Judaism and Ecology

'He placed him in the Garden of Eden to develop it and to preserve it' (Genesis 2:15)
Presentation by Rabbi David Rosen at the Anglican-Jewish Consultation,
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Within Jewish tradition, there are two central names that we use for God – *Elohim* and *Adonai* (the Tetragrammaton) - and these are identified with the two essential Divine Attributes of justice and mercy.

There is also the sense that they represent the two dimensions of the encounter with God - the transcendent and the immanent, which thus also parallel the two ways in which we "discover" God , reflected both within Scripture and above all in our liturgy. God is both the Lord of Creation and the Lord of History. We encounter Him both through events in our lives, individually and collectively, and of course above all in terms of our religious history. But perhaps above all we encounter God on a daily basis through our awareness of His presence in the cosmos, in the Divine Creation. As already referred to in our discussion, this is extensively reflected in the Psalms (most notably in 8, 19,104) that the Creation declares God's glory.

However, the awareness of the Divine Presence is seen as more than simply a testimony. Maimonides in his introductory or the first section of his *Mishneh Torah*, his legal magnum opus, in the section Foundations of Torah, Chapter 2 Section 2, he asks rhetorically what is the way to love and fear God in keeping with the Biblical injunctions to do so ? And he answers:-

"When a person meditates on His wonderful and great works and creations and sees through them his wisdom that is beyond compare and limits, immediately he loves and praises and glorifies and desires a great desire to know Him, to know His great Name. As David said, 'My soul thirsts for God, the living God'. And when he considers these very things, immediately he draws back and is fearful knowing that he is a small and lonely creature standing in weak and limited understanding before The One of perfect knowledge….As David said, 'When I see the heavens and the

work of your fingers (*that is the more correct translation – the Hebrew word is not hands but fingers, DR*), what is human being that you should remember him?"

So for Maimonides, our awareness of the cosmos that God has created is not purely a consciousness of the Divine Presence, but is actually the means by which we fulfil the charge to love and fear God. It is the way which we draw ourselves towards that intimacy with God. In fact it is interesting that Maimonides in a sense is connecting the transcendent and the immanent at one and the same time in what he understands to be the basic religious calling. Accordingly for Maimonides, as indeed throughout the generations of Jewish tradition (until modern times, which produced, inter alia, a reactionary Jewish withdrawal in ultra-Orthodox circles) , scientific understanding was not only not seen as a threat, but as actually being an essential means by which we develop our love and reverence of God.

And in that Creation that testifies to the Divine Presence in the world, as we have discussed, the summit of that Creation is the human person as clearly articulated in Genesis. I'll return to further implications of this uniqueness, but the explicit special role is expressed in this phrase in Genesis 2:15 that was chosen as the title of my presentation, which describes the human responsibility in the Garden of Eden. As has been noted, these words are more accurately translated as "to cultivate and preserve it" and sum up the challenge that has already been referred to in the felicitous language of "responsible custodianship". However it also expresses the idea that is so central to modern ecological movement expressed in the words "sustainable development", and thus I gave the alternative legitimate translation of the Hebrew word *l'ovdah* as "to develop". However there are a number of other fascinating concerning this word which is most frequently translated as ‘to serve’. It therefore indicates a relationship of humanity to the Creation as one of service.

Indeed one of the most prominent medieval commentators [R' Ovadiah Seforno] actually understands the object of the activity referred to as the human spirit and that work is essential as service for the human spirit itself. Thus cultivating, developing the Garden of Eden - in other words the metaphor for human engagement -, is an essential facility for the growth of the human spirit. But the Hebrew word *avodah* is also used to mean Divine service and thus there were those of our ancient sages actually who understood this phrase in Genesis 2:15 not

simply in a physical sense but also in a spiritual sense, in a moral sense. Indeed 'divine service' needs to be understood not purely in the narrower meaning as referring to prayer or the Temple offerings; but also as service in the sense of obedience to and fulfilment of God's word and way. This suggests a profound connection between consciousness of the Divine Presence conveyed by and reflected in the Creation; and the sense of the moral law that gives it direction, purpose and ennoblement. This is expressed beautifully by Emmanuel Kant:-

"There are two things that fill my soul with holy reverence and ever-growing wonder. The spectacle of the starry sky that virtually annihilates us as physical beings and the moral law which raises us to infinite dignity as intelligent beings."

Returning to the more literal meaning of the charge for humanity in relation to Creation, the implications of this are delightfully expressed in the well known Midrash on the book of Ecclesiastes (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7 Section 28) which will be familiar to many of you. The Midrash states:-

"In the hour when the Holy One Blessed Be He created the first human being, He took him and let him pass before all His works in the Garden of Eden and said to him, "See my works, how fine and excellent they are. All that I have created for you I have created them. Think upon this and do not corrupt or destroy my world; for if you corrupt it there is no one to set it right after you."

Now this beautiful little homily contains three essentially three lessons which I will elaborate upon as three pillars of my presentation, in keeping with Rabbi Cohen's introduction.

The first important message in this story is the principle of Divine ownership – the Creation belongs to God who made it. This is expressed most categorically in relation to the Sabbatical year (which I will speak about in a little more detail later) in Leviticus 25 Verse 23, where God is presented as saying, "For the earth is mine and you are sojourners and temporary residents in it with me." Fundamental to the Biblical description of the reality in which we live and the way in which we should conduct ourselves in relation to the cosmos itself, is the understanding that we are tenants in this world - a world that belongs to its Creator.

And this awareness is in fact something that Jewish Tradition seeks to instil in our daily consciousness, even hourly consciousness. This is expressed through one of the most central liturgical functions in Jewish tradition that Judaism doesn't even really think of as liturgical because it is so much an integral part of Jewish practice and life. This is the concept of the *brachah*, blessing, which was also alluded to yesterday. In fact the obligation of *brachot*, blessings, is the injunction for constant awareness and acknowledgement of Divine ownership.

In the tractate of the *Talmud* precisely called *Brachot*, on folio 35a, we are told that if one consumes anything in this world of benefit or pleasure without making a *brachah* , one is a thief, because one has not acknowledged the ownership - the Divine ownership - of that from which one has benefitted. The *Talmud* addresses an apparent contradiction in Psalms. Whereas in the first verse of Psalm 24, it says "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof", indicating Divine ownership of it all; another verse in Psalm 115 verse 16 declares, "The heavens are the heavens of the Lord and the earth He has given to human beings", which implies that He has given it to us and it is thus ours to own.

The contradiction is resolved, explains the *Talmud*, when one makes a *brachah*. Then that which belongs to God is permitted to be assumed by humanity. This world is indeed given to humanity to enjoy, but to do so in a manner that acknowledges the Divine origin of all - and this is done through first making a blessing on that of which one wishes to partake.

For those of you who might not be familiar with the practice of the *brachah*, before we drink or eat anything, or even enjoy a fragrance, we are obliged to pause for a moment and pronounce a formula. So if I am about to eat an apple for example, the formula is "blessed are You O Lord our God, Sovereign of the Universe who creates the fruit of the tree." In this act, in this recitation, we express our awareness, appreciation and gratitude for that which God had provided for our pleasure and well being. Of course there is always the danger in structured religious life that things can become just habitual and automatic. But what we are meant to be doing before we consume anything, is to be conscious of the Source of all that has created and generated that which we are about to enjoy and thereby sustain ourselves; and in so doing acknowledge that this is in fact God's property which we

have been granted the right to partake of for our benefit. Through the act of making blessings, Judaism seeks to instil in us a continuous awareness of Divine ownership of our world.

The second idea that emerges from this *Midrash* is a fascinating and a rather daring theological concept in the Jewish Tradition with which you will be familiar; namely, that humanity is actually a partner with God in the Creation. God has in fact created us in order to partner with Him in developing His Creation. This is understood in many passages within the *Talmud* simply in the very capacities and skills with which humanity is endowed to transform the raw materials that God has created into the various prepared foods, materials, clothing etc., for our pleasure, sustenance and well being.

But of course the idea implies even more than that. It emphasises that God has given us the ability to maintain, sustain and improve our world, as well as the capacity to destroy it. These capacities are in our hands and are a matter of our moral choice. This concept of course is diametrically opposed to the modern phenomenon of anti-"speciesism" which sees humanity as just one among the different species with no inherent distinctive status let alone superiority – a position arguably most identified with the well-known philosopher Peter Singer.

Notably, three of our Jewish delegation here are religious ethical vegetarians. We believe not only that vegetarianism is the right dietary way for a spiritually sensitive person (and as opposed to ages and places past, is today perfectly practical for the vast majority of people) but we would utilise Jewish teaching rooted in our Biblical sources to reinforce our own particular world view.

Indeed we would highlight the Biblical prohibitions against cruelty to animals and point out that paradoxically in our contemporary world, modern forms of factory farming have increased the cruel exploitation of animals making the consumption of animal flesh far more problematic today than in the past. Notwithstanding however, we will all acknowledge that the Bible does mandate for the consumption of animals and it does not consider this to be wrong in and of itself; even if there are Biblical allusions that we would point to, which would suggest that there is a higher way of

living. While we are required to treat animal life with special regard and responsibility, this does not mean that animals have the same status of humanity. Humanity is at the summit of the Divine creation and that idea is similarly articulated in the abovementioned *Midrash*, in the statement that the Divine purpose of bringing the Creation into being was/is to provide for humankind. However this unique privilege brings with it unique responsibilities – *noblesse oblige*

Thus we come to the third of the principles contained in our *Midrash*. The passage in Genesis where God explicitly gives humanity dominion over the rest of the sentient world is well known and much abused. There has been a tendency – particularly among critics of religion and the Bible - to portray this as a warrant for unbridled exploitation and arrogant anthropocentricism that allows virtually everything to serve its own particular end. However as far as an authentic Jewish understanding of the text, such a derogatory interpretation could not be further from the truth and some of the greatest rabbinic authorities of recent centuries have commented extensively in this regard.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kuk, the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi in the Holy Land in the earlier part of the twentieth century and among the greatest of Jewish thinkers, is very explicit on this subject in his writings. He points out that the phrase "have dominion" is not, God forbid, the mandate for a form of tyranny, but precisely a mandate for responsibility as that of a benevolent sovereign who takes into full account the needs of those who are his subjects. He points out by way of proof for his argument that the use of the term dominion here cannot mean unlimited exploitation of the physical world, to the very fact that Adam and Eve themselves are initially required to be vegetarian and are limited in what they are permitted to consume.

Rabbi Kuk furthermore refers to verse 9 of Psalm 145 which states "God’s mercies are extended to all His creatures". If God cares for all His creatures and as we are called to emulate Him (e.g. Leviticus 19:1), i.e. Imitatio Dei, then it is our human responsibility to care with mercy for all God's creatures accordingly.

A central concept in Judaism regarding human responsibility towards the environment, is drawn from a limited though already ecologically responsible injunction in Deuteronomy Chapter 20 Verse 19, which prohibits cutting down fruit trees when laying siege to a city in a context of war. The sages of the *Talmud* draws an *a fortiori* conclusion that if in a situation of war where human life is in danger it is prohibited to cut down a fruit tree; under normal conditions the idea of destroying anything that provides sustenance is even greater and indeed extends the prohibition to anything that can be of use and of value. The concept is further expanded in the *Talmud* not only to any wanton destruction (*Kiddushin* 32a) but also to any kind of waste (*Berachot* 52b) and even to over ostentation and over indulgence (*Hullin* 7b; *Shabbat* 140b).
Indeed children have accordingly been raised in traditional Jewish homes with a strong awareness of the obligation not to waste - not only food, but anything that can be a source of benefit including clothing, furniture; and again to be conscious that everything that we have comes from the Source of all.

Allow me to quote two passages from later Jewish sources elaborating on this concept. The first is from the 13th Century work, *Sefer HaChinuch*, attributed to Rabbi Aharon Ha-Levi of Barcelona (though in fact the authorship of this work is highly disputed.) This important book lists and comments on all the commandments in the *Torah*, the Pentateuch. Concerning this specific commandment against destruction/waste, *Sefer haChinuch* (529) states:-

> "The purpose of this commandment… is to teach us to love that which is good and worthwhile and to cling to it, so that that good becomes a part of us and we avoid all that is evil and destructive. This is the way of the righteous and of those who improve society, who love peace and rejoice in the good in people and bring them close to *Torah*; that nothing, not even a grain of mustard should be lost to the world; that they should regret any loss or destruction that they see, and if possible prevent any destruction that they can. Not so are the wicked, who are like demons who rejoice in the destruction of the world and thus destroy themselves."

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch was one of the greatest Orthodox rabbis of the 19th Century, and he actually considered this concept of *bal tashchit*, the prohibition against wasting and any wanton destruction, to be the most basic Jewish principle of all.

His understanding of this precept is partially similar to my above mentioned description of *brachah*, a blessing, as the acknowledgement of the sovereignty of God as the Source and Owner of all. But Hirsch goes further and sees these injunctions as expressing an essential limitation and discipline on our own personal will and ego. Accordingly when we preserve the world around us, we act with understanding that God owns everything. However when we destroy it, we are worshipping the idols of our own desires indulging only in self gratification and forgetting if not denying the One Source of all. By observing the discipline of this prohibition we restore harmony between ourselves and the world around us and above all consciously respect the Divine will which we place before our own.

> "Do not destroy anything is the first and most general call of God, lest you should now raise your hand to play a childish game to indulge in senseless rage wishing to destroy that which you should only use; wishing to exterminate that which you should only gain advantage from.If you should regard the human 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, "You shall not destroy anything."

According to Hirsch, this is a call to 'be a *mensch*' - the Yiddish/German word for a human being, but used here in a deeper sense to mean a **decent** human being.

> "Only if you use the things around you for wise human purposes, sanctified by the word and my teaching, only then are you a *mensch* and have the right over them which I have given you as a human. However if you destroy, if you ruin, at that moment you are no longer truly human and you have no right to the things around you. I, God, lent them to you for wise use only, never forget that I entrusted them to you. As soon as you use them unwisely, be it the greatest or the smallest, you commit treachery against My world, you commit

murder and robbery against My property, you sin against Me. This is what God calls unto you and with His call God represents the greatest and the smallest against you and grants the smallest as well as the greatest, a right against your presumptuousness. In truth there is no one nearer to idolatry than one who can disregard the fact that all things are the property of God; and who then presumes also to have the right because he has the might, to destroy them according to a presumptuous act of will. Indeed such a person is already serving the most powerful of idols, anger, pride and above all ego, which in its passion regards itself as the master of all things."(*Horev*, 397-8)

However in keeping with the aforementioned affirmation that the human person is the summit of Creation created in the Divine Image (Genesis 5:1,2) our human environmental responsibilities are first and foremost towards human beings and not least of all ourselves, in accordance with the scriptural injunction in to preserve our own wellbeing (Deuteronomy Chapter 4 Verse 9.)

As opposed to the widespread secular approach, in particular example, that of modern feminist ideology, Judaism teaches that we are **not** the owners of our bodies to do with as we choose. We are the custodians of our bodies that we have the duty to care for; and indeed Maimonides declares that maintaining a healthy diet exercise and keeping ourselves in good condition, is our in fact moral obligation not only to ourselves, but to the Almighty who entrusted our bodies into our hands as it were.

While the principle of loving one's neighbour (Leviticus 19:18) may be seen as a comprehensive injunction to care for one's fellow, there are of course precepts that are more specific regarding protecting others, not least of all the commandment two verses beforehand, "You shall not stand idly by while your brother's blood is spilt."

Jewish tradition understands this to mean that we have an obligation in the face of any possible threat to another, to do everything possible to protect him or her. In addition the injunction that appears another two verses earlier (Leviticus 19:14) requiring us to remove the stumbling block before the blind , is understood within

Jewish tradition as requiring us to do everything to eliminate anything that can pose any possible danger to another - especially towards the vulnerable.

Accordingly anyone who fails to prevent any harm to another is seen by Jewish tradition as having transgressed these prohibitions. (see Maimonides, Yad, Hilchot Rozeach,2:3)

However beyond forewarning and doing our best to safeguard others from danger are we obliged to do anything more than? While we have already mentioned the responsibility of the individual towards him or herself, do we have the right let alone the obligation to intervene in the life of another? If God is our healer (Exodus 15:26), is it perhaps not an impiety, to actually intervene?

Maimonides, who of course was a leading physician of his time, understands the abovementioned text in Leviticus 19:16 (and Deuteronomy 4:9) to also mandate and require proactive intervention. However the later scholar Nachmanides, also a physician, views the phrase in Exodus 21 Verse 19, "He shall surely provide for his healing" as the Biblical mandate for medical intervention; and explains that the need for this additional injunction is precisely in order to address the question we have raised.

"a physician may say, 'Why do I need to take this trouble on myself? Perhaps I may err in my treatment with the result that I have taken life by mistake."

Therefore says Nachmanides, the *Torah* not only gives him permission to heal, but actually enjoins him to do so. He continues

> "….and there are those who compare a physician to a judge who is obliged to judge and give rulings; because after all God is the supreme judge and maybe we shouldn't even be judging at all. Moreover this permission is explicitly granted so that people should not say that God alone wounds and heals."

In this final sentence Nachmanides is warning against the self-righteous lack of compassion for others that avoids responsibility through portraying sickness as Divine Will. However his analogy between a judge and a doctor is particularly noteworthy. Even though the *Torah* describes God as the True and Supreme Judge, it exhorts judges to pursue the administration of justice even though

inevitably as human beings they cannot guarantee absolute justice. Accordingly judges are adjured "you shall not fear any man, for judgement is God's" (Deuteronomy 1:17.) Judges are obliged to be engaged in "God's work" notwithstanding their inevitable limitations and even failures Similarly as mentioned, God is also described as a physician (Exodus 15: 26).Thus while the Bible affirms that all healing comes from God, as with justice this truth does not allow us to avoid our human responsibility, on the contrary. It obliges us to engage in what are seen as Divine goals and fulfil our responsibilities as partners in the development of the Divine Creation, even if inevitably we will sometimes fail in this regard. Just as we are obliged to work for the moral betterment of society, so we are obliged not only to provide for healing but also to advance the wellbeing of society through scientific and medical innovation.

However the unimagined capacities for innovative intervention in our world today, suggesting even more far reaching capacities in the future, pose new moral dilemmas regarding the dangers as well as the opportunities of human "interference" in Creation. These not only pertain to genetic engineering in human life, but also to genetic modifications in the foods we produce and consume and the consequences of such innovation for the environment as a whole.

While the Bible does not give explicit reasons for the prohibition against certain cross breeding (see Deuteronomy 22:9,11) which the *Oral Torah* Jewish tradition extensively expands upon; it would seem to be a particularly pertinent reminder to us of the need for limitations on what we are capable of achieving. As important as it is to improve the human condition and environment, the need for moral checks and balances is imperative. As was stated in the final communiqué from another recent Jewish-Christian meeting "not everything that is feasible is permissible"(*ninth meeting of the Bilateral Commission of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel and the Holy See*.).

As already mentioned, environmental responsibility is first and foremost our responsibility to our neighbours, to human society and especially to the vulnerable. The extensive body of precepts in the *Torah* in this regard is further expanded upon by our sages. In addition the latter are highly conscious of the fact that in many respects all of us are environmentally vulnerable and a significant body of

literature in Jewish jurisprudence deals with these threats. Accordingly legislation was laid down that required certain businesses – notably threshing floors and tanneries - to be kept at a distance from human domicile so that they do not cause harm either through physical pollution or even through the pollution of the senses through unpleasant odours et cetera.

These three central ideas that I have dwelt on:- Divine ownership, partnership in Creation; and concomitant human responsibility; are perhaps most dramatically brought together within two concepts which in a sense are one. Arguably the most central precept of Judaism, seen by our sages as the original precept given to the children of Israel as God's special gift, is the Sabbath. Moreover as a great Zionist thinker, Asher Ginzburg, noted: "more than Israel has kept the Sabbath the Sabbath has kept Israel." A later Israeli man of letters, Pinchas Peli, used to say, "tell me what a Jew's Sabbath is like and I'll tell you what kind of Jew he is." The Sabbath is a central if not the central focus of observant Jewish life.

However the Sabbath is very much an ecological paradigm concerning as a day on which the natural eco-system is able to rest, as well as human society regardless of position or authority.

In the words of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (in his commentary on Exodus 20:10):-

> "The Sabbath was given so that we should not grow arrogant in our dominion in God's Creation…. …(to) refrain on this day from exercising our human sway over the things of the earth, and not lend our hands to any object for the purpose of human dominion. …. the borrowed world is, as it were, returned to its Divine owner in order to realise that it is but lent (to us). On the Sabbath you divest yourself of your glorious mastery over the matter of the world and lay yourself and your world in acknowledgement at the feet of the Eternal, your God."

And Erich Fromm writes:-

> "Work is any interference by man, be it constructive or destructive, with the physical world. 'Rest' is a state of peace between man and nature. Man must leave nature untouched, not to change it in any way, either by building or destroying anything…. On the basis of the general definition we can understand

the Sabbath ritual. Any heavy work like ploughing or building is work in this as well as in our modern sense. But lighting a match and pulling up a blade of grass while not requiring any effort, are symbols of human interference with a natural process (and) are a breach of peace between man and nature…. The Sabbath symbolises a state of union between man and nature and between man and man." (*The Forgotten Language*, p.244)

The Sabbath is accordingly seen as a weekly restoration of the natural relationship both in relation to the Divine and in relation to our environment, social and ecological. It is not that the work and material development of our weekday activity are unnatural, but that there is the danger that this engagement can take us over, subjugating and even stifling our social and spiritual potential. Shabbat facilitates a restoration, recharging our conscious awareness of our relationship with God, with our families, communities and our environment as a whole.

Here is another quote from Hirsch, written a century ago, but all the more apposite for our contemporary society :-

" … to cease for a whole day from all business, from all work, in the frenzied hustle and bustle of our time ? To close the exchanges, the workplaces and factories; to stop all railway services? Great Heavens, how would it be possible - the pulse of life would stop beating and the world would perish ! The world would perish? On the contrary, it would be saved." (*The Sabbath*, in *Judaism Eternal*)

Expanding beyond the Sabbath day, is arguably the most remarkable Biblical paradigm of ecological restoration – the Sabbatical year.

As you know, the sabbatical year involves three essential components. First and foremost as stated in Exodus 23 Verse 10, the land is to lie fallow, untilled and un-possessed, serving as the most eloquent testimony that "the earth is the Lord's". In an agricultural society, land is also the source of status. Thus in requiring that every seven years the land is, as it were, returned back to its original owner, to God; a very important social ethical statement is being made with regards to the equality of all before God. This restoration of social equilibrium is further reinforced by the other two precepts.

The one is the cancellation and annulment of debts. The moral significance of this concept can only be understood within the agrarian context in which it functioned. Loans (and consequent debts) which for us are a normal part of commercial life, were not part of a normal healthy agrarian society. A loan was only taken when a farmer fell upon unusual hardship through diseased crops or drought or suchlike and did not have the seed and resources in order to be able to restore his harvest once again. Thus a loan was an unusual but essential means to restore a normal agricultural society to its productive cycle. However, taking a loan potentially posed the threat of a poverty trap. If the following year's harvest was not successful enough, one may not have made sufficient to be able to repay one's debt. This may continue year after year, the debt is compounded and the farmer economically trapped. Accordingly, the cancellation of debts in the Sabbatical year ensured that nobody would ever be caught in a poverty trap for very long.

This served to restore what one might call the human ecology protecting the dignity of all and protecting a social and economic equilibrium. Similarly with the third component of the Sabbatical year, the manumission of slaves and this idea also can only be fully understood in its context.

There were two situations in ancient Hebrew society that led to the placement of a member of the community into temporary servitude to another. One concerned a thief who was unable to pay the compensation and fine as laid down in the Torah. The courts has the authority to place the thief into the employ of the individual he had stolen from (or possibly another's employ) and, as a result, the thief would be able to make restitution as required. The other situation would be if an individual had fallen upon hard times and voluntarily sold himself into the employ of the other in order to raise himself up out of poverty.

Actually the demands that Jewish law lays down for the maintenance of such servants are so extensive that the *Talmud* declares (*Kiddushin* 22a) that "he who acquires a Hebrew slave acquires a master over himself". You will recall that the servant would enter the other's employment for a period of seven years. However he might find the conditions so convenient that he would not want to leave his employer's protection and provision. In such a case the Bible describes a ceremony at which the servant was brought to the lintel of the door and his ear

pierced with an awl(Exodus 21:5,6) Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakai (loc.cit.) explains that the reason why it is the ear specifically that is to be pierced is because "the ear that heard at Mount Sinai (the Divine words) 'unto me are the children of Israel servants' (Leviticus 25:55) and not the servants of other servants, let that ear come and bear testimony " that the man voluntarily relinquished his God given freedom.

This ceremony accordingly seeks to highlight the inalienable God -given freedom granted to all persons and that ideally no one should be subjugated by another. Yet as the same time, there is a willingness to accommodate those who do not have the confidence and capabilities to live with such a degree of autonomy.

And even then, the slave still **had** to go free in the Jubilee year even if he didn't want to, thus emphasising the supreme social value of human freedom and dignity.

Thus the Sabbatical year itself combines the three dimensions referred to above – recognition and affirmation of Divine ownership; of the glory and the dignity of the human person; and of the social and environmental responsibilities that flow from these.
Interestingly, the most extensive passage in the Bible dealing with Sabbatical year, Leviticus Ch.25, is followed in the next Chapter by the promise of good rains and harvests and prolonging our days on the earth, as a consequence of observing the Divine commandments; and warning of the opposite, if the Divine word is ignored and desecrated. This of course is reiterated in the eleventh chapter of Deuteronomy (verses13-21), the second paragraph of the *Shema*, - the central biblical reading in our daily liturgy, morning and evening.

Maimonides could only explain this imagery in metaphoric terms. It only made sense to him as a way of conveying the higher idea of spiritual consequences to our actions, in a manner that even the most simple might be able to grasp – "the *Torah* speaks in peoples' language".

However it has been pointed out that today we can understand these texts more literally than ever before, because the consequences of human conduct on our environment are so strikingly evident. Human avarice, unbridled hubris, insensitivity and lack of responsibility towards our environment, have polluted and destroyed much of our natural resources, interfered with the climate as a whole jeopardising

our rains and harvests and threatening the very future of sentient life on the planet (see the reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change http://www.ipcc.ch/) Moreover unrestrained irresponsible indulgence in modern society has not only led to far greater cruelty towards animal life exploited for human consumption, but also to a further exploitation of large sections of humanity to serve a much smaller sector. Indeed shocking numbers of human beings languish in hunger while others over self indulge. A recent study concluded that the average US citizen needs 100 acres of biologically productive space to support his or her annual consumption of food, water, energy and other resources. Distributed evenly however there are only 15 acres of productive land for each of the 6.5 billion people on earth. That means that the average US citizen consumes over seven times his or her share of the earth's capacity.

Multiply this by hundreds of millions of people and the human environmental toll comes into better perspective.

While these realities confront global governance as well as national authorities; we as communities, families and individuals are also challenged in terms of our own lifestyles and conduct. I think it noteworthy in this regard , that a vegetarian lifestyle is not only an important response to the problematic exploitation of sentient life , but a reduction in meat consumption is critically necessary in developed societies in order to reduce deplorable wastage at the expense of other parts of the world. For example, it takes 17 times the amount of water to produce a kilo of beef than it does to produce a kilo of grain. Wise and responsible reorientation and utilisation of resources could enable us to address most of the shameful hunger and poverty that afflict our planet.

Thus the Biblical link between natural conditions/productivity and our moral conduct is strikingly relevant for contemporary society, as is our very capacity to live in the land. This connects the current theme of our deliberations with the topic of our previous meeting – the relationship between people and land, and more specifically in the biblical context, between the Children of Israel and the Holy Land.
The Bible declares that failure to fulfil the Divine Law will lead to the land vomiting out its inhabitants (see Leviticus 18:28 and 20:22). Indeed it is in such terms that Jewish tradition has understood the destruction of the two Temples and the tragic

consequences for the Jewish people. Accordingly we recite in our liturgy "because of our sins we were exiled from our land". Our capacity to live in the land depends upon our capacity to observe God's word and his way. Here again I quote Hirsch:-

"Just as the people is the people of God, so its land too is the land of God. From the time that Abraham was chosen and the land was chosen for him the land has never meekly endured corruption in those who dwelt upon it. The flowering of the land is dependent on the moral flowering of the people which the land has brought forth, nourishing them with its fruit and enriching them with its treasures. All that stirs within the womb of this earth, all that is produced by this earth, all that absorbs due and rain beneath its skies and is invigorated and brought to maturity by the sunlight above, all this is subject to the law God gave to man.

It is for the fulfilment of God's will by men of moral purity that each seed germinates, each flower blooms, each fruit ripens. For this purpose alone does the sun shine and the dew provide life-giving moisture. All of physical life in this land shall attain its own perfection as the bearer of the nation for perfect free willed morality.

Thus if society that lives in this land subverts the purpose of its existence by social and moral corruption the land too loses the reason for its existence. Therefore a nation that is socially and morally corrupt can have no future on the soil of this land. For it is with the vital forces of this land of God, liberated through the muscles and sinews of its human inhabitants, that the nation has perpetrated its crimes against the Law of God. In other words, God's own strength and resources have been misused and squandered for the aberration and immoral excesses of men. Through the *tum'ah* (the defilement) of its inhabitants the land too becomes *tameh* (defiled) and the crimes of its inhabitants become its crimes. As long as sin and excesses of immorality remain confined to individuals while the nation as a whole continues to maintain, champion and enforce God's Law, the individual who transgresses the Law is eliminated from that society by the sentence of God or man, and the nation continues to grow and prosper on the land because it adheres to God. But once sin and excesses of immorality become the rule rather than the exception, if society finds excuses for them and indeed gives them sanction so that they become national institutions, then the

> human society which has thus set itself against God's moral law has set itself also against the soil that is sacred to this law. And in that case the land will vomit out the society even as any organism will reject an element that has become incompatible with it. (*Commentary on the Pentateuch, on Leviticus 18:24-28*.)

This very powerful passage of course is not limited to any one location. While it has its own particular context, it has universal application in terms of the relationship between human morality and the ecosystem.

What I have not dwelt upon until now in my presentation, is a profound mystical tradition that identifies every aspect of the cosmos with the presence of the Divine. This sensibility is a source of an abundant liturgical richness within our heritage. But I will conclude with this beautiful prayer from one of the great Hassidic masters of the late 18th century, Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav, perhaps most identified with this sense of communing with nature as part and parcel of religious devotion.

> "Master of the universe, grant me the ability to be alone; that it may be my custom to go outdoors each day among the trees and the grass, among all growing things and there may I be alone to enter into prayer, to talk with the One I belong to. May I express everything in my heart and may all the foliage of the field - all grasses, trees and plants - may they all awake at my coming, to send the power of their life into the words of my prayer, so that my prayer and speech are made whole through the life and spirit of growing things, which are made as one by their transcendent Source. May they all be gathered into my prayer and thus may I be worthy to open my heart fully in prayer, supplication and holy speech." (*Maggid Slihot*,48)