
**Introduction to Environmental Awareness as a
Jewish Responsibility**

Students' Course Book

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[פרשת בראשית] א בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ :
 ב וְהָאָרֶץ הִיְתָה תְהוֹמוֹ וְבָהוּ וְחֹשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹמוֹ וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת
 עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם : ג וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהיֶה־אֹר וַיְהיֶה־אֹר : ד וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים
 אֶת־הָאֹר כִּי־טוֹב וַיַּבְדֵּל אֱלֹהִים בֵּין הָאֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ : ה וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים־
 יום לְאֹר יוֹם וְלַחֹשֶׁךְ קָרָא לַיְלָה וַיְהיֶה־עֶרֶב וַיְהיֶה־בֹקֶר יוֹם אֶחָד :

- In the beginning G-d created the heavens and the land. And the land was unformed and void and darkness was over the surface of the deep and a wind of G-d was over the water. G-d said, “There shall be light” and there was light. And G-d saw the light and that it was good and G-d separated the light from the darkness. G-d called the light day and the darkness, G-d called night; and it was evening and morning, one day/period of time.

Note that a bit later in this chapter, we read as follows in verses 26 – 29 of this first chapter of the Torah in looking at the story of the Creation of the world as we know it:

כו וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ וַיְרֵדוּ בְדִגְתַּי הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף
 הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבַבְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל־הָאָרֶץ וּבְכָל־הָרֶמֶשׂ הָרֹמֵשׂ עַל־הָאָרֶץ : כז וַיִּבְרָא
 אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא
 אֹתָם : כח וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם אֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ
 אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וּכְבֹשׁוּהָ וּרְדוּ בְּדִגְתַּי הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבְכָל־חַיַּי הָרֹמֵשׂ
 עַל־הָאָרֶץ : כט וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים הִנֵּה נֹתְתִי לָכֶם אֶת־כָּל־עֵשֶׂב | זֶרַע זֶרַע
 אֲשֶׁר עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָאָרֶץ וְאֶת־כָּל־הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר־בּוֹ פְרִיעֵץ זֶרַע זֶרַע לָכֶם יְהיֶה
 לְאֹכְלָה :

- And G-d said, “Let us make a human in our image, after our likeness; they shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth. And all the creeping things that crawl upon the earth.” And G-d created the human in G-d’s image, in the image of G-d was he created, male and female, G-d created them. And G-d blessed them and G-d said to then, “Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky and all living things that creep on the earth.” And G-d said, “Here I give you

all of the seed bearing plants that are upon all of the earth, and every tree that has seed bearing fruit shall be for you as food.”

Further, in the following chapter of *Bereshit*, we read about how there was no steward entrusted with the care of the land that G-d had created. G-d then creates the human being from the dust of the earth and places the human in the Garden of Eden that G-d had created. In Chapter Two, verse 15, we read:

טו וַיִּקַּח ה' אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם וַיִּנְחֵהוּ בְּגַן־עֵדֶן לְעַבְדָּהּ וּלְשָׁמְרָהּ

- And G-d took the human and placed him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

Let us take note of words that are used to indicate how we should relate to the land.

1. Look at 1: 26 – 1:29. What words are used to indicate how the human being is to relate to the land?

2. Look at 2:15. What words are used to indicate how the human being is to relate to the land?

3. Do you see any conflict or inconsistency between these different directives?

4. Consider the following statement and react to it:

“...there is a *conflict built into the very essence of the human-Nature relationship. On the one hand, we are meant to utilize and*

exploit Nature. Considered the pinnacle of Creation, the world was created for our use, to conquer and manipulate. ***On the other, we are merely the custodians of a perfect, divinely created world.*** Adam and Eve were placed in the Garden of Eden to nurture and protect it.”

Quoted from *Le’ovda U’leshomra: Judaism and the Environmental Ethic*, by Ilana Stein, in **Compendium of Sources in Halacha and the Environment**, Ora Sheinson and Shai Spetgang, editors, Jerusalem: Canfei Nesharim Publication, 2005.

- Can you find and identify a place for the different tasks and roles indicated in the texts above in this statement?

- Do you see the balance – the *Izzun* between each of these different roles and how they can (and have to) be combined in our approach to the land?

- G-d intended for us to be stewards and maintain and cultivate all aspects of G-d’s Creation, insuring that all that G-d created interacts in a reciprocal and healthy manner of sustainability. This was G-d’s *system of interdependence*. Look back at the texts from this lesson and consider where you see indications that this notion of us depending on all elements of our environment and the reciprocal dependence of these elements on us is expressed.

Suggested follow up activity: Go back with your class and look at Chapter One of Bereshit. Note how different elements are added as G-d moves along in G-d's creative activity and that at times along the way, G-d "pauses," so to speak, and we see G-d's stamp of approval in the refrain, ויהי טוב. Can we see this as "G-d's approval" of G-d's intended *system of interdependence*? Think of the final statement when this process is completed; what is G-d saying here about the totality of what G-d has created?

לא ויֵרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וְהִנֵּה טוֹב מְאֹד וַיְהִי עֶרֶב וַיְהִי בֹקֶר
יוֹם הַשֵּׁשִׁי :

- And G-d saw all that G-d created and behold it was very good and there was *erev* and there was *boker*, the sixth *yom*.

Unit One: Introduction to Environmental Awareness as a Jewish Responsibility

Lesson Two: Something Went Very Wrong

Let's think about this together: Focus on our interaction with the land continues throughout the Torah and the later classical texts that document our involvement with the land. These references are integral as we learn Halachot and teachings about every aspect of our lives. They teach us to have a conscious and reciprocal relationship with land; that is to be appropriate and careful stewards of this *system of interdependence*. *Does this in fact characterize how we utilize and think about our resources and our use of them?*

Consider the following statement,

“We have a finite amount of resources to serve an infinitely growing degree of desires and wants for their use.”

How does this statement “stand up” in terms of the texts we have just explored from our Torah in our last lesson, especially Bereshit 2:15?

טו וַיִּקְחָהּ אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּגֵן־עֵדֶן לְעַבְדָּהּ וּלְשִׁמְרָהּ

What was גֵן־עֵדֶן? How were the humans to originally live in it? Have we in fact continued to practice the prescribed actions of לְעַבְדָּהּ וּלְשִׁמְרָהּ? Why or why not?

wrong even in the very beginning with our first family. By the time of the generation of Noach, these problems reached irreparably problematic proportions.

Look at this text that appears in the second Parsha of our Torah, Parshat Noach.

ט אֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדוֹת נֹחַ נֹחַ אִישׁ צַדִּיק תְּמִים הָיָה בְּדִרְתּוֹ אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים
הַתְּהַלְלָדָנֹחַ : י וַיּוֹלֵד נֹחַ שְׁלֹשָׁה בָנִים אֶת־שֵׁם אֶת־חָם וְאֶת־יָפֶת׃
י א וַתִּשְׁחַתּוּ הָאָרֶץ לְפָנָי הָאֱלֹהִים וַתִּמְלֵא הָאָרֶץ חָמָס׃ יב וַיַּרְא אֱלֹהִים
אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וְהִנֵּה נִשְׁחָתָה כִּי־הִשְׁחִית כָּל־בֶּשֶׂר אֶת־דַּרְכּוֹ עַל־הָאָרֶץ׃

- These are the generations of Noah; Noah was a righteous man, he was complete and perfect for his generation; Noah walked with G-d. Noah had three sons – Shem, Ham and Yefet. The earth became corrupt before G-d; the earth was filled with violence. G-d saw the earth and all of its corruption; because all flesh had corrupted its way on the earth.

What is so wrong by this point?

Who/what has been involved in causing what is wrong to happen?

Who/what is feeling the impact of what went wrong?

Let's think about this together: So, we as humans may have the best of intentions but unfortunately, we can *get in our own way* when our actions do

not match our intentions. As Torah-observant Jews, we claim that the lessons and instruction we need are all found in our Torah and its supportive instructions as indicated in the Talmud and elsewhere. In the cycle of our lives, we find it challenging to constantly remind ourselves of the need for accepting the ongoing responsibility to think not just of the immediate needs and desires we have but to do long range strategic planning and live accordingly.

What do I personally do that is not the most economical use of resources that ***I could change?*** (Remember the list from Lesson I)

What about my family?

What about my community?

How/what could I change in my use of resources that would promote Environmental Sustainability that is not too hard but just involves my being more aware of the gift of the land that G-d gave us to use? (Now, we are beginning to address and work towards ***Izzun*** in our use and working of the land while observing the ***mitzvah*** of ***Bal Tashchit.***)

