



Society for Conservation Biology

RELIGION AND CONSERVATION BIOLOGY

Working Group

<http://www.conbio.org/workinggroups/Religion/>

Judaism and Conservation Fact Sheet

Religion and background

Jewish tradition marks the covenant between God and Abraham as the beginning of Judaism. Through this covenant, Jews believe, Abraham's descendents would be God's chosen people, and they would keep God's law. Later, Moses received God's laws, including the Ten Commandments, after leading the tribes of Israel (who were descendents of Abraham) out of captivity in Egypt. The Torah, part of the Hebrew Bible, contains these laws and is central to Jewish thought and practice, as is Rabbinic literature, such as the Talmud. In Western countries, Judaism became divided into various movements (such as the Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform), which differ on some religious issues but share a core of common values and beliefs. Jews await the coming of the Messiah, whom they believe will bring a period of peace to the world.

Religion in relation to environment

In the opening passages of the Book of Genesis (in the Hebrew Bible), God pronounced each part of the creation "good" as it was formed. The account of humanity's placement on the Earth appoints him a special role to use and protect creation. Great medieval Jewish philosophers such as Maimonides and Rashi interpreted these passages as highlighting the intrinsic value of all life forms and emphasizing the need for humanity to act worthily and responsibly toward them. In the Jewish view, Earth is the Lord's and we are stewards.

Two important Jewish observances are the Sabbath day and the sabbatical year. On the Sabbath, Jews must refrain from labor or activity that changes the natural order or that utilizes things of nature for human purposes; on the sabbatical year (every seventh year), farmers must allow their fields to lie fallow. These practices not only emphasize reliance on God, but also serve as a reminder that nature's value does not lie in monetary or human-centered considerations alone. Jews also recognize that one of the purposes of the sabbatical year is to benefit the land.

Other Jewish values that pertain to conservation include *tikkun olam*, which is a sense of responsibility to repair and heal the world, and *tzaar baalei chayyi*, or humane treatment of animals.

"The land belongs to God. We are given permission to enjoy the Creator's abundant gifts, but we must not waste or wantonly destroy anything. The Jewish injunction known as bal tashchit teaches us to live lightly, conserving earth's abundance. Indeed, the rabbis declare that anyone who eats a fruit without saying the proper blessing of thanksgiving to God is like a thief, stealing from the Creator." - Daniel B. Fink, Rabbi of Congregation Ahavath Beth Israel (Idaho, USA), and co-author of *Judaism and Ecology* (<http://fore.research.yale.edu/religion/judaism/index.html>)

"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 defence of the whole of nature at the very centre of our concern."—from The Assisi Declarations, 1986

"One's mercy must extend to all the oppressed. One must not embarrass or destroy them, for the higher wisdom is spread over all that was created: inanimate, vegetable, animal, and human. For this reason were we warned against desecrating food stuffs ... and in the same way, one must not desecrate anything, for all was created by His wisdom—nor should one uproot a plant, unless there is a need, or kill an animal unless there is a need." - R. Moshe Cordovero (1522–1570), in *Tomer Devorah*



Examples of religious leaders in conservation

- Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL); <http://www.coejl.org/index.php>
- Abraham Joshua Heschel Center for Environmental Learning and Leadership; <http://www.heschel.org.il/eng/>
- Eco Kasher Network
- Canfei Nesharim; <http://www.canfeinesharim.org/>

Examples of conservation projects aided by religion

- The Jewish National Fund (JNF) has planted over 240 million trees in Israel during the last century. JNF also promotes *Tu B'Shevat* (the Jewish New Year of the Trees) celebration and is involved in other environmental projects, as well. http://fore.research.yale.edu/religion/judaism/projects/jewish_national.html
- The Shalom Centre (which also provides informational resources for *Tu B'Shevat*) published the Green Menorah Covenant, which aims to help reduce US oil consumption by seven-eighths by the year 2020. <http://www.shalomctr.org/node/1186>

For more information, see Alliance of Religions and Conservation (www.arcworld.org) and the Forum on Religion and Ecology (<http://fore.research.yale.edu/main.html>)

