



Genesis and Human Stewardship of the Earth

Rabbi Yonatan Neril¹

The first two chapters of Genesis contain teachings with profound relevance for ourselves and our world today. In the first chapter of Genesis, twice in three verses, G-d speaks of humans ruling over other living beings. In the second instance, after creating Adam and Eve, G-d blesses them, saying "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."² What does it mean for humans to subdue the earth and have dominion over other creatures?

Human Righteousness and Dominion of the Planet

One of the central precepts of Rabbinic Judaism is that the Written Torah must be understood within the context of the 2,300 year-old rabbinic tradition (including the Midrash and other works) that interprets it. While on the surface the words of this verse appear to give people license to degrade and subdue the earth, the Rabbis for the most part³ do not read them this way. The rabbinic commentaries reveal much about these verses beyond the simple reading. The Oral tradition makes clear that a wholly different message is being conveyed.

The Midrash offers a key insight into the dominion about which the Torah speaks. It teaches, "Rabbi Chanina said, 'if he [the human being] merits it then [G-d says] have dominion, while if he does not merit, then [G-d says] he will be taken down.'⁴ Rabbi Yaakov of Kfar Chanin said, 'If he [acts] in Our image and likeness [then] 'he will rule,' if he [acts] not in Our image and likeness, then 'and he will be taken down.'"⁵ The Midrash is based on a play on words in Hebrew, in which the root of the word 'to rule' is the same root as the word 'to be taken down.'

The great commentator Rashi writes based on the Midrash that if we do not merit, we will be ruled by animals.⁶ In this vein, the Soncino translator writes, "Man is entitled to pre-eminence only as long as he cultivates his G-d-like qualities; when he voluntarily abandons them he is even lower than the brute creation."⁷ Can humans be ruled by animals today? At first one may think that human beings are so powerful as to be immune to these predictions, but one only need think of insect infestations (even in the Western world) which have caused tremendous havoc. One example is the "bed bugs" outbreak in North America in 2010. Another example relates to diseases such as malaria, dengue fever, and the West Nile Virus. These are spreading into new areas as the range of certain mosquitoes extends to more northern latitudes as a result of human-induced climate change.⁸

¹ The author would like to thank Evonne Marzouk for her significant editorial comments.

² Genesis 1:28

³ The explanation of Nachmanides (Ramban) goes in a different direction than many other commentaries. In explaining 'kivshu'ha,' 'subdue it,' the Ramban emphasizes that G-d gives people the power to uproot trees and to extract resources from the earth through mining, among other human activities vis a vis the earth. Had this permission not been granted, Noah would never have built the ark, and humans would not have entered the Bronze Age.

⁴ Or, let others (the besasts) rule over him (footnote of Soncino translation)

⁵ Midrash Genesis Raba (Wilna Edition), 8:12. The Maharal explains in Gur Aryeh to Genesis 1:26 that "the verse uses 'v'yirdu' for 'ruling,' from the root resh-dalet-heh, rather than the more common 'mashal,' so that it can be expounded as if it were from the root yud-resh-dalet, 'declining, degenerating,' as well." (From Artscroll Rashi Bereishit)

⁶ Rashi to Genesis 1 :26

⁷ As contained in footnote 3 of Judaic Classics Library version of Soncino translation.

⁸ See the most recent Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, available at www.ipcc.ch

The Midrash above links human dominion of creation to humanity's righteousness: if humanity merits through its righteousness, then it shall rule over nature. But if it does not merit because it does not act in an upright fashion, then humanity itself will descend and not be granted rulership over nature. One key message emerging from the Midrash is that G-d's blessing to rule over other creatures depends on our living as righteous people. The rabbis learn this from the juxtaposition of G-d saying that the human will be created in G-d's image and then G-d saying the human will rule over other creatures.⁹

Another Midrash makes clear that part of human righteousness involves being stewards of the earth. The Midrash says that G-d showed Adam 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."¹⁰ Acting righteously thus involves treating the world with utmost respect; for this the human will merit dominion of creation.

What Does it Mean to Rule?

Maimonides understands our verse about dominion as teaching us that humans have a disposition to dominate, but that is not the purpose for which G-d created us. He writes, "The Torah tells man, "And rule over the fish of the sea etc." — this does not mean that he was created for this purpose, but rather it informs us of the nature that the Holy One implanted in him."¹¹

The Toldot Yitzhak addresses the following question: why does G-d state that human beings are only permitted a vegetarian diet after G-d tells them to rule over the fish, fowl, and animals? His answer teaches that the ruling over these creatures does not involve killing them for human food.¹²

A further question: why does the Torah (here in Genesis 1:26 and 1:28) use the order fish-- birds-- animals?¹³ The Kli Yakar (Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz, Prague, 1550-1619) explains,¹⁴

Of these three species, man has the ability to rule over one to a greater extent than the other. Indeed, man has the ability to rule to a greater extent over domestic and wild animals and over everything that creeps on the earth, for they are present with him and man can follow them in all the places they run to and fro. This is not the case with birds and fish since man cannot fly in the air or go down to the depths of the sea.

He explains that if humans do not merit, then not only will they not dominate the fish, which are harder to catch, but also the birds and animals, which are easier.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of Israel, writes that "no intelligent, thinking person could suppose that when the Torah instructs humankind to dominate... [[that] it means the domination of a harsh ruler, who afflicts his people and servants merely to fulfill his personal whim and desire, according to the crookedness

⁹ Rabbi Zev Wolff Einhorn in his commentary (Perush Maharzav) to the Midrash explains that this Midrash is explaining the different grammatical uses of the verb 'to rule' in verses 26 and 28. In verse 26, before the human being has been created, G-d says about them, 'v'yirdu,' in the future tense, meaning 'and they shall rule over.' Verse 27 reads 'And G-d created Man...' Verse 28 contains G-d's blessing to people, in the imperative form 'urdu,' meaning 'rule over.' The Midrash, however, reads the latter verse differently. The lettering can also be read 'v'yeiradu,' in the passive form meaning 'they [people] will be ruled over [by animals].'

¹⁰ Midrash Kohelet Rabbah 7:13

¹¹ The Guide for the Perplexed, 3:13. Another interpretation is provided by Rabbi Daniel Kohn. He writes that "In this [first] story [of Creation] G-d is called Elokim, a name which implies Power, differentiation and judgment. Man is created to be like G-d Who rules by power: "and G-d said we will make man in our image and form and he will rule over...the world." He is created in the image of G-d, specifically in His manifestation as Elokim... The first story is one of din alone, and is about a world which cannot survive."

¹² Toldot Yitzhak (Wagshal edition, Jerusalem, 1994) to Bereishit 1:28

¹³ He also contrasts this usage with that in the Torah portion of Noah and in Psalms 8:7-9, in which the reverse order of animals-- birds-- fish is used. He answers by saying that here the Torah uses a 'not only this, but even that' formulation which is also seen in the Mishna and Talmud. Rabbi Yitzhak Frank explains that formulation: "Some texts list cases in a climactic sequence—starting from the most obvious case and progressing until the climax, which is the least obvious and hence the most novel case." Practical Guide to the Talmud, Ariel: Jerusalem, 1995, p. 131

¹⁴ To Genesis 1:26

of his heart...”¹⁵ Rabbi David Sears writes on this:

Rather, it comprises a form of stewardship for which humanity is answerable to G-d. Both Talmudic and Kabbalistic sources state that it is forbidden to kill any creature unnecessarily, or to engage in wanton destruction of the Earth’s resources. All forms of life are precious by virtue of the divine wisdom that brings them into existence, whatever rung they may occupy in the hierarchy of creation... The divine mandate for man to dominate the natural world is a sacred trust, not a *carte blanche* for destructiveness.¹⁶

Subduing in the Context of Being Fruitful

Rabbi Daniel Kohn beautifully contextualizes the command to ‘subdue the earth’ and sheds new light on what it means. In his understanding, it is very much connected to the command that precedes it, ‘be fruitful and multiply,’ to spread and make life manifest. He teaches that ‘be fruitful and multiply’ describes a natural process of things growing and diversifying without control—disorganized, disconnected. ‘Subduing’ is about organizing this abundance, giving things their place and actively caring about them, so that they come to their full expression in the context of an integrated and balanced harmony with one another. Rabbi Kohn emphasizes that subduing involves the application of intelligent planning and foresight -- always in the context of the Divine imperative to spread and diversify life.

Rabbi Kohn continues that subduing can only be as G-d intended when it grows out of a commitment to life. To cause extinction would be the opposite of this—it would be ‘shachet,’ destroying. ‘Subduing’ does not imply destroying, extinguishing, oppressing, or annihilating, but rather it requires preserving life’s diversity and helping life perpetuate itself. In this sense G-d’s command impels diverse and sustainable living.¹⁷

In a similar light, Rabbi Norman Lamm, former chancellor of Yeshiva University, writes that “ ‘Subdue it’ is not only not an invitation to ecological irresponsibility; it is a charge to assume additional moral responsibility, not only for the natural world as such, but even for the manmade culture and civilization that we found when we were born into this world.”¹⁸

Genesis 2:15: To Work It and to Protect It

The second chapter of Genesis includes a second story of Creation that focuses on human beings in the Garden of Eden. The Torah tells us that G-d placed the human being “in the Garden of Eden to work it and to guard it.”¹⁹ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks points out the significance of the two Hebrew verbs used to describe the human being’s mandate. He writes, “The first-- *le’ovdah*—literally means “to serve it.” The human being is thus both master and servant of nature. The second—*leshomrah*--means “to guard it.” This is the verb used in later biblical legislation to describe the responsibilities of a guardian of property that belongs to someone else. This guardian must exercise vigilance while protecting, and is personally liable for losses that occur through negligence. This is perhaps the best short definition of humanity’s responsibility for nature as the Bible conceives it.”

¹⁵ “A Vision of Vegetarianism and Peace,” by HaRav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook. Edited by HaRav David Kohen, the Nazir of Jerusalem. Translated by Rabbi David Sears.

¹⁶ *The Vision of Eden*, Orot: Spring Valley, NY, 2003, p. 69-70

¹⁷ Rabbi Kohn also provides an interpretation of the differing commands in the first two chapters of Genesis. He writes, “Genesis chapter 1 can be summarized as a rulership mandate – where people are the ruler and the planet is a servant in the sense of G-d’s name ‘Elokim,’ which signifies *din* (judgment), of a master-servant relationship where the master subjugates his servant to keep him from becoming independent-- an antagonistic relationship. The resources of the earth are here to serve me, since I am their master and they are created for me. Genesis chapter 2 can be summarized as a stewardship mandate, where we are the father and the planet is our child, where the father desires the best for his child – based on *Rachamim* (compassion), as in the name of G-d ‘Hashem.’ The earth is unfurling of man’s will by man praying for rain and through G-d bringing rain to cause plants to grow.” (From essay on prayer written December 2011.)

¹⁸ “Ecology in Jewish Law and Theology” in *Torah of the Earth* vol. 1, p. 125. Rabbi Lamm is also the editor of the journal ‘Tradition.’

¹⁹ Genesis 2:15

Modern Industrial Society

A glaring contrast emerges between the Kli Yakar's 17th century description of the limited human capacity for domination of the animals, birds and fish of the natural world and what we know about the ability of contemporary society to dominate the land, air, and sea of planet earth.²⁰ The 20th century witnessed the extinction of numerous species of land animals and birds, including species of tigers and rhinoceroses.²¹

While the Kli Yakar emphasizes that fish are not visible to people, sonar, satellite data and the Global Positioning System (GPS) enable fishermen to effectively 'see' giant schools of fish with pinpoint accuracy. These technologies were developed by militaries during the Cold War and then transferred to commercial fishing trawlers post-1989. According to a study led by researchers at the University of British Columbia (UBC) in Vancouver, Canada, these changes have contributed to a dramatic fall in fish populations in all of the world's oceans. One of the researchers, Villy Christensen, said "The total weight of tablefish—species eaten by man—in the oceans has declined by a total of 85 percent in the last century and continues to decline at 2 percent or more per year. Many species are being hunted right down to the last fish."²²

Several examples illustrate the extent of human domination of the waters. In recent years, Canadian cod serves as an example of overfishing and the dramatic drop in cod populations that resulted.²³ This spurred the Canadian government to ban Northern cod fishing in 1992.²⁴ In 2010 the Yangtze River Dolphin was reported functionally extinct; a New York Times article was aptly titled: "20 Million Years and a Farewell."²⁵ In January 2011, the Israeli government banned for two years commercial fishing in the Sea of Galilee. Explaining the decision, Agriculture Ministry spokeswoman Dafna Yurista said, "The data raised serious concerns of an ecological disaster that would take place, turning the Kinneret [Hebrew for Sea of Galilee] into a lake completely devoid of fish."²⁶ When human mastery grows such that we seriously deplete the numbers of a particular fish, our continued access to this fish quickly diminishes.

Industrial technology has changed the scope and scale of human mastery of the earth. The BP oil spill revealed the consequences of human domination. Today people extract oil thousands of feet below the surface of the sea. In April 2010, a deep-water oil spill released millions of barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico. People, birds, fish, and plants in this ecologically-rich region face the decades-long effects of the spill. Despite some claims that the oil released simply disappeared, researchers have stated that hydrocarbon levels near the blowout "exceeded background levels by up to 75,000 times."²⁷ As the oil spreads it has the potential, by blocking sunlight, to decrease algal growth. As algae are at the base of the Gulf food chain, this may present problems for ecosystem health. While less algae at the surface means less falling to the bottom of the Gulf to decompose, an oxygen-consuming process, it is also likely that oil-consuming bacteria will increase in numbers. Because such bacteria also consume oxygen, such an increase in microbial activity may extend the area of the human-caused hypoxic "dead zone" in the Gulf currently caused by fertilizer runoff and sewage discharges that travel down the Mississippi River.²⁸ Since sea creatures depend on oxygen in the water for their survival, this will likely negatively impact sea life in these areas.

²⁰ David Roberts, citing a June 2012 tipping point study in the journal *Nature*, wrote that "it is becoming increasingly clear that the decisions made by people alive today will determine the fate of life on Earth for centuries to come." *Grist Magazine*, 6.11.2012, online at <http://grist.org/business-technology/getting-used-to-being-in-charge-of-the-planet/>

²¹ For a full treatment of this subject, see Wilson, E.O., *The Future of Life* (2002) and Leakey, Richard, *The Sixth Extinction: Patterns of Life and the Future of Humankind*,

²² As cited in "Cold war military technologies have devastated global fish populations." *National Geographic Magazine*, Bijal P. Trivedi, 2.25.2002, online at http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2002/02/0225_0225_TVnomorefish.html

²³ See Clover, Charles (2004). *The End of the Line: How Overfishing Is Changing the World and What We Eat*. London: Ebury Press.

²⁴ "Marine World - Will Atlantic cod ever recover". *Ices.dk*. <http://www.ices.dk/marineworld/recoveryplans.asp>.

²⁵ <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/17/weekinreview/17basics.html> by Andrew Revkin

²⁶ CBN News, "Temporary Fishing Ban for Sea of Galilee," 11.15.10, online at

<http://www.cbn.com/cbnnews/insideisrael/2010/November/Temporary-Fishing-Ban-for-Sea-of-Galilee/>

²⁷ In "Magnitude and oxidation potential of hydrocarbon gases released from the BP oil well blowout" Samantha B. Joye, Et Al *Nature Geoscience* 4, 160-164 (2011) <http://www.nature.com/ngeo/journal/v4/n3/full/ngeo1067.html>

²⁸ See background sheet from the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), online at see http://www.noaa.gov/factsheets/new%20version/dead_zone_oil.pdf.

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, “The real and present challenge to Jews specifically, humanity generally, is to wrestle with the ever more consequential challenges of human action. To believe either that we are accountable to no one, or that G-d will somehow intervene to save us from ourselves, is consistent but irresponsible, and this is not how I read my faith or understand the human condition.”²⁹

Rabbi Daniel Kohn links the blessing to subdue (kivshuha) in our verse with the Mishna’s use of ‘subdue’ in a different context. In the Ethics of the Fathers (Pirke Avot), Ben Zoma teaches, “Who is strong? One who subdues his inclinations. As is stated (Proverbs 16:32), "Better... one who rules over his spirit than the captor of a city." That is, spiritual discipline comprises true strength, and not physical prowess. Rabbi Kohn teaches that a person must decide in their own life which desires to subdue and which desires to bring to realization.

Jewish tradition teaches us that we only merit the opportunity to rule the earth if we behave righteously. This includes the spiritual discipline to use our resources wisely, and subdue with a sense of moral responsibility. In our times, we have demonstrated our ability to subdue the earth. A central question facing humanity concerns whether we will exhibit the strength to rein in our desires. If we do not, we may be taken down by our lack of righteousness. May we pray for the strength to conquer our short-term desires, live with righteousness, and merit an enlightened dominion of the planet G-d created.

This material was produced as part of the Jewcology project. Jewcology.com is a new web portal for the global Jewish environmental community. Thanks to the [ROI community](#) for their generous support, which made the Jewcology project possible.

Rabbi Yonatan Neril founded and directs Jewish Eco Seminars, which engages and educates the Jewish community with Jewish environmental wisdom. He has worked with Canfei Nesharim for the past six years in developing educational resources relating to Judaism and the environment.

²⁹ [To Heal a Fractured World](#), p. 14