

How Does the Torah view Sustainability?

Presented by
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The Question:

**Is there a well-defined Torah attitude
to environmental concerns?**

**Specifically, should a Torah-observant society
relate at all to sustainability of resources on
Planet Earth?**





Definitions



Environmental Sustainability definition:

(בעברית: קיימות, סביבה בת-קיימא)

"Avoidance of the depletion of natural resources in order to maintain an ecological balance."

In addition to **environmental sustainability**, there is **economic sustainability**, and **social sustainability**. These three balances are referred to as: **Planet, Profits, Population.**

From Wikipedia :

Sustainable development is “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.

Yet others view the two terms (sustainability and development) as paradoxical: i.e. development is inherently unsustainable.

... the possibility that human societies will achieve environmental sustainability continues to be questioned, in light of environmental degradation, climate change, overconsumption, population growth and economic growth.

What Does The Torah Teach Us?

Bereishit chap. 1: 26. And G-d said, let us make man in our image, after our likeness, and they shall rule over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the heaven and over the animals, and over the earth, and over all creeping things that tread upon the earth. 27. And G-d created man in His image, in the image of G-d He created him, male and female He created them. 28. And G-d blessed them, and G-d said to them, be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and rule over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the sky, and over all the beasts that tread upon the earth. 29. And G-d said, behold I have given you every seed-bearing herb which is upon the surface of the entire earth, and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit, it will be yours for food. 30. And to all the beasts of the earth and to all the fowl of the heavens, and to everything that treads upon the earth in which there is a living spirit, every green herb to eat, and it was so.

The text tells us:

1. Mankind was created in G-d's image.
2. Mankind is to rule over fish, fowl and beast.
3. Mankind is to multiply and fill the earth.
4. Mankind's food shall be herbs and fruit.



After the Great Flood:

Bereishit chap. 9: 1. G-d blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them: be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. 2. And your fear and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird of the heavens, in everything that treads on the ground and in all fish of the sea, in your hand they are given. 3. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you, like green herbage I have given you everything. 4. But flesh with its soul, its blood, you shall not eat. 5. And but your blood of your souls I shall demand, of every beast I will demand it, and from mankind, from every man that of his brother, I shall demand the soul of mankind. 6. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of G-d He made mankind. 7. And you be fruitful and multiply, teem on the earth and multiply on it.

This text (to Noah) adds to the previous (to Adam):

1. Mankind is allowed to eat all living creatures, as previously with herbs.
2. However one must not eat flesh from a live animal.
3. It is prohibited to kill a living human.
4. Anyone who kills a human shall be killed.
5. Mankind is encouraged to be fruitful and multiply.



It could be argued that allowing killing of animals for food, particularly after the Great Flood had depleted the animal population, shows disregard for survival of animal species, giving priority to human needs.

On the other hand, The Almighty places all of Nature in the hands of Mankind, including the responsibility of human society to control its food supplies and other limited resources of Planet Earth.

The seven Noachide laws as traditionally enumerated in Tosefta Avodah Zarah chap. 9:4 are the following:

- **Not to worship idols.** *Avodah Zarah*
- **Not to curse God.** *Birkat HASHEM*
- **To establish courts of justice.** *Dinim*
- **Not to commit murder.** *Shefichut Damim*
- **Not to commit adultery or sexual immorality.**
- **Not to steal.** *Gezel*
- **Not to eat flesh torn from a living animal.**

These principles are discussed in the

Talmud Bavli, tractate Sanhedrin 56a – 59a

Modern concepts of human freedom and rights are not always consistent with the Noachide Principles.

Noachide Principle

respect for G-d

no idol worship

a judicial system

no adultery or incest

no murder or violence

no theft

no cruelty to animals

Human Rights Principle

freedom of speech

religious freedom

right to justice

sexual freedom

right to life

right to property

animal rights

The principles of sustainability are not there!

Torah, Kedushah and Sustainability

At Exodus, on Mount Sinai, the Jewish nation was given 613 Mitzvot, which enable us to be elevated to the status of AM KADOSH – a holy people.

(note: the only mention of KEDUSHAH in the entire book of Bereishit - is regarding the Shabbat in chap.2:3, but from Exodus onwards the term KADOSH appears in the Torah more than 200 times.)

Does concern for the environment, or regard for resource depletion, appear in any of the Mitzvot?

Bal Tashkhit

Devarim 20:19-20 : When you besiege a city many days to fight it to take it, you shall not destroy its trees by taking an axe against them, indeed you may eat from them, but not cut them down, for is the tree of the field a man, that it should be besieged by you? Only a tree that you know is not an edible tree, it you may destroy and cut down, in order to build siege against the city that makes war with you until its subduction.



Sefer Hakhinuch

Mitzvah 529: Not to destroy edible trees in a siege, and all destruction is included in this prohibition.

... likewise included in this prohibition, not to cause any loss, such as to burn or tear a garment, or to break a vessel needlessly. And in all these and similar matters that are destructive, our Rabbis always say in the Talmud (e.g. Kiddushin 32A) 'this is a transgression of Bal Tashkhit'... It is only prohibited to destroy needlessly, but if it is beneficial, such as to avoid damage or for economic reasons, it is permitted.

Continuity and uncertainty in Kohelet

Chap.1:9 What has been - shall be, and what has been done - shall be done, and there is nothing new under the sun.

Chap.6:12 For who knows what is good for Man in life, the days of his life are like a shadow, for who can tell Man what will be after him under the sun.

Chap.11:6 In the morning sow your seed, and in the evening do not withhold, for you know not which of them shall prosper, or whether both are good alike.

Midrash Kohelet Rabba chap.7:13

“ Observe the work of G-d, for who can mend that which he has spoiled”. When G-d created Adam, He took him through all the trees of Eden, and said to him: See my works, how fine and worthy they are, and all that I created – for you I have created. Take care that you do not destroy and ruin My world, for if you have destroyed – no one can mend it after you.



Babylonian Talmud tractate Taanit 23A

From the well-known story of Khoni HaMe'agel:

... One day he was on his way, and he saw a man planting a carob tree. He asked him: How many years until this will bear fruit? The man responded: after seventy years. He asked him: Are you sure that you will be alive seventy years hence? The man responded: I found this world with carob trees existing. Just as my forefathers planted (carob trees) for my benefit, thus I plant for my children's benefit.



Babylonian Talmud tractate Sanhedrin 97a

Rav Ketina said: six thousand years is the existence of the world, and one (millenium) it will be destroyed...

A Baraita supporting Rav Ketina says: Just as Shemitah is the seventh year out of seven, thus the world has a Shemita of a thousand years out of seven thousand years, as it says (Isaiah 2:11): “and The Lord alone shall be exalted on that day”, and it says (Tehillim 92:1) “A psalm, a song for the Sabbath day”, a day that is totally Sabbath, and it says (Tehillim 90:4) “For a thousand years in Your eyes are like yesterday as it passes” ...

***This notion is repeated in many major sources!
So maybe we need not worry about sustainability...***

Conclusions

1. From the Torah we learn that HASHEM has given Mankind the power and permission to rule the world.
2. Humans are accountable to exercise their free will responsibly, but have been given no explicit instruction regarding environment preservation.
3. Of the 613 Mitzvot given to the Jewish People to elevate them to Kedushah, one Mitzvah specifically deals with environment preservation: **Bal Tashkhit**.
4. Many Midrashic sources discuss the importance of sensitivity to ecological issues, but not sustainability.



Thank You!

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