Repairing the Order of Creation: A Jewish Perspective on Environmental Ethics

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The following presentation was given by Rabbi Lawrence Troster on June 25, 2003, at the National Association of Environmental Professionals' (NAEP) 28th Annual Conference, held in San Antonio, Texas.

I want to begin by thanking you for inviting me to be on this panel. While I have addressed many different groups on the environment over the years, this is the first time that I have had the opportunity of speaking to a group of people who are doing much of the on-the-ground work in environmental protection.

I would like to do two things in my remarks. First of all, I would like to give you an outline of Jewish religious environmentalism. Then I will then respond specifically to a few parts of your Code of Ethics' from a Jewish perspective.

The environmental crisis the world faces is unparalleled in human history. Environmentalism, a response to this crisis, arose as a different way of thinking about the natural world and humanity's relationship to it. In the Jewish community, a distinctly Jewish form of environmentalism has evolved and created a new area of Jewish ethics.

Before the twentieth century, no religious tradition has had to fully deal with the issues and concerns that the environmental movement has now raised. While resource management, loss of arable land, pollution control, and even species extinction may have been addressed by some religious traditions in the past, these issues now exist on a completely different scale. Overpopulation, climate change, toxic waste, water shortages, and biodiversity are issues that traditional religions could never have possibly imagined. Because of the growth of scientific knowledge, the natural world is now understood in a profoundly different way than the world in which most of the world's religions developed.

Jewish environmental ethics is a very new area of Jewish ethics and tradition. In the last 10 years, however, there has been a growing body of Jewish scholarship and theology on the environment, but the translation of much of this material into practice is still in the future.

Environmentalism is a radical critique of the relationship between humanity and the natural world. Environmentalism challenges all ideologies derived from the Western humanist tradition, which asserts the centrality of human power and reason. This tradition developed with the rise of Western capitalism, the scientific revolution in the 16th and 17th centuries, and the growth of industrial revolution in the 19th century. This tradition is anthropocentric (human centered) and denies the Biblical doctrine of the divine creation of the natural world. Instead, the natural world is solely an object for human exploitation. This objectification of the natural world also nullifies the Biblical concept that human beings are created in the image of God. While the Biblical worldview sees God, humanity, and the natural world linked together in a sacred order, the Western humanist view denies that this order exists.

Environmentalism also challenges our economic system, because the way we are living, producing, and consuming is not sustainable. Our global economic system is also unjust in the distribution of resources. Developed countries consume the vast majority of resources while creating the largest amount of refuse, which is often exported to poorer countries in the form of toxic waste. Therefore, environmentalism seeks to create sustainable economic development within a just global trade system.

Seen in this way, the environmental crisis is a crisis of values, not technology. Environmental ethics tries to create a process of response to the crisis. Up until now, traditional ethical systems, including most systems of religious ethics, have been inadequate to deal with the environmental crisis because they are primarily concerned with relationships between human beings. In contrast to these anthropocentric ethics, environmental ethics tries to include within its perspective whole systems or communities of life. These may include landscapes, ecosystems, and even the entire biosphere. Environmental ethics is a more holistic ethical approach and includes the findings of modern science.

There have been two main trends in environmental ethics: stewardship ethics and non-anthropocentric ethics. Stewardship ethics asserts that environmental degradation is morally wrong because human beings will be adversely affected. Human needs are, however, still privileged in this approach. If, for example, there is a conflict between a human need and the survival of a species, then the human need comes first.

Non-anthropocentric environmental ethics considers stewardship ethics to be inadequate to deal with the environmental crisis because human needs will always be privileged over the survival of species or ecosystems that are not deemed to be of any use as resources for human benefit. An example of non-anthropocentric environmental ethics is the "land ethic" of Aldo Leopold, a conservationist and member of the United States Forest Service (1909-1928), and also Professor of Game Management at the University of Wisconsin (1933-1948). His work, A Sand County Almanac, published posthumously, is a classic of environmental literature.

Leopold asserted that ethics must include nonhuman life and the landscape itself. He wrote: "There is yet no ethic dealing with man's relationship to the land, to the animals and plants which grow upon it... The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of community to include soils, water, plants and animals or collectively the land." He also said, "A land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it." In this new ethical approach, something is right when it "preserves the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic commu-
nity. It is wrong when it tends otherwise. 

Environmental ethics also tries to create what has been called an environmental consciousness or identity in each person. This consciousness or identity creates through intellectual comprehension and experiential education a new sensitivity to our connection with the natural world. Environmental educator Mitchell Thomas-how has defined environmental identity as the state when “people perceive themselves in reference to nature, as living breathing beings connected to the rhythms of the earth, the biogeochemical cycles, the grand and complex diversity of ecological systems.”

What then is the role of religion in the environmental crisis? If how we act as members of a religious community depends on what we think, then our religious attitude to the environment will determine our response to the environmental crisis. Jewish environmentalists and scholars have begun to bring out sources and ideas from our tradition that can be used to create a Jewish environmental theology and a Jewish environmental ethics. This does not mean that there are no problems in creating such theology or ethics. There are times where Judaism may come into conflict with some of the assumptions of environmentalism. Jewish tradition also tries to concretize theology and ethics into discrete practice, but at this time there are few environmental precedents. And while traditional ethical theory has mostly been concerned with rights, Jewish ethics tends to emphasize duties and obligations. Lastly, most classical Jewish sources are based on a pre-modern cosmology in which there is a static universe and a fixed number of species. The findings of biology and ecology are essential to our connection with the natural world. Environmental education can be developed from the perspective can be developed from the biotic community, united again with our fellow creatures in harmony. On the Sabbath we become stewards by helping to maintain the balance of the Order of Creation (Deuteronomy 10:7-11).

The special place that humans occupy in Creation gives them power that no other creatures possess (Psalm 8). This special place is expressed in the concept that humans were created in the image of God (Hebrew: tzelem Elohim). Tzelem Elohim means that humans were put on the earth to act as God’s agents and to actualize God’s presence in Creation. It also is a descriptive term, which shows humanity as having certain moral characteristics (infinite value, equality, and uniqueness) while also possessing the God-like capacities of power, consciousness, and free will. Jewish ethics says that we are to imitate God but not impersonate God.

Because the realities of life and human society can cause inequality and oppression, God has special concern for the weak, the downtrodden, the poor, and the oppressed (Psalm 113). In the ideal world, humans should exercise their abilities to be wise stewards by helping to maintain the balance of the Order of Creation even while using it for their own benefit within the limits established by God. This balance applies within human society, as well as to the relationships between humanity and the natural world. Humanity thus has a special responsibility for Creation because of its vulnerability, and this responsibility extends to future generations (Deuteronomy 29:13-14; Genesis 9:12).

Finally, the Jewish concept of a perfect world is one of harmony between all creatures of Creation. This can be seen in the famous vision of Isaiah (Isaiah 11:1-10), in which no creature kills for sustenance and there is no war or injustice in human society. This reconciliation between humanity and the rest of Creation is the re-creation of the Garden of Eden. The Biblical concept of the Sabbath is the here-and-now symbol of that harmony. On the Sabbath we become merely citizens of the biotic community, united again with our fellow creatures in the order of Creation. Rabbi Ismar Schorsch has written that the Sabbath “reminds us of our earthly status as tenant and not overlord.”

Environmental awareness from a Jewish perspective can be developed from the Biblical commands to love and fear God (Deuteronomy 6:5,13). Moses Maimonides (1135-1204), one of the greatest philosophers and religious thinkers in the Jewish tradition, interpreted these commandments in the following way:

And when people observe God’s works and God’s great and marvelous creatures, and they see from them God’s wisdom that is without estimate or end, immediately they will love God, praise God and long with a great desire to know God’s Great Name. And when people think about these things they draw back and are afraid and realize...
that they are small, lowly and obscure, endowed with slight and slender intelligence, standing in the presence of God who is perfect in knowledge. Thus, when we study Creation with all the tools of modern science, we are filled with love and a sense of connection to a greater order of things. We feel a sense of wonder, but also a sense of awe and humility, as we perceive how small we are in the universe as well as within the history of evolution. Love and humility should then invoke in us a sense of reverence for Creation and modesty in our desire to use it.

In the last few decades, it has been recognized that human beings, especially in the developed world, produce a great deal of waste. In response, the environmental movement created the "three R's" of Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle. The Jewish tradition deals with wasteful consumption. When we waste resources, we violate the commandment of what is called in Hebrew Bal Tashhit ("Do not destroy"): 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 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 siegeworks against the city that is waging war on you, until it has been reduced. (Deuteronomy 20:19-20)

This law is the core of Bal Tashhit but was expanded in later Jewish sources to include the prohibition of the wanton destruction of household goods, clothes, buildings, springs, food, or the wasteful consumption of anything. The underlying idea of this law is the recognition that everything we own belongs to God. When we consume in a wasteful manner, we damage Creation and violate our mandate to use Creation only for our legitimate benefit. Modesty in consumption is a value that Jews have held for centuries. For example, one is not supposed to be excessive in eating and drinking, or in the kind of clothes that one wears.

In the Jewish tradition, we have an obligation to save and preserve life (called in Hebrew: pikuach nefesh), based on a Talmudic interpretation of Leviticus 18:5. Jewish tradition also forbids us from knowingly harming ourselves (Leviticus 19:28). There are also Biblical and Talmudic sources about the proper disposal of waste and how noxious products from industrial production should be kept far from human habitation. In the Jewish tradition, the public good overrides individual desires.

There are two contemporary environmental principles that are relevant here. First is the "Precautionary Principle," which states that new technology should be assessed for indication of harm rather than proof of harm. In other words, a cost-benefit analysis of possible harm does not go far enough. The onus of proof of safety is on those who create the technology. This concept is connected to a second, the "Principle of Unintended Consequences." Many modern technologies have produced unintended results that were not foreseen when they were first developed.

While there are many useful and even lifesaving technologies that come from modern technology, a Jewish environmental ethic would assert that we have an obligation to be cautious in their use. Pikuach nefesh, for example, demands that we consider the impact of our use of chemicals and other materials, not only in the short term but also in the long term. We might also see the Precautionary Principle as a modern form of the warning not to tamper too much with the boundaries of Creation.

Environmental justice is the term used to describe both the connection between degradation of the environment and its impact on the poor, and also the unequal distribution of resources between the developed and underdeveloped world. Poor people are disproportionately affected by environmental damage.

In the Bible, Creation since the expulsion from the Garden of Eden has been out of balance because of humanity's unchecked egoism and greed. A Jewish version of environmental justice would use the concept of tzedek, usually translated as righteousness, but which can also mean equity. Tzedek is the practical attempt to return the world to a more equal balance of power. In the Bible, tzedek is used to describe the proper order in society that is put there by God.

Examples of laws that attempt to redress the imbalances in human society and Creation are the laws of the Sabbatical year (Exodus 23:11; Leviticus 25:2-5; Deuteronomy 15:1-11) and the Jubilee (Leviticus 25:8-24). There is in the Torah a whole program of tzedek, which tries to preserve a just distribution of resources across the community. If we do not live according to tzedek, we will continue to see a degraded biosphere. Without tzedek there will be increased competition for resources, which will intensify the level of violence and warfare that has been endemic over the last hundred years.

Our ancestors could not have anticipated the loss of biodiversity that the modern world has produced. From their perspective, there was no natural extinction rate of species. God had created all species at one time and there could be no new creatures. Only humans could cause the extinction and the loss of one of the members of the Creation choir. In the Torah, there is a law that says:

If along the road, you chance upon a bird's nest, in any tree or on the ground, with fledglings or eggs and the mother sitting over the fledglings or on the eggs, do not take the mother with her young. Let the mother go, and take only the young, in order that you may fare well and have a long life. (Deuteronomy 22:6-7)

Moses Nachmanides (1194–1270), one of the most important Jewish scholars of the Middle Ages, interpreted this commandment in the following way:

This also is an explanatory commandment, of the prohibition you shall not kill [the mother] and its young both in one day (Leviticus 22:28), because the reason for both [commandments] is that we should not have a cruel heart and not be compassionate, or it may be that Scripture does not permit us to destroy a species altogether, although it permits slaughter [for food] within that group. Now the person who kills
the mother and the young in one day or takes them when they are free to fly [it is regarded] as though they have destroyed that species."

It is evident from the first chapter of Genesis and other Biblical texts (Psalms 148 and 104; Job 38–41) that God takes care of, and pleasure in, the variety of life that makes up Creation. And although we might regard a species as unimportant or bothersome to human beings, God does not regard them so. The rabbis of the Talmudic period understood that we do not know God’s purpose for every creature and that we should not regard any of them as superfluous. They said: “Even those things that you may regard as completely superfluous to Creation—such as fleas, gnats, and flies—even they were included in Creation; and God’s purpose is carried through everything—even through a snake, a scorpion, a gnat, a frog.” In environmental terms, every species has an inherent value beyond the instrumental value to human beings.

While we now understand from the theory of evolution that species do not exist in a statically fixed way, we can nonetheless make a distinction between the way Creation naturally evolves and humanity’s radical new interventions. Genetic engineering crosses species that would never be crossed in the natural world, and does so in a time frame that collapses thousands of years of evolution into a few moments. This process could be considered a violation of the boundaries of Creation, going far beyond the permissible manipulation of Creation for our own benefit. Here too, the Precautionary Principle and the Principle of Unintended Consequences would apply. Crossing a boundary of creation may be defined as creating a new technology or doing something to the environment without adequately thinking through what its ultimate consequences will be. Jewish environmental ethics requires us to be cautious in the development of this radical new technology.

As mentioned above, moderation is a value that Jewish ethics has preached for centuries. “He [God] has told you, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: Only to do justice and to love goodness, and to walk modestly with your God” (Micah 6:8). In the Middle Ages, Jewish communities—for reasons of communal safety—often enacted sumptuary laws.

The Code of Ethics of the National Association of Environmental Professionals (NAEP) contains many concepts that echo many ethical values found in the Jewish tradition. The Code says that “Honesty, justice and courtesy form moral philosophy which, associated with a mutual interest among people, constitute the foundation of ethics.” In the Jewish tradition, there is a well-known Talmudic teaching that the world rests on three foundations: truth, justice, and peace. Courtesy between people is called, in the Jewish tradition, Derech Eretz (“the way of the land”), and is considered to be one of the ways in which peaceful relationships are established. The NAEP Code also recognizes that a proper balance between private benefit and public welfare is essential in deciding environmental disputes. As mentioned above, a Jewish environmental ethic would definitely place the public welfare over the private benefit. The NAEP Code also understands that human needs must be balanced with the integrity of the whole ecosystem and that present need must be weighed against responsibility to the future. As mentioned above, Jewish environmental ethics tells us that while humanity is allowed to use Creation for its own benefit, this should not be done to the detriment of the rest of the order of Creation or to the loss to future generations.

The NAEP Code also demands that all the work of its members be done in a “scientifically and technically objective manner.” In the Bible, there is a law in Leviticus 19:14 that states that it is forbidden to “curse the deaf nor put a stumbling block before the blind.” The Jewish tradition has interpreted this to mean that we are forbidden to knowingly deceive someone and give them false advice. The Code also says that every member of the NAEP must be careful of any conflict of interest. This is in accordance with the Biblical warning to judges to be impartial and to pursue only just decisions (Leviticus 19:15; Deuteronomy 16:20).

I would like to conclude with a rabbinic story that Jewish environmentalists are fond of quoting:

When God created the first human beings, God led them around the Garden of Eden and said: “Look at my works! See how beautiful they are—how excellent! For your sake I created them all. See to it that you do not spoil and destroy My world; for if you do, there will be no one else to repair it.”

The perfecting or the repairing of the world (called in Hebrew Tikkun olam) has become a major theme in modern Jewish social justice theology. It is usually expressed as an activity that must be done by humans in partnership with God. It is an apt metaphor in light of the task ahead for those concerned with the state of the earth. In our ignorance, our greed, and our egotism, we have damaged the world and silenced many of the voices of the choir of Creation. Now we must fix it. There is no one else to repair it but us.

Notes
1. For those readers who are not members of the National Association of Environmental Professionals (NAEP) and therefore not familiar with the Code of Ethics, the Code may be found in the back of each issue of Environmental Practice.

The Editorial Staff would like to thank NAEP member Norman Arnold for his role in obtaining this transcript.

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