

## ***Jewish teaching on an “Integral Ecology”***

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It is my honour to share insights from the Jewish tradition that resonate so powerfully with the themes expressed in Pope Francis’ remarkable encyclical *Laudato Si*.

Maimonides (*Mishneh Torah, Yesodei haTorah, 2:2*) addresses the question of how we fulfil the Biblical commandments to love and fear God:-

"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 , what is human being that you should remember him ?"

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. 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, the summit of that Creation is the human person created in the Divine Image (Genesis 1:27) whose explicit special role in the world is expressed in the phrase in Genesis 2:15 “and He placed him in the Garden of Eden to work it and to preserve it “.

The Hebrew word “*l’ovdah*” is more accurately translated in this context as "to cultivate", cultivation and preservation together indicating the challenge of "responsible custodianship".

The word *avodah* may also be translated as “development” and thus the phrase also reflects the idea that is so central to the modern ecological movement expressed in the words "sustainable development".

However there is additional meaning to the word, which is most frequently translated as ‘to serve’. It therefore indicates a relationship of humanity to the Creation and all that is in it, as one of service.

Moreover one of the most prominent medieval commentators Rabbi Ovadiah Seforno, actually understands that it is the human spirit that is the object of this activity, and that work itself is essential as service for the human spirit. 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 some of our sages actually 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."

The ecological charge for humanity is expressed in the Midrash (works of homiletical exposition) on the book of Ecclesiastes ( Kohelet Rabbah 7 Section 28):- "In the hour when the Holy One Blessed Be He created the first human being, He took him and let him pass before all the trees 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."

The aforementioned beautiful little homily contains three essential lessons.

The first is the fundamental principle of Divine ownership. As Pope Francis emphasises in *Laudato Si*, the Creation belongs to God who made it. This is expressed most categorically in relation to the Sabbatical year (to which I will refer in more detail below) 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 world in which we live and the way in which we should conduct ourselves in relation to it, is the understanding that we are but tenants here in a world that belongs to its Creator.

This awareness is something that Jewish Tradition seeks to instil in our daily consciousness, even hourly consciousness, expressed through one of the most central liturgical functions in Jewish tradition that Judaism doesn't really even 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.

In fact the obligation of *brachot*, blessings, is the injunction for constant awareness and acknowledgement of Divine ownership. Jewish practice requires a *brachah* before drinking or eating, or even enjoying a fragrance. In so doing we pause for a moment and pronounce the traditional formula and thus express our awareness, appreciation and gratitude for that which God had provided for our pleasure and well-being. For example before eating a piece of fruit one declares "Blessed are You O Lord Our God Sovereign of the Universe, who has created the fruit of the tree". Through the act of making blessings, Judaism seeks to instil in us a continuous awareness of Divine ownership of our world and gratitude for His gifts.

The second idea that emerges from this *Midrash* is a fascinating and a rather daring theological concept in the Jewish Tradition; 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 wellbeing.

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.

This relates directly to the Divine Image in which humanity is created that distinguishes human beings from the rest of Creation. These capacities are in our hands and are a matter of our moral choices.

Accordingly while Judaism permits humanity to benefit from animal resources, it lays down extremely strict demands regarding the treatment of animals and the state they have to be in prior to slaughter. It is questionable today whether present day conditions and demands in the livestock industry and factory farming are consonant with these teachings and whether in today's world, mass produced animal products can be considered fully kosher.

However there is no question that today, the livestock industry is one of the greatest polluters of our environment. In fact the UN study *Livestock's Long Shadow* indicates that today's industry in animal products causes more environmental pollution than all forms of transport together globally.

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 anthropocentrism that allows virtually everything to serve its own particular end.

Indeed Pope Francis has acknowledged that “some Christians wrongly believe” that this passage “invites us to subjugate the earth (so that) the savage exploitation of nature would be encouraged, presenting the image of human beings as rulers and destroyers.” Pope Francis states “This is not the correct interpretation of the Bible as intended by the Church.”

And that is certainly not the correct interpretation as far as an authentic Jewish understanding of the text is concerned. 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 modern 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.

Above all Judaism derives the imperative of environmental responsibility from the specific prohibition in Deuteronomy Chapter 20 Verse 19 against cutting down fruit trees when laying siege to a city in a context of war. The sages of the Talmud draw 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 against any wanton destruction (*Kiddushin* 32a) waste (*Berachot* 52b) and even to over ostentation and over indulgence (*Hullin* 7b; *Shabbat* 140b).

Accordingly the Talmud also requires 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 etcetera.

The prohibition against cutting down fruit trees is extended by our rabbis even to non-fruit bearing trees where there is no need for such. Today when we both understand how central trees and forests are for human well-being and the cosmos as a whole and yet they are being decimated by human avarice, this prohibition becomes even more relevant and urgent.

The following two passages from later Jewish sources elaborate on this concept against what Pope Francis describes as "a throw away culture". The first is from the 13th Century work, *Sefer HaChinuch*. This important book lists and comments on all the commandments in the *Torah*, the Pentateuch.

Concerning this specific commandment against destruction/waste, (529) we read:-

"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 ethical precept in keeping with the goal of *brachah*, i.e. the acknowledgement of the sovereignty of God as the Source and Owner of all. But Hirsch goes further viewing these injunctions as expressing an essential limitation and discipline on our own personal will and ego. When we preserve the world around us, he states, 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 transcendent Divine Will which we place above our own selfish interests.

According to Hirsch, this is a call to 'be a *mensch*' - the Yiddish/German word for a person, but used here in a deeper sense to mean a *truly moral* 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)

These three central ideas mentioned:- Divine ownership, partnership in Creation; and concomitant human responsibility; are perhaps most dramatically brought together within two Biblical concepts which a common message.

Arguably the most central precept of Judaism, seen by our sages as God's first special gift to the children of Israel, is the Sabbath. The Sabbath is very much an ecological paradigm providing for a day on which the natural eco-system is able to rest, as well as human society, regardless of position or authority.

Again 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."

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 – on the contrary. We are in fact commanded “six days shall you work”. But there is a real danger that our creative labour can take us over, subjugating and even stifling our social and spiritual potential. Indeed there is a danger that our technological capacities can become the be all and end all in what has often become a kind of modern idolatry. Pope Francis warns against this in *Laudato Si*

There is a tendency to believe that every increase in power means “an increase of ‘progress’ itself”, an advance in “security, usefulness, welfare and vigour” as if reality, goodness and truth automatically flow from technological and economic power as such. The fact is that our immense technological development has not been accompanied by a development in human responsibility, values and conscience. ...But human beings are not completely autonomous. Our freedom fades when it is handed over to the blind forces of the unconscious, of immediate needs, of self-interest, and of violence. In this sense, we stand naked and exposed in the face of our ever-increasing power, lacking the wherewithal to control it. ... Put simply, it is a matter of redefining our notion of progress. A technological and economic development which does not leave in its wake a better world and an integrally higher quality of life cannot be considered progress. *Laudato Si*, ¶105, ¶194

We may add that in addition to a redefinition there is a need for a practical reorientation.

In the words of Hirsch again:- " ... 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? (*we might add, to switch off our computers, to do without our smartphones ?*) 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, we find the remarkable Biblical paradigm of ecological restoration in the Sabbatical year .

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 agricultural 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 exceptional 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 ensnared. 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 Pope John Paul II termed 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 servants who either sold themselves into the employment of others in order to escape poverty or to pay off debts (or punishments administered by the courts.)

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 – precisely what Pope Francis means by an “Integral Ecology”.

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 and guaranteeing peace – what Pope Benedict XVI refers to as an “ecology of peace. This ,the Bible explains, is the consequence of observing the Divine commandments; but if we disregard these, we face ecological disaster, no good harvests, no peace, war and devastation.

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 people’s language", in terns that even the most uneducated minds can comprehend, he explains..

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. Laudato Si highlights this outrage.

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 plant based diet is not only an important response to the problematic exploitation of sentient life and environmental degradation, 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. The Torah 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". Even if God's promises are eternal, any long term future 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." (*Commentary on the Pentateuch, on Leviticus 18:24-28.*)

This comment is not limited to any one location. While it refers to a particular context, it has universal application in terms of the relationship between human morality and the ecosystem.

In addition to all of the above, Judaism contains a profound mystical tradition that identifies every aspect of the cosmos with the presence of the Divine and echoes the words of Maimonides with which I opened this presentation.

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 18<sup>th</sup> 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)