



The Spiritual Roots of the Environmental Crisis

By Rabbi Yonatan Neril

Human beings believe, in their arrogance, that if they continue developing the world on the basis of an ever-expanding science and technology, they will eventually achieve an environment that will afford everyone unlimited gratification of the senses and a life of untrammelled ease and pleasure. There can be no greater error than this.

-Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler¹

In our times we are beginning to witness the planet's ecological balance weakening due to human influence: rainforests shrinking, deserts expanding, forests burning, the planet heating.² What is driving the deterioration of the natural world? To be sure, there are physical reasons, as well as deeper societal structures causing our environmental challenges. Yet to answer 'fossil fuels' or 'wood use' or even 'consumerism' would provide only partial answers.

Beyond the physical causes, the environmental crisis conveys a deeper message. The widespread degradation of the natural world indicates that our way of life is out of balance. Thus *the environmental crisis also reflects a spiritual crisis*. Ecological disruptions reflect the inner imbalance within billions of human beings. The change required of us to correct this is, to a significant degree, of a spiritual nature.

The Talmud teaches that the First and Second Temples were destroyed because of Israel's sins: the First Temple because of idol worship, sexual immorality, and bloodshed, and the Second Temple because of senseless hatred.³ The Maharal of Prague explains that “the destruction [of the First Temple occurred] when it was not fitting for the Shechina [Divine Presence] to dwell among them, that is, when [the Jewish people] made the Temple impure, as G-d does not dwell amidst their impurity.”⁴ At a proximate, physical level, the Babylonians destroyed the First Temple and the Romans the Second Temple. But at an ultimate level, the Sages teach that actions of the Jewish people determined the Temple's fate.

To demonstrate this point, our Sages record a powerful story about the Babylonian general Nebuzaradan after he set fire to the First Temple. “His mind was now elated [with his triumph], when a voice came forth from Heaven saying to him, ‘You have slain a dead people, you have burned a Temple already burned...’⁵ At a physical level,

¹ Strive for Truth, vol. 3, English translation published 1989 “The Destructive Philosophy of Materialism,” lecture given at Gateshead in 1944 p. 143

² Concerning climate change induced decline of forests, see “With Deaths of Forests, a Loss of Key Climate Protectors,” Justin Gillis, *The New York Times*, 10/1/2011

³ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Yoma 9b.

⁴ Sefer Netzach Yisrael, chapter 4, p. 58-9, translation by the author. Similarly, Rabbi Sholom Noach Berezovsky taught about both Temples that “Israel's sins caused the holy, elevated influence from G-d to stop, and then there was not able to be a higher union [between Israel and G-d]...Since the strength of the Temple was taken away, the Temple was destroyed on its own.” Sefer Netivot Shalom: Bamidbar, p. 210, translation by the author.

⁵ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin 96b, translation adapted by the author from Judaic Classics Library translation. The Talmud teaches how Nebuzaradan single-handedly broke through the walls of Jerusalem, struck down Jerusalem's defenders, and set fire to the Temple. As he was feeling haughty over what he did, a voice came down from heaven telling him the above.

the Temple had not been 'already burned'--the Cohanim (priests) were bringing offerings soon before it was destroyed. Rather, the Talmud is speaking of a spiritual deterioration that made way for the destruction of the physical structure.

Addressing the Environmental Crisis at its Roots

The Talmud shows us that in order to truly understand a problem, we need to look under its surface to understand the *underlying causes*, which center not on the physical but on the spiritual health of human beings. If one only sees physical causes (such as, in the case of the Temple, the foreign armies), one may incorrectly view them as the only reason for an effect occurring. The response to the problem, then, will also be limited to the *physical* level alone. Yet if we neglect the underlying spiritual source, the problem will keep reemerging in different physical forms, growing out of the underlying root. On the other hand, as Rabbi Shlomo ben Aderet (the Rashba, Spain, 13th century) taught, when you address the roots of a problem, the outer problems naturally fall away.⁶

Our usual pattern today is to turn to scientists and politicians for technological solutions to our environmental challenges. If the problem is too much carbon in the atmosphere and too much fossil fuel use, the solution must be hybrids cars, incandescent light bulbs, and other technological solutions. Yet these solutions are not sufficient to address today's global problems. For example, the problem of addressing climate change and other significant environmental challenges cannot be solved with technology alone, but also requires people to change their attitudes and action on energy use. A report from the McKinsey Global Institute cited how China relies on coal-burning power plants to produce as much as 85% of its electricity. The report estimated that were China, an emerging leader in electric cars, to replace gasoline-powered cars with similar-size electric cars, it would only reduce the greenhouse emissions from those cars by 19 percent.⁷ This is because the electric cars would draw on energy generated by burning coal for their electricity. Scientists have stated that humanity must reduce its emissions by many times that amount in order to reduce the impact of climate change.

The most important and powerful aspect of a Jewish environmental approach may be our understanding that *unless we repair the spiritual roots of the environment crisis, the problems branching outward will not be addressed in any meaningful way*. Over the last decades we have seen and at some level addressed numerous environmental challenges, from reducing the depletion of the ozone layer to decreasing garbage through recycling campaigns. Still, environmental problems continue to spring up faster than before; even if we address today's issues we can see clearly that more difficulties lie ahead. This is because we have not addressed our environmental challenges at the root.

What are the spiritual roots of the environmental crisis? How do these roots drive abuse of the natural world? And how can we rectify these roots today?

Let us explore—through the prism of Jewish teaching-- several fundamental root causes of our contemporary environmental challenges. Some of these roots include arrogance, insecurity, desire for honor, modern man's disconnection from nature and from other people, and the need to feel in control. We will focus on three: shirking responsibility for one's actions, desire for instant material gratification, and lack of being present.

Taking Responsibility

Being responsible and taking responsibility is key to being human. G-d placed humans in the Garden of Eden

⁶ Chidushei HaRashba to Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Nida, p. 11a. He said this in regard to the laws of Nida. See also Beit Yosef to Tur, Yoreh Deah 184:6. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto made a more general statement that to deal with a sickness from its uproot, one must uproot the cause (*Da'ath Tevunoth/A Knowing Heart*, translated by Shraga Silverstein, Feldheim Publishers: 1982, p. 304)

⁷“China Charges Up: The Electric Vehicle Opportunity,” Paul Gao et. Al, October 2008, p. 9, online at http://www.mckinsey.com/locations/greaterchina/mckonchina/pdfs/China_Charges_Up.pdf

l'ovda u'leshomra, 'to work it and protect it.' Rabbi Shlomo Riskin teaches that to be a shomer (a protector) means to be responsible. This is very clear from Cain's response to God when asked of Abel's whereabouts: "Am I my brother's keeper? (shomer) -in the sense of protection. The Bible resoundingly answers, yes! In this vein, Rabbi Joseph Ber Soloveitchik taught this core Jewish value: I am responsible, therefore I am.

Humans have the ability to choose to do evil, and therefore our responsibility to exercise our freedom of choice properly is tremendous.⁸ Yet human beings do not always succeed in the challenge of being responsible. In fact, after this instruction to be a protector, the Torah continues with the story of Adam and Eve's failure to take responsibility for their actions.⁹ The Talmud extends this to taking responsible for one's family, community, and world, when others will listen to the person's call to others to improve their ways.¹⁰

Today, not being responsible for our actions allows us to avoid attending to the significant environmental challenges of the world. We use the resources of the world – trees, mineral ores, petroleum – without sufficient attention to how these resources are produced, transported, and disposed of. We likely do not see the impacts on our air and water and on people's health in faraway places. To awaken the Jewish value of being responsible, we must broaden our perspective to include people we do not know, and the children of the next generation. We will use our resources more responsibly if we can be attentive to the broader effects of our actions.

The tendency to avoid responsibility affects most people today. To address this root in your own life, try expanding your sense of responsibility for others and your small, invisible impacts on them. Then, think of one specific action you can do to take on greater responsibility for how you live and consume.

Desire for Pleasure

The Sages teach that desire or lust is one of three traits that remove a person from the world.¹¹ Today, we see this root in the form of desire for instant material gratification – the continual purchasing of more, better, different – the newest clothing, shoes, computers, cell phones.

A person driven by desire is less likely to consider the effect of his or her actions, both in producing and in consuming. If all I want is the end product, then I am likely not to consider the consequences of the means employed. Yet those means—especially in producing consumer goods for billions of individuals-- are causing species to go extinct, polluting air and water, and altering the planet's climatic balance.

We can address this spiritual root of the environmental crisis by *being satisfied with what we have*. As the Mishna in Pirke Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) says, "*Who is rich? The one who is happy with their lot.*"¹² The shift in awareness to being satisfied with what one has is what generates wealth for a person, and not the accumulation of money or physical possessions.

To address this in your own life, think of one thing you have been wanting to buy, that you know you do not really need. Then, choose not to buy it, based on the teaching of being satisfied with what you already have. This simple action may begin a cascade as you share it with others and allow it to affect your future choices.

Being Present in the Moment

⁸ Rabbi Ovadia Sforno, commentary to Genesis 1:26

⁹ See Genesis 3:8-13

¹⁰ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat, p. 54b

¹¹ The Sefat Emet quotes this teaching of the Sages in his commentary to Sefer Bamidbar, Parshat Beha'alotcha, year 5644.

¹² Pirke Avot 4:1, in the name of Ben Zoma

In our society, we rush from one task to another with hardly a moment to pause and reflect in a long week of work. Our culture tells us to do more, work harder, and buy more – an endless cycle which undermines our peace of mind and causes tremendous impacts on our environment. By not being present in the moment, and we lose sight of what truly matters. Our hectic pace leads to using our planet’s resources more rapidly than they can be renewed, and leaving too little for others and future generations.

As with the previous two traits, a lack of being present leads a person to disregard what impact their action has on other people and the natural world. The solution, then, is to cultivate the trait of being present.

How can a person cultivate this quality within himself or herself? By being conscious and aware in the present moment. The Psalmist, King David, teaches: “I hold G-d before me always”-- 'Shiviti Hashem l'negdi tamid.'¹³ The awareness that G-d is always present with us enables a person to 'make friends with the present moment,'¹⁴ because they know that whatever is happening now emanates from the Higher Source.¹⁵

Rabbi Daniel Kohn helps us understand what it means to be present:

Say, for instance, you were looking at the sweet face of a small child, beatific and shining as he holds a candle, vibrant with life and with Presence. Say, then, you would soften your glance, and emotions, and simply be present to this dear moment; not in judgment, nor in thought, but in simple, sweet, presence. Your initial connection to what *is* at that moment indeed may be through your eyes, but as you "soften" into what is here, your experience will become more of "resonance" with this life that is beaming, with this warmth of vital sentience, with something you, and this child, share and are united by. It may only be a moment, before you think "how beautiful" or "how cute" or "where's the camera, I never want to forget this"... But at that moment, that child's face, that sense of good, become windows to all that is, to all of Creation in its vibrancy, goodness and light.¹⁶

Being present satiates a person spiritually and cultivates humility and modesty. A person becomes less driven toward environmentally destructive material consumption, and more aware of how their consumption impacts others.

One way to cultivate presence is by slowing down and resting on the Jewish Sabbath. Taking one day a week to be with oneself, one's family, and one's community can promote subtle spiritual changes within a person. This suggestion to be present in the moment on the Sabbath applies even to people who are currently “Sabbath-observant.” Using the Sabbath to slow down and create moments of being present can make a big difference for us all.

A Common Thread: Long-term Thinking

These three roots - avoiding responsibility, succumbing to desire for instant gratification, and not being present in the moment – have a common thread. Each of them leads us to ignore the impacts our action will have at a future time.

Jewish tradition teaches, “The wise man has his eyes in his head.”¹⁷ The Sages learn from this that a wise person foresees what will come while still at the beginning of an action.¹⁸ Thus when Alexander the Great

¹³ Psalms 16:8, translation by the author.

¹⁴ Eckhart Tolle writes extensively about this and cultivating presence in his books The Power of Now and A New Earth, and provides practical techniques for how to do this.

¹⁵ Rabbi Shalom Arush in The Garden of Emuna focuses on the importance of emunah, which is related to being present with what is occurring.

¹⁶ “Chanukah and the Light of the Small Vessels,” unpublished essay, December 2010.

¹⁷ Ecclesiastes 2:14, Artscroll translation.

¹⁸ Jerusalem Talmud, Tractate Sotah 8:10.

asked the Jewish Sages, “Who is called a 'wise man'?” They responded to him, “The person who sees the consequence of an action.”¹⁹ The Rambam understands this to mean that a person *in the present* is able to see the effect their actions will have in the future.²⁰ He emphasizes that the Sages are teaching about the present—one who sees in the current moment what is likely to be in the future.

Ironically, being more in the present moment helps a person act with greater concern for the future, by rooting himself or herself in what is important now and for the future. Presence and foresight go hand in hand: one who is truly present with what they are doing will be better able to sense what effect one’s action will have.

Today we desperately need this long-term thinking as we approach our complex environmental challenges. Though climate change receives the most attention, our problems extend beyond this single issue. The Pulitzer-prize winning scientist Jared Diamond identifies what he sees as the twelve greatest current environmental problems, among them water scarcity, overfishing, soil salinization, and biodiversity loss.²¹ Today, Diamond writes that these twelve problems are like time bombs in our modern society, each with fuses of less than 50 years.²² Clearly, a more fundamental cultural and spiritual shift is needed.

Jewish teachings are characterized by long-term thinking. Our prayers hearken back to the Temple which was built about 3,000 years ago and first destroyed over 2,500 years ago. By comparison, when scientists write about likely ecological disruptions in 2050—41 years from now, when we or our children are likely to be living—we may discount their warnings as unimportant long-term admonitions. But we do so against the wisdom of our Sages.

Today our foresight must be informed by global and ecological awareness, as well as by Jewish values. The wisdom of our tradition is vast and accessing its deep-rooted spiritual messages will be critical in addressing today's environmental challenges at their root. We can elevate our desires and take greater responsibility for our actions. By taking responsibility, resisting our impulses to buy what we do not need, and being present in the moment, we can make a significant difference in protecting the environment and addressing our environmental challenges at their roots.

The message of the Sages to Alexander the Great remains relevant for us, the Western world, and the whole world today: Be present now to the consequences of your actions. Wise action stemming from such foresight will set an example to the world—a light for the nations—that can inspire humanity to live sustainably.

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¹⁹ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Tamid 32a. Translation by the author. Similarly, Pirkei Avot (Chapter 2, sections 10 and 13) teaches that “Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai had five [primary] disciples...He said to them: Go out and discern which is the proper way to which a man should cling. Rabbi Shimon says: One who considers the outcome of a deed.” (ha'ro'eh et ha'nolad') Translation by Artscroll.

²⁰ Maimonides, *Commentary on the Mishna* to Avot 2:9, based on Rabbi Yosef Kapach Hebrew translation from the Arabic.

²¹ *Collapse*, p. 487. He lists the twelve most serious environmental problems as 1) Destroying natural habitats 2) Overfishing and the environmental impact of aquaculture 3) Biodiversity loss. 4) Soil erosion and salinization 5) Energy ceilings for fossil fuel extraction 6) Over-utilization of fresh water 7) Using or diverting sunlight for human purposes vs. allowing it to be used for plants 8) Impacts of chemicals on the natural world and people 9) Alien species 10) Emissions leading to a depletion of the ozone layer and climate change 11) Population growth 12) Human consumption.

²² *Collapse*, Viking publishers: New York, 2005, p. 498.

