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God created a perfect world that we must care for

By LEILA SPEISMAN
Staff Reporter

And God said, “Let us make Mankind in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” Genesis, 1:26

“Behold My works, how splendid they are. All that I have created I created for your sake. Do not ruin or destroy my world. For if you do, there is no one to clean it up after you.” Kohellet Rabba, 7:13

These two statements, one from the story of creation in the Torah and the other from a midrash about God taking Adam on a tour of the Garden of Eden, show the two sides of the Jewish theological view of the relationship between man, God and the natural world. On the one hand, God created a beautiful, perfect world and gave it to man, not only to enjoy but also to be in charge of. On the other hand, human beings, God warns, must care for it and make sure that this great gift is not squandered – that it will remain as a legacy for future generations.

While the above quotations speak in generalities, the Torah and commentaries have a good deal to say about the environment.

Toronto environmental consultant Shai Spetgang said that the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century has made the Earth less susceptible to some of the forces of nature. For example, as Israel becomes more industrialized, and more land is covered with concrete, less rain can get down to the Earth, and the water table gets contaminated, Spetgang pointed out.

“From a purely selfish perspective, we all want clean air and water, and to eat non-poisonous food. This is not only for us, but for those who come after,” he said.

It behooves us, then, to follow the precepts of the sages, which point us in the right direction, said Spetgang, the manager of membership services and the program development staff person at the Ontario Environment Industry Association and the executive director of the Canadian Environmental Markets Association.

The Messiah will come in time, but in the interim we need to do something about our environmental problems, Spetgang stressed.

Certain issues have surfaced in recent years. There are increased incidences of asthma in children, and people worry about the number of toxins they are exposed to.

Is a tomato infused with fish genes kosher? Some say that it is, since the fish genes bear no similarity to actual fish. The bigger issue, though, is whether we are allowed to manipulate nature.

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Halachic sources are adaptable to today’s world

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It is important to note, in this regard, especially since the Human Genome Project deciphered the genetic code, that the manipulation of genes for medical or therapeutic purposes is not, by and large, considered problematic.

While halachic sources do not deal directly with such modern concepts as acid rain and recycling plastic, they are surprisingly adaptable to today’s modern world.

The laws of schchitah, ritual slaughter, decree that animals must be killed in the most pain-free way possible, with one stroke of a specially sharpened knife by someone skilled in the process.

Canfei Nesharim, an organization of Orthodox Jews dedicated to teaching the importance of protecting the environment from the perspective of Jewish tradition, has published a fascinating book, The Pendulum of Sources in Halacha and the Environment, edited by Spetgang and Ora Sheinson. It not only discusses how Judaism views the environment and our responsibilities but also gives extensive background and sources.

Schiichta falls directly into the purview of the laws of tza’ar ba’alei chaim – kindness to animals. One must feed one’s animals (including pets) before eating oneself; one must not cause them pain; and a hunter must not take a mother animal together with her offspring.

This recognition that animals have rights and needs not only ensures the welfare of the animals, but, the Torah says, several times, that if one observes these rules, “it will be good for you and it will prolong your life.” (Devarim, 22:6). Being kind to animals not only discusses how Judaism views the environment but also gives us goodness gives us.

Maimonides, the Mishnah and other codes of law, to not throw stones on a public thoroughfare; to place dead animals, cemeteries and tanneries outside cities, and not the side that the wind comes from; and to work in such a way that dust or ash is carried out away from other people.

One must not, Maimonides says, soak flax near vegetable patches (the flax will destroy the vegetables) or dispose of dangerous objects where they will possibly hurt others. There are even such seemingly modern considerations as keeping a greenbelt around a city and re-fraining from building in the public domain where the structures will obstruct traffic or block sunlight. Builders, the Torah commentator Rashi says, must begin to work immediately after construction materials are brought to the work site.

We must be conscious of both authority and responsibility, Halachah says – to be grateful to God for His goodness and to care for that which His goodness gives us.

Shai Spetgang

Hadassah takes up environment mantle

By JACOB BERKMAN
JTA

Renowned for its work providing state-of-the-art medical care in Israel, Hadassah at its national convention last month focused on keeping people healthy by going green.

The Women’s Zionist Organization of America urged the 2,500 members attending its annual assembly in New York to take up simple actions that could help save the environment and stave off global warming – for instance, turning off lights and buying more trees from the Jewish National Fund.

At the Hilton Hotel parlery, several sessions on the environment included a talk by Rabbi Lawrence Troster of the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life.

“We brought to this convention the opportunity to become an activist on a personal level,” convention chairwoman Barbara Spack said.

The organization’s national director of advocacy, Shelley Klein, said the convention “was the start of mobilizing our grassroots to take this situation seriously.”

She said the nearly 100-year-old organization used the convention to see if global warming and the environment resonate with its members. The organization is working on position papers and starting to look at the issue on a policy level, Klein said.

Hadassah is also a partner in the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, an effort to provide education that would improve eight pressing areas by 2015: hunger, primary education, gender equality, child mortality rates, maternal health, HIV/AIDS, environmental sustainability and global development.

Klein called the environment a natural fit for Hadassah because of the biblical responsibility to use the earth’s resources properly and a reduction in the dependence on oil would benefit Israel.

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