Genesis and Human Stewardship of the Earth

Hebrew/English Source Sheet

This material was prepared by Rabbi Yonatan Neril and Evonne Marzouk of Canfei Nesharim, as part of the Jewcology project. English Translations, unless otherwise noted, are from Judaica Press, available online at chabad.org.

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I. Genesis Chapter 1, Verse 26

בראשית פרק א פסוק כו

וֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים נַעֲשֶה אָדָם בְּצַלְּמֵנוּ כִדְּמוּתֵנוּ וְּיִרְדּוּ בִדְּגַת הַיָם וּבְּעוֹף הַשָמַיִם וּבַבְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל הָאָרֶץ וּבְכָל הָרֶמֶש הָרֹּּם עַל הָאָרֶץ:

Genesis 1:26

And God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness, and they shall rule over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the heaven and over the animals and over all the earth and over all the creeping things that creep upon the earth."

בראשית רבה (וילנא) פרשה ח סימן יב

ורדו בדגת הים, אומר רבי חנינא אם זכה רדו והם נשאלו רדו, אם רבי ייעקב טפח חן והם נשוא בצלמנו דומחה ורוד, והם נשוא על שאריה.

Rabbi Chanina said, “if he merits it then [G-d says] have dominion, while if he does not merit, then [G-d says] he will be taken down.”

1 Or, let others (the animals) rule over him (footnote of Soncino translation).

2 The translation of the last sentence is based on the commentary to the Midrash of R’ Naftali Katz Berman Ashkenazi (Matnot...
Rashi to Genesis 1:26

and they shall rule over the fish: Heb. ר"ת This expression contains both the meaning of ruling and the meaning of subservience. If he merits, he rules over the beasts and over the cattle. If he does not merit, he becomes subservient to them, and the beast rules over him. — [from Gen. Rabbah 8:12]


“All other creatures are introduced only with their creation, at Man creation halts to proclaim to the world which is already created the intention to make a Man, an Adam. For this Adam is to enter the created world as appointed by G-d to be its ruler and master.”


This is the position the human being is to have towards all other living creatures on earth. He has not been given the mission to make them all, and indeed not entirely, subservient to him. The earth and its creatures may have other relationships, of which we are ignorant, in which they serve their own purpose. But the human being has the mission to make them all, and indeed not entirely, subservient to him. The earth and its creature


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No intelligent, thinking person could suppose that when the Torah instructs humankind to dominate – "And have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves upon the Earth" (Genesis 1:28) – it means the domination of a harsh ruler, who afflicts his people and servants merely to fulfill his personal whim and desire, according to the crookedness of his heart. It is unthinkable that the Torah would impose such a decree of servitude, sealed for all eternity, upon the world of God, Who is "good to all, and His mercy is upon all His works" (Psalms 145:9), and Who declared, "The world shall be built upon kindness" (ibid. 89:3).

Discussion Questions:
1. How do the commentators understand humanity’s “rulership” over animals, birds, and fish?
2. What do you think inspired the commentators to interpret this verse in this way?
3. What type of relationship between humanity and other creatures does this reflect?

II. Genesis Chapter One, Verse 28

Genesis 1:28
And God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and rule over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the sky and over all the beasts that tread upon the earth."

Ramban (Nachmanides) to Genesis 1:28
«G-d gave them power and dominion over the world, to manipulate the animal kingdom, to build and to uproot, to mine the ground for metals and everything of a like nature.»

“Following [G-d] saying ‘and rule over [the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the sky and over all the animals that tread upon the earth (verse 28)],’ [G-d] needed to say ‘Behold, I have given you [every seed bearing herb…and every tree that has seed bearing fruit; it will be yours for food (verse 29)].’ Since [G-d] said ‘rule over [the fish, fowl, and animals],’ it would seem that people would be permitted to eat them. To this [G-d] said, even though you will rule over them, you are not permitted to eat them. Rather, ‘every seed bearing herb…and every tree that has seed bearing fruit, [it will be yours for food].’
Kivshuha’ [conquer the earth] is [refers to] property: the mastering, appropriating and transforming the earth and its products for human purposes. This acquirement of property is a preliminary necessity for the preceding tasks of home and society which require it as the means for accomplishing them. This makes the acquisition of property itself into a moral duty. But as this preliminary duty is mentioned last, it gives it its limitation, as having a moral meaning and importance only if it is devoted to the preceding purposes; only if fortune is sought and acquired to found family and further the needs of social work. But not if the order is reversed and one looks on marriage and society as merely the means to acquire property and riches.

Discussion questions:
1. Early environmentalists considered the biblical instruction to “fill the earth and subdue it” as a key piece of today’s environmental problem. Do you think this was a fair judgment?
2. How would you interpret “kivshuha” today?

Genesis 2:15

Now the Lord God took the man, and He placed him in the Garden of Eden to work it and to guard it.

Ibn Ezra  (Spain, 1089-1164), commentary to Genesis 2:15, translation by R’ Neril

...The meaning of ‘to work it’ is: to irrigate the garden. And ‘to guard it’ from all wild animals so that they will not enter there and despoil it...

Ramban, Genesis 2:8, translation by R’ Neril

What is the meaning of 'and He placed him in the Garden of Eden to work it and guard it' (verse 15)? That He placed him there to plant for himself wheat and various produce and all seed-yielding plants, and garden-beds of spices. And he harvested and cut and ate at will. This is the meaning of 'to work and to guard'-- to work the land of the Garden—the garden-beds that he would make there, because the Garden—that is the trees—they would not work.
"To work it and to preserve it" The plain meaning of this phrase is that seeing that G'd had already assigned to man what he was to eat, i.e. vegetables and fruit, He now placed him in the garden so that he would practice the art of gardening and plant all manner of crops therein. He was also encouraged to plant all kinds of fruit (trees). He had been placed in that garden in order to enjoy it and to experiment therein at will. His daily food consisted of the fruit provided by the trees in that garden. He would drink from the rivers traversing Eden, whereas he would use the “divine clouds of glory” as his clothing. His position in that garden was most distinguished. His primary preoccupation was with spiritual delights whereas he spent relatively little time engaged in pleasurable physical pursuits. He enjoyed a most serene state of mind as both his mind and his body cooperated fully in being servants of the Lord.

The reason that G'd had withheld from him the fruit of the tree of knowledge was to spare him the mental and physical tension which he would experience once he experienced lust, greed, etc., all phenomena which are part and parcel of a true freedom of choice. At that point, prior to Adam experiencing the need to eat from the tree of life, G'd had not had any reason to deny that tree to him as he was not going to die even if he did not eat from that tree.

Once he had sinned, the fact that he had eaten from the forbidden fruit caused him to become far more preoccupied with concerns of the body at the expense of his pursuit of spiritual values. In short, he experienced the same limitations and handicaps when pursuing spiritual pursuits with which we are familiar nowadays. Seeing that he had reversed the order of priorities G'd had assigned to him as his purpose in life, G'd now reversed the order of what He had ordained for him so that his life span was reduced and the angel of death...
attained authority over him.

You should know that in the future, after the resurrection of people who deserve to be resurrected, these people will once again experience the idyllic conditions which prevailed in the Garden of Eden. At that time man will once again be occupied primarily with spiritual pursuits and will devote only relatively little energy to matters pertaining to his body. At that time man will resume either very long life, or never-ending life, as the universe will then revert to its original state of perfection.

The words 'to work it and preserve it' refer to the soil of the garden. [The word adamah, soil, is feminine, hence the feminine endings in 'to work it and preserve it'.]


“The terms avoda and shmira include not only the direct work and care of the ground, but also the whole moral behaviour of Man in acting and refraining from acting in accordance with his duty. Indeed... Nature itself finds its appointed purpose promoted, as well as the necessary condition for its continuance, in Man’s conscientious dutiful use of the bounties of nature, as expressed by avoda and shmira. Our sages refer this conception here, to Tora and Mitzvot, accordingly to the general mission of mankind.”

Rabbi Samphson Rafael Hirsch, Ben Uziel 44

The human position is “neither as god nor as slave...in the midst of the creatures of the earth-world; but as brother, as co-working brother...[Though people have] the rank of first-born among his brother beings, because of the peculiar nature and extent of his service, [we need to administer the] whole Divine estate [and] provide and care for all therein according to the will of God.”

Rabbi Norman Lamm, “Ecology in Jewish Law and Theology.” In Torah of the Earth p. 126

Man is not only an oved, a worker and fabricator, he is also a shomer, a trustee who, according to the Halakha, is obligated to keep the world whole for its true Owner, and is responsible to return it in no worse condition than he found it.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is the rabbincical understanding of “l’ovdah uleshomra” (to work it and to guard it)?
2. Do you think that applying this to a modern environmental understanding is appropriate?
3. If so, how can this responsibility be applied today?

Other Relevant Sources
Mishna, Ethics of the Fathers, 4:1
Who is strong? One who overpowers his inclinations. As is stated (Proverbs 16:32), "Better one who is slow to anger than one with might, one who rules his spirit than the captor of a city."

Psalms 8:4-6
1. To the conductor, on the gittith, a song of David. 2. O Lord, our Master, how mighty is Your name in all the earth, for which You should bestow Your majesty upon the heavens. 3. Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings You have established strength because of Your adversaries, in order to put an end to enemy and avenger. 4. When I see Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and stars that You have established 5. What is man that You should remember him, and the son of man that You should be mindful of him? 6. Yet You have made him slightly less than the angels, and You have crowned him with glory and majesty. 7. You give him dominion over the work of Your hands; You have placed everything beneath his feet. 8. Flocks and cattle, all of them, and also the beasts of the field; 9. the birds of the sky and the fish of the sea, he traverses the ways of the seas. 10. O Lord, our Master, how mighty is Your name in all the earth!

Shabbat was given to humanity “in order that he should not grow arrogant in his dominion” of God’s creation. On the Day of Rest, “he must, as it were, return the borrowed world to its Divine Owner in order to realize that it is but lent to him.”

Leviticus 19:19
You shall observe My statutes: You shall not crossbreed your livestock with different species. You shall not sow your field with a mixture of seeds, and a garment which has a mixture of shaatnez shall not come upon you.

Deuteronomy 22:6
If a bird's nest chances before you on the road, on any tree, or on the ground, and [it contains] fledglings or eggs, if the mother is sitting upon the fledglings or upon the eggs, you shall not take the mother upon the young.

**Deuteronomy 22:7**
You shall send away the mother, and [then] you may take the young for yourself, in order that it should be good for you, and you should lengthen your days.

**Deuteronomy 20:19-20**
When you besiege a city for many days to wage war against it to capture it, you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an ax against them, for you may eat from them, but you shall not cut them down. Is the tree of the field a man, to go into the siege before you? However, a tree you know is not a food tree, you may destroy and cut down, and you shall build bulwarks against the city that makes war with you, until its submission.

**Discussion questions:**
1. What can we learn from these sources about the human relationship with the created world?
2. What limits are placed on our use of the resources of this world?
3. How do these sources illuminate the meaning of the verses in Genesis?

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