

Session 11: Stewardship of the Earth—Compelling Mitzvah of Our Time

❖ Text Study A: The environment as religious wonder

Text 1: Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, New York: 1970, pp 57-59.

I can contemplate a tree.
I can accept it as a picture: a rigid pillar in a flood of light, or splashes of green traversed by the gentleness of the blue silver ground.
I can feel it as movement: the flowing veins around the sturdy, striving core, the sucking of the roots, the breathing of the leaves, the infinite commerce with earth and air—and the growing itself in its darkness.
I can assign it to a species and observe it as an instance, with an eye to its construction and its way of life.
I can overcome its uniqueness and form so rigorously that I recognize it only as an expression of the law—those laws according to which a constant opposition of forces is continually adjusted, or those laws according to which the elements mix and separate.
I can dissolve it into a number, into a pure relation between numbers, and eternalize it.
Throughout all of this the tree remains my **object** and has its place and its time span, its kind and condition.
But it can also happen, if will and grace are joined, that as I contemplate the tree I am drawn into a relation, and the tree ceases to be an It. The power of exclusiveness has seized me....
What I encounter is neither the soul of a tree not a dryad, but the tree itself.

Text 2: Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, pp.43, 46

Among the many things that religious tradition holds in store for us is a *legacy of wonder*. The surest way to suppress our ability to understand the meaning of God and the importance of worship is to *take things for granted*. Indifference to the sublime wonder of living is the root of sin... The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living. What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder.

Discussion Questions:

- Buber describes an approach to nature he calls a relationship. What sort of changes happen to him as he moves from thinking about a tree to having a relationship with the tree. Has this ever happened to you with respect to the natural world?
- Heschel's focus is on wonder. Have you ever experienced nature in this way?
- How do these ways of thinking and feeling about nature connect to other aspects of Jewish life?

❖ Text Study B: Mitzvah links the present to the future

Text 3: Babylonian Talmud, *Taanit 23a*

Once Honi was walking along the road when he saw a man planting a carob tree. Honi asked, 'How long before it will bear fruit?' The man answered, seventy years.' Honi asked, 'Are you sure you will be here in seventy years to eat from the fruit?' The man replied, 'I found the world filled with carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted for me, so I will plant for my children.'

Discussion Questions:

- It is easy to think of mitzvot that look to the past: “ a reminder of the Exodus from Egypt” the Covenant of Abraham our Father, etc. but where is the focus of this mitzvah in time?
- What are some other examples of mitzvot which connect the present to the future?
- What is the relationship between practicing a mitzvah and receiving a reward according to this text?

❖ **Text Study C: Translating these attitudes towards nature into mitzvah practice**

Text 4: Genesis 2:15

<p>And the Lord took Adam and placed him the Garden of Eden to work it and guard it. (<i>L'avdah u'Ishomrah</i>)</p>	<p>וַיִּקַּח ה' אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאָדָם וַיִּנְחֵהוּ בְּגַן עֵדֶן לְעִבְדָּהּ וּלְשֹׁמְרָהּ :</p>
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Text 5: Midrash Kohelet Rabbah 7:13

<p>Upon creating the first human beings, God guided them around the Garden of Eden, saying: “Look at my creations! See how beautiful and perfect they are! I created everything for you. Make sure you don't ruin or destroy MY world. If you do, there will be no one to fix it.</p>	<p>ראה את מעשה האלהים כי מי יוכל לתקן את אשר עותו, בשעה שברא הקב"ה את אדם הראשון נטלו והחזירו על כל אילני גן עדן ואמר לו"י ראה מעשי! כמה נאים ומשובחין הן! וכל מה שבראתי בשבילך בראתי, תן דעתך שלא תקלקל ותחריב את עולמי. שאם קלקלת אין מי שיתקן אחריך.</p>
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Text 6: Bereshit Rabbah 10:7

<p>The Rabbis said: Even though you may think superfluous in the world things such as fleas, gnats and flies, even they are included in the creation of the world. The Holy One has a purpose for everything including snakes, scorpion, gnats and frogs.</p>	<p>רבנן אמרי אפי' דברים שאתה רואה אותן שהן יתירה בעולם כגון זבובין ופרעושין ויתושין אף הן בכלל ברייתו של עולם הן. ובכל הקב"ה עושה שליחותו, אפי' ע"י נחש, אפי' ע"י יתוש, אפי' ע"י צפרדע.</p>
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Text 7: Jeremy Benstein, *The Way into Judaism and the Environment*, pp. 47-49.

<p><i>Avoda</i> is work or labor (and in the context of land, cultivation) and <i>shemira</i> is guarding or protecting...</p> <p>If we try to divine the meaning of these terms from their referents in other contexts, our relationship to the Garden, and by, implication, the world, is homologous to our relationship with God: we are enjoined to do to the Garden what we do for God (<i>avoda</i>-service), and also what God does for or to us, as in the priestly blessing of Numbers 6:24: “<i>Yevarechecha...veyishmerecha</i>,” May God bless you and watch over you.”</p> <p>...The mission is to work, to produce, to develop—but at the same time to preserve, to guard, to be vigilant that the work doesn't get out of hand. It must remain, in a word, sustainable. Indeed, perhaps the best translation of the biblical phrase <i>leovda uleshomra</i> is “sustainable</p>
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development.” Working the land is crucial for human flourishing, but guarding the earth is the critical complement. We need to guard the world precisely from our avoda, the effects of our work. In our struggle for the earth’s fruits we sow the seeds of our own, and the world’s destruction, unless we temper our toil with responsibility and concern for posterity...

(We) cannot totally manage the earth—nor should we strive to—but our impact on it is so great that we have to take responsibility for shaping policy for our actions, which determine a great deal of the course of this planet... Stewardship, then, is more of a stance, an attitude about service and discipline than a scientific vision of a type of control.

Discussion Questions:

- What would be some concrete examples of ways to do this mitzvah?
- If protecting biodiversity is way of practicing this mitzvah, how can that be accomplished?
- Are there other examples in the siddur (like the priestly blessing) you connect to this mitzvah?

❖ **Text Study D: Bal Tashchit**

Text 8: Deuteronomy 20: 19-20

When in your war against a city you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy its trees, wielding the ax against them. You may eat of them but you must not cut them down. Are the trees of the field human to withdraw before you into the besieged city? Only trees that you know do not yield food may be destroyed; you may cut them down for constructing siege works against the city that is waging war on you, until it has been reduced.

כִּי תִצּוּר אֶל־עִיר יָמִים רַבִּים לְהִלָּחֵם עָלֶיהָ
 לְתַפְשָׁהּ לֹא תִשְׁחִית אֶת־עֵצָהּ לְנִדְחֵי עָלְיוֹ
 גְּרֹזוּן כִּי מִמֶּנּוּ תֹאכַל וְאִתּוֹ לֹא תִכְרֹת כִּי
 הָאָדָם עֵץ הַשָּׂדֶה לֵבֵא מִפְּנֵיךָ בַּמִּצּוֹר: רַק עֵץ
 אֲשֶׁר תִּדְעֶה כִּי לֹא־עֵץ מֵאֲכָל הוּא אִתּוֹ
 תִשְׁחִית וְכָרֵת וּבְנִית מִצּוֹר עַל־הָעִיר
 אֲשֶׁר הוּא עֹשֶׂה עִמָּךְ מִלְחָמָה עַד רִדְתָּה:

Text 9: Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Kings 6:8 and 6:10

It is forbidden to cut down fruit-bearing trees outside a besieged city, nor may a water channel be deflected from them so that they wither. Whoever cuts down a fruit-bearing tree is flogged. This penalty is imposed not only for cutting it down during a siege; whenever a fruit-yielding tree is cut down with destructive intent, flogging is incurred. It may be cut down, however, if it causes damage to other trees or to a field belonging to another man or if its value for other purposes is greater. The Law forbids wanton destruction.
 Not only one who cuts down trees, but also one who smashes household goods, tears clothes,

אִין קוֹצְצִין אֵילָנֵי מֵאֲכָל שְׁחוּץ לַמְּדִינָה,
 וְאִין מוֹנְעִין מֵהֶם אִמַּת הַמַּיִם כְּדֵי שִׁיבְשׁוּ,
 שְׁנֹאמֵר לֹא תִשְׁחִית אֶת עֵצָהּ, וְכֹל הַקּוֹצֵץ
 לוֹקֵה, וְלֹא בַּמִּצּוֹר בְּלִבְד אֵלָּא בְּכֹל מְקוֹם
 כֹּל הַקּוֹצֵץ אֵילָן מֵאֲכָל דֶּרֶךְ הַשְּׁחִתָּה לוֹקֵה,
 אֲבֵל קוֹצְצִין אוֹתוֹ אִם הִיָּה מְזִיק אֵילָנוֹת
 אַחֲרָיִם, אוֹ מְפַנֵּי שְׂמִזִּיק בְּשֵׂדֵה אַחֲרָיִם, אוֹ
 מְפַנֵּי שְׂדֵמִיּוֹ יִקְרִים, לֹא אִסְרָה תוֹרָה אֵלָּא
 דֶּרֶךְ הַשְּׁחִתָּה.
 וְלֹא הָאֵילָנוֹת בְּלִבְד, אֵלָּא כֹּל הַמְּשֻׁבֵּר

<p>demolishes a building, stops up a spring, or destroys articles of food with destructive intent transgresses the command "you must not destroy." Such a person is not flogged, but is administered a disciplinary beating imposed by the Rabbis.</p>	<p>כלים, וקורע בגדים, והורס בנין, וסותם מעין, ומאבד מאכלות דרך השחתה, עובר בלא תשחית, ואינו לוקה אלא מכת מרדות מדבריהם .</p>
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Text 10: Benstein, The Way into Judaism and the Environment, pp. 100-101.

We can contemplate similar extensions in our own day. For instance, *bal taschit* can be defined as forbidding the wanton destruction of anything of value... (Recycling) technologies mean that garbage now has value. Therefore, not recycling should be declared a flagrant violation of this biblical injunction... The debate (we) need to have (is): what are the limits... and what demands for holiness and sustainability make on our lives and lifestyles?

The *Sefer haChinuch*... saw in this mitzvah a very general principle, a *midda*, a virtue, to be cultivated:

...this is the way of the righteous and those who improve society... that nothing, not even a grain of mustard, should be lost... if possible they will prevent any destruction that they can. Not so are the wicked, who rejoice in the destruction of the world, and they are destroying themselves (#530)

Discussion Question:

- What examples go beyond recycling?

❖ **Text Study E: Tzaar Baalei Hayim**

Text 11: Bentstein, The Way into Judaism and the Environment, p. 102f.

The biblical and rabbinic imperatives were immediate responses to everyday situations: is that donkey struggling or fallen under a heavy load? Go help it (Deut. 22:4). And although the beast of burden is somebody's property, it doesn't matter whose, for as Exodus 23:5 states, you are obliged to do this, even for your enemy's animals... Should we desecrate Shabbat to save an injured animal? Yes, *pikuach nefesh*, the mandate to save lives, extends to the lives (*nefashot*) of animals (Shabbat 128b). Furthermore, when you plow, don't yoke an ass and oxen together (Deut 22:10)—the weaker one will suffer. And when it comes time to thresh, don't muzzle that ox (Deut 25:4) preventing it from eating the grain always before its eyes. These regulations, along with others, such as the obligation to allow one's animals to rest on Shabbat (... Deut 5:14), are like labor laws, protecting the conditions of the workers who happen to have four legs...

The Torah affirms three central propositions regarding animals and their treatment: that although they are "ownable" they are more than chattel, that they do indeed suffer, and that it is incumbent upon us to minimize that suffering in our dealings with them. And what seemed like a few isolated examples becomes a whole subclass of ethical imperatives, incorporating some eighteen different laws, including those mentioned, as well as the laws of separation of milk and meat (the life of the animal and its death), feeding domestic animals before oneself (Talmud *Berachot* 40a), and critical attitudes to hunting, among others...

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True concern for animal welfare is a Session in humility, both in learning the deep connections we

have with the nonhuman, inanimate world and in confronting its ultimate otherness. We expand our moral universe when we break out of the shell of the self to include others in relationship...and we need animals to put ourselves in perspective.

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The negative—limiting ourselves and refraining from action—and the positive, pushing ourselves and embarking on initiatives—need to go together and inform each other. Although the model is conceptually clear, its application in real life is far from uncomplicated: one person's *tikun* may be another's *kilkul* (rupture or breakdown). The idea of competing or improving nature doesn't obviate the need for exploring or defining the limits; rather the opposite is the case—it makes that need all the more urgent.

Text 12: Midrash Tanhuma, Tazria 5

Akiba explained: everything created during the six days of Creation needs perfecting (*tikun*): mustard needs sweetening, wheat needs grinding, and even man needs perfecting. This perfection of purification is achieved not according to our whims but by following divinely ordained commandments.

Discussion Questions:

- Akiba and Maimonides and Benstein all focus not just on why these mitzvot are good for the earth and for its creatures, but for the moral development of human beings as well. What examples do they give?
- How does the practice of a mitzvah affect a person? List some other examples that have significance for you.