

Jewish ethics and climate justice

Essay 2/2 for Liberal Judaism by Marloes Schoonheim

Twice I have made a complete career change: the first time I left academics and started working for a medical NGO; the second time I left the field of humanitarian aid and joined an environmental organisation. Both decisions were deliberate: I loved doing research and teaching, but wanted to contribute directly to a better world; the second time I was motivated by the climate crisis that exacerbated the growing vulnerability to disasters in every single country I worked. UNCR reports that in 2019 alone, weather-related hazards triggered some 24.9 million displacements in 140 countries. It predicted that “without ambitious climate action and disaster risk reduction, climate-related disasters could double the number of people requiring humanitarian assistance to over 200 million each year by 2050.”¹ Since joining the climate movement I have been curious to discover the moral philosophy of Judaism in this field. What do Jewish ethics tell us about the climate crisis and how it impacts humanity? What sources motivate that relationship? How do Jewish movements differ in their approaches to climate justice?

Climate change is the human-caused and significant change in the measures of climate, such as temperature, rainfall, or wind, over an extended period.² It has a huge impact on the world’s ecosystems: from the extinction of animal and plant species and forest desiccation to reef degradation, biodiversity is in decline because of global warming.³ This makes climate change a Jewish issue because we have a responsibility as caretakers of the natural world God has given us, and need to preserve our ecosystems for future generations -- the idea of stewardship and partnership in the ongoing work of Creation. This goes back to Genesis 2:15: God places man on earth to *l’av’dah ul’sham’rah*, to work and guard (also translated as keep, tend) it. “Creation includes all people, animals, and plants, and as such we heed the call to be faithful stewards of our entire natural world,” the Religious Action Center from the Union for Reform Judaism explains. “As stewards of God’s creation, we are charged with protecting the integrity of the web of life.”⁴

Several other passages in Torah elaborate on how we should protect the environment. In Exodus 23:10-11 and Leviticus 25 and 26 we learn about the laws of *sh’mitah*, to lie fallow agricultural land every seventh year. You shall release the land, Rashi explains, and what is left on the field is for animals to eat.⁵ Deuteronomy 20:19 warns us not to cut down fruitbearing trees needlessly in a

¹ Tim Gaynor (2020), Climate change is the defining crisis of our time and it particularly impacts the displaced. <https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2020/11/5fbf73384/climate-change-defining-crisis-time-particularly-impacts-displaced.html>

² BBC (2020), What is climate change? A really simple guide. <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-24021772>

³ Columbia Climate School (2018), What is Biodiversity and How Does Climate Change Affect It? <https://news.climate.columbia.edu/2018/01/15/biodiversity-climate-change/>

⁴ Religious Action Center (2021), Climate Justice. <https://rac.org/climate-justice>

⁵ Benjamin Perla, Shemita—The Sabbatical Year Hebrew/English Source Sheet. <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/72921.5?lang=bi>

time of war: destruction must not be wanton, Sforno explains.⁶ This is linked to the mitzvah of *bal tashchit*, of not destroying or wasting items from the natural world. It's believed that Torah is enunciating a general principle here in the form of a specific and extreme case. Fruit trees are expanded to include everything else, and so is the way trees are harmed. "Any form of despoliation is forbidden by biblical law, even diverting the irrigation without which the tree will wither and die."⁷ The prohibition in fact covers all situations according to the Talmud: acts of vandalism are not allowed during peacetime either. We show our commitment to Creation and to each other by preventing all destruction and degradation of our planet. But the laws of *sh'mitah* include relationships with people (outstanding debts should be waived, slaves should be freed).⁸ And *bal tashchit* also applies to the body, which is part of the natural world and therefore should also be treated well.⁹ It's actually quite challenging to isolate Jewish ethics regarding the environment from human welfare -- and that actually makes a lot of sense since they are intrinsically linked.

Climate change is after all not a uniquely environmental and physical issue, but also a humanitarian issue. The adverse impacts of a warming climate are not felt equitably among people. The richest 10% of the world population, mostly living in the global north, produces 50% of the CO2 emissions worldwide. The poorest half of the global population are responsible for only around 10% of total global emissions attributed to individual consumption, yet live overwhelmingly in the countries most vulnerable to climate change.¹⁰ Within most affected regions, the climate crisis disproportionately affects marginalised populations like women, ethnic minorities, the elderly and disabled people. Heat waves, droughts, and extreme storms for instance affect women more than men, because they are already more likely to live in poverty, have fewer basic human rights, and face systemic violence that increases under instability.¹¹ But also in our wealthy countries the climate crisis increases inequality. State subsidised solar panels and electric cars with tax credits are great - it's the wealthy who mostly profit from them.¹² The energy transition causes a rise in fuel prices, which reversely affect the poor. In 2018, around 10

⁶ Shoshana Landau, ט"ו בשבט & בְּלִתְשׁוֹחֵת <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/55186.14?lang=bi>

⁷ Norman Lamm (1971), Bal Tashchit: The Torah Prohibits Wasteful Destruction <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/bal-tashchit-the-torah-prohibits-wasteful-destruction/>

⁸ Louis Jacobs (1995), Shemitah, the Sabbatical Year, and The Jubilee Year (Yovel). <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/sabbatical-year-shemitah-and-jubilee-year-yovel/>

⁹ Reform Judaism (2016), Bal tashchit. <https://www.reformjudaism.org.uk/bal-tashchit/>

¹⁰ Oxfam (2015), Extreme Carbon Inequality: Why the Paris climate deal must put the poorest, lowest emitting and most vulnerable people first. https://oi-files-d8-prod.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/file_attachments/mb-extreme-carbon-inequality-021215-en.pdf

¹¹ United Nations (2021), Introduction to Gender and Climate Change. <https://unfccc.int/gender>

¹² See for instance Nicolas Loris and Bryan Cosby (2018), How 'Green' Energy Subsidies Transfer Wealth to the Rich. <https://www.heritage.org/energy-economics/commentary/how-green-energy-subsidies-transfer-wealth-the-rich>

per cent of households in England were classed as fuel poor and a staggering 24 per cent of those in Scotland.¹³

Climate change therefore also addresses the vast and central area of Jewish ethics regarding social justice. “The field of Jewish social justice is a response to the brokenness of our world and a way to bring deep Jewish wisdom to that work,” Cheryl Cook of Avodah, the organisation for Jewish social justice leadership, explains. “For our Jewish community to fully live our justice values, we cannot hold ourselves at arm’s length from those who are in need now. Our work for justice must flow from being in relationship with people who are vulnerable, from listening to the stories that they share, and from standing up for their needs.”¹⁴ Jewish ethics on social justice stem from numerous sources: Leviticus 19:18 (love your neighbour as yourself), 19:18 (you shall not stand by the blood of your neighbour), and perhaps the most often quoted Deuteronomy 16:18: justice, justice you shall pursue (*tzedek tzedek tirdof*). Another important driver - to which Cook refers - is the concept of *tikkun olam* (world repair). Dating back to Rabbinic Judaism, *tikkun olam* is commonly used to refer to a specific category of mitzvot involving work for the improvement of society.¹⁵ Tikkun olam is an important driver of social justice, in particular in the context of climate change. “Dealing with the human existential crisis of global climate change is our ultimate task of Tikkun Olam,” the Jewish Climate Action Network states.¹⁶

Firmly rooted in Jewish text and tradition, for many branches of Judaism climate justice has come to mean addressing climate change at the intersections of the racial, social and economic disparities that it perpetuates - though approaches differ. Because of its emphasis on the ethical facets of faith rather than the ceremonial ones, climate justice resonates strongly with progressive Judaism.¹⁷ Social justice and the conservation of nature are listed as ethical values that Liberal Judaism commits itself to, giving them the same importance as love of neighbour and charity.¹⁸ Anticipating humanitarian catastrophes as a result of climate change, Liberal Judaism has

¹³ The Big Issue (2021), Fuel poverty in the UK: The causes, figures and solutions <https://www.bigissue.com/latest/fuel-poverty-in-the-uk-the-causes-figures-and-solutions/>. In the Netherlands, 8% of the households were dealing with fuel poverty in 2020. TNO (2020), Energiearmoede en de energietransitie <https://www.tno.nl/nl/over-tno/nieuws/2020/11/energiearmoede-en-de-energietransitie/>

¹⁴ Cheryl Cook (2019), Expressing Our Judaism Through Social Justice in 2019. <https://www.jtsa.edu/expressing-our-judaism-through-social-justice>

¹⁵ In Rabbinic Judaism, *tikkun olam* already had the meaning of rectifying social problems. See Mishnah Gittin ch. 4.

¹⁶ Jewish Climate Action Network (2021), Mission. <https://www.jewishclimate.org/mission.html>

¹⁷ Julie Halpert (2016), Judaism and Climate Change. <https://yaleclimateconnections.org/2012/02/judaism-and-climate-change/>

¹⁸ Affirmations of Liberal Judaism 13, “We affirm our commitment to Judaism’s ethical values, which include reverence for life, respect for persons and property, love of neighbour, practical kindness (גְּמִילוֹת חֲסִידִים, g’milot chasidim) and charity (צדקה, tz’dakah), social justice and peace, the conservation of nature and the humane treatment of animals.” <https://www.liberaljudaism.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Affirmations-of-Liberal-Judaism-Booklet-MAR-2020.pdf>

promoted environmental responsibility in its communities.¹⁹ The Religious Action Center from the Union for Reform Judaism has been calling for measures to combat climate injustice both within and outside the Jewish community.²⁰ With few explicit references and activism to climate justice coming from orthodox Judaism, it's particularly interesting that Hasidism has inspired what is now known as eco-centric Judaism.²¹ "The most essential truth I glean from Hasidic teachings, the unity and holiness of all life, even of all existence, is one the world most urgently needs to hear," the scholar Arthur Green writes in the context of global warming.²² Another revaluation of traditional sources for Jewish climate justice can be found in the work of David Seidenberg who challenges us to not regard God as divine being that separates us from creation. "Can we revalue the divine image, and envision Creation and all creatures as participating in this image?"²³ Seidenberg's vision relates to many ecological issues – animal rights, intrinsic value, stewardship, biodiversity - and provides a new direction for Jewish ethics on climate justice.

When we do or benefit from an action that improves the world, we can respond by saying the blessing for *la'asot ma'akeh* - for constructing a fence.²⁴ A specific commandment aimed at preventing people from falling off a roof now inspires us to acknowledge all labour that benefits the world. The fact that Judaism tells me to stand up for the devastating effects of global warming on both nature and people inspires me spiritually and influences my individual actions. Above all it's a powerful motivation for my daily work on systemic environmental and social change. I've made the right choice changing my career.²⁵

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¹⁹ Promoting environmental responsibility in our communities. <https://www.liberaljudaism.org/2019/05/promoting-environmental-responsibility-in-our-communities/>

²⁰ Climate Justice (2021), <https://rac.org/climate-justice>

²¹ Haggai Resnikoff (2020), Why isn't climate change a bigger issue for the Orthodox? <https://forward.com/scribe/452192/why-isnt-climate-change-a-bigger-issue-for-the-orthodox/>

²² Arthur Green (2010), Radical Judaism: Rethinking God and Tradition. P.8.

²³ David Seidenberg (2015), Kabbalah and Ecology: God's Image in the More-Than-Human World. P.18.

²⁴ Chaim Stern, Donna Berman, Edward Graham, H. Leonard Poller (ed. 2010), On the Doorposts of Your House: Al Mezuzot Beitecha Prayers and Ceremonies for the Jewish Home. P.46.

²⁵ I'm grateful for feedback on this essay from Noor and Marjan, and for the support and encouragement from Cornelis.