**Jewish Teachings on Care for God's Creation**

In recent decades, Jewish rabbis and scholars have shown that traditional Jewish teachings about God, humanity, and nature contain much wisdom that can inform a spiritual and ethical response to present-day environmental concerns. Longstanding Jewish religious and ethical teachings encourage appreciation for nature, a sense of spiritual connection to it, and the responsibility to protect human health and the diversity of life. This wisdom is carried into the present from the past by the Hebrew Scriptures, the later oral and written commentaries by religious and legal scholars, and the prayers, liturgies and religious practices of the Jewish community.

Among the Jewish teachings and practices that support environmental concern are the following:

**God as Ruler and Owner of the World**

God never fully relinquishes dominion over the world. In promulgating the laws of the sabbatical year (Leviticus 25:23), he reasserts his proprietorship over creation, stating, “The land is mine.” This principle of divine ownership of nature is . . . the basis for several categories of liturgical blessing. According to the Tosefta, “Man may not taste anything until he has recited a blessing, as it is written ‘The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof’ (Psalm 24:1).

"Anyone who derives benefit from this world without a (prior) blessing is guilty of misappropriating sacred property." The list of blessings based on this concept includes numerous specialized and general blessings recited on comestibles and a host of rules and regulations regarding their application and priorities. (Jonathan Helfand, “The Earth is the Lord’s: Judaism and Environmental Ethics,” in Religion and Environmental Crisis, Eugene Hargrove, ed., University of Georgia Press.)

**L'ovdah ul'shomrah: To serve and protect**

In Genesis 2:15, the first humans are commanded "to till and to tend" the Earth. This formulation hints at a kinship with the rest of creation that becomes even clearer when we look at the Hebrew more closely. Avad means not only to till, or even to work in a more general sense; it means also, and more powerfully, to serve or to participate in worship of the Divine. Thus, our "tilling" is more properly understood as service to God's Earth, a service that is not only a profound responsibility but a direct and critical part of our connection with and worship of God as well. And shamar, or "tend," means not only to tend, but more commonly, to guard or to watch over. What these meanings have in common is that the shomrim guard property that does not belong to them, but that is entrusted to them. (Daniel Swartz, “[Jews, Jewish Texts, and Nature: A Brief History.](http://coejl.org/resources/jews-jewish-texts-and-nature-a-brief-history/)”)

**Sidrei bereshit: The Divine Plan of Creation**

The fact that God is Creator endows all of creation with an intrinsic significance and importance. The Talmud observes, “Of all that the Holy One Blessed be He created in Hs world, He created nothing in vain [superfluous].” Nothing in creation is useless or expendable, everything manifests some divine purpose. It follows, therefore, that there is a divine interest in maintaining the natural order of the universe. (Jonathan Helfand, “The Earth is the Lord’s: Judaism and Environmental Ethics,” in Religion and Environmental Crisis, Eugene Hargrove, ed., University of Georgia Press.)

**Bal Taschchit: Do not destroy**

The principle of Bal Tashchit (derived from Deuteronomy 20:19) prohibits the needless waste of anything, from food to fuel. Today, in light of the environmental crisis, using disposables, leaving lights on unnecessarily, over-utilisation of air-conditioning, or driving a car when it is not necessary might be considered a violation of the principle of Bal Tashchit. (Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, “[Caring for the Cycle of Life.](http://coejl.org/resources/lifecyle/)”)

**Shabbat: The day of rest**

The weekly message of Shabbat rings with environmental import, if we but dare to understand it on its own terms. . . . With its incessant strictures against work, Shabbat reminds us of our earthly status as tenant and not overlord. To rest is to acknowledge our limitations.

One day out of seven we cease to exercise our power to tinker and transform. Willful inactivity is a statement of subservience to a power greater than our own. The design of Shabbat to rein in our lust for grandeur and gratification, then, addresses the environmental issue head on. . . . How salutary for the environment if one day a week we turned off the engines to walk rather than drive, to cultivate our inner lives, to relate to family and friends. How much cleaner the air is in Jerusalem on Shabbat! (Ismar Schorsch, “Tending to Our Cosmic Oasis.” )

**Brachot: Thanks for the gifts of Creation**

The Jewish tradition teaches that humans exist for the purpose of sanctifying the world, for bringing holiness into it. The satisfaction of our needs sanctifies life when we avoid causing harm to people, other creatures, or the Earth in the process. Every moment and each act can become an opportunity for sanctification. Blessings call us to consciousness, remind us of the importance of having gratitude for every day, for every bit of nourishment, for every opportunity to mark the passages in our lives. Following from the principle that humans are temporary tenants on the Earth, not owners of it, blessings provide an opportunity for us to “ask permission” to use, benefit, and take pleasure from what we find in the world. (Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, “[Caring for the Cycle of Life.](http://coejl.org/resources/lifecyle/)”)

**Community Responsibility, Individual Rights**

The Jewish tradition has a strong communal orientation, one that has limited individual rights by placing them within the context of and subordinating them to communal responsibilities. For the good of the community, even "private property" could be taken, under the principle of hefker bet din hefker, literally, "what the court declares ownerless is ownerless," the Mishnaic version of "eminent domain." More generally, a community could both coerce its residents to take positive actions for the good of the community and prohibit them from actions held to be deleterious to the community. This prohibition went so far, for example, as to enable residents of a courtyard or sealed alley generally to prohibit any profession (excluding the teaching of Torah) from being performed in that area if it threatened, because of noise or noxious odors, to reduce the quality of life for the residents. (Daniel Swartz, “[Jews, Jewish Texts, and Nature: A Brief History.](http://coejl.org/resources/jews-jewish-texts-and-nature-a-brief-history/)”)

**Ha-mafkir Nehasav Chayyav: Responsibility for Abandoned Property**

This halakhik (Jewish legal principle) requires us to take continuing responsibility for damage caused by that which we put into the public domain. Each of us leaves much in the public domain every day — including trash, car emissions, sewage. Our tradition requires us to make sure that those things we discard do not cause pollution that harms people, other species, or the environment. (Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, “[Caring for the Cycle of Life.](http://coejl.org/resources/lifecyle/)”)

**Precautionary Principle**

The Bible instructs us to cautiously and prudently err in favor of protecting human life and health — a value that supersedes any but devotion to God. . . . There are many threats to human life that are neither certain nor immanent. . . . The Bible provides some instruction for such a case. Deuteronomy 22:8 tells us that, “When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet [a fence] for your roof, so that you do not bring blood-guilt on your house if anyone should fall from it. Rabbi Moses Maimonides, perhaps the greatest Jewish sage, taught that we must take action to protect others from any object of potential danger, by which it is likely that a person could be fatally injured, including building a fence on an unprotected roof. In the Mishneh Torah, his great commentary on the Bible, he wrote that a person (not just the owner) must remove a possible danger that could cause fatal harm to another, even, in the case of the parapet, when the danger is not imminent or certain. ([Testimony to Congress by Mark X. Jacobs on behalf of COEJL](http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=%28Testimony+to+Congress+by+Mark+X.+Jacobs+on+behalf+of+COEJL%2C+Feb.+10%2C+2000&source=web&cd=2&ved=0CCcQFjAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fcoejl.org%2Fwordpress%2Fwp-content%2Fuploads%2F2011%2F08%2FTenYearReport.pdf&ei=eWtWT7XFKoS00AGd2cmdCg&usg=AFQjCNFbcoiRTWW0gAxLKXYrOAAhypyZvw&cad=rja), Feb. 10, 2000.)

**Balancing concern for nature and concern for people**

When approaching the subject of environmental protection, we must be careful to maintain the proper balance between protection of the environment and protection of man. The proper balance in this context is certainly not one of equality between man and nature. The relationship between man and nature is one of ownership — albeit limited. In our enthusiasm for protecting the environment, we must not forget man’s interests or his role in the scheme of creation. Love of nature may not take precedence over love of man. We must avoid at all costs the error of those who were known as lovers of animals yet perpetrated the worst crimes imaginable against their fellow men. . . . When discussing the quality of the environment, we must remember that the environment also comprises the people living in it — individuals and community.

Protection of the environment, by itself, cannot solve conflicts of interest, though it can extend the range of factors considered when seeking solutions to problems. Solutions must, in the final analysis, be based upon economic, social, and moral considerations. (Nahum Rakover, “[Living in God’s World](http://www.arcworld.org/faiths.asp?pageID=81).”)