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The Spiritual Roots of the Environmental Crisis

By Rabbi Yonatan Neril¹

In our times we are beginning to witness the planet's ecological balance weakening due to human influence: rainforests shrinking, deserts expanding, hurricanes intensifying, the planet heating. What is driving the deterioration of the natural world? To be sure, there are physical reasons, yet to answer 'fossil fuels' or 'wood use' or even 'consumerism' would provide only partial answers. In order to truly understand a problem, we need to look under its surface to understand the *root causes*. In regard to the great loss of the First and Second Temples, the Jewish sages focus not on the destroying armies but on the spiritual deterioration which made way for the destruction of the physical structure.² For many ecological issues, the root issues beyond the physical symptoms lie in the spiritual health of human beings.

If one only sees physical causes, one may incorrectly view them as the only reason for an effect occurring. The response to the problem, then, will also be limited to the *physical* level alone. Yet if we neglect the underlying spiritual source, the problem will keep reemerging in different physical forms, growing out of the underlying root. On the other hand, as Rabbi Shlomo ben Aderet (the Rashba, Spain, 13th century) taught, when you address the roots of a problem, the outer problems will naturally fall away.³

Over the last decades we have seen and at some level addressed numerous environmental challenges, from reducing the depletion of the ozone layer to decreasing garbage through recycling campaigns. Still, environmental problems continue to spring up: climate change, deforestation, water insecurity. This is because we have not addressed our environmental challenges at the root.

Our usual pattern today is to turn to scientists and politicians for technological solutions to our environmental challenges. If the problem is too much carbon in the atmosphere and too much fossil fuel use, the solution must be hybrid or electric cars, incandescent light bulbs, and other technological solutions. Yet these solutions are not sufficient to address today's global problems. For example, a report from the McKinsey Global Institute cited how China relies on coal-burning power plants to produce as much as 85% of its electricity. The report estimated that were China to replace gasoline-powered cars with similar-size electric cars, it would only reduce the greenhouse emissions from those cars by 19 percent.⁴ This is because the electric cars would draw on electricity generated by burning coal. Scientists have stated that humanity must reduce its emissions by many times that amount in order to reduce the impact of climate change.

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² Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Yoma 9b.

³ Chidushei HaRashba to Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Nida, p. 11a. See also Beit Yosef to Tur, Yoreh Deah 184:6.

⁴ "China Charges Up: The Electric Vehicle Opportunity," Paul Gao et. Al, October 2008, p. 9, online at http://www.mckinsey.com/locations/greaterchina/mckonchina/pdfs/China_Charges_Up.pdf

Beyond the physical causes, the widespread degradation of the natural world indicates that our way of life is out of balance. Thus *the environmental crisis also reflects a spiritual crisis*. Human-caused disruptions to the natural world emerge from the inner imbalance within billions of human beings. The change required of us to correct this is, to a significant degree, of a spiritual nature. This insight may be one of the most important contributions of a Jewish environmental approach.

What are the roots of our contemporary environmental challenges? There are many. One that we can all address is learning to take responsibility for our actions. As the Torah teaches, G-d placed humans in the Garden of Eden *l'ovdah uleshomra*, 'to work it and protect it.' Rabbi Shlomo Riskin teaches that to be a *shomer* (a protector) means to be responsible. His rabbi, Rabbi Joseph Ber Soloveitchik taught this core Jewish value: I am responsible, therefore I am. Being responsible and taking responsibility is core to being human. This is very clear from Cain's response to God when asked of Abel's whereabouts: "Am I my brother's keeper?" The term used is *shomer*, in the same sense of "protection" mentioned in the Garden of Eden. The Bible resoundingly answers, yes!

Our failure to take responsibility for our actions on a planet of seven billion people has major environmental consequences today. We use the resources of the world – trees, mineral ores, petroleum – without sufficient attention to how these resources are produced, transported, and disposed of. We likely do not see the impacts on our air and water and on people's health in faraway places.

To awaken the Jewish value of being responsible, we must broaden our perspective to include people we do not know, and the children of the next generation. You can try to address this root in your own life by expanding your sense of responsibility for others and your small, invisible impacts on them. Then, try to think of one specific action you can do to take on greater responsibility for how you live and consume.

We will use our resources more responsibly if we can be attentive to the broader effects of our actions. Let us live up to the challenge.

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