The Glory in Creation: Valuing Biodiversity

Hebrew/English Source Sheet

This material was prepared by Rabbi Yonatan Neril and Evonne Marzouk of Canfei Nesharim, as part of the Jewcology project.

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Since the teachings of the Ramban are central to understanding a Jewish perspective on species preservation, his biography (from the Bar Ilan Responsa Project) is included here:

Rabbi Moses ben Nachman (Ramban, Nachmanides) was born in Gerona, Spain in 1194 C.E, and died in Israel in 1270 C.E. Ramban was the outstanding Torah authority of his generation. After he left Spain, his famous disciples, Rashba and Rabbi Aaron Halevi (to whom the Sefer Ha-Chinuch is often ascribed), took over as spiritual leaders of Spanish Jewry. Ramban's multifaceted literary activities included commentaries on the Bible and Talmud, halachic codes, responsa, works on mysticism and philosophy, and sermons. In 1267, in the aftermath of a public debate with the apostate Pablo Christiani, which was forced upon Ramban by the king and Christian clergy of Catalonia, and decided in favor of the Christians from the outset, Ramban was banished from Spain. At age 73, Ramban took the difficult and dangerous trip to Israel and fulfilled his life's dream of settling in the holy land. There Ramban restored the Jewish community in Jerusalem, which had previously been destroyed by invading Tartars. Accordingly, Ramban is considered the father of modern Jewish settlement in Jerusalem. Like Maimonides and many other Spanish rabbinic scholars, Ramban was a practicing physician.

I. Creation and Species

Genesis 1:4, Judaica Press translation
And G-d saw that it was good, and G-d separated between the light and between the darkness

Ramban to Genesis 1:4, translated by Rabbi Yaakov Blinder (bracketed words are his additions)¹
And [the establishment of] the permanent existence [of those things] is called “seeing [that it is good]” … The idea is to indicate that the continued existence of all things is by [G-d’s] desire, and that if His desire would depart from them for an instant, they would cease to exist. And just as [Scripture] says for each act, day after day, And G-d saw that it was good, and on the sixth day, when everything was finished, it says, And G-d saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good (v. 31), so did He say on the first day, when the light came into existence, G-d saw [that the light] was good, [meaning] that He willed its permanent existence.

Genesis 1:11, Judaica Press translation
And G-d said, "Let the earth sprout vegetation, seed yielding herbs and fruit trees producing fruit according to its kind in which its seed is found, on the earth," and it was so.

¹ Ramban—Nachmanides/ Commentary on the Torah, Volume 1—Genesis, part 1, p. 33, Mesorah Publications: New York, 2004
Ramban to Genesis 1:11, translated by Rabbi Yaakov Blinder (bracketed words are his additions)²

G-d said, 'Let the earth sprout forth sprouts' [Until this point, each thing came into being by G-d's decree, 'Let such-and-such come into being.' Here, however, with regard to the vegetation, G-d did not use the formula, 'Let there be vegetation;' rather, He said, 'Let the earth sprout forth sprouts.' Why did G-d address His command to the earth rather than to the vegetation itself?] [G-d] decreed that there should be [incorporated] into the nature of the land a capability of sprouting [vegetation] and bearing seed, so that the [various] species of [vegetation] should exist forever.

Genesis 1:31-2:1, Judaica Press translation
And G-d saw all that He had made, and behold it was very good, and it was evening and it was morning, the sixth day. Now the heavens and the earth were completed and all their host.

Ramban to Genesis 1:31, translated by R' Yaakov Blinder³

And behold, it was very good: [Ramban explains the connotations of this statement:] This [expression denotes] permanent establishment, as I have explained [above, on verses 3,10, and 12, regarding the phrase that it was good].

Discussion Questions:
1. Why do you think the capability of reproduction (i.e., sprouting) was included in creation rather than having G-d create each thing individually?
2. Do you think there is ever anything in the world that G-d would NOT consider good? If so, how?

II. Manifold Creation

Midrash Rabbah - Leviticus 22:2, Soncino Translation
Our Rabbis explain the text, ‘And the superfluities of the earth’ (Eccl. 5:8) as signifying that even things which seem to you superfluous in the world, such as flies, fleas, and gnats, are also included in the scheme of the creation of the world; as it is written, “And the heaven and the earth were finished, and all the host of them” (Gen. 2:1).

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² Ibid, p. 49
³ Ibid, p. 81

“The Holy One Blessed Be He sits and sustains all creatures, from the horns of the wild ox to the eggs of lice.”

Midrash Bereshit (Genesis) Rabbah 10:7, Soncino translation

Our Rabbis said: Even those things which you may regard as completely superfluous to the creation of the world, such as fleas, gnats, and flies, even they too are included in the creation of the world, and the Holy One, blessed be He, carries out His purpose through everything, even through a snake, a scorpion, a gnat, or a frog. R. Aha related this story: A man was standing by the bank of a river when he saw a frog bearing a scorpion and carrying it across the river; as soon as it had carried out its commission, it carried it back to its place.

Minchat Kehuna to Midrash Bereshit (Genesis) Rabbah 10:7, translation by R’ Neril

Included in His creation: there is a need for them, and they too are essential in creation.

Ecclesiastes 5:8, translation adapted from that of Judaica Press and R’ David Sears

And the superiority of the earth is in everything; even the King is subservient to the field.

Midrash Vayikra Rabba 22:2 (Wagshal edition),  translation adapted from that by Rabbi David Sears

“And the superiority (yitron) of earth [is in everything]…” (Ecclesiastes 5:8).

The rabbis said [and rendered the word yitron interpretively]: Even creatures you see on the Earth [that seem superfluous (meyutarin)]⁴, such as flies, gnats, and mosquitoes, they, too, are part of G-d's creation, as it is written, “And [G-d] finished the heavens and the earth and all the legions [works].”

Midrash Rabbah - Leviticus 22:1 (Vilna edition), translation adapted from Soncino translation

“And the superiority (yitron) of earth is in everything…” (Ecclesiastes 5:8)... Rabbi Judah said: Even things that seem to you superfluiities in the world are also included among the things that are a benefit to the world; bast is

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⁴ The Hebrew word 'yitron' (meaning lofty or superior) contains within it the root 'yeter,' which is the same root as the word 'meyutar,' or superfluous. [Note of the editor]
for making ropes, twigs are for hedging gardens.

**Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat, p. 77, Soncino translation.**

Rab Judah said in Rab's name: Of all that the Holy One, blessed be He, created in His world, He did not create a single thing without purpose. [Thus] He created the snail as a remedy for a scab; the fly as an antidote to the hornet’s sting; the mosquito [crushed] for a serpent’s bite; a serpent as a remedy for an eruption. and a [crushed] spider as a remedy for a scorpion’s bite.

**Psalms 104:24, translation from The Jerusalem Bible. Koren Publishers: Jerusalem, 1992**

How diverse are Your works, Oh Lord! You make them all with wisdom, the world is full of Your possessions.

**Vayikra 22:28**

An ox or sheep you shall not slaughter it and its offspring in one day.

**Rabbi Samphson Raphael Hirsch (19th century, Germany), Fourth Letter of Ben Uziel, translated by Bernard Drachman**

Not yours is the earth, but you belong to the earth, to respect it as Divine soil and to deem every one of its creatures a creature of G-d, your fellow-being...

**Maimonides (12th century, Egypt), Guide of the Perplexed 3:13, translated by Shimon Pines**

"It should not be believed that all the beings exist for the sake of the existence of man. On the contrary, all the other beings too have been intended for their own sakes and not for the sake of something else."

**Discussion Questions:**

1. Can you think of an example of something in creation that might be considered superfluous by some, but has an important purpose?
2. What is the benefit of having such a vast and diverse set of species?

**III. Noah and the Raven**

And he sent forth a raven (Genesis 8:7). Resh Lakish said: The raven gave Noah a triumphant retort. It said to him, 'Your Master hates me, and you hate me. Your Master hates me — [since He commanded] seven [pairs to
be taken] of the clean [creatures], but only two of the unclean. You hate me — seeing that you leave the species of which there are seven, and send one of which there are only two. Should the angel of heat or of cold smite me, would not the world be short of one kind?

Midrash Rabbah - Genesis 38:4, Judaica Classics Library translation

"'And it went forth to and fro' R. Judan said in the name of R. Judah b. R. Simon: It began arguing with him [with Noah]: 'Of all the birds that you have here you send none but me!' 'What need then has the world of you? As it is written, And the ravens ('orbim) brought him bread and flesh, etc. (I Kings XVII, 6). He further endowed them with a power to bring forth [only] after their kind, and that they should never be changed, as it is Said with reference to all of them [at the time of Creation], after its kind. This driving force in the normal mating of animals is for the sake of preserving the species, even as human beings engage in sexual activity for the sake of having children. Thus one who combines two different species, thereby changes and defies the work of Creation, as if he is thinking that the Holy One, blessed be He, has not completely perfected the world and he desires to help along in the creation of the world by adding to it new kinds of creatures.

IV. Maintaining the Integrity of Species

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 sha’atnez shall not come upon you.

Leviticus 19:19, Judaica Press translation

Now the reason for [the prohibitions against] kilayim ["mixed kinds,"], is that G-d has created in the world various species among all living things, both plants and moving creatures, and He gave them a power of reproduction enabling them to exist forever as long, as He blessed be He, will desire the existence of the world, and He further endowed them with a power to bring forth [only] after their kind, and that they should never be changed, as it is Said with reference to all of them [at the time of Creation], after its kind. This driving force in the normal mating of animals is for the sake of preserving the species, even as human beings engage in sexual activity for the sake of having children. Thus one who combines two different species, thereby changes and defies the work of Creation, as if he is thinking that the Holy One, blessed be He, has not completely perfected the world and he desires to help along in the creation of the world by adding to it new kinds of creatures.

5 The raven is unclean (Leviticus. 9:15)
Discussion Questions:
1. According to these sources, why are we to avoid mixing species?
2. Do you think this value is present in our society today? Give examples.

V. Sending Away the Mother Bird

Deuteronomy 22:6-7, Judaica Press translation
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.
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.

Ramban (Nachmanides) to Deuteronomy 22:6
This precept is a moral instruction, as is the related prohibition not to kill a mother animal and its young on the same day (Leviticus 22:28). The reason for both commandments is that we should not be cruel-hearted and lacking compassion.

Alternately, it could be inferred that the Torah does not permit destruction--the extinction of an entire species--even if it permits the killing [of animals for food or other legitimate human needs] within a given species. One who kills the mother and her young on the same day, or takes them when they are free to fly, is considered as if he had eliminated an entire species.

R. Isaac ben R. Judah Abarbanel to Deuteronomy 22:6, (Lisbon 1437- Venice 1508), translation by R' Neril Behold, the Torah's further intention in this is to prevent the possibility of untimely destruction and rather to encourage creation to exist as fully as possible, since one enables existence to reproduce by having children, like a tree which produces fruit. And the Holy One, Blessed be He, commanded that one should not destroy that which reproduces and makes offspring. But, just as cutting fruit is permitted yet cutting the [fruit] tree is forbidden, as is stated (Deut. 20:19) “for from it you will eat, and you shall not cut it down,” so too G-d commanded that we take the offspring, which are the fruit, if the mother bird is hovering over them, and that we not destroy the [fruit] tree in war. Rather, we should send away the mother bird in order that we will have food from the offspring or chicks, and the mother bird will produce other offspring and existence and goodness will persist...

...And for this was the end of the verses, 'in order that it will be good for you and you will live long,' which means, that this commandment was not for the benefit of animals, but rather in order that it will be good for
people when existence will persist in them [the animals] in order that people will eat from them at other times. And this is [the meaning of] 'and you will live long,' that since in the future you will live long in the land, you need existence to persist for food in order to provide you with food for the long term. Therefore come the Midrashot, Rabbi Tanchum said...[see next source for comment of Rabbi Tanhuma]

Midrash Deuteronomy Raba, 6:7, translation from Judaic Classics Library
Another explanation: What is the meaning of, 'You shall send away (shiluah) the mother bird'? If you will fulfill this precept you will hasten thereby the coming of King Messiah, of whom Scripture uses the expression shiluah ('sending free'), as it is said, "That send forth freely the feet of the ox and the ass" (Isa. 32:20).
Another comment: R. Tanhuma said: If you fulfill this precept you will hasten the coming of Elijah the prophet, of blessed memory, of whom Scripture uses the expression, 'shiluah,' as it is said, "Behold, I will send (sholeah) you Elijah the prophet" (Malachi 3:23); and he will come and comfort you. Where is this [in Scripture]? For it is said, "And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children" (ib., verse 24).

Discussion Questions:
1. What is the essence of the mitzvah of sending away the mother bird?
2. Why do you think it is linked to the coming of the Messiah?
3. How does this value apply to our actions today?

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Chidushei Hardal explains that “in the merit of sending away the mother bird, the person sends away the mother bird and she is consoled by the offspring that will be to her.” The human act of compassion causes the mother bird to be consoled at a future time. The Midrash cites the verse in Malachi as a Scriptural basis of a human parent emotionally returning to their children. The Midrash relates this to a mother bird being consoled by offspring that replace the ones a person took.