

Judaism's Approach To The Phenomena Of Nature

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Introduction

Judaism does not contain a single ancient word equivalent to the modern term “environmentalism.” The Torah and rabbinic literature were written long before industrial pollution, climate change, plastic waste, or mass extinction became recognizable global problems. Yet Jewish texts repeatedly ask how human beings should use land, animals, water, food, and material goods. They do not treat nature as morally irrelevant. Nor do they present a simple rule that nature must never be changed. The tradition is more demanding than either extreme.

Human beings are permitted to cultivate, build, eat, and protect themselves. At the same time, the world is not regarded as ownerless material available for limitless consumption. Psalm 24 begins with the claim that the earth and everything within it belong to God. (*Psalms* 24:1) That theological statement changes the moral position of the human user. A person may possess property in law, but ownership does not erase responsibility. Jewish environmental thought grows from this tension between use and restraint, human need and the integrity of creation.

Creation, Dominion, and Responsibility

The opening chapters of Genesis contain two images that have shaped later discussion. In Genesis 1, humanity is told to fill the earth and exercise dominion over other living creatures. Read carelessly, dominion can sound like a license to exploit. Within the wider biblical account, however, royal authority is expected to preserve order and protect what has been entrusted to it. Power carries obligation.

Genesis 2 offers a more intimate image. The human is placed in the garden “to work it and to guard it.” (*Genesis* 2:15) Cultivation and protection appear together. Work without protection can exhaust the land; protection without any human use would ignore the command to cultivate. The verse therefore resists the idea that environmental responsibility means removing people entirely from nature. Human life takes place inside a cultivated world, but cultivation must remain compatible with care.

A rabbinic teaching often quoted in modern Jewish environmental writing imagines God showing Adam the beauty of creation and warning him not to ruin it because no one will repair it afterward. Whether applied directly to present ecological crises or read first in its original moral setting, the

teaching captures an important idea: damage can exceed the ability of the person who caused it to restore what was lost.

Bal Tashchit: The Prohibition against Needless Destruction

The best-known Jewish principle connected with environmental ethics is *bal tashchit*, usually translated as “do not destroy” or “do not waste.” Its biblical source is Deuteronomy 20:19–20. (*Deuteronomy* 20:19–20; Schwartz, 1997) During a siege, an army is forbidden to destroy fruit trees simply to use them as military material. The command is striking because it places a limit on destruction in wartime, when ordinary restraints are often weakened.

Rabbinic law extended the principle beyond fruit trees. Later discussion applies it to wasting food, fuel, clothing, household objects, and other useful resources. The central concern is not that nothing may ever be cut down, discarded, or consumed. The prohibition addresses wanton, pointless, or disproportionate destruction. A dangerous tree may be removed; a material may be used for a legitimate need; damaged goods may be discarded when they cannot reasonably be repaired. Context and purpose matter.

This nuance is important for modern environmental ethics. Calling every use of a natural resource a violation would make ordinary life impossible and would not reflect the legal tradition. Yet convenience is not automatically a sufficient reason. Throwing away edible food, leaving energy running without purpose, replacing usable goods for status, or destroying habitat without considering alternatives can all be examined through the question raised by *bal tashchit*: Is this loss necessary, and is the benefit proportionate to what is being destroyed?

Scholar Eilon Schwartz has shown that *bal tashchit* developed through legal reasoning rather than as a ready-made modern ecological slogan. That history makes the principle more useful, not less. It encourages judgment instead of moral performance. The difficult cases are precisely those in which human benefit is real but environmental cost is also serious.

Shabbat and the Discipline of Stopping

Shabbat is usually discussed as a religious and social institution, but it also changes the relationship between work and creation. For one day each week, ordinary production stops. Human beings, servants, resident strangers, and working animals are included in the rest described by the Torah. The command does not condemn work; six days of work remain part of the pattern. It denies that work should become endless.

This rhythm has environmental significance because modern consumption often depends on

continuous production, transport, advertising, and attention. Shabbat creates a boundary around economic activity. A person is asked to experience time without proving worth through output or purchase. Meals, prayer, study, walking, family, and community become central.

It would be anachronistic to claim that biblical Shabbat was designed as a climate policy. Its primary meanings are theological, covenantal, and social. Nevertheless, the practice teaches habits relevant to ecological life: restraint, gratitude, limits, and freedom from the belief that every hour must be converted into production. Environmental problems are partly technological, but they are also problems of appetite and pace.

Shmita: Land, Debt, and Social Balance

Leviticus 25 describes the sabbatical year, or *shmita*, in which agricultural land in Israel is given rest. (*Leviticus* 25:1–24) What grows is not treated as an ordinary privately managed harvest. The chapter connects the land’s rest with the welfare of servants, residents, and animals. Deuteronomy adds the release of certain debts at the end of the seventh-year cycle.

The agricultural laws of *shmita* have detailed legal applications and cannot be reduced to the modern instruction “leave every field unused once every seven years.” Rabbinic authorities have debated how the commandments operate under different historical, economic, and geographic conditions. Still, the sabbatical pattern makes a remarkable moral claim: land and economic relationships should not be driven indefinitely by maximum extraction.

Modern readers have used *shmita* to think about soil health, debt, inequality, food access, and the limits of ownership. Such applications should be made carefully. Ancient agrarian law does not provide a complete policy for industrial agriculture. It offers a framework in which ecological rest and social justice belong to the same moral conversation. Land degradation and poverty are not separate issues when the same economic system affects both.

Animals as Creatures with Claims

Jewish law permits the use of animals for food and work, but it places restrictions on their treatment. The command to allow working animals to rest on Shabbat recognizes that laboring creatures are not machines. Deuteronomy 25:4 forbids muzzling an ox while it threshes, preventing the animal from being surrounded by food while denied the ability to eat. (*Deuteronomy* 25:4) Exodus 23:5 requires assistance to an animal struggling under a burden, even when it belongs to an enemy.

Rabbinic discussion develops the principle of *tza’ar ba’alei chayim*, the prevention of animal suffering. The exact legal scope is debated, but cruelty is not treated as morally neutral. Human need may justify certain uses, while unnecessary pain remains objectionable.

These sources create difficult questions for modern industrial agriculture. Conditions that were impossible in the ancient world—large confinement systems, long-distance transport, selective breeding for extreme production, and mechanized slaughter—require fresh application of old principles. Jewish communities do not all reach the same conclusions about vegetarianism, meat consumption, or certification. The tradition does, however, make indifference to suffering difficult to defend.

Hunting also illustrates the distinction between need and sport. Biblical figures hunt, but later Jewish authorities often regarded recreational hunting with suspicion because it risks cruelty and danger without supplying a necessary purpose. Again, the tradition does not teach that humans may never kill an animal. It asks why the act is being done and what kind of character the act cultivates.

Water, Pollution, and Neighbourly Harm

Rabbinic civil law contains detailed discussion of smoke, odor, noise, waste, water channels, hazardous structures, and activities that damage neighbouring property. The second chapter of tractate Bava Batra is particularly important. Its cases concern local disputes rather than global ecology, yet they establish a principle with wider relevance: a person's ownership does not include an unlimited right to impose harm on others.

Pollution creates exactly this kind of problem. The benefits of an activity may be private while the costs are carried downwind or downstream. A factory earns revenue, but residents breathe the emissions. A farm gains production, but fertilizer enters shared water. The ancient cases cannot decide modern regulatory standards by themselves, but they challenge the claim that private economic freedom ends the moral inquiry.

Water receives special attention throughout Jewish life because it is both ordinary and life-sustaining. Blessings for rain, prayers during drought, ritual uses of water, and biblical accounts of wells all preserve awareness of dependence. In places where clean water appears automatically from a tap, that dependence can be forgotten. Conservation begins partly by recovering the sense that water is received before it is consumed.

Green Space, Cities, and the Meaning of Boundaries

Numbers 35 describes open land surrounding the towns assigned to the Levites. Modern writers sometimes call these areas biblical greenbelts. The comparison can be helpful, but it should not be pushed too far. The passage belongs to a specific system of Levitical cities and grazing land, not a general municipal planning statute.

Even so, the text recognizes that a settlement needs space around it. Cities cannot be understood only as buildings and roads. Open land supports animals, food systems, drainage, movement, and human well-being. Contemporary planning faces similar questions about parks, tree cover, heat, flood risk, and access to public space.

Environmental justice adds another dimension. Wealthier neighborhoods often have more trees, cleaner air, and easier access to recreation, while poorer communities may be located near highways, waste facilities, or industrial sites. Jewish ethics concerning neighbourly harm and the protection of vulnerable people suggest that environmental benefits and burdens should not be distributed according to political power alone.

Species Boundaries and the Misuse of *Kilayim*

The original essay interpreted Leviticus 19:19 as a modern ban on attempts to create new plant or animal species. That reading is too broad. The laws of *kilayim* address prohibited mixtures, including certain forms of crossbreeding, mixed planting, and combined materials. (*Leviticus* 19:19; Tirosh-Samuelson, 2002) Their meanings are legal and symbolic, and they have been interpreted through a detailed halakhic tradition.

They should not be presented as a simple judgment on all genetics, crop science, or animal breeding. Modern biotechnology raises questions that ancient categories did not address directly: human health, food security, animal suffering, ecological escape, corporate control, and unintended consequences. Jewish legal authorities analyze such issues through several principles, not one isolated verse.

The broader moral lesson may be caution about the assumption that technical power is self-justifying. The ability to alter life does not answer whether the alteration is wise, safe, or fair. At the same time, preserving boundaries cannot become an excuse to reject treatments or crops that may reduce suffering. Jewish reasoning usually proceeds through the details of purpose, risk, and obligation.

Blessings, Gratitude, and Attention

Jewish blessings are recited over food and certain natural phenomena, including thunder, lightning, oceans, trees in blossom, and remarkable sights. A blessing does not convert nature into an object of worship. It directs gratitude through nature toward the Creator. The practice interrupts automatic consumption. Before eating, a person pauses long enough to recognize that food has a source.

This habit of attention has ecological value. Waste becomes easier when products appear without history. A packaged meal hides soil, rain, labor, transport, refrigeration, and animal life. A blessing cannot reveal every supply chain, but it can resist the illusion that consumption begins at the store.

Tu BiShvat, historically connected to the agricultural calendar and tithing of fruit trees, has also become a focus for Jewish environmental education. Contemporary customs differ, and not every modern ecological interpretation is ancient. Traditions often develop by placing inherited practices in conversation with new circumstances. The test is whether the new use remains intellectually honest about its sources.

Environmental Justice and Human Need

Jewish environmental ethics is sometimes criticized as too human-centered because many rules protect resources for human use. That criticism identifies a real feature of the tradition: human life and obligation occupy a central place. Yet human-centered concern does not have to mean short-term selfishness. Protecting health, future generations, the poor, animals, and the conditions of communal life can demand extensive environmental restraint.

A purely romantic view of nature can also ignore human vulnerability. Forest protection may affect families who rely on fuel. Conservation zones may displace Indigenous or local communities. Energy transitions may raise costs for people with little income. A Jewish approach informed by justice should ask who receives the benefit, who carries the burden, and whether alternatives have been considered.

The poor are often more exposed to heat, polluted air, unsafe water, and disaster while contributing less to the causes. Environmental policy that overlooks this inequality is incomplete. Charity after harm is not enough when institutions could have prevented the unequal exposure.

From Text to Contemporary Practice

Ancient texts do not provide calculations for carbon budgets or instructions for solar grids. Communities must use science to understand the physical problem and ethics to decide how to respond. Religious language cannot substitute for measurement. It can shape motivation, responsibility, and the willingness to accept limits.

Practical applications may include reducing food waste, improving energy efficiency, choosing lower-impact transport, supporting humane treatment of animals, protecting water, and considering environmental consequences in communal purchasing and building decisions. No individual action can replace public policy, and no policy removes personal responsibility. Both levels matter.

Jewish institutions also face the danger of symbolic environmentalism: planting a tree while ignoring energy use, celebrating creation while investing without scrutiny, or teaching *bal tashchit* without measuring waste. Serious practice requires accountability. It asks not only which values a community announces but what its budgets, kitchens, buildings, and contracts reveal.

Conclusion

Judaism's approach to nature is balanced, but "balanced" should not mean comfortable or vague. The tradition permits human use of the world while resisting waste, cruelty, unlimited ownership, and endless production. Creation belongs to God; the human task includes both cultivation and protection. Shabbat limits work, *shmita* interrupts extraction, *bal tashchit* challenges needless destruction, and laws concerning animals and neighbours place moral boundaries around private benefit.

These teachings do not form a complete modern environmental program, and they should not be distorted to make them sound as if they anticipated every scientific problem. Their contribution lies elsewhere. They train attention toward purpose, proportion, gratitude, justice, and responsibility across generations. In a period when ecological damage often results from ordinary habits multiplied across entire economies, those questions remain demanding: What are we using? Who is harmed? What is being lost? And have we mistaken the ability to consume for the right to destroy?

References

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