **And God saw their works that they turned from their evil way.** (Jonah 3:10) See now, he said, when the sons of men are righteous and observe the commands of the Torah, the earth becomes invigorated, and a fullness of joy pervades it, because then the *Sh'kbinah* rests upon the earth, and there is thus gladness above as well as below. But when men corrupt their way and do not observe the commands of the Torah, and sin before their Master, they, as it were, thrust the

Sh'kbinah out of the world, and the earth is thus left in a corrupt state. For the *Sh'kbinah* being thrust out, another spirit comes and hovers over the world, bringing with it corruption.

-Zohar, 1:61a

- c. Consider God's doing! Who can straighten what He has twisted? (Ecclesiastes 7:13) When the Holy One created the first human being, God took him by the hand and led him past all the trees in the Garden of Eden and said to him: "look upon My works; see how lovely and praiseworthy they are. All that I have created, I have created for you. Be careful not to ruin and destroy My world, for if you ruin it, there will be no one else to fix it."

- *Kohelet Rabbah* 7:13

- d. Our concern with environment cannot be reduced to what can be used, to what can be grasped. Environment includes not only the inkstand and the blotting paper, but also the impenetrable stillness in the air, the stars, the clouds, the quiet passing of time, and the wonder of my own being. I am an end as well as a means, and so is the world: an end as well as a means. My view of the world and my understanding of the self, determine each other. The complete manipulation of the world results in the complete instrumentalization of the self.

- *Who is Man?* by Abraham Joshua Heschel (pp. 88)

Reflections

The story of the flood begins with a statement of the earth's corruption and God's decision to destroy the earth. Only Noah is righteous in his generation; God calls on him to build an ark and to gather all of the animals and birds on the earth along with his family. But what was the nature of the earth's corruption? The Bible uses two words but never tells us what the evil might have been: *hamas*, lawlessness; and *hashbata*, corruption. While the sages speculated on the nature of the moral corruption that made the world worthy of destruction, we do not know what it is. What is interesting is that the second verb, *hashbatab*, is used four times in these three short verses. *Hashbatab* refers not only to corruption but to the destruction of the planet. It is not just humanity that has become corrupt but animals and even the earth. These words are interchangeable. If humanity's corruption leads to the destruction of the earth, then possibly our destruction of the planet is also a form of corruption.

But what was the earth guilty of? Why was it necessary to destroy the planet along with humanity that was lawless and corrupt? If one reads the story of the flood carefully, one notes that God's act was not a punishment but an attempt to start over. God was disappointed. He began with a garden that existed in a state of harmony, but was quickly corrupted by humanity. Neither humanity nor the earth turned out the way God hoped they would so He brought up the waters from below the earth and above the earth and flooded the planet. Remember, that creation begins by God separating the waters above from the waters below.

Despite Troster's initial statement, I believe that environmentalism begins with the story of Noah and the Flood. Where there is a lack of righteousness and justice, it is absent not only in the way human beings treat one another but in the way human beings treat their environment as well. Our planet is subject to our behavior, as we see in the Midrash of God and Adam walking through the Garden. "*Be careful not to destroy My world; if you ruin it there will be no one else to fix it?*" (*Kohelet Rabbah* 7:13). We have the free will and the potential to destroy our environment or preserve it. While classical Judaism does not address 'global issues' it addresses our treatment of the environment in a variety of meaningful ways; Shabbat, the prohibition against wanton

destruction, the sabbatical and Jubilee years and the human treatment of animals are all a reflection of our attempt to manipulate and to see the environment as a simply an object for us to abuse. Environmentalism begins with the commandment for human beings to till and tend the earth, to become its stewards.

Halakhah L'ma-aseh

- a. *In the Jewish tradition, the halakhah actually deals explicitly with the concept of wasteful consumption. When we waste resources, we are violating the mitzvah not to destroy the world, usually known in Hebrew as bal tashbit, literally, “do not destroy.”*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 880
- b. *The overconsumption of resources is at the heart of the environmental crisis. As Jews we are obligated to consider our real needs carefully whenever we purchase anything. When we have a simbah, we are obligated to consider the extravagance of our celebrations.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 880
- c. *Shabbat is one way for Jews to embrace the concept of living a sustainable life. For one day out of seven, Shabbat observers limit their use of the earth’s resources dramatically.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 880
- d. *The Torah has a whole program of tzedek-based laws, all of which try to preserve a just distribution of resources across the community...tzedek should be at therefore be at the heart of the Jewish perspective on environmental justice.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 884
- e. *As Jews we must make a moral commitment to developing a sustainable economy, and we must adopt personal practices and communal policies that reflect that ideal. We must urge our governments to become part of our international process to lower carbon emissions. The future of the Jewish community is bound up with the environment fate of the world.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 892

Questions to Ponder

1. How is contemporary environmentalism different from the type of legislation we find in traditional Jewish law? How has our perspective changed?
2. Environmentalism isn't specifically a “Jewish concern.” Do you think it is important for us to try to address these issues through classical Jewish thought, theology, and *halakhah*? Why or why not?
3. In the story of creation we find two different expressions describing humanity’s relationship to the natural world. In Chapter 1 of Genesis, we are told that human beings should “*rule over the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth...*” (Genesis 1:28). In Chapter 2 humanity is called upon “*to till and tend*” (Genesis 2:5) the earth. How are these expressions different from one another? Do they contradict or complement one another?
4. In what ways is Noah a success as an environmentalist? In what ways is he a failure?
5. Following the flood, God permits Noah and his descendants to consume animal flesh as long as they do not consume the blood of the animals as well. How has humanity’s relationship to the natural world changed following the flood? Why?
6. How can the Jewish community institutionalize ‘environmental’ concerns as religious practices?
7. How might environmentalism be reflected in the laws of *Kashrut*, the dietary laws? Do you think we genetically modified organisms should be considered un-kosher? If so, under what circumstances?

Adapted from Torah Table Talk by Mark Greenspan