

## Green and Passionate About It

By Jonathan Wittenberg

I've always loved all (or most) things green. I was brought up to be a keen gardener, needed no one to tell me to love animals, naturally inclined to vegetarianism, and at one time planned to take an MSC in forestry management. Maybe I missed my true vocation.

But love is not enough; what's needed now is selfless commitment to the good of our environment. In Jewish terms, commitment translates as *Mitzvah*, that which we are obligated to do because Judaism understands it to be God's will.

Judaism possesses clear teachings about the environment. Early environmentalists blamed the Judaeo-Christian heritage for an anthropocentric attitude which, it was claimed, looked on the rest of nature as little more than a source of materials for the benefit of humans, quoting Genesis 1:26 in particular, 'They shall have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the cattle and all the earth'. This is a falsification of the real biblical view which never ascribes unlimited exploitative rights to humankind, but rather places upon us the responsibilities of trusteeship. 'The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof', teach the Psalms, (24:1) and our role within that world is better described by the verse in Genesis 2 in which God explains to Adam and Eve that their duties in the Garden of Eden consist in 'working it and preserving it' (2:15).

Rabbinic Judaism developed two categories of environmental commandment. The first, *Bal Tashchit* - 'You shall not destroy', was gradually expanded from the specific case in the Torah of not cutting down trees in wartime to include any form of needless and destructive waste. The second, *Tza'ar Ba'alei Chayyim* - '[Preventing] the suffering of animals' is based on a series of cases in the Torah about avoiding cruelty to animals: an ox may not be muzzled while threshing the corn; an ox and a donkey must not be yoked together to the plough, presumably because of their unequal strength; a beast of burden collapsing under its load must be helped and a lost animal restored to its owner. The law of *Tza'ar Ba'alei Chayyim* can, and has, been applied today to protest not only hunting but, perhaps more significantly, aspects of factory farming. Israel recently banned the forced feeding of geese to produce *pate de foie gras*.

Strikingly relevant to us is Nachmanides' explanation of the law that one may not take a mother bird together with its eggs or fledglings unless the former is first be shooed away. He understands this as the Torah's defence of bio-diversity; eggs or fledglings may legitimately be taken as food, but if their mother is not protected how will the species be able to reproduce? It's an interesting, and chastening, thought that the extinction of species must already have been conceived as a threat in the thirteenth century.

But it's morally inadequate to fall back on tradition and say with satisfaction that Judaism was long ago sufficiently far-sighted to address the issue of our relationship with our environment. The real questions are how we extend and develop Judaism's legal and philosophical framework into the realities of today and whether we are prepared to be bound by our conclusions.

Thus 'You shall not destroy', must have an impact on our whole pattern of consumption. How much energy are we prepared to save by cutting our use of water; by using low energy light bulbs, and none at all when unnecessary; by travelling wherever possible by foot, bicycle, or public transport; by holidaying nearer home and by train; by minimising air travel; by avoiding buying goods which have travelled long distances; by eating local produce, and so forth? How much are we prepared to pay, or sacrifice, to shop ethically and live justly, in such a way that neither the poor of the earth nor other species pay the real price for our wealth and pleasures?

There can be no doubt that we have to change the way we live. For Jews, a largely international people, this can be especially challenging. Environmentalists refer to travel for the purpose of seeing relatives as 'love miles'; we're evidently an affectionate people, because I'm sure we do lots of those. But should we? What can we cut? Can we be one car, or 'share a car', or indeed 'no car' families? Should our shuls own a small fleet of electric cars which congregants share, booking them out per day? If we don't change the way we live, and do so soon, the world around us surely will, and we'll end up robbing our children of that very beauty and glory we inherited from our ancestors, God's earth.

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