WATER, ECOLOGY, AND THE JORDAN RIVER IN THE JEWISH TRADITION

A sourcebook for educators and community leaders

ECOPEACE / FRIENDS OF THE EARTH MIDDLE EAST (FoEME)
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And he said to me, 'Son of man, have you seen this?' Then he led me back to the bank of the river.

Ezekiel 47:6
WATER, ECOLOGY, AND THE JORDAN RIVER IN THE JEWISH TRADITION
Dear Friend,

This document is a compilation of writings about the Jordan River in the Jewish tradition, about the sacredness of water, and about the profound connection between spirituality and care for the natural world. We hope that you will use some of these materials to create inspiring talks, sermons, or lessons, and to engage your congregation or class in the campaign to revive the Jordan River.

At the beginning of the booklet you will find three specially commissioned pieces of writing about the state of the river and about the role of the Jewish community in its rehabilitation. You are welcome to use these works as the basis for your own presentations or sermons, or to adapt them to suit your audience. You will also find scriptural texts, prayers, poems, and essays.

We encourage you to treat this as a working document: to annotate it, to select what is most illuminating for your own teaching, and to enrich it through your own knowledge and insight. We’ve left some pages blank for you to add notes and cuttings. For the next edition, we’re planning to develop a section of questions and discussion topics that educators and leaders can use to engage their students and communities. We would welcome your contributions as we develop this sourcebook.

With gratitude,

EcoPeace / Friends of the Earth Middle East
November 2013
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“The Jordan River is of enormous ecological, historical and spiritual significance both for the peoples who live in this Land and for those who hold it dear. Accordingly, its revivification is an urgent imperative for us all.”

Rabbi David Rosen
International President of Religions for Peace
Water is a central issue of a diverse set of problems that we face today. Climate change’s most devastating disruptions will result from changes in water sources and the water cycle: ice caps melting, more severe and more frequent storms, floods, changes in oceanic ecosystems and desertification that threaten suffering, forced migration and destabilization. This is doubly true for Israel whose long-term security and survival hinges on access to sustainable and reliable water resources, including the Jordan River.

The work of EcoPeace / Friends of the Earth Middle East (including the recent report ‘Take me over the Jordan’) gives a summary of the history of the Jordan River and the danger it faces from climate change and the growing water demand from Israel, Palestine, Jordan and Syria. Damming and diversion have reduced the amount of water flowing through the Lower Jordan River Valley to only 4%(!) of what flowed 50 years ago. Coupled with discharges of untreated municipal wastewater and other pollution, the Jordan River is no longer able to sustain the robust ecosystems of its past; some native animal populations are facing extinction, while other invasive species take their place. Without significant efforts and cooperation between the stakeholders in the region, the Jordan River may dry out and become a dangerously destabilizing force threatening the security of every nation in the region and undermining any realistic prospect for a viable peace process.

“Without significant efforts and cooperation...the Jordan River may dry out and become a dangerously destabilizing force, threatening the security of every nation in the region and undermining prospects for a viable peace”

Self-interest and biblical mandate converge. As Reform Jews, we see clearly that our traditions mandate us to be shomrei adamah, protectors of God’s creation and as with all of k’lal Yisrael, Israel’s security and well being are key foci of our policy agendas. Both argue for us to engage strongly with efforts to solve these environmental challenges. While climate change has the potential to escalate existing conflicts, it also provides an opportunity for regional collaboration and cooperation to address this mutual threat, and thus build relations of trust in working to secure their common environmental well-being, contributing to a lasting peace.
Protectors of Creation: Judaism and the State of the Jordan River...

“As Jews, we see clearly that our traditions mandate us to be shomrei adamah, protectors of God’s creation”

EcoPeace / Friends of the Earth Middle East’s campaign to rehabilitate the Jordan River presents a vital starting point for a rigorous debate about water usage and environmental preservation in a region of volatile politics and fragile ecosystems. The next few years will be critical to shaping the future of the State of Israel and the region, and this campaign makes a significant contribution to a holistic solution toward a hopeful future for all.
In recent decades, the Jordan River has declined precipitously. From a Jewish perspective, the significance of the Jordan River becomes readily apparent from the numerous references to it in the Tanach (Hebrew Bible). The physical state of the Jordan River points to a deeper spiritual challenge facing Israel’s inhabitants as well as all of humanity: how do we live as spiritual beings in a physical existence?

Human beings depend on a sufficient supply of high quality fresh water for their survival. Because of this essential dependence, Jewish sources equate water with life. By recognizing our dependence on water, and ultimately our dependence on G-d, we can strengthen our appreciation and protection of our precious natural resources, and our relationship with the Creator of the world.

This article will begin by exploring the Jewish teachings on the Jordan River, continue with a look at water more generally in Jewish sources, and conclude with a look at water issues and the Jordan River in contemporary times.

The Jordan River in the Bible

The first of many references to the Jordan River in the Tanach can be found in the Book of Genesis, in which the Jordan River is compared to “the garden of God” after Abraham’s nephew Lot saw that the Jordan valley was “completely watered”.

Later in Genesis, the patriarch Jacob is described as crossing the Jordan River. The Oral tradition teaches that Jacob placed his staff into the Jordan River and the river split.

Following the Exodus from Egypt, the second covenant between God and the Israelites was given while the Israelites were encamped near the Jordan River. This is the location where Moses gave his speech that is the book of Deuteronomy. In the Book of Joshua, two and a half of the Israelite tribes settled east of the Jordan River and built a large altar on its banks as “a witness” between them and the other tribes.

Furthermore, in Biblical history, the Jordan appears as the scene of several miracles – the

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1 Avot of Rabbi Natan 34:10. This introduction is based on Dr. Akiva Wolff’s “Water: A Sukkos Drash”

2 Genesis 13:10
3 Genesis 32:11
4 Midrash Tanchuma Buber, Vayetze 3; Aggadath Bereishith 45:2
5 Numbers 35:1
6 Joshua 22:10, 22:26
Water and the Jordan River: Appreciating a Limited Resource...

first taking place when the Israelites crossed the Jordan under Joshua and the river split.⁷ In a different instance, two prophets, Elijah and Elisha, split the Jordan River and walked across on dry ground.⁸ Similarly, Elisha performed two other miracles at the Jordan: he healed Naaman by having him bathe in its waters, and he made the axe head of one of the “children of the prophets” float, by throwing a piece of wood into the water.⁹

Water and the Jews in the Desert and the Land of Israel

Even before the Israelites entered the land of Israel, water was central to their collective experience. In the desert, uncertainty about water resources inspired numerous complaints and lessons for the wandering Jews.¹⁰ The Talmud teaches that in the merit of Miriam’s song, a well appeared in the desert which accompanied the Jews wherever they went.¹¹ G-d gave us this essential resource, without which we could not live for more than a few days, in the water-scarce desert. But the long-term security of the resource was never certain.

The Biblical experiences with water in the desert can be understood as a spiritual training to cultivate appreciation for G-d’s goodness. Through the process of taking water for granted, losing it and then receiving it directly from G-d, the desert wanderers certainly appreciated water and the One Who provided it. The Prophet Jeremiah refers to G-d as the ‘Source of Living Waters,’¹² since water is one of the chief means by which G-d provides life to people. Thus, at the end of the Jews’ desert experience, they sang an exultant song about their appreciation to God for water.¹³

Upon entering Israel, the experience of water scarcity continued for our ancestors, living in an agrarian society whose bounty or famine was regulated by rain. Israel is a semi-arid country with no significant rivers other than the Jordan. It receives modest rainfall, averaging less than 100 millimeters per year in the extreme south to 1,128 millimeters in the north.¹⁴ (By comparison, New York City averages between 710 and 1140 millimeters of precipitation per year.¹⁵) Until the 20th century, most agriculture in Israel was rain-fed and not irrigated; farmers depended on the winter rains in order to eat and live. Our sources¹⁶ teach that this water insecurity is by Divine design, to help us realize that G-d is the ultimate Provider not only of

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⁷ Joshua 3:15-17
⁸ II Kings 2:8, 2:14
⁹ II Kings 5:14, 6:6
¹⁰ See, for example, Numbers 20:3
¹¹ Midrash Tanchuma Bamidbar 2 and Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Ta’anit 9a. When Miriam dies, the well goes away (see Numbers 20:1-2)
¹² Jeremiah 2:12, 17:13
¹³ Numbers 21:17
¹⁵ Normals & Extremes, Central Park, New York, 1869 to Present, National Weather Service Forecast Office, 01 April 2006.
¹⁶ For example, Rabbi Alex Israel teaches regarding rain in the Land of Israel: “The dependency of the mountain-land makes it a difficult place to live. Throughout the book of Genesis we read of periodic famine in Canaan. Israel is destined to live a life of dependency on God. This is Israel’s legacy, its historic challenge. The land of Israel is naturally insecure and that is precisely the reason that it was destined for Israel.” Commentary to Parshat Eikev, 5766, originally posted on website of Midreshet Lindenbaum, Jerusalem.
water, but all our needs.  

Jewish prayers and texts reinforce this message and remind us of what our ancestors knew about water. Our prayers and texts are replete with appreciation for rain, profound recognition of the importance of water, prayers imploring G-d to provide us with water, and gratitude for the rains when they come. For example, Dr. Jeremy Benstein notes that Biblical Hebrew contains at least six different words to describe liquid precipitation (geshem, matar, yoreh, malkosh, revivim, se’irim), which denote different times and intensities of rainfall. Yoreh refers to the early rains of October, and malkosh refers to the late rains of April.

Furthermore, the Talmud records: “Rav Judah said in the name of Rav: ‘We give thanks to You, Hashem, our G-d for every single drop which you have caused to fall upon us.’” This is said at the beginning of each fall rainy season. And the Talmud teaches, “The day when rain falls is as great as the day on which heaven and earth were created.” Kabbalistically, water symbolizes consciousness, and is thus an appropriate means through which we cultivate our awareness of G-d. Praying for rain helps develop our relationship with our Creator by reminding us that G-d provides us water – along with everything else we need – each day.

Water in Contemporary Times

Today, the industrialization of water distribution has increased the availability of water yet reduced our appreciation of its importance. We generally do not see where food is grown or the rain or irrigation that waters the crops. In Israel, for example, the National Water Carrier distributing water from the Kinneret (Sea of Galilee) and electric pumping of the underground aquifers has enabled irrigation of most Israeli farmland, increasing crop yields. Most recently, desalinization of Mediterranean seawater is becoming an increasing source of freshwater to fulfill increasing demand and to make up for expected future decrease supply from these other sources. (However, desalinization requires a significant amount of energy to produce the water.) Throughout the world, irrigation through electric pumping of water has transformed crop production. For households, piped water now comes directly to us, replacing reliance on local water sources.

These innovations have relieved us from transporting water from streams and cisterns to our homes. While this represents a tremendous improvement in quality of life, it also blinds us to where water comes from - both physically and spiritually. With this, we have lost the deep-seated experience of the preciousness of water. For many, this is partly a spiritual loss: lacking the sense of our ultimate dependence on G-d for all our needs. But it also has very significant practical impacts, because where appreciation ends, misuse begins.
The world increasingly faces a water crisis, experienced most by those in Africa, South Asia, and China. A lack of sufficient drinking water is recognized to be a leading cause of death in the world. Some 884 million people in the world do not have access to safe drinking-water sources. The United Nations Environment Program notes that two-thirds of the world’s population is likely to face water stress by 2025, a result of “climate change, uncontrolled urbanization, unplanned water withdrawal and inappropriate water policies.”

In the Land of Israel, Israel’s main aquifers and the Sea of Galilee have dipped below their red lines in recent years, endangering water quality. This has been due to increasing demand and overall reduced rainfall. The Israeli Ministry of the Environment has warned that “Preservation of the country’s scant water sources may be the greatest challenge facing Israel today.”

The Case of the Lower Jordan River

The Jordan River is a geological and cultural landmark, sustaining diverse vegetation and fauna. The river once supplied Israel and its neighbors with part of their water needs, including for industry, agriculture, and domestic consumption. Pollution, overuse, and inappropriate development, however, have damaged the river’s ecosystem and have endangered a clean water supply for both the Jordan valley and the highlands.

A report developed through a collaboration between the French Regional Mission for Water and Agriculture of the French Embassy in Jordan (MREA) and the International Water Management Institute (IWMI) describes the striking transformation of the Jordan River Basin and the Lower Jordan River (south of the Sea of Galilee). According to the report, in 1950, only 10,000 hectares were irrigated, groundwater was untapped and abundant water flowed to the Dead Sea – whereas currently, 46,000 hectares are irrigated, groundwater is being severely mined, and nearly all surface resources are tapped.

Consequently and mainly because of an overdraft of the aquifers and competition for water, water use became unsustainable; and at present, while around 2,700 Mm3/yr of surface water and rainfall water enter the River Jordan basin on average, only 200 Mm3/yr reach the Dead Sea. The Lower Jordan now survives as a river in good part due to the inflow of raw sewage.

23 “Note of the Executive Director,” 2003, available online at www.unep.org/GC/GC22/Document/K0263442.doc
Conclusion

Piped water and irrigated fields give us the misimpression that the availability of fresh water is virtually limitless. Yet freshwater is scarce on planet earth. And these technologies obscure how water is becoming even more limited due to a plethora of factors, among them increasing demand, climate change, and pollution of freshwater supplies. Can human society simultaneously enjoy pumped and piped water and use it wisely?

Developing a deeper water awareness is crucial to ensure our long-term access to water, and to rehabilitate the Lower Jordan River. That is where the teachings of our 3000-year old tradition come in. These teachings on rain, water, and the Jordan can help us cultivate an appreciation for water, and inspire us to value and protect the water resources with which we are blessed.

27 The Science Advisory Board of Canfei Nesharim write:

“Although water is seemingly abundant, the amount of fresh water is not. 97.5% of all water on Earth is salt water, leaving only 2.5% as fresh water. Nearly 70% of that fresh water is frozen in the icecaps of Antarctica and Greenland; most of the remainder is present as soil moisture, or lies in deep underground aquifers as groundwater not accessible to human use. Less than 1% of the world’s fresh water (~0.007% of all water on earth) is accessible for direct human uses. This is the water found in lakes, rivers, reservoirs and those underground sources that are shallow enough to be tapped at an affordable cost. Only this amount is regularly renewed by rain and snowfall and is therefore available on a sustainable basis. Water, however, is not equally distributed. Of the very small amount of water that is usable by humans, approximately 20% is in the Great Lakes of North America (equal to 84% of all surface freshwater in the US, with another 20% in the Russian Lake Baikal.”
The other side of the Jordan is accident prone. For what else can we make of the odd fact that of the six cities of refuge — those ‘Ir Miklat’ where negligent manslaughters might flee to safety from the relatives of the slain victims, who could elsewise hunt them down and kill them - of those six cities, three were located on the other — what we moderns would call the Jordanian side of the Jordan river. Half of the cities of refuge erected for a less than a fifth of the population? On the other side of the Jordan only the tribes of Rueben, Gad and a half-portion of Manasseh decided to dwell. According to the final census taken in the 40th year of desert wandering before the conquest of Israel, that amounted to 110,550 men from the ages of 20 and upwards. Why would 110,550 men from a total of over 600,000 males of Israel require half of the cities of refuge? What is wrong with the far side of the Jordan that made accidents there so much more commonplace, and thus necessitated so many more cities of refuge per capita?

Perhaps it is a matter of geography. Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks speaks of the contours of the land of Israel as a moral teacher. There are just two large lakes in Israel, he points out, the Kinneret and the Yam Ha’Melach, the Salty or Dead Sea. The Kinneret is alive with flora and fauna teeming at its banks and below its surface. The Dead Sea is literally dead of nearly every organism. The difference is simple. The Kinneret both receives and gives of its waters. The Dead Sea only extracts an inflow, and does not give out. That is the simple moral lesson we learn from the ecology of Israel: In order to live, one must give of oneself.

And the Jordan river was the tangible conduit of that giving gesture. Its flow was the move from interiority to exteriority. Perhaps this is why the outrageous responsibility the Torah demands of Israel, a responsibility to bear the brunt of another’s hidden faults, only applies — according to the Talmudic sages — once Israel ‘crosses over the Jordan river.’ (Talmud Sanhadrin 43b) When the Jordan is the living metaphor per excellence for the need to flow towards the ‘other’, then this Rabbinical dictum is not a quasi-mystical transformation of responsibility upon the backs of Israel, but a simple recognition. As the people stepped into the flow of the Jordan River, there was no freeing baptism, but rather a strapping on of the immense frailties of every other crosser. We share the burden of the stranger, as we emerge dripping from the banks. For just as the Jordan River gave and gave again, so must we.

Those two and one-half tribes who never crossed over that river, or rather, stopped their
journey at the threshold of that shared burden of responsibility, perhaps left themselves just a hairs-breadth more susceptible to negligent murder. Just a touch more in need of another city of refuge. For what is manslaughter other than a dis-attention to the external world and the others who inhabit it? What is manslaughter but the innocuous decision to quickly cut my own kindling wood above the need to check the axe-head one last time so that it does not fly off to kill the passer-by? Without the lesson of wading through the Jordan, of feeling the flow of responsibility - bracingly cold against the face and body - incidents against the other, those small insensitivities towards the external, can multiply onto death.

Lest we think that the cities of refuge represent some vestige of the archaic past, Consider the words of Emanuel Levinas, the modern French moral philosopher: “Do not these murders, committed without the murderer’s volition, occur in other ways than by the axe-head leaving the handle and coming to strike the passer-by? In Western Society – free and civilized, but without social equality and a rigorous social justice – is it absurd to wonder whether the advantages available to the rich in relation to the poor…whether these advantages, one thing leading to another, are not the cause somewhere, of someone’s agony? Are there not, somewhere in the world wars and carnage which result from these advantages?…Does not all this make our cities cities of refuge or cities of exile?” (Beyond the Verse, p. 40).

It is a damning claim. That we, Westerners, live good lives, whilst and perhaps even because, others are suffering. Might we even turn Levinas’ conception into an environmental clarion call. We, who have become needy takers from the earth and its fullness, despite our good intentions, are we not depriving others further downstream from us of the shared benefit of those resources we enjoy with relative ease? Is this not another reason then, why crossing the Jordan was the fulcrum act of Israel realizing its potential. That in crossing, one remembers not just an upstream lake that gave, but must recall that there is also a downstream, in which the ripples we form are multiplied. The waste we pour into today's river, becomes the washing and drinking for the downstream dwellers by tomorrow.

Once, the Jordan River guarded Israel from this type of negligence, this rationalized greed. Now that its tributaries are polluted, its waters siphoned off for irrigation and intensive agriculture, its fish dead, now that only a thin brown gurgle of pesticide run-off will ever reach the desert, what now can we bath in, in order to remember our responsibility? What now can we cross over that will awaken ourselves to the geography of the caring deed and the downstream gesture? What now will save us from living in cities of manslaughter and negligence?

Crossing the Jordan River...
FROM THE TANAKH

NB: All English-language excerpts from the Tanakh are taken from the New Jewish Publication Society (JPS) Bible [1985], with the exception of the quote (Ezekiel 47:6) on the front cover, which comes from the English Standard Version.

‘...the whole plain of the Jordan...’
Abram said to Lot, "Let there be no strife between you and me, between my herdsmen and yours, for we are kinsmen.

Is not the whole land before you? Let us separate: if you go north, I will go south; and if you go south, I will go north."

Lot looked about him and saw how well watered was the whole plain of the Jordan, all of it -- this was before the LORD had destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah -- all the way to Zoar, like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt.

So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan, and Lot journeyed eastward. Thus they parted from each other;

Abram remained in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled in the cities of the Plain, pitching his tents near Sodom.

*Genesis 13:8-12*

‘...with my staff alone I crossed this Jordan...’
Then Jacob said, “O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD, who said to me, ‘Return to your native land and I will deal bountifully with you’!

I am unworthy of all the kindness that You have so steadfastly shown Your servant: with my staff alone I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps.

*Genesis 32:10-11*

‘...all Israel crossed on dry land...’
Early next morning, Joshua and all the Israelites set out from Shittim and marched to the Jordan. They did not cross immediately, but spent the night there.

Three days later, the officials went through the camp and charged the people as follows: "When you see the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD your God being borne by the levitical priests, you shall move forward. Follow it -- but keep a distance of some two thousand cubits from it, never coming any closer to it -- so that you may know by what route to march, since it is a road you have not traveled before."

And Joshua said to the people, “Purify yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will perform wonders in your midst.”

Then Joshua ordered the priests, “Take up the Ark of the Covenant and advance to the head of the people.” And they took up the Ark of the Covenant and marched at the head of the people.
The LORD said to Joshua, “This day, for the first time, I will exalt you in the sight of all Israel, so that they shall know that I will be with you as I was with Moses.

For your part, command the priests who carry the Ark of the Covenant as follows: When you reach the edge of the waters of the Jordan, make a halt in the Jordan.”

And Joshua said to the Israelites, “Come closer and listen to the words of the LORD your God.

By this,” Joshua continued, “you shall know that a living God is among you, and that He will dispossess for you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Gergashites, Amorites, and Jebusites: the Ark of the Covenant of the Sovereign of all the earth is advancing before you into the Jordan.

Now select twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one man from each tribe.

When the feet of the priests bearing the Ark of the LORD, the Sovereign of all the earth, come to rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan -- the water coming from upstream -- will be cut off and will stand in a single heap.”

When they came to the region of the Jordan, the Reubenites and the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh built an altar there by the Jordan, a great conspicuous altar.

A report reached the Israelites: “The Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh have built an altar opposite the land of Canaan, in the region of the Jordan, across from the Israelites.”

When they came to the region of the Jordan in the land of Canaan, the Reubenites and the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh built an altar there by the Jordan, a great conspicuous altar.

A report reached the Israelites: “The Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh have built an altar opposite the land of Canaan, in the region of the Jordan, across from the Israelites.”

When the people set out from their encampment to cross the Jordan, the priests bearing the Ark of the Covenant were at the head of the people.

Now the Jordan keeps flowing over its entire bed throughout the harvest season. But as soon as the bearers of the Ark reached the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the Ark dipped into the water at its edge, the waters coming down from upstream piled up in a single heap a great way off, at Adam, the town next to Zarethan; and those flowing away downstream to the Sea of the Arabah (the Dead Sea) ran out completely. So the people crossed near Jericho.

The priests who bore the Ark of the LORD’s Covenant stood on dry land exactly in the middle of the Jordan, while all Israel crossed over on dry land, until the entire nation had finished crossing the Jordan.

From the Tanakh...
What alarmed you, O sea, that you fled, Jordan, that you ran backward, mountains, that you skipped like rams, hills, like sheep?

Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the LORD, at the presence of the God of Jacob, who turned the rock into a pool of water, the flinty rock into a fountain.

**Psalm 114**

’The water has remained wholesome to this day…’

When the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha had set out from Gilgal.

Elijah said to Elisha, ”Stay here, for the LORD has sent me on to Bethel.” “As the LORD lives and as you live,” said Elisha, ”I will not leave you.” So they went down to Bethel.

Disciples of the prophets at Bethel came out to Elisha and said to him, ”Do you know that the LORD will take your master away from you today?” He replied, “I know it, too; be silent.”

Then Elijah said to him, ”Elisha, stay here, for the LORD has sent me on to Jericho.” “As the LORD lives and as you live,” said Elisha, ”I will not leave you.” So they went on to Jericho.

The disciples of the prophets who were at Jericho came over to Elisha and said to him, ”Do you know that the LORD will take your master away from you today?” He replied, ”I know it, too; be silent.”

Elijah said to him, ”Stay here, for the LORD has sent me on to the Jordan.” “As the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you,” he said, and the two of them went on.

Fifty men of the disciples of the prophets followed and stood by at a distance from them as the two of them stopped at the Jordan.

Thereupon Elijah took his mantle and, rolling it up, he struck the water; it divided to the right and left, so that the two of them crossed over on dry land.

As they were crossing, Elijah said to Elisha, ”Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?” Elisha answered, ”Let a double portion of your spirit pass on to me.”

“You have asked a difficult thing,” he said. ”If you see me as I am being taken from you, this will be granted to you; if not, it will not.”

As they kept on walking and talking, a fiery chariot with fiery horses suddenly appeared and separated one from the other; and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind.

Elisha saw it, and he cried out, ”Oh, father, father! Israel’s chariots and horsemen!” When he could no longer see him, he grasped his garments and rent them in two.

He picked up Elijah’s mantle, which had dropped from him; and he went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan.

Taking the mantle which had dropped from
Elijah, he struck the water and said, “Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?” As he too struck the water, it parted to the right and to the left, and Elisha crossed over.

When the disciples of the prophets at Jericho saw him from a distance, they exclaimed, “The spirit of Elijah has settled on Elisha!” And they went to meet him and bowed low before him to the ground.

They said to him, “Your servants have fifty able men with them. Let them go and look for your master; perhaps the spirit of the LORD has carried him off and cast him upon some mountain or into some valley.” “Do not send them,” he replied.

But they kept pressing him for a long time, until he said, “Send them.” So they sent out fifty men, who searched for three days but did not find him.

They came back to him while he was still in Jericho; and he said to them, “I told you not to go.”

The men of the town said to Elisha, “Look, the town is a pleasant place to live in, as my lord can see; but the water is bad and the land causes bereavement.”

He responded, “Bring me a new dish and put salt in it.” They brought it to him;

he went to the spring and threw salt into it. And he said, “Thus said the LORD: I heal this water; no longer shall death and bereavement come from it!”
From the Tanakh...

The water has remained wholesome to this day, in accordance with the word spoken by Elisha.

2 Kings 2:1–22

‘Go and bathe seven times in the Jordan...’

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was important to his lord and high in his favor, for through him the LORD had granted victory to Aram. But the man, though a great warrior, was a leper.

Once, when the Arameans were out raiding, they carried off a young girl from the land of Israel, and she became an attendant to Naaman’s wife.

She said to her mistress, “I wish Master could come before the prophet in Samaria; he would cure him of his leprosy.”

[Naaman] went and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said.

And the king of Aram said, “Go to the king of Israel, and I will send along a letter.” He set out, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten changes of clothing.

He brought the letter to the king of Israel. It read: “Now, when this letter reaches you, know that I have sent my courtier Naaman to you, that you may cure him of his leprosy.”

When the king of Israel read the letter, he rent his clothes and cried, “Am I God, to deal death or give life, that this fellow writes to me to cure a man of leprosy? Just see for yourselves that he is seeking a pretext against me!”

When Elisha, the man of God, heard that the king of Israel had rent his clothes, he sent a message to the king: “Why have you rent your clothes? Let him come to me, and he will learn that there is a prophet in Israel.”

So Naaman came with his horses and chariots and halted at the door of Elisha’s house.

Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, “Go and bathe seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.”

But Naaman was angered and walked away. “I thought,” he said, “he would surely come out to me, and would stand and invoke the LORD his God by name, and would wave his hand toward the spot, and cure the affected part.

Are not the Amanah and the Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? I could bathe in them and be clean!” And he stalked off in a rage.

But his servants came forward and spoke to him. “Sir,” they said, “if the prophet told you to do something difficult, would you not do it? How much more when he has only said to you, ‘Bathe and be clean.’”

So he went down and immersed himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had bidden; and his flesh became like a little boy’s, and he was clean.

Returning with his entire retinue to the man of God, he stood before him and exclaimed, “Now I know that there is no God in the whole world except in Israel! So please accept a gift from your servant.”
But he replied, “As the LORD lives, whom I serve, I will not accept anything.” He pressed him to accept, but he refused.

And Naaman said, “Then at least let your servant be given two mule-loads of earth; for your servant will never again offer up burnt offering or sacrifice to any god, except the LORD.

But may the LORD pardon your servant for this: When my master enters the temple of Rimmon to bow low in worship there, and he is leaning on my arm so that I must bow low in the temple of Rimmon -- when I bow low in the temple of Rimmon, may the LORD pardon your servant in this.”

And he said to him, “Go in peace.” When he had gone some distance from him,

Gehazi, the attendant of Elisha the man of God, thought: “My master has let that Aramean Naaman off without accepting what he brought! As the LORD lives, I will run after him and get something from him.”

So Gehazi hurried after Naaman. When Naaman saw someone running after him, he alighted from his chariot to meet him and said, “Is all well?”

“All is well,” he replied. “My master has sent me to say: Two youths, disciples of the prophets, have just come to me from the hill country of Ephraim. Please give them a talent of silver and two changes of clothing.”

Naaman said, “Please take two talents.” He urged him, and he wrapped the two talents of silver in two bags and gave them, along with two changes of clothes, to two of his servants, who carried them ahead of him.

When [Gehazi] arrived at the citadel, he took [the things] from them and deposited them in the house. Then he dismissed the men and they went their way.

He entered and stood before his master; and Elisha said to him, “Where have you been, Gehazi?” He replied, “Your servant has not gone anywhere.”

Then [Elisha] said to him, “Did not my spirit go along when a man got down from his chariot to meet you? Is this a time to take money in order to buy clothing and olive groves and vineyards, sheep and oxen, and male and female slaves?

Surely, the leprosy of Naaman shall cling to you and to your descendants forever.” And as [Gehazi] left his presence, he was snow-white with leprosy.

2 Kings, 5

‘Let us go to the Jordan...’

The disciples of the prophets said to Elisha, “See, the place where we live under your direction is too cramped for us.

Let us go to the Jordan, and let us each get a log there and build quarters there for ourselves to live in.” “Do so,” he replied.

Then one of them said, “Will you please come along with your servants?” “Yes, I will come,” he said; and he accompanied them. So they went to the Jordan and cut timber.

From the Tanakh...
As one of them was felling a trunk, the iron ax head fell into the water. And he cried aloud, “Alas, master, it was a borrowed one!”

“Where did it fall?” asked the man of God. He showed him the spot; and he cut off a stick and threw it in, and he made the ax head float.

“Pick it up,” he said; so he reached out and took it.

2 Kings 6:1-7

‘A land of with streams and springs...’

For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with streams and springs and fountains issuing from plain and hill;

a land of wheat and barley, of vines, figs, and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey;

a land where you may eat food without stint, where you will lack nothing; a land whose rocks are iron and from whose hills you can mine copper.

When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to the LORD your God for the good land which He has given you.

Take care lest you forget the LORD your God and fail to keep His commandments, His rules, and His laws, which I enjoin upon you today.

Deuteronomy 8:7-11

On the waters of the Jordan...

Rabbi Judah bar Simon in the name of Rabbi Yohanan: In the Torah, in the Prophets, and in the Writings we find proof that the Israelites were able to cross the Jordan only on account of the merit achieved by Jacob.

In the Torah: For with my staff I crossed this Jordan and now I have become two camps (Gen. 32:11).

In the Prophets: You will tell your children, “Israel crossed this Jordan on dry land.” (Josh. 4:22).

In the Writings: What is wrong with you, O Sea, that you flee? O Jordan, that you turn away from before the God of Jacob (Ps. 114:5,7).

Midrash B’reshith Rabbah 76:5

Rabbi Levi said, There is a place where the Jordan falls with a roar into the hot springs of Tiberias. In his great trepidation, Jacob entered there and Esau shut him in, But the Holy One, blessed be He, dug an opening for Jacob at a different point, so that he got through. Thus it is written, When you pass through water, I will be with you; Through streams, they shall not overwhelm you (Isaiah 43:2).

Midrash B’reshith Rabbah 76.5

The waters of the Jordan surround all the earth, half thereof (flow) above the earth and the other half below the earth.

Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer, Ch. 11
On the care of creation...
When God created the first human beings, God led them around the Garden of Eden and said: "Look at my works! See how beautiful they are—how excellent! For your sake I created them all. See to it that you do not spoil and destroy My world; for if you do, there will be no one else to repair it."

*Midrash Kohelet Rabbah 1*

On the blessing of rain...
Rabbi Tanhum ben Hiyya said, "The falling of the rain is greater than the giving of the Torah, for the giving of the Law was a joy only to Israel, while the falling of the rain is a rejoicing for all the world, including the cattle and the wild beasts and the birds."

*Midrash Tehillim 117*

Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai said, "Three things are of equal importance - earth, humans and rain". Rabbi Levi ben Hiyyata said, "...to teach that without earth, there is no rain, and without rain, the earth cannot endure, and without either, humans cannot exist".

*Midrash B’reshith Rabbah 13:3*

On the just management of water ...
The rivers and the springs that are drawn upon belong to everyone.

*Tosefta (Bava Kamma 6:15)*

On awe and reverence...
Small is the world that most of us pay attention to, and limited is our concern. What do we see when we see the world? There are three aspects of nature that command our attention: its power, its beauty, and its grandeur. Accordingly, there are three ways in which we may relate ourselves to the world – we may exploit it, we may enjoy it, we may accept it in awe.

*Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, God in Search of Man, 1959*

On human stewardship and responsibility...
There can be no doubt in the mind of any intelligent, thinking person that when the Torah instructs humankind to dominate – "And have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves upon the Earth" (Bereshit 1:28) – it does not mean the domination of a harsh ruler, who afflicts his people and servants merely to fulfill his personal whim and desire, according to the crookedness of his heart. It is unthinkable that the Torah would impose such a decree of servitude, sealed for all eternity, upon the world of God, Who is “good to all, and His mercy is upon all His works” (Psalms 145:9), and Who declared, “The world shall be built upon kindness” (Psalms 89:3).

*Abraham Isaac Kook, First Chief Rabbi of Israel*

Regard all living things as God’s property. Destroy none, abuse none, waste nothing, employ all things wisely...look upon all creatures as servants in the household of creation.

*Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch*
The simplest image, and surely the most sensible one, in thinking about our ecological responsibilities is to see the earth as belonging to the source of being, and us as its trustees, charged with conserving and if possible beautifying it for the sake of our grandchildren not yet born.

_Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, The Dignity of Difference_

**On care for the land of Israel...**

In our generation, the Land has been transformed from a virtual reality into a very concrete one. Israel is no longer a dreamed-of abstraction but a flesh and blood country, with factories, parks, sewage, roads, wildlife, and millions of people – Jews and non Jews – who call it home...the question of the environmental relationship of Jews to land, and of Jews to the Land, is a relatively new one. What does it mean to relate to the important concepts of a sense of place and responsibility for one’s place as Jews, and specifically, as Jews living comfortably, and apparently permanently, in many places all over the world? And what does that mean regarding our relationship to the Land and to the State of Israel?

_Jeremy Benstein, Judaism and the Environment_

**A prayer of praise for creation...**

Praised are You, Our God, Ruler of the universe, former of light, creator of darkness, maker of peace and the creator of all things. In Your mercy light shines over the earth and upon all who inhabit it. Through your goodness the work of the creation is daily renewed. How great are Your works, O God, in wisdom You have made all of them. The earth is filled with your creations.

_Daily Prayer, Siddur Amidah, Yotzer Or (Former of Light)_

**On solitude and communion...**

Master of the universe grant me the ability to be alone;

May it be my custom to go outdoors each day

Among the trees and the grass,

Among all growing things;

And, there may I be alone to enter into prayer

There I may express all that is in my heart

Talking to you, the one to whom I belong.

_Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav (1772 – 1810)_

**On the miracle of the earth's beauty...**

With the ink of its showers and rains, with the quill of its illuminating lightning, and the hand of its clouds, autumn wrote a letter upon the garden, in purple and blue.

No artist could conceive of such things.

And this is why the earth,
grown jealous of the sky,
embroidered stars in the folds of the
flowerbeds.

*Solomon b. Judah Ibn Gabirol of Cordova (c.1021-1058)*

**On wonder and gratitude...**

My friends, let us give thanks for Wonder.

Let us give thanks for the Wonder of Life that infuses all things now and forever.

Blessed is the Source of Life, the Fountain of Being the wellspring of goodness, compassion and kindness, from which we draw to make for justice and peace.

From the creative power of Life we derive food and harvest, from the bounty of the earth and the yields of the heavens we are sustained and are able to sustain others.

All Life is holy, sacred, worthy of respect and dignity.

Let us give thanks for the power of heart to sense the holy in the midst of the simple. We eat not simply to satisfy our own appetites, we eat to sustain ourselves in the task we have been given.

Each of us is unique, coming into the world with a gift no other can offer: ourselves.

We eat to nourish the vehicle of giving, we eat to sustain our task of world repair, our quest for harmony, peace and justice.

We eat and we are revived, and we give thanks to the lives that were ended to nourish our own.

May we merit their sacrifice, and honor their sparks of holiness through our deeds of loving kindness.

We give thanks to the Power that makes for Meeting, for our table has been a place of dialogue and friendship.

We give thanks to Life.

May we never lose touch with the simple joy and wonder of sharing a meal.

*Rabbi Rami M. Shapiro*
Nelson Mandela on seeing beyond our own lifetime...

“Our clean flowing rivers must be known by my grandchildren’s grandchildren, many years from now, just as I knew them as a child, many years ago.”

_Nelson Mandela_

‘Now the waters are poisoned’

We have forgotten who we are.
We have forgotten who we are.
We have alienated ourselves from the unfolding of the cosmos.
We have become estranged from the movements of the earth.
We have turned our backs on the cycles of life.
We have forgotten who we are.
We have sought only our own security.
We have exploited simply for our own ends.
We have distorted our knowledge.
We have abused our power.
We have forgotten who we are.
Now the land is barren.
And the waters are poisoned.
And the air is polluted.
We have forgotten who we are.
Now the forests are dying,
And the creatures are disappearing,
And the humans are despairing.
We have forgotten who we are.
We ask for forgiveness.
We ask for the gift of remembering.
We ask for the strength to change.
We have forgotten who we are.

UN Environmental Sabbath Program

To restore the waters
We join with the earth and each other.
To bring new life to the land
To restore the waters
To refresh the air.
We join with the earth and each other.
To renew the forests
To care for the plants
To protect the creatures.
We join with the earth and each other.
To celebrate the seas
To rejoice in the sunlight
To sing the song of the stars.
We join with the earth and each other.
To recreate the human community
To promote justice and peace
To remember our children.
We join with the earth and each other.
We join together as many and diverse expressions
Of one loving mystery: for the healing of the
Earth and the renewal of all life.

UN Environmental Sabbath Program
Other Reflections & Insights...

On our inter-dependence with the natural world...

Humans have become so numerous and our tools so powerful that we have driven fellow creatures to extinction, dammed the great rivers, torn down ancient forests, poisoned the earth, rain and wind, and ripped holes in the sky.

Our science has brought pain as well as joy; our comfort is paid for by the suffering of millions.

We are learning from our mistakes, we are mourning our vanished kin, and we now build a new politics of hope.

We respect and uphold the absolute need for clean air, water and soil.

We see that economic activities that benefit the few while shrinking the inheritance of many are wrong.

And since environmental degradation erodes biological capital forever, full ecological and social cost must enter all equations of development.

We are one brief generation in the long march of time; the future is not ours to erase.

So where knowledge is limited, we will remember all those who will walk after us, and err on the side of caution.

*The Declaration of Inter-dependence, David Suzuki Foundation*
TIMES AND SEASONS: SUKKOT

The holiday of Sukkot presents an opportunity for communities to engage with the call to bring mayim chayim - 'living water' - back to the Jordan River.

Water and Sukkot

By Rabbi Jacob Elisha Fine

This article was written for Huffington Post by Rabbi Fine, Director of Programs at the Jewish Farm School, and is re-printed here with his kind permission.

"You are our God. Who causes the wind to blow and the rain to fall. May it bring blessing and not curse. May it bring life and not death. May it bring bounty and not famine." - From the Prayer for Rain recited on Shmini Atzeret.

The holiday of Sukkot is the Jewish tradition’s water festival. The Land of Israel depends on an all-important rainy season that typically begins around Sukkot and the themes of rain and water are embedded in the weeklong festival in a number of ways.

Whereas tradition holds that humans are judged for life or for death on Rosh Hashanah, on Sukkot God passes judgment for rain for the ensuing year (Mishnah, Rosh Hashanah 1:2). In ancient Israel, and still for most of the world today, a “bad judgment” amounting to inadequate and/or untimely rainfall is nothing short of disastrous.

With this appreciation of, and concern for, our utter dependence on water, Sukkot incorporates a number of sensorial rain themed rituals, prayers and petitions that include shaking four biblical plant species associated with water, beating willow branches (one of the four species) on the earth, and on Shmini Atzeret, the one-day festival at the end of Sukkot, the recitation of a hauntingly beautiful Prayer for Rain.

The Torah is full of references to mayim chayim, “living waters.” The language of mayim chayim is used in a number of contexts. It is used to describe the fresh, potable water that Isaac’s servants find when re-digging Abraham’s stopped wells (Bereshit 26:19), and by the prophet Jeremiah who refers to the Creator as the “Source of Living Waters” (Jeremiah 17:13). Finally, the language of “living waters” is used commonly in the context of ritual purification for both people and for objects (Numbers 19:17, for example).

The common thread between these various uses of mayim chayim is water’s primary association with our very existence. In each of these cases, water is meant to be taken both literally and metaphorically as a substance upon which humans, and all life, depends. The early rabbis later came to distinguish “living water” to be found in flowing forms such as rain, streams, lakes and springs from “dead water” that has been sitting stagnant in a well or closed body of water and is, therefore, unacceptable for purification purposes.

The conclusion of the Prayer for Rain that Jews recite on Shmini Atzeret pleads, “You are our God. Who causes the wind to blow and the rain to fall. May it bring blessing and not curse. May
Times and Seasons: Sukkot...

it bring life and not death. May it bring bounty and not famine."

In our generation, Sukkot is an opportunity to wake up to the damage we are doing to the Living Waters. While Jews plead and pray that we be inscribed for life during the High Holy Days, on Sukkot it is fitting that we pray for the strength of character, the will and the heart to protect our planet’s watersheds and waterways as if they were the arteries and channels running through our own bodies. And this year, may water be for life and not for death.
JEWISH DECLARATIONS ON ECOLOGY

Jewish Declaration on Nature

This is the Jewish declaration on Nature, taken from the original Assisi Declarations on Nature which were created in 1986, at a meeting held in Assisi by WWF-International, at which five leaders of the five major world religions were invited to come and discuss how their faiths could help save the natural world.

"WHOEVER IS MERCIFUL to all creatures is a descendant of our ancestor Abraham" (Bezoh 32b). In the sacred writings of Judaism, Jews are described over and over again as “merciful people, the children of merciful people.” (Yebamot 79a, Shabbat 133b). The Talmud even tells us (Shabbat 151b) that heaven rewards the person who has concern and compassion for the rest of creation, but this assurance of reward is not the major moral thrust of Jewish teaching. Our tradition emphasizes that Jews are commanded to do what is moral, "not for the sake of receiving a reward" (Abot 1:3). The good is necessary even when it does not redound to our immediate, personal benefit.

When God created the world, so the Bible tells us, He made order out the primal chaos. The sun, the moon, and the stars, plants, animals, and ultimately man, were each created with a rightful and necessary place in the universe. They were not to encroach on each other, "Even the divine teaching, the Torah, which was revealed from on high, was given in a set measure" (Vayikra Rabbah 15:2) and even these holy words may not extend beyond their assigned limit. "And the Lord took man and put him in the Garden of Eden, to tend it and guard it" (Bereshit 2:15). Soon Adam, man, the one creature who is most godlike, gave names to all of creation, as God looked on and approved.” And the name that Adam gave to each living being has remained its name” (Bereshit 2:19) forever. In the Kabbalistic teaching, as Adam named all of God’s creatures, he helped define their essence. Adam swore to live in harmony with those whom he had named. Thus, at the very beginning of time, man accepted responsibility before God for all of creation.

Judaism, of course, knows the doctrine of the world beyond death, but its central concern is with life in this world. The tzaddik, the righteous Jew, is not a pillar saint who has withdrawn from the world. He is someone whose conduct in the very midst of life helps to establish that which seems impossible – one can live in this world of righteousness without encroaching on the rights of other people, or of any of God’s creatures.

The festivals of the Jewish religion do call upon us to stand before God, in the awe at His majesty, trembling before His judgments, but that is not the dominant mood of the Jewish faith. The festivals celebrate, in joy, the cycle of the seasons of nature. The rabbis even insisted that: "He who has denied himself any one of the rightful joys in this world is a sinner” (Baba Kama 91b). The highest form of obedience to God’s commandments is to do them not in mere acceptance but in the nature of union with Him.
In such a joyous encounter between man and God, the very rightness of the world is affirmed.

The encounter of God and man in nature is thus conceived in Judaism as a seamless web with man as the leader and custodian of the natural world. Even in the many centuries when Jews were most involved in their immediate dangers and destiny, this universalist concern has never withered. In this century, Jews have experienced the greatest tragedy of their history when one third of their people were murdered by unnatural men and, therefore, we are today particularly sensitive to the need for a world in which each of God’s creations in what He intended it to be. Now, when the whole world is in peril, when the environment is in danger of being poisoned and various species, both plant and animal, are becoming extinct, it is our Jewish responsibility to put the defense of the whole of nature at the very centre of our concern.

And yet it must be said, in all truth, that this question of man’s responsibility to the rest of creation cannot be defined by simply expressing our respect for all of nature. There is a tension at the centre of the Biblical tradition, embedded in the very story of creation itself, over the question of power and stewardship. The world was created because God willed it, but why did He will it? Judaism has maintained, in all its versions, that this world is the arena that God created for man, half beast and half angel, to prove that he could behave as a moral being. The Bible did not fail to demand even of God Himself that He be bound, as much as man, by the law of morality. Thus, Abraham stood before God, after He announced that He was about to destroy the wicked city of Sodom, and Abraham demanded of God Himself that He produce moral justification for this act: “Shall not judge of all the earth do justice?” (Bereshit 18:25). Comparably, man was given dominion over nature, but he was commanded to behave towards the rest of creation with justice and compassion. Man lives, always, in tension between his power and the limits set by conscience.

Man’s carnivorous nature is not taken for granted, or praised, in the fundamental teachings of Judaism. The rabbis of the Talmud told that men were vegetarians in earliest times, between creation and the generation of Noah. In the twelfth century Maimonides, the greatest of all rabbinic scholars, explained that animal sacrifices had been instituted in ancient Judaism as a concession to the prevalent ancient practice of making such offerings to the pagan gods (The Guide for the Perplexed P111:32). The implication is clear, that Judaism was engaged in weaning men from such practices.

Judaism as a religion offers the option of eating animal flesh, and most Jews do, but in our own century there has been a movement towards vegetarianism among very pious Jews. A whole galaxy of central rabbinic and spiritual teachers, including several past and present Chief Rabbis of the Holy Land, have been affirming vegetarianism as the ultimate mean of the Jewish moral teaching. They have been proclaiming the autonomy of all living creatures as the value which our religious tradition must now teach to all of its believers. Let this affirmation resound this day
and in the days to come. Let it be heard by all our brethren, wherever they may be, as the commandment which we must strive to realize. This cannot be achieved in one generation, and it will not happen through pressure from within or without. Jews will move increasingly to vegetarianism out of their deepening knowledge of what their tradition commands, as they understand it in this age.

Our ancestor Abraham inherited his passion for nature from Adam. The later rabbis never forgot it. Some twenty centuries ago they told the story of two men who were out on the water in a rowboat. Suddenly, one of them started to saw under his feet. He maintained that it was his right to do whatever he wished with the place which belonged to him. The other answered him that they were in the rowboat together; the hole that he was making would sink both of them. (Vayikra Rabbah 4:6).

We have a responsibility to life, to defend it everywhere, not only against our own sins but also against those of others. We are all passengers together in this same fragile and glorious world. Let us safeguard our rowboat – and let us row together.
Across the world people are becoming increasingly aware that certain forms of human activity are leading to environmental damage and seriously limiting the possibility of a sustainable development for all. Climate change, air and water pollution, desertification, resource depletion, and loss of biodiversity are among the consequences. While many have contributed to this damage, all must learn to live in a way which respects the integrity of the delicate balance that exists among the earth’s ecosystems.

[...]

The respect due to each person, endowed with a God-given dignity, allows for no exception and excludes no one. Life is precious. We are to affirm it, to promote it, to care for and cherish it. When harm is done to the environment, the lives of both individuals and communities are profoundly affected. Any social, economic, or political activity that directly or indirectly destroys life or diminishes the possibility for people to live in dignity is counter to God’s will.

[...]

The human person has an immense responsibility, that of caring for all of creation. No person or group can use the resources of this earth as proprietor, but only as God’s steward who destined these goods for all.

Our responsibility for all that dwells in the earth and for the earth itself extends into the future. The earth is not ours to destroy (cf. Dt 20:19), but to hand on in trust to future generations. We cannot, therefore, recklessly consume its resources to satisfy needs that are artificially created and sustained by a society that tends to live only for the present. We also need to act, together whenever feasible, to assure that sound practices, guaranteed by law, are established in our countries and local communities for the future preservation of the environment.

Respect for God’s creation, of which we are a part, must become a way of life. We therefore call upon our respective religious communities and families to educate children, both by teaching and example, to fulfill the trust that God has confided to us.

“...
Few texts have had a deeper influence on Western civilization than the first chapter of Bereshit, with its momentous vision of the universe coming into being as the work of God. Set against the grandeur of the narrative, what stands out is the smallness yet uniqueness of humans, vulnerable but also undeniably set apart from all other beings. The words of the Psalmist echo the wonder and humility that the primordial couple must have felt as they beheld the splendor of creation:

“When I consider your heavens, The work of your fingers, The moon and the stars, Which you have set in place. What is humanity that you are mindful of it, The children of mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them little lower than the angels And crowned them with glory and honor.”  
(Psalm 8:3-5)

The honor and glory that crowns the human race is possession of the earth, which is granted as the culmination of God’s creative work: “Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it.” This notion is fortified in Psalm 115: “The heavens are the Lord’s heavens, but the earth God has given to humanity.” While the creation narrative clearly establishes God as Master of the Universe, it is the human being who is appointed master of the earth.

Grappling with the challenging notion of humans as divinely-ordained owners and subduers of the earth, we come face to face with the fundamental questions of our place in the universe and our responsibility for it. A literal interpretation suggests a world in which people cut down forests, slaughter animals, and dump waste into the seas at their leisure, much like we see in our world today.

On the other hand, as Rav Kook, first Chief Rabbi of Israel, writes, any intelligent person should know that Bereshit 1:28, “does not mean the domination of a harsh ruler, who afflicts his people and servants merely to fulfill his personal whim and desire, according to the crookedness of his heart.” Could God have really created such a complex and magnificent world solely for the caprice of humans?

A Second Narrative

Bereshit chapter 1 is only one side of the complex biblical equation. It is balanced by the narrative of Bereshit chapter 2, which features a second Creation narrative that focuses on humans and their place in the Garden of Eden. The first person is set in the Garden “to work it and take care of it.”
The two Hebrew verbs used here are significant. The first--"le’ovdah"--literally means "to serve it." The human being is thus both master and servant of nature. The second--"leshomrah"--means "to guard it." This is the verb used in later biblical legislation to describe the responsibilities of a guardian of property that belongs to someone else. This guardian must exercise vigilance while protecting, and is personally liable for losses that occur through negligence. This is perhaps the best short definition of humanity’s responsibility for nature as the Bible conceives it.

We do not own nature--"The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof." (Psalm 24:1) We are its stewards on behalf of God, who created and owns everything. As guardians of the earth, we are duty-bound to respect its integrity.

The mid-nineteenth century commentator Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch put this rather well in an original interpretation of Bereshit 1:26, “Let us make the human in our image after our own likeness.” The passage has always been puzzling, since the hallmark of the Torah is the singularity of God. Who would God consult in the process of creating humans?

The "us," says Hirsch, refers to the rest of creation. Before creating the human, a being destined to develop the capacity to alter and possibly endanger the natural world, God sought the approval of nature itself. This interpretation implies that we would use nature only in such a way that is faithful to the purposes of its Creator and acknowledges nature’s consenting to humanity’s existence.

The mandate in Bereshit 1 to exercise dominion is, therefore, not technical, but moral: humanity would control, within our means, the use of nature towards the service of God. Further, this mandate is limited by the requirement to serve and guard as seen in Bereshit 2. The famous story of Bereshit 2-3--the eating of the forbidden fruit and Adam and Eve’s subsequent exile from Eden--supports this point.

Not everything is permitted. There are limits to how we interact with the earth. The Torah has commandments regarding how to sow crops, how to collect eggs, and how to preserve trees in a time of war, just to name a few. When we do not treat creation according to God’s Will, disaster can follow.

A Degraded Planet

We see this today as more and more cities sit under a cloud of smog and as mercury advisories are issued over large sectors of our fishing waters. Deforestation of the rainforests, largely a result of humanity’s growing demand for timber and beef, has brought on irrevocable destruction of plant and animal species.

We can no longer ignore the massive negative impact that our global industrial society is having on the ecosystems of the earth. Our unbounded use of fossil fuels to fuel our energy-intensive lifestyles is causing global climate change. An international consensus of scientists predicts more intense and destructive storms, floods, and droughts resulting from these human-induced changes in the atmosphere. If we do not take action now, we risk the very survival of civilization as we know it.
The Midrash says that God showed Adam around the Garden of Eden and said, “Look at my works! See how beautiful they are--how excellent! For your sake I created them all. See to it that you do not spoil and destroy My world; for if you do, there will be no one else to repair it.”

Creation has its own dignity as God’s masterpiece, and though we have the mandate to use it, we have none to destroy or despoil it. Rabbi Hirsch says that Shabbat was given to humanity “in order that he should not grow overweening in his dominion” of God’s creation. On the Day of Rest, “he must, as it were, return the borrowed world to its Divine Owner in order to realize that it is but lent to him.”

Ingrained in the process of creation and central to the life of every Jew is a weekly reminder that our dominion of earth must be l’shem shamayim -- in the name of Heaven.

The choice is ours. If we continue to live as though God had only commanded us to subdue the earth, we must be prepared for our children to inherit a seriously degraded planet, with the future of human civilization put into question. If we see our role as masters of the earth as a unique opportunity to truly serve and care for the planet, its creatures, and its resources, then we can reclaim our status as stewards of the world, and raise our new generations in an environment much closer to that of Eden.
This week’s Torah portion, Hukkat, can be viewed as a narrative about the Jewish people and water. Water - in Hebrew, *mayim* - is mentioned 22 times. The portion begins with God’s command to mix water with the ashes of a red cow for purification. Next, Miriam dies, and the well which provided the Israelites with water disappears. The Jewish people quarrel with Moses, complaining (Numbers 20:3), “There is no water to drink!” Moses and Aaron strike the rock and God brings forth water.

Next, Moses asks the Edomites to pass through their land, with a promise not to drink their water, or alternately, to buy it from them. Then the Jewish people travel by way of the Sea of Reeds—where God had split the sea for them—and on their desert journey complain again about lacking water. They arrive in modern-day Jordan and sing an exultant song about their appreciation to God for water. Finally, the Torah portion ends with them encamped on the eastern bank of the Jordan River.

Learning to be Appreciative

What is God teaching us through the Torah’s water narrative? The Jews’ experiences with water in the desert can be understood as a spiritual training to cultivate appreciation for God’s goodness. God takes the essential, tangible resource of water and gives it to us in environments where we do not have it.

We learn to appreciate water and to know Who really provides it through the process described here of taking water for granted, losing it, and then being given it by God. In an ultimate sense, water does not nourish us. God does. Water is one of the chief means by which God provides life to us every day. The see-saw experience of having water and then losing it is the means to develop the spiritual muscles of appreciating God.

Yet, always being on the positive side of having water leads a person to take it for granted. Today, piped water is incredibly convenient; it relieves us from carrying our water from streams and cisterns to our homes. Today, people in the West tend to lack an appreciation of where water comes from, and they end up wasting and polluting it. Where appreciation ends, misuse begins.

Abuses Abound

This explains how much of the western and southeastern United States could experience water scarcity and need government agencies to call for conservation. Or how we could lose sight of how much energy goes into bringing every
gallon to our faucet. In many areas of the United States and the world, electricity-producing generators power pumps that raise water hundreds or even over a thousand feet from the underground aquifer to the water tanks at the top of local mountain ranges, so that gravity can then take it to our homes.

Given this, if we use 230 gallons of water a day, we are raising almost 2,000 pounds in weight every day up the vertical height of a 60 story skyscraper. Over an entire lifetime, this is a lot of energy used and a lot of carbon put into the atmosphere. Misusing water wastes energy and unnecessarily causes global climate change. Scientists predict that climate change is likely to cause sea levels to rise, impacting sandbars like Long Beach Island and New Jersey, and islands like Manhattan, as well as causing more intense storms and floods.

Environmental problems do not just have to do with air pollution, global warming, species extinction, or water scarcity. Those are merely symptoms. As long as we only treat the symptoms, the problems will continue popping up and getting bigger.

**Branches vs. Roots**

Henry David Thoreau said, “There are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the root.” Today we generally hack at the branches: in many countries we spend significant amounts on wastewater treatment and desalinization plants to produce more usable water, and in some states we enact Draconian measures like water rationing when the aquifer just gets too low.

Environmental problems at their root are spiritual problems—they stem from a lack of awareness of the Source of all Existence. Once we come to that awareness, we can address environmental problems in very different ways. Since beneath every environmental problem is a spiritual problem, awaiting every environmental problem is a spiritual solution. Drop a stone in the pond and the ripples will reach far beyond you.

The Torah is a blueprint for spiritual living on this planet. It enables us to transform our daily, mundane ways into holy acts. If we can preserve our connection to God’s sustaining power in our world of great abundance, we can transform our lives and the world in holy ways.

The great Sage of Talmudic times, Rabbi Tarfon, teaches that “The day is short, the work is much, the workers are lazy, the reward is great, and the Master is pressing.” I might add: the climate is changing, the seas are rising, the glaciers are melting.

We can address environmental issues at their roots if we live according to the Torah’s call. And when we get at the roots, we’re going to deal with many of the branches as well. When we finally embrace this path as a people, our spiritual problems masquerading as environmental problems will make their way down the drain.

**Suggestion Action Items:**

1. **Easy:** Connect to the physical source of the water you drink. Go to that source and sit by it, like Jacob and Moses did. Listen to the water. Think about how most of your body...
Water Consciousness...

is comprised of water. Try this every year or every month and see what happens.

2. **Still not demanding a lot**: Contemplate your monthly water bill, remembering that each drop is given to you as a gift. If you use close to 230 gallons a day, like the average person in the United States does, think about key areas where you could reduce the amount you use.

3. **More involved**: Connect this physical substance to its spiritual source, which is the Creator of the Universe. Before and after you drink water or any liquid, say the blessing on it. The blessing begins with the word ‘baruch,’ which is related to ‘bereicha,’ pool, since God is like an infinite pool.

4. **Still more involved**: Another gateway to water awareness is the Jewish ritual netilat yadayim, washing hands with water for purity. By using a vessel to pour water over our hands when arising in the morning and before eating bread, we can connect to the purifying potential of water.

5. **For the truly committed**: Take a few concrete steps toward water conservation. Install low-flow faucets and toilets. Hook up a grey water system to water your lawn with sink water.
Notes, Additions, Reflections...
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