

Rosh Hashanah: A Study Guide on the Environment
Our Connection to the Land
www.rac.org/holidayguides

Rosh Hashanah marks the anniversary of the creation of the world. In addition to the themes of repentance, self-reflection and prayer that are traditionally thought about during the Yamim Noraim (High Holy Days), we mark and celebrate God's work in creating the world. As we contemplate our actions, both good and bad, during the past year, we turn our thoughts to the world around us and our role as inhabitants of the earth. This text guide will help us explore the themes in our text about our connection to the land and think about how we treat the earth.

We encourage you to use the High Holy Day Environmental Fact Sheet (see www.rac.org/holidayguides) as well as the following texts and discussion questions to engage in environmental dialogue on Rosh Hashanah, the birthday of the world:

Text 1 & 2: Ownership of the Land

The land shall not be sold for ever; for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me. -Leviticus 25:23	לי פי לצמתת תמכר לא וְהָאָרֶץ עֲמָדֵי אֲתֶם וְתוֹשְׁבֵימ גְרָמִים פִּי הָאָרֶץ
---	---

1. What is the Leviticus text trying to prevent? What does it mean to buy and sell land? What does the concept of ownership of land mean?
2. If we can never truly own the world, what does that imply about how we must treat it? How do you treat things you own differently from things you rent?

And ye shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof; it shall be a jubilee unto you; and ye shall return every man unto his possession, and ye shall return every man unto his family. A jubilee shall that fiftieth year be unto you; ye shall not sow, neither reap that which groweth of itself in it, nor gather the grapes in it of the undressed vines. For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy unto you; ye shall eat the increase thereof out of the field. -Leviticus 25:10-12	וּקְרָאתֶם, שְׁנֵה הַחֲמִשִּׁים שָׁנָה אֵת, וְקָדְשְׁתֶּם תְּהִינָה, הוּא יוֹבֵל; יִשְׁבִּיחַ-לְכֹל, בְּאֶרֶץ דְרֹר אֶל וְאִישׁ, אֲחֻזָּתוֹ-אֶל אִישׁ וְשִׁבְתֶּם, לְכֶם הַשָּׁנָה הַחֲמִשִּׁים שָׁנָה, הוּא יוֹבֵל. תָּשֻׁבוּ מִשְׁפָּחָתוֹ אֵת תְּקַצְרוֹ וְלֹא--תִזְרְעוּ לֹא; לְכֶם תְּהִיחַ- הוּא יוֹבֵל פִּי. גְזֻרְיָהּ-אֵת תְּבַצְרוּ וְלֹא, סִפִּיחִיחַ אֵת, תֹּאכְלוּ--הַשָּׂדֶה-מִן; לְכֶם תְּהִיחַ קֹדֶשׁ תְּבוֹאָתָהּ.
--	--

1. What is the purpose of the Jubilee year? How does the return of all to land to its original owners nuance our views of ownership?
2. How might this text relate to how we treat the earth? Does it affect the way that we use the land for our own purposes (agriculture, development, natural resources)? How might we return land to nature after we make use of it in a responsible way?

Text 3: How We Use the Land

And so with the rest of Israel's cities – we don't make a cultivated field into an open space nor an open space into a	עוֹשִׂין אִין--יִשְׂרָאֵל עָרֵי בְשָׂאָר וּכְנ וְלֹא, שְׂדֵה מְגֻרָשׁ וְלֹא, מְגֻרָשׁ שְׂדֵה
--	---

cultivated field, nor an open space into city nor city into open space. A person should not demolish his house in order to make a garden nor should he plant a garden on the ruins of his house in order not to destroy the land of Israel. - Maimonides, *Mishne Torah*, Laws of Sh'mitta and Yovel, 13:5

ולא; מגרש עיר ולא, עיר מגרש
גינה לעשותו ביתו את אדם יסתור
שלא: גינה חורבתו את ייטע ולא
ישראל ארץ יחריבו

1. What is this text saying about proper land use? What are we not allowed to do when developing land?
2. What might look different in our society if it adhered to this principle? How does this affect our concept of ownership of land? What limitations on ownership exist?

Text 4: Guard, Don't Own

Humanity's role is to tend the garden, not to possess it; to "guard it and keep it" (Genesis 2), not to exploit it; to pass it on as sacred trust, as it was given. Even though we are given the authority to have dominion over the earth and its creatures, we are never allowed to own it, just like we can't own the waters or the air. "The land cannot be sold in perpetuity" (Lev. 25:23). The land is the commons, and it belongs to everyone equally and jointly. -Ellen Bernstein, "Rereading Genesis: Human Stewardship of the Earth," Righteous Indignation: A Jewish Call for Justice

1. What does it mean to "own" land, and why does Ellen Bernstein say that we are not allowed to do it? What are the implications of ownership? How might we act differently if we did not feel as though we owned the land?
2. How does this text rethink the Genesis quotations that lay out our role as stewards of the earth? How should we understand the texts?

Text 5: The Power to Save

Everything bestowed upon you – mind, body, fellow man, material goods, other creatures, every talent and every power – all are merely means to action, to further and to safeguard everything. With love and with justice! -Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch, "The Nineteen Letters"

1. What is given to humanity? What are we meant to do with the gifts we receive?
2. What does this mean for our relationship to the land? What does responsible ownership mean?