



The Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life
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ENVIRONMENTAL SERMON STARTERS

The material in this section, developed by Rabbi Daniel Swartz, is intended to offer sermon suggestions for rabbis. While the sacred texts of our tradition cannot address today's environmental crisis in its totality (for our sages and ancestors could not even have imagined some of the technologies with which we now transform our world), our texts do delineate a just and moral relationship with the environment. If we can move ourselves and our congregants to develop such relationships, we will have taken a significant step toward responding to the environmental crisis. Listed below are 12 suggested sermonic approaches to Jewish environmental themes. Please feel free to use any of this material without attribution.

1. The Holiday Cycle and the Cycles of Nature:

Most Jewish holidays, such as the pilgrimage festivals and Tu B'shvat, have strong nature-related, agricultural, and environmental themes. For example, ecological dimensions to Sukkot include not only the whole notion of harvest, but also of spending nights beneath the stars and the prayer for rain. These connections could be highlighted in one general sermon, or sermons could be given separately for each holiday, more fully exploring connections with the environment. Possible sources include Leviticus 23, Nature in our Biblical Heritage, by Nogah Hareuveni (see Resources section), and any of a number of books about Jewish holidays.

2. Global Warming: Applying a Jewish Environmental Ethic:

Through the use of halacha regulating "closed alleyways" as an analogy for our biosphere as a whole, Jewish texts are applied to the modern problem of Global Warming.

3. Noah, Honi, and John Rawls: A Covenant for the Generations:

Attempts to construct a clear Jewish environmental ethic should closely examine the consequences of our actions today for future generations, holding us responsible to those generations yet to come. Many modern philosophers, such as John Rawls in A Theory of Justice, examine similar themes. What can our sources teach us of these obligations to the future? Possible sources include the Noah story (Genesis 6-9) and traditional or modern retellings of the story of Honi the Circle Drawer (Ta'anit 23a); also, a number of modern commentators have written about the concept of Brit Ha-Dorot, a covenant for the generations.

4. Heroes, Demons, and Plain Possums: Our Role in Nature:

While our tendency is to look for environmental heroes and demons, in light of the Jewish tradition, we should instead say, like Pogo the Possum, "we have met the enemy and he is us."

5. Garments of the Shekhina: Jewish Mystics and the environment:

The Jewish mystical tradition is especially rich in environmental insights and metaphors, some of which are mentioned in the Jews and the Natural World section of this kit. Through investigating these sources, we can approach both the natural world and our tradition in a fresh light. Many works about Jewish mysticism, including a number of fine anthologies of translated mystical texts have been published. While none of these to date have focused only on mystical texts with environmental themes, Shomrei Adamah (see Resources section) is planning to publish such works in the near future.

6. Breaking the Toxic Cycle:

An exploration, especially appropriate at Rosh Hashanah or Tu B'Shvat, of how the Jewish tradition constantly gives us opportunities to break from the poisons of the past, both physical and spiritual.*

7. Holy Land, Sacred Earth: Israel and the Environment:

Early Zionist philosophers and pioneers wrote extensively about their relationship with and attitudes about the Land - but these writings were not viewed by later generations primarily in an ecological sense. Today in Israel, environmental problems are just beginning to come to the forefront of society, and the efforts of Israeli environmentalists deserve our attention (see Jews and the Natural World section and the "Israel" fact sheet in the Environmental Crisis section of this site for more information; Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and A.D. Gordon's writings are especially interesting in this regard).

8. Wanting More: Material vs. Environmentally Motivated Mensch:

Modern societies often place a high, sometimes too high, value on consumption. What lessons can our tradition teach us about how to achieve a balance between materialism and asceticism? *

9. Jewish Nature Poetry from the Bible to Today:

From the Song of Songs and the Psalms to modern Israeli poets (see Jews and the Natural World section for examples), Jews have created a rich literature of nature poetry. A closer look at such poetry can both inspire and inform us. Useful collections of such poetry include The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse, edited by T. Carmi, and A Treasury of Jewish Poetry, edited by Nathan and Maryann Ausubel.

10. Food and the Messiah: the Land Bridge:

In the Jewish vision of the Messianic Age, food will be abundantly available to everyone. What is the connection between ending hunger and ushering in the Messianic Age? How do texts such as the Birkat HaMazon, the blessing after the meal, highlight this connection? How can we address hunger today, and what do environmental land use principles have to do with ending hunger?

11. To Till and to Tend, to Serve and to Guard: Jewish Environmental Stewardship:

The Jewish environmental tradition speaks in a rich and highly nuanced fashion about the proper role of humans in nature, a role that is unique in both its privileges and its responsibilities. An examination of that tradition can help us find our balance in nature today. This balance is discussed in the Jews and the Natural World section from a number of different viewpoints: Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's "The Lonely Man of Faith," has an excellent discussion of the tensions between the Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 accounts of creation.

12. "The Land is Mine," Says the Eternal: Sabbatical and Jubilee:

The tradition of the Sabbatical and Jubilee years, which reassert God's ownership of the world, offer us a unique way to join our social justice concerns with our care for the environment. This tradition protects both the poor and the land, even as it speaks eloquently of our faith. Leviticus 25 covers the Biblical tradition; see commentaries, including such works such as Rabbi David Bleich's "Man and Nature in the Sabbatical Year," Tradition, 1986, and Arthur Waskow's "Beyond Marx and Buddha" in his book God Wrestling, for interesting discussions on the broader implications of the Sabbatical and Jubilee laws.

Source: COEJL