

Tu BiShvat Across Campus

A joint initiative between Jewish National Fund and World Zionist Organization –
Dept. of Diaspora Activities



Beit Ha'Am – Green Zionist Beit Midrash

**Human vs. Nature or Human together with the Nature?
What is the nature of our connection to the land in
light of these Jewish and Zionist texts?**

1) Human vs. Nature?

Judaism has a rich heritage of respect for our surroundings and nature. In this history, there have been many books written on the subject. This Green Zionist text study will introduce the Zionist angle to this topic through various texts and resources.

In the book of Ecclesiastes, Shlomo Ha'melech (King Salomon) says:

“רָאָה, אֶת-מַעֲשֵׂה הָאֱלֹהִים: כִּי מִי יוּכַל לְתַקֵּן, אֶת אֲשֶׁר עָוְתוּ”

“Consider the work of God; for who can make that straight, which He hath made crooked”
(Ecclesiastes, 7:13)

Later Sages commented:

“בשעה שברא הקב"ה את אדם הראשון נטלו והחזירו על כל אילני גן עדן ואמר לו ראה מעשי כמה נאים ומשובחין הן וכל מה שבראתי בשבילך בראתי, תן דעתך שלא תקלקל ותחריב את עולמי, שאם קלקלת אין מי שיתקן אחריך”

“When God created the first human beings, God led them around all the trees of 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 Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13)

What can we learn in reference to the way that humans should treat nature, and for what reason? Should humanity's relationship to nature arise out of respect or out of concern? What is our responsibility to the environment? What is God's responsibility to the environment?

2)

In King Solomon's words, it is impossible for us to live without having some negative effect on the natural habitat around us. Even those who say that they live entirely harmonious with nature, inevitably use water, eat plants for sustenance and use natural resources to build a home.

In the Book of *Dvarim* (Deuteronomy), the *Torah* understands the necessary consequences of human activities in the world; the *Mitzvah* of *Bal Tashcit* (do not destroy) teaches us:

"כי-תצור אל-עיר ימים רבים להלחם עליה לתפשה, לא-תשחית את-עצה לנדח עליו גרזן--כי ממנו ת'אכל, ואתו לא תקר'ת: כי האדם עץ השדה, לב'א מפניך במצור. רק עץ אשר-תדע, כי-ל'א-עץ מאכל הוא--אתו תשחית, וקר'ת; ובנית מצור, על-העיר אשר-הוא ע'שה עמך מלחמה--עד רדתה"

"When you besiege a city for a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them. You may eat from them, but you must not cut them down. Are trees of the field human to withdraw before you into the besieged city? Only trees that you know do not yield food may be destroyed; you may cut them down for constructing siege works against the city that is waging war on you, until it has been reduced"
(Deuteronomy 20:19-20)

What can we learn from this text about human nature? Why do you think the Torah chose the example of a war to teach us the Jewish rule of Bal Tashchit?

What is the solution that the Torah offers us to settle the conflict between the needs of people and the continuity of the nature?

3)

In light of this text, we learn that in reality where human's necessary activities can affect the nature, the *mitzvah* of *Bal Tashchit* essentially prohibits any wasteful action which could produce a negative effect on the natural environment. The question that has challenged scholars throughout the generations is the determination of what is wasteful and what is necessary for human survival (and therefore not wasteful).

The relationship between the Jewish people and the nature has an essential part in the writings of early Zionists, as we can see in the words of A.D. Gordon. Gordon (1856-1922) was born in Lithuania to a religious family. The founder and lead philosopher of the Labor Zionist movement, Gordon moved in 1903 to Israel, where he was a founding member of Kibbutz Degania. After a hard day's labor on the land, Gordon was known to write his essays by candlelight:

"We have come to our homeland in order to be planted in our natural soil from which we have been uprooted, to strike our roots deep into its life-giving substances, and to stretch out our branches in the sustaining and creating air and sunlight of our homeland. ... And when you, O human, will return to Nature, that day your eyes will open, you will stare straight into the eyes of Nature and in its mirror you will see your image. You will know... that when you hid from Nature, you hid from yourself. ... We, who have been torn away from nature, who have lost the savor of natural living — if we desire life, we must establish a new relationship with nature"

What can we learn from the words of Gordon? What are the values that he sees in reconnecting to the land? What is the source of this connection: is it out of love and respect to the nature or does it have a different origin? Do you think that Gordon would say this about nature in general or only about the land of Israel?

As we can see, at its core, the early Zionist dream was a dream of reconnection to the land from which our ancestors were torn of, almost two thousand years ago. However, in what way did the early Zionist leaders see our mission when we do reconnect with our land?

David Ben-Gurion (1886-1973, the first prime minister of the state of Israel) wrote in the first days after the establishment of the state of Israel:

"The tasks that lie ahead will require pioneering efforts the likes of which we have never known, for we must conquer and fructify the waste places... First of all, we must conquer the sea and the desert, for these will provide us with room for new settlers and will serve as a laboratory for the development of new forms of economic and agricultural endeavour. Unless we conquer both the sea and the desert, we cannot succeed in

the tasks of immigration and resettlement that we must shoulder after the war. ... This combination will enable them to find a way of making the wilderness bloom and turning the desert into a place of settled habitation... The Negev offers the Jews their greatest opportunity to accomplish everything for themselves from the very beginning. This is a vital part of our redemption in Israel. For in the end, as man gains mastery over nature he gains it also over himself. That is the sense, and not a mystical but a practical one, in which I define our redemption here. If the state does not liquidate the desert, the desert may liquidate the state."

According to Ben Gurion, what are the tasks that lay ahead for the young Jewish state? What are the solutions that he offers, and how far should we go to pursue them? Do you think Ben Gurion sees these solutions as practical solutions or as core values? According to this text, do you think Ben Gurion and A.D. Gordon shared the same vision regarding our tasks in the new land?

Do you agree with Ben Gurion and/ or Gordon and see this as a Zionist value?

4)

Yitzhak Shamir (born October 15, 1915), Israel's seventh Prime Minister (who, during his term as Prime Minister, had to absorb more than a million new immigrants to Israel from former Soviet Union and Ethiopia) once said:

"They talk about clean air and natural resources and that's all very important. But on the other side, there is development. I mean why have we come here anyway? To bring the Jewish people here back to the land of Israel. To do this we need development. Ultimately, in the name of development, I am willing to sacrifice anything"

Do you agree with Yitzhak Shamir? What do you think shaped his opinions? What would you say if you were the P.M. of Israel in the same situation?

Do you think that the logic that set the ground for the Mitzvah of Bal Tashcit (understanding the necessity of human activities in the world), and that we learned from the Book of Dvarim (Deuteronomy), should be the same logic in the case of fulfilling the Zionist dream?

5)

We can learn from the words of A.D. Gordon, Ben Gurion and Shamir, that in the early days of Zionism and in the process of building the new state, we actively changed the nature and the land of Israel. These changes arose due to practical need, but also from pure ideological belief.

Do you think Israel has the same needs as in the days of Ben Gurion and Shamir? Do you think the Zionist vision towards the nature has changed?

In the next text, S. Yizhar (1916-2006) an Israeli writer, poet and politician tries to explain the motives of early Zionists actions and the way he thinks they were wrong:

"For a long time Zionism embodied an exuberant declaration against the wilderness; it was anti-wasteland, and for 'making the desert bloom'. ... Making the desert bloom meant doing away with the wasteland, erasing the nothingness, exploiting completely all natural resources. We felt that if we succeeded in doing this thing, if we could conquer the wilderness, do away with it, make it bloom — in other words, if we could settle it, build it up, make it not wild, not devoid of human values — then we would have achieved the Zionist dream. ... In those empty places there is a slow wisdom that surpasses our hasty wisdom — the same slow wisdom of stalactites in the darkness, working in historical harmony. There is in those empty places more balance than in the things that were created only yesterday in order to satisfy our human needs."

“From certain perspectives, from a perspective of security, from the perspective of Israel’s population, it is clear that there is something impelling in the call to settle every bit of land, even the wasteland. But even here, we return to the same blindness in planning: Wasteland is not just emptiness, and even if it was empty, it is impossible to be without it. Even if it was nothing, it would be impossible without it. More than this: This nothing is as important as the something. There is no something without nothing. Just as there is no opened without closed. No existence without lack of existence. Only in an unrealistic world does something exist without nothing. Accordingly, destruction of the nothing is equivalent to destruction of the something: Destruction of the chance for equilibrium on which the world is built. I propose that in order for humankind to be cultured and civilized, their culture must stand on the border of no culture: in contact with unsettled nature, the uncultivated, one should not be ashamed of lack of culture. That lack of culture is not a swamp. And a swamp ... is not always something that you must destroy and eliminate. The negative connotation of a swamp, or of the desert, as if they are not humane places, is something of a distortion, an un-ripe idea. With time, this misconception will pass.”

With which side do you relate more, to Ben Gurion and Shamir or to the opinion of S. Yizhar? Do you think that the actions of the early Zionist were wrong or necessary?

What do you offer as a way to settle the conflict between the needs in the creation of the new state in one hand, but protecting the nature in the other hand?

Do you think this decision regarding the balance between development and preservation of the land of Israel is one that only Israelis can decide, or is it open to Jews from around the world?

These important questions are actually not easy to settle. As a question of balance between a contradiction of two values, there is no right or wrong, rather only different opinions. But maybe we can find some food for thought from the words of Amos Oz (born in 1937), Israel’s most renowned author.:

“And now it is my turn for a terrible confession. I object to nature preservation. The very ideal of ‘preservation’ is not acceptable in almost any area of life. We have not come into this world to protect or preserve any given thing, mitzvah, nature or cultural heritage. ... We have not inherited a museum, to patiently wipe off the dust from its displays or to polish the glass. ... Nature also is not a museum. One is allowed to touch, allowed to move, to draw closer, to change and to leave our stamp. ... Touch the stone. Touch the animal. Touch your fellow man. On one condition. How to touch? To answer ‘on one leg’ and in a word I would say: ‘with love.’ ”

This text study is part of Beit Ha’am program of the World Zionist Organization, Department for Diaspora Activities.

The Beit Ha’am program developed by the Department for Diaspora Activities of the World Zionist Organization serves as a conversation about Zionist Identity and its relationship to the State of Israel. This program uses a variety of traditional and modern texts related to a wide array of themes. Through encountering these texts, we aspire to create (for the international Jewish world in general, and for the younger generation in particular) lively debate surrounding the topic of Zionist identity.



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