



Sustainability Texts from Jewish Tradition

Omer Text Study Initiative
Jewish Reconstructionist Federation
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I. Biblical

1. "The Earth is the Eternal's and all that it holds, the world and its inhabitants."
– Psalm 24:1
2. "The land must not be sold beyond reclaim, for the land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me." – Leviticus 25:23
3. "The Eternal God formed the human (*adam*) from the dust of the Earth (*adamah*). God blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the human became a living being...The Eternal God took and placed the human being in the Garden of Eden, to till it and tend it." – Genesis 2:7, 2:15
1. 7. "When you reap the harvest of your land, you will not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not pick your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I am the Eternal your God." - Leviticus 19:9-10.
2. 8. "When you enter the land that I assign to you, the land shall observe a Sabbath of the Eternal. Six years you may sow your field and six years you may prune your vineyard and gather in the yield. But in the seventh year the

land shall have a Sabbath of complete rest, a Sabbath of the Eternal: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your untrimmed vines. It shall be a year of complete rest for the land. But you may eat whatever the land during its Sabbath will produce..." - Leviticus 25:2-6

3. 9. "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 an axe 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
4. 10. "But ask the beasts, and they will teach you; the birds of the sky, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth and it will teach you; the fish of the sea, they will inform you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Eternal has done this?" - Job 12:7-9
5. 11. "One generation goes, another comes, but the earth remains the same forever." - Ecclesiastes 1:4
6. 12. "Is it not enough for you to graze on choice grazing ground, but you must also trample with your feet what is left from your grazing? And is it not enough for you to drink clear water, but you must also muddy with your feet what is left?"
- Ezekiel 34:18

II. Rabbinic

1. "It is forbidden to live in a town that does not have a green garden." – Jerusalem Talmud, Kiddushin 4:12
2. "Once, Honi the circle-maker was walking on the road and saw an old man planting a carob tree. Honi said to him: 'You know that a carob tree takes 70 years to bear its fruit. Are you sure that you will live long enough to eat from it?' The old man replied, 'I found this world provided with carob trees, and so just as my forebears planted them for me, I will plant for my descendants.' Honi then sat down to eat and fell asleep. As he slept, a cave formed around him and he was hidden, so that he slept for 70 years. When he awoke and came out from the cave, he saw an old man gathering carobs and eating them. Honi asked him, 'Did you plant this tree and live to eat from it?' 'No, my grandfather planted it for me. Now I plant for my grandchildren.' Honi said to himself, 'Only by sleeping 70 years could I understand this.' - based on Mishnah Ta'anit 23a

3. "God led Adam around the Garden of Eden and said, 'Look at My works. See how beautiful they are, how excellent. See to it that you do not spoil or destroy My world - for if you do, there will be no one to repair it after you.'" – Midrash, Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13
4. "Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai said, 'Three things are of equal importance: earth, humans and rain. Rabbi Levi ben Hiyyata said, "...to teach that without earth, there is no rain, and without rain, the earth cannot endure, and without either, humans cannot exist.'" – Midrash, Genesis Rabbah, 13:3
5. "Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai ... used to say, "If you have a sapling in your hand, and someone should say to you that the Messiah has come, stay and complete the planting, and then go to greet the Messiah" -- Avot de Rabbi Nathan, 31b
6. "How can a person of flesh and blood follow God? ... God, from the very beginning of creation, was occupied before all else with planting, as it is written, 'And first of all (*mi-kedem*, also 'in the east') the Eternal God planted a Garden in Eden' [Genesis 2:8]. Therefore ... occupy yourselves first and foremost with planting." – Mishnah, Leviticus Rabbah 25:3

III. Medieval

1. "Torah does not permit a killing that would uproot a species, even if it permitted the killing [of individuals] in that species." – Nachmanides, Commentary on Deuteronomy 22:6
2. "It should not be believed that all the beings exist for the sake of the existence of humanity. On the contrary, all the other beings too have been intended for their own sakes, and not for the sake of something else." -- Maimonides, Guide for the Perplexed, 456
3. "Rabbi Shimon said, 'the shade spread over us by these trees is so pleasant! We must crown this place with words of Torah.'" -- Zohar, 2:127a
4. *My Thoughts Awaken Me to See You*
 - My thoughts awaken me to see you;
 - They show me in your heart's eye your deeds;
 - They teach me to tell your wonders,
 - i. "When I behold your heavens,
 - ii. The work your fingers made."
 - Around its course the disk of heaven walks,
 - A potter's wheel enwhirling the world;

- It has no lips, and yet it tells your glory
- To earth, unmoved within its orbit,
 - i. Suspended in the void,
 - ii. By cords of your love stayed.
- Thither the sun yearns, and there burns,
- And of its light some to the moon lends.
- While heaven's sphere is spread out like a tent,
- With stars blooming on it, a garden,
 - i. Proclaiming how profound
 - ii. The plans that you have laid.
- Moses ibn Ezra

IV. Modern

1. Quotes from the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism:
 - a. "The world is full of wonders, special radiance, and marvelous secrets, but all it takes is a small hand held over the eye to hide it all."
 - b. "If we were to walk in the woods and a spring appeared just when we became thirsty, we would call it a miracle. And if on a second walk, if we became thirsty at just that point again, and again the spring appeared, we would remark on the coincidence. But if that spring were there always, we would take it for granted and cease to notice it. Yet is that not more miraculous still?"
2. "And when you, O human, will return to Nature, that day your eyes will open, you will stare straight into the eyes of Nature and in its mirror you will see your image. You will know... that when you hid from Nature, you hid from yourself... We who have been turned away from Nature -- if we desire life, we must establish a new relationship with Nature" – A.D. Gordon, *Mivhar Ketavim*, 57-58
3. Quotes from R. Samson Rafael Hirsch:
 - a. "Yea, 'Do not destroy anything' is the first and most general call of God...If you should regard the beings beneath you as objects without rights, not perceiving God who created them, and therefore desire that they feel the might of your presumptuous mood, instead of using them only as the means of wise human activity – then God's call proclaims to you, 'Do not destroy anything! Be a *mentsh!* Only if you use the things around you for wise human purposes, sanctified by the word of my teaching,

only then are you a *mentsh* and have the right over them that I have given you as a human. However, if you destroy, if you ruin, at that moment you are not human but an animal and have no right to do the things around you. I lent them to you for wise use only; never forget that I lent them to you.”

- b. "This, then, is the first law that is opposed to your presumption against things: Regard things as God's property and use them with a sense of responsibility for wise human purposes. Destroy not! Waste not! Do not be avaricious! Be wise economically with all the means that God grants you, and transform them into as large a sum of fulfillment of duty as possible." - from Horeb: A Philosophy of Jewish Law and Observances
 - c. "One glorious chain of love, of giving and receiving, unites all living creatures. None is by or for itself, but all things exist in continual reciprocal activities - the one for the all and the all for the one. None has power or means for itself; each receives only in order to give and gives in order to receive and finds therein the purpose of existence." – from Nineteen Letters
4. "Nature is of the very essence of Deity." - Israel Baal Shem Tov, *Shivkhe Ha-Besht*, 329
 5. "Master of the Universe, grant me the ability to be alone; may it be my custom to go outdoors each day among the trees and grass and all growing things, and there may I be alone, and enter into prayer." - Nachman of Bratzlav, *Maggid Sichot*, 48
 6. "I can contemplate a tree. I can accept it as a picture... I can feel it as a movement... I can assign it to a species and observe it as an instance... I can overcome its uniqueness and form so rigorously that I can recognize it only as an expression of law... I can dissolve it into a number, into a pure relation between numbers, and externalize it. Throughout all of this the tree, the tree remains my object and has 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." - Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, 57-58

V. Contemporary

1. "All Hebrew words which are commonly used to express ownership in reality only express the notion of possession. Phrases like *yesh li* ("I have" or "mine"), or *shayach li* ("belonging to me"), or even *ba'al* ("owner"), do not convey the sense of absolute ownership, but of possessory or other complex

relationships. The language here is the handmaiden of theology; we cannot speak of human “ownership,” because our theology does not believe that there is rightfully any such notion. God is the “owner” of all, and we humans have simply possession rights...” – Rabbi Saul Berman, To Till and To Tend: A Guide to Jewish Environmental Study and Action

2. “Small is the world that most of us pay attention to, and limited is our concern. What do we see when we see the world? There are three aspects of nature that command our attention: its power, its beauty, and its grandeur. Accordingly, there are three ways in which we may relate ourselves to the world – we may exploit it, we may enjoy it, we may accept it in awe.” – Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel
3. “Our responsibility for all that dwells in the earth and for the earth itself extends into the future. The earth is not ours to destroy (cf. Dt 20:19), but to hand on in trust to future generations. We cannot, therefore, recklessly consume its resources to satisfy needs that are artificially created and sustained by a society that tends to live only for the present. We also need to act, together whenever feasible, to assure that sound practices, guaranteed by law, are established in our countries and local communities for the future preservation of the environment...Respect for God’s creation, of which we are a part, must become a way of life.” – International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee, “A Common Declaration on the Environment.” March 1998.
4. "Our duty is, with renewed vigor, to enter the twenty-first century wisely, having plumbed the meaning of our own experience... and then to produce our own ethical will, a testament to what we seek to preserve, and what we believe wants change, a testament we can then pass on to the new generations that follow ours." - Albert Vorspan, R. David Saperstein. Tough Choices: Jewish Perspectives on Social Justice, URJ Press, 1992
5. “On Tu B'shvat/when spring comes/An angel descends/ledger in hand/and enters each bud, each twig, each tree, and all our garden flowers./From town to town, from village to village/the angel makes a winged way/searching the valleys, inspecting the hills/flying over the desert/and returns to heaven./ And when the ledger will be full/of trees and blossoms and shrubs/when the desert is turned into a meadow/and all our land a watered garden/the Messiah will appear” - Shin Shalom, modern Israeli poet

VI. Reconstructionist

1. “**Bal tash’hit** (Avoiding waste): Material resources are limited, and we have the responsibility to guard against overconsumption and needless waste. No matter how much we can afford to buy, we should protect each thing of worth to any person or creature even if it has little value to us directly. This reflects

gratitude for what we have and appreciation for the needs of all.” – David A. Teutsch, A Guide to Jewish Practice: Introduction, Attitudes, Values and Beliefs – Kashrut: The Jewish Dietary Laws Second Edition

2. *In Praise: Genesis 1,2*

Hail the hand that scattered space with stars,
 Wrapped whirling world in bright blue blanket, air,
 Made worlds within worlds, elements in earth,
 Souls within skins, every one a teeming universe,
 Every tree a system of semantics, and pushed
 Beyond probability to place consciousness
 On this cooling crust of burning rock.

Oh praise the hand, mind, heart, soul, power or force
 That so enclosed, separated limited planets, trees, humans
 Yet breaks all bounds and borders
 To lavish on us light, love, life
 This trembling glory.

- Ruth Brin, Kol Haneshamah Daily Prayer Book, p.433

3. *God The Life of Nature*

Our ancestors acclaimed the God
 Whose handiwork they read
 In the mysterious heavens above,
 And in the varied scene of earth below,
 In the orderly march of days and nights,
 Of seasons and years,
 And in the checkered fate of humankind.

Night reveals the limitless caverns of space,
 Hidden by the light of day,
 And unfolds horizonless vistas
 Far beyond imagination's ken.
 The mind is staggered,
 Yet soon regains its poise,
 And peering through the boundless dark,
 Orients itself anew
 By the light of distant suns
 Shrunk to glittering sparks.
 The soul is faint,
 Yet soon revives,
 And learns to spell once more the name of God
 Across the newly visioned firmament.

Lift your eyes, look up;
 Who made these stars?

God is the oneness
That spans the fathomless deeps of space
And the measureless eons of time,
Binding them together in deed,
As we do in thought.
God is the sameness
In the elemental substance of stars and planets,
Of this our earthly abode
And of all that it holds.

God is the unity
Of all that is,
The uniformity of all that moves,
The rhythm of all things
And the nature of their interaction.

God is the mystery of life,
Enkindling inert matter
With inner drive and purpose.

God is the creative flame
That transfigures lifeless substance,
Leaping into ever higher realms of being,
Brightening into the radiant glow of feeling,
Till it runs into the white fire of thought.

By that token
Which unites the worlds in bonds of matter
Are all the worlds bound
In the bond of Life.

God is in the faith
By which we overcome
The fear of loneliness, of helplessness,
Of failure and of death.

God is in the hope
Which, like a shaft of light,
Cleaves the dark abysses
Of sin, of suffering, and of despair.

God is in the love
Which creates, protects, forgives.

It is God's spirit

That broods upon the chaos we have wrought,
Disturbing its static wrongs,
And stirring into life the formless beginnings
Of the new and better world.

-- Mordecai M. Kaplan, Kol Haneshamah Machzor, pp. 68-70