

Jewish Texts on the Environment

1. Our relationship to our world:

- A. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds in the air, and over every living thing that crawls upon the earth. “ Genesis 1:28
- B. God placed the human in the Garden of Eden, l’ovdah (to serve/till) u’l’shomrah (and to guard/tend it). Gen. 2:15
- C. Look at God's work - for who can straighten what they have twisted? (Ecclesiastes 7:13). When the Blessed Holy One created the first human, God led Adam around all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to him: “Look at My works, how beautiful and praiseworthy they are! And all that I have created, it was for you that I created it. Pay attention that you do not corrupt and destroy My world: if you corrupt it, there is no one to repair it after you. Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabba 7:13
- D. The Earth is God’s, and the fullness thereof, the settled land, and its inhabitants. Psalm 24:1
- E. The land shall not be sold forever; for the land is Mine; you are strangers and sojourners with me. Leviticus 25:23
- F. “And have dominion over the fish of the ocean (Gen. 1:28). Rabbi Hanina said: “Humanity will rule over if they deserve to; if they do not deserve to, then they will go under [and be ruled by the evil they have created]. Genesis Rabba 8:12
- G. A Jewish economy...[is] not based on the assumption that we are no different from other living creatures. It [begins] with the opposite idea: We have a special responsibility precisely because we are different, because we know what we are doing. Rabbi Harold Kushner, To Life!, p. 59

2. B’al Tashchit – do not destroy

- A. 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 the ax 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. Deut. 20:19-20

B. A farmer was clearing stones from his field and throwing them onto a public thoroughfare. A pious one rebuked him saying, "Worthless one! Why are you clearing stones from land which is not yours and depositing them onto property which is yours?" The farmer scoffed at him for this strange reversal of the facts. In the course of time, the farmer had to sell his field, and as he was walking on the public road, he fell on those same stones he had thoughtlessly deposited there. He then understood the truth of the pious one's words: the damage he had wrought in the public domain was ultimately damage to his own property and well-being. (Paraphrased by Jonathan Helfand, "The Earth is the Lord's: Judaism and Environmental Ethics")
Talmud Baba Kama 50b

C. Whoever breaks vessels or rips up garments, destroys a building, stops up a fountain, or ruins food is guilty of violating the prohibition of bal tashchit.
Kiddushin 32a

D. One should be trained not to be destructive. When you bury a person, do not waste garments by burying them in the grave. It is better to give them to the poor than to cast them to worms and moths. Anyone who buries the dead in an expensive garment violates the negative command of bal tashchit.
Mishnah Torah

E. Righteous people ... do not waste in this world even a mustard seed. They become sorrowful with every wasteful and destructive act that they see, and if they can, they use all their strength to save everything possible from destruction. But the wicked ... rejoice in the destruction of the world, just as they destroy themselves. Sefer HaChinuch 529; 13th Century

Pollution:

A. Do not dump waste in any place from which it could be scattered by the wind or spread by flooding.
Mishnah Torah

B. Furnaces and other causes of smoke, odor and air pollution are not permitted inside a city.
Baba Kamma 82b

C. A permanent threshing floor may not be made within 50 cubits from the city. None may make a permanent threshing floor within one's own domain unless her property extends 50 cubits in every direction, and it must be far enough away from the plantings and plowed land of a neighbor for [the chaff] to cause no damage. Carcasses, graves and tanneries may not remain within a space of 50 cubits from the town. A tannery may be set up only on the east side of the town. Rabbi Akiva says: "[The tannery] may be set up on any side except the west."

Baba Batra 2:8-9

A Final Thought:

Talmud, Ta'anit 23a the sage Honi encountered an old man planting a carob tree. Honi asked him: "How many years will it take for this tree to give forth its fruit?" The man answered that it would require 70 years. Honi asked: "Are you so healthy a man that you expect to live that length of time and eat its fruit?" The man answered: "I found a fruitful world because my ancestors planted it for me. So, too, will I plant for my children."