

Addressing the Climate Crisis and Environmental Injustice

Rabbi Julie Saxe-Taller

Judaism is an earth-based tradition. Our origins as a Jewish people and the stories in the Hebrew Bible are inextricably connected with the natural world, especially the seasonal and lunar cycles and our relationship to the land. The earth's beauty and power are celebrated in the Psalms, where mountains rejoice, and trees clap their hands (Isaiah 55:12). Our responsibility toward all species is regulated in Jewish law from the Bible through the Talmud and into modern Jewish philosophies and their applications in all streams of contemporary Judaism. This text study is meant to spark discussion of current climate and environmental realities and how we engage with these realities intellectually, spiritually and through action. Each text can be discussed on its own or alongside the others.

I. Addressing Issues of Magnitude

Deuteronomy 30:11-14

הַמְצִנָּה הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מְצִוֶּה הַיּוֹם לֹא־נִפְלְאת הוּא מִמֶּךָ וְלֹא רְחֹקָה הוּא: לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם  
הוּא לֵאמֹר מִי יַעֲלֶה־לָּנוּ הַשָּׁמַיִמָּה וְיִקְחֶהָ לָּנוּ וְיִשְׁמְעֵנוּ אֶתְהָ וְנַעֲשֶׂנָּה: וְלֹא־מֵעֵבֶר לַיָּם הוּא  
לֵאמֹר מִי יַעֲבֹר־לָּנוּ אֶל־עֵבֶר הַיָּם וְיִקְחֶהָ לָּנוּ וְיִשְׁמְעֵנוּ אֶתְהָ וְנַעֲשֶׂנָּה: כִּי־קְרוֹב אֵלֶיךָ הַדְּבָר  
מְאֹד בְּפִיךָ וּבְלִבְבְּךָ לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ:

Surely, this Instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens, that you should say, "Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?" No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to do it.

For Discussion:

The Instruction, or *mitzvah*, referred to in the text is usually understood to be the entirety of the system of *mitzvot*. Here, the Torah is reassuring us that despite its greatness, we can fulfill its demands. When something “baffles” us, we sometimes decline even to talk about it, let alone take action. But many complicated subjects are understandable when we name them, break them down, and ask questions about them. The magnitude of both the causes and the effects of environmental injustice and climate change challenge us not to remain baffled, but to think, speak and act.

1. What is a climate/environmental justice issue that you want to understand better?
2. When have you participated in or witnessed a social change that previously seemed baffling or too big to address?
3. What does “the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart” mean in terms of climate change and environmental justice or injustice? In other words, what types of local actions can play a role in achieving large-scale change on these issues?

## II. Ownership, Responsibility, Sustainability

### 1. *Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13*

רָאָה אֶת מַעֲשֵׂה הָאֱלֹהִים כִּי מִי יוּכַל לְתַקֵּן אֶת אֲשֶׁר עָוְתוּ. בְּשִׁעָה שֶׁבָרָא הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֶת אָדָם  
הָרִאשׁוֹן, נִטְלוּ וְהִחְזִירוּ עַל כָּל אֵילָנֵי גֶן עֵדֶן, וְאָמַר לוֹ, רָאָה מַעֲשֵׂי כַּמָּה נְאִים וּמִשְׁבָּחִין הֵן, וְכָל מָה שֶׁבָרָאתִי  
בְּשִׁבְלֶךָ בְּרָאתִי, תֵּן דַּעְתְּךָ שְׁלֵא תִקְלַקֵּל וְתִחְרִיב אֶת עוֹלָמִי, שְׂאֵם קִלְקֵלֶת אֵין מִי שְׂיִתְקֵן אַחֲרֶיךָ

Look at God's work - for who can straighten what they have twisted? (Ecclesiastes 7:13). When the Blessed Holy One created the first human, God led Adam around all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to him: "Look at My works, how beautiful and praiseworthy they are! And all that I have created, it was for you that I created it. Pay attention that you do not corrupt and destroy My world: if you corrupt it, there is no one to repair it after you.

#### For Discussion:

1. What does it mean that natural resources exist "for us"? To what extent do you think this is true?
2. What defines the line between using natural resources and destroying part of the world? Who should make this decision for a given resource?
3. Some natural processes are amazingly resilient and can be repaired after damage, up to a point. What do you know about repairs such as land restoration and endangered species protection in your region?

## 2. Talmud *Baba Kama* 50b

A farmer was clearing stones from his field and throwing them onto a public thoroughfare. A pious one rebuked him saying, “Worthless one! Why are you clearing stones from land which is not yours and depositing them onto property which is yours?” The farmer scoffed at him for this strange reversal of the facts. In the course of time, the farmer had to sell his field, and as he was walking on the public road, he fell on those same stones he had thoughtlessly deposited there. He then understood the truth of the pious one’s words: the damage he had wrought in the public domain was ultimately damage to his own property and well-being. (paraphrased by Jonathan Helfand, “The Earth is the Lord’s: Judaism and Environmental Ethics”)

### For Discussion:

1. What is the misunderstanding between the farmer and the one rebuking him?
2. What are some climate/environmental justice-related parallels to this story?
3. How can we learn what the farmer learns before we trip on the stones?
4. How have definitions of public and private property affected you, your family? Have you and your family always had access to land for a home, recreation, growing a garden?
5. What role do you see questions of public/private domain playing in how we address the need to reduce carbon levels released into the atmosphere?

## 3. Talmud, *Ta’anit* 23a

The sage Honi encountered an old man planting a carob tree. Honi asked him: “How many years will it take for this tree to give forth its fruit?” The man answered that it would require 70 years. Honi asked: “Are you so healthy a man that you expect to live that length of time and eat its fruit?” The man answered: “I found a fruitful world because my ancestors planted it for me. So, too, will I plant for my children.”

### For Discussion:

1. What are you benefiting from that was ‘planted’ approximately 70 years ago?
2. What, specifically, do you want to ‘plant’ for those who will benefit from it in 70 years?

### III. Environmental Policy Through the Lens of *Teshuvah*

Introduction: “Surely, this *mitzvah* which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach,” (Deuteronomy 30:11). Nachmanides (or Ramban), a leading medieval Spanish Bible commentator, taught that the *mitzvah* referred to in this verse is the entire system of *mitzvot*, and at the same time that it refers specifically to the responsibility to do *teshuvah* – to repair our mistakes. In this light, the Torah is encouraging us, saying to us: You can do it! You can *accomplish major change*. The work of altering societal perspectives, changing habits, and refashioning the structures through which we relate to natural resources is a *mitzvah*, a great challenge, and one that we can meet. The following texts examine this work from the perspective of **teshuvah**, or changing our behavior, our lives and even our society, toward paths of justice and sustainability.

#### 1. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Repentance 5:1-2

Free will is granted to all humans: If one wanted to turn oneself to a good path and to be righteous, s/he has the license to do so, and if one wanted to turn oneself to an evil path and be wicked s/he has the license to do so, as it is written in the Torah, *Behold, the human is become like one of us, knowing good and evil* (Genesis 3:22), that is, this species of human is unique in the world, and there is no other species like it in this matter, that it of its own initiative and will and thought knows good and evil and will do whatever it pleases, and there is no one to prevent its hand from doing good or evil... every person is capable of being righteous like Moshe Rabeinu or wicked like [King] Yerov'am...

#### For Discussion:

1. Our freedom to think, decide and act is central to Jewish thought. How does this stand up to your personal experience?
2. This teaching focuses on the ability to turn or change behavior. What powerful changes have you made or witnessed? What contributed to the ability to change?
3. What have you found enables change on a group or societal level?

2. *Mishkan Hanefesh*, Yom Kippur prayerbook, p83

Why [in the communal confession on Yom Kippur] do we confess to wrongs we have not personally committed? The 16<sup>th</sup>-century mystic Rabbi Isaac Luria teaches that the people of Israel may be likened to a body of which every Jew is a living part. The vitality of the whole depends upon the health of every organ and limb. That is how deeply we are connected to one another. Therefore, each individual sin inflicts damage on the whole organism, and all of us share responsibility for healing the body of Israel.

For Discussion:

1. Are we truly responsible for healing wrongs we did not personally commit?
2. Who, specifically, do you imagine will bear the brunt of particular damages we are now causing to the environment?
3. How might Luria's poetic understanding of our inter-connectedness be helpful to our morale as we work on issues such as climate change and environmental damage?

3. From an interview with Rabbi Kevin M. Kleinman, *ReformJudaism.org*

*Shmita*, defined as “release,” is in essence Judaism’s prescription for maintaining economic, environmental, and social balance in the world. It is as timely [now] as it was 3,000 years ago, when it first emerged. In the seventh year, after six years of farming the Land of Israel, our ancestors relinquished control over all they owned and owed. At least in principle, according to the biblical commandments...the planting of crops ceased, the poor and hungry gleaned food from the land, Hebrew slaves were freed, and debts between Israelites were forgiven. The idea of release underlied all *shmita* observance. Literally, slaves were released. But farmers, too, were released from grueling daily tasks. Food growing naturally in fallowed fields was shared equally among rich and poor, so the needy were released from worry about survival. The land itself was released from having to nurture seeds planted within it. Metaphorically, *shmita* called forth the vision of return to the Garden of Eden, a land of abundance unmarred by inequities in wealth and property. Exile from the garden led to the development of agrarian society, in which private property was created, and food storage led to wealth, dividing those who had sustenance and those who did not. *Shmita* was conceived as a corrective to such inequalities, reorienting society every seven years from an economy based on the acquisition of private property to one of communal responsibility to provide for all...Today... we Reform Jews can reclaim this essential biblical mandate on our own terms to help create a more compassionate and just society.

For Discussion:

1. How are economic disparities contributing to climate crises?
2. How could policies of letting farmland rest periodically to protect it from depletion be combined with other policies to protect farmers’ livelihoods?
3. What could reclaiming the *shmita* year look like for a congregation? A city or town?

4. Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything*, p59

What I am saying is that the science forces us to *choose* how we want to respond. ...we can choose to heed climate change's planetary wake-up call and change course, steer away not just from the emissions cliff but from the logic that brought us careening to that precipice. Because what the "moderates" ... are really asking is: How can we create change so that the people responsible for the crisis do not feel threatened by the solutions? How, they ask, do you reassure members of a panicked, megalomaniacal elite that they are still masters of the universe, despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary?

The answer is: you don't. You make sure you have enough people on your side to change the balance of power and take on those responsible, knowing that the true populist movements always draw from both the left and the right. And rather than twisting yourself in knots trying to appease a lethal worldview, you set out to deliberately strengthen those values ("egalitarian" and "communitarian" ...) that are currently being vindicated, rather than refuted, by the laws of nature.

For Discussion:

1. This challenging text asserts that there are people in power who will not be persuaded to make the necessary changes to solve the issues of climate and environmental justice, and that, in addition to persuasion, we must use power. What do you think about this, and how does your thinking influence your approach to working on these issues?
2. Do you see ways in which climate change creates new opportunities for bringing together people on the "left" and the "right" and other divided groups?
3. What does Klein mean by saying that "egalitarian" and "communitarian" values "are currently being vindicated, rather than refuted, by the laws of nature"?