



On the Mitzvah of Sustainability

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I. Guiding Questions

1. In a world facing the urgent challenges of climate change and environmental degradation, how should a Jew live?
2. Does Jewish ethics encompass relations between humans and nature as well as relations between human and human? That is, does our duty to act well and ethically extend to Creation? If so, what is that duty? How far does it go? What claims does Creation make on us? (And does your opinion change if we say “Nature” instead of “Creation”?)
3. The 20th-century Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas writes: “The gap between the ability to foretell and the power to act creates a novel moral problem... No previous ethics had to consider [humanity’s impact on] the global condition of human life [and we might add all life... Therefore,] a new conception of duties and rights, for which previous ethics and metaphysics provide not even the principles, let alone a ready doctrine,” needs to be enunciated.
4. How can/does Judaism fill this gap?

II. Texts

1. In Genesis 1:28, on the sixth day of creation, God creates humans and says

Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the world and subdue it. Gain control over the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky and every animal that roams on the earth.	פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ וּכְבֹּשׁוּהָ וּרְדּוּ בְּדִגַּת הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבְכָל-חַיַּה הָרֹמֶשֶׂת עַל-הָאָרֶץ:
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Do you read this as blessing? A mandate? A misguided right? A necessary power? Something else? How might this verse be used to guide our behavior?

2. Genesis 2:15 reads

God took the human and placed him in the Garden of Eden to work and protect it.	וַיִּקַּח ה' אֶת־הָאָדָם וַיִּנְחֵהוּ בְּגֶן־עֵדֶן לְעֲבֹדָה וּלְשִׁמְרָה:
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How does this compare with the verse in Genesis 1? What are the implications that flow from it? Does this affect how you read Genesis 1:28? How might Genesis 2:15 be used to guide our behavior?

3. Nahmanides (13th-century) (commentary to Leviticus 19:19) wrote

God created species in the world... giving them the power to give birth so that those species should continue forever, as long as God wished the world to continue.	ד' ברא המינים בעולם... ונתן בהם כח התולדה, שיתקיימו המינים בהם לעד, כל זמן שירצה הוא יתברך בקיום העולם.
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What might this teach us about the value of species differentiation, species survival and species extermination? What ethical implications flow from this?

4. Isaiah 45:18

The Lord who creates the heavens, he is God, He who fashions the earth and makes it, He prepares it. He did not create it to be chaos, He fashioned it to be inhabited (lashevet).	ה' בּוֹרָא הַשָּׁמַיִם הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים יִצֵּר הָאָרֶץ וַעֲשָׂהּ הוּא כּוֹנֵנָהּ לֹא־תִהְיֶה בְּרָאָה לְשִׁבֶּת יִצְרָהּ
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Rashi (11th-century) comments on this very verse (found on Yevamot 62b), explaining:

Lashevet -- means to participate in the [ongoing] establishment of the world (Yishuv ha'olam)	לשבת -- להיות עסוקים ביישובו של עולם
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What does that imply? What obligations does this verse place on us?

5a. The establishment of a habitable world, *Yishuv Ha'Olam*, was recognized by Sefer HaHinnukh (13th-century) as the heart of the very first commandment

<p>[The parashah of] Bereishit has one mitzvah – procreation... Fundamentally, this mitzvah [teaches] that the world is designed to be inhabited, for the Holy One wishes the world to be inhabited, as it says: “God did not create it to be chaos (tohu) בראה תהו ; לא תהו בראה (tohu) God fashioned it to be habitable. ” (Isaiah 45:18) לשבת יצרה. It is a great mitzvah on account of which all other mitzvot in the world exist.</p>	<p>בראשית יש בה מצות עשה אחת, והיא מצות פריה ורביה... משרשי מצוה זו, כדי שיהיה העולם מיושב (גיטין מא, ב במשנה), שהשם ברוך הוא חפץ בישובו, כדכתיב: (ישעיהו מה יח) לא תהו בראה לשבת יצרה. והיא מצוה גדולה שבסבתה מתקיימות כל המצות בעולם</p>
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5b. Seder Hayom (Moshe ben Yehudah Ibn Machir, 16th-century), Commentary to Mishnah Avot 5.21

<p>The basis of the mitzvah to procreate is in order to leave a blessing after yourself which is the perpetuation of the species “generation after generation, and the world remains forever” (Kohelet 1:4) thus he becomes a partner of the Holy One in the works of creation (Shabbat 10a).</p>	<p>עיקר המצוה של פריה ורביה היא כדי להשאיר אחריו ברכה ויהיה קיום המין ו"דור הולך ודור בא והארץ לעולם עומדת" (קהלת א, ד) ונעשה שותף להקב"ה במעשה בראשית (שבת י ע"א)</p>
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What does habitability (lashevet) here mean? What is the role of procreation? Is the call to procreate unlimited? If not, how do we assess when the mitzvah is sufficiently fulfilled?

6a. Maimonides, Hilkhot Shekheinim (the Laws of Neighbors) 10:5

<p>If the actions of one person [conducted] in his own property cause damage to another when he does them, it is as if he caused damage with his own hands. To what does this compare? To one who stands in his own property and shoots arrows into his neighbor's property, saying: I'm doing [this] in my own property! – we prevent him [from doing so].</p>	<p>אם היו מעשיו של זה שעושה ברשותו מזיקין את חבירו בשעת עשייתו הרי זה כמי שמזיק בידו. הא למה זה דומה? למי שעומד ברשותו ויורה חצים לחצר חבירו ואמר ברשותי אני עושה, שמונעים אותו</p>
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What might this law and others like it teach us about modern sources of pollution and culpability? What might it teach us about environmental justice?

6b. Maimonides on the commandment: bal tashkhit – do not destroy fruit trees
(Deuteronomy 20:19–20)

<p>One does not cut down fruit trees... nor cut off their source of irrigation in order to dry them out [viz. in order indirectly to cause them to die and thus be allowed to cut them down] because the Torah says, "Do not destroy its trees." Whoever does so is punished. This does not apply only in a siege but in every case, one who cuts down a fruit tree as an act of destruction is punished. [But] One may cut down such a tree if it was harming other trees, or harming others' fields, or because it is of high financial value. The Torah only prohibited this as an act of destruction.... And this pertains not just to [the act of destroying] fruit trees but the one who needlessly, destructively breaks vessels, tears clothes, destroys buildings, stops up wells, wastes food transgresses the mitzvah of bal tashkhit, "do not destroy."</p>	<p>אין קוצצין אילני מאכל... ואין מונעין מהם אמת המים כדי שייבשו, שנאמר "לא תשחית את עצה", וכל הקוצץ לוקה. ולא במצור בלבד אלא בכל מקום כל הקוצץ אילן מאכל דרך השחתה לוקה, אבל קוצצין אותו אם היה מזיק אילנות אחרים, או מפני שמזיק בשדה אחרים, או מפני שדמיו יקרים. לא אסרה תורה אלא דרך השחתה ולא האילנות בלבד, אלא כל המשבר כלים, וקורע בגדים, והורס בנין, וסותם מעין, ומאבד מאכלות דרך השחתה, עובר בלא תשחית</p>
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Rambam teaches that we should not destroy anything unnecessarily, but we may cut down trees if destroying it yields a higher return than its fruit. Is this an example of a need for "a new conception of duties and rights"? We now know much more about the ecosystem of trees, and the benefits (yields) they confer than we did before. How, then, should we assess the value of a tree? Is it only in the amount of fruit it gives? Over what period of time? Upon what basis is "high financial value" calculated? How can/should we articulate a conception of duties and rights to fruit trees, and the ecosystem as a whole, given what we know about the interdependence of life and the planetary boundaries?

Compare Maimonides' explanation of bal tashkhit with Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch's treatment (Horeb, Vol. II, sect. IV, #56, pp. 279-282)

6c. Yea, 'Do not destroy anything!' is the first and most general call of God, which comes to you... as master of the earth. All round you you perceive earth and plant and animal... already bearing your imprint.... [T]hey have been transformed by your human hand for your human purposes... and you have taken them as your property.... If you should now raise your hand... wishing to destroy that which you

should only use... if you should regard the beings beneath you as being objects without rights, not perceiving God Who created them...then God's call proclaims to you, 'Do not destroy anything! ... The first prohibition of creation is thus not to destroy... [D]estruction... also means trying to attain a certain aim by use of more things... when fewer... would suffice... This, then, is the first law.... Regard things as God's property and use them with a sense of responsibility for wise human purposes. Destroy nothing! Waste nothing! Do not be avaricious! Be wisely economical with all the means which God grants you...

Take a look at the following charts. How do they help us understand and implement the commandment of Yishuv Ha'olam?

Comparison	
Genesis One	Genesis Two
World is wilderness	World is garden
Verbs: domination and control	Work/labor & preserve/protect
Earth made for humanity	Humanity made for earth
Earth self-renewing	Earth requires "inputs" of water and humanity
Human "godly"	Human/humus
Human as sovereign	Human as "g[lu]ardener"

Comparison

Genesis One	Genesis Two
Human relationship to Earth: extractive	Human relationship to Earth: Generative
Consumption (almost) limitless	Consumption limited
No concept of exile or earth's destruction	Concept of exile and destruction
Nature as commodity	Nature as community
Ego-centric	Eco-centric

The famed biologist E O Wilson wrote: “Unlike any creature that lived before, we have become a geophysical force, swiftly changing the atmosphere and climate as well as the composition of the world's fauna and flora.”

Given this new reality, does that demand a new ethic and attitude toward Creation, as Hans Jonas suggested?

Hans Jonas urges us to “act so that the effects of our actions are compatible with the permanence of life.” Is this a compelling way to explain the mitzvah of Yishuv Ha’olam? How would you explain it?

What actions flow from your understanding of Yishuv Ha’olam? What three practical steps can you and your congregation commit to undertaking to meet the ethical imperative of Yishuv Ha’olam?