

Rosh Hashanah: A Study Guide on the Environment
Our Stewardship of the World
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 stewards of Creation.

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:

Texts 1 & 2: God's Role for Humanity

God blessed them, and God said to them, Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and conquer it, and rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky and every living thing that moves on the earth. -Genesis 1:28	קִים אֱלֹהִים לָהֶם וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים אֲתֶם וַיִּבְרָךְ וַיְכַשְׁתֶּם הָאָרֶץ אֶת וּמִלְאֻהּ וּרְבוּ פָרוּ וּבְכָל הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבַעֲוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם בְּדָגַת הַיָּם וּבְכָל הָאָרֶץ עַל הָרֶמֶשׂתַּיִם חַיָּה
And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to tend it and to keep it. -Genesis 2:15	וַיִּנָּחֵהוּ; הָאָדָם-אֶת, אֱלֹהִים יְהוָה וַיִּקַּח וַיִּשְׁמְרֶהָ לְעִבְדָּהּ, עֵדֶן-בֶּגֶן

1. These two texts come from the two creation stories found in the Bible (Genesis 1 & 2).
- 2). How does each text describe humanity's role regarding the earth? How are they similar and different?
2. What do "conquering" the earth and "tending and keeping" the earth mean to you? How does each of these roles play out in how we treat the environment? How should they play out?

Text 3: Our Responsibility

"The Heavens"... Unlearned people once thought that the dominion of people on earth was like the dominion of God in the Heavens, but they were not speaking correctly, because God's dominion is everywhere. But the meaning of "the earth God gave to humans (Psalms 115:16)" is that people are like the clerks of God on earth over all that is on earth, and everything is [ruled by] the word of God. - Ibn Ezra Commentary on Psalms	כִּי חֲשָׁבוּ דַעַת וַחֲסָרֵי... הַשָּׁמַיִם הַשֵּׁם כַּמִּשְׁלַת בָּאָרֶץ הָאָדָם מִמִּשְׁלַת מַלְכוּת כִּי נִכְוֶנָה דִּבְרוּ וְלֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם לְבִנֵי נֹתֵן פִּירוּשׁ רַק מִשְׁלָה בְּכָל הַשֵּׁם בָּאָרֶץ אֱלֹקִים פִּקִּיד כִּמוֹ שֶׁהָאָדָם הָאָדָם הַשֵּׁם בִּדְבַר וְהַכֹּל בִּהּ שֵׁשׁ מֵה כָּל עַל
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1. What misconception is Ibn Ezra trying to correct in this commentary? How does this text complicate humanity's role that was laid out in the Genesis texts?
2. What does it mean to be the "clerks" of God on earth? What does this suggest about our responsibility in our stewardship of the world? What makes a good steward or a bad one?

Text 4: Rethinking Stewardship

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai said: Three things are equally important: earth, humanity, and dew. Rabbi Levi bar Chiya said: These three terms are each composed of three letters to teach that without the earth there is no dew, without the dew there is no earth, and without them both there is no humanity. -Genesis Rabbah 13:3

זה שקולין דברים 'ג יוחאי בן ש"אר
ר"א, ומטר ואדם ארץ הן ואלו, כזה
אותיות 'מג ושלשתן חייא בר לוי
ואם מטר אין ארץ אין שאם ללמדך
שניהם אין ואם, ארץ אין מטר אין
אדם אין

1. What kind of dependency relationship does this text create? How does this change the responsibility humanity has in acting as stewards of the earth?
2. What does this text suggest might be the consequence of irresponsible environmental policy, exploiting the land or trying to possess the land have?
3. Do people often think about environmental issues in terms of self-preservation? How might they act differently if they did?

Text 5: Revisiting Genesis

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?