

Caretakers on God's Estate

By Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis

Abstract (summary)

The earth is lent to human beings, but not as if they were lords of the land, but as stewards of the Lord's estate. Precisely because the "earth is the Lord's," people may not do with it as they wish. "The land is not to be sold in perpetuity" (Leviticus... Show all

Full Text

One of the contemporary distortions of the Biblical ethos comes from some spokesmen of the ecological movement. The gravamen is based on the Biblical mandate to "subdue" the earth and "have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (Genesis 1:28). This verse is taken to warrant the exploitation of nature. The Bible's "disenchantment of nature," as sociologist Max Weber described it, is claimed to have encouraged science and technology to rape the earth.

The roots of the critique go back at least to 19th-century philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, who attacked Judaism in his "The Essence of Christianity" for its egoistic doctrine of creation. "The Israelites... to nature only the gastric sense. Their taste of nature lay only in the palate."

It is true that the Bible's religious humanism regards the human being as the crown of creation. But that in no way implies the denigration of nature.

This portion, Behar, includes key evidence of the dignity of the earth.

The earth breathes, labors and requires rest. Resources are not to be squeezed out the earth on the seventh day (Leviticus 25:3- 6), and the land requires a "Sabbath of the Lord" in the seventh year (Leviticus 25:4). The Sabbath of the land expresses a covenant between humankind and nature.

Nor is such concern for creation restricted to Behar. Towards the animal world, there are reiterated passages of concern. Animals, Maimonides reminds us in the "Guide for the Perplexed," may not be endowed with the cognitive powers of human beings, but they have feelings like our own which must be respected. This empathic approach is rooted in dozens of Biblical laws, such as Deuteronomy 22:4: "If you see your fellow's ass or ox fallen on the road, do not ignore it..." This attitude informs Jewish law to the extent that shouting at an animal to frighten it away from eating from the fields it works is prohibited by the Shulhan Arukh (in Hoshen Hamishpat): "Men may be forbidden to consume that which they harvest, but animals must be allowed to eat if they desire, for while man can understand deprivations, animals cannot."

How men with whips, rods, traps, and swords deal with dumb, dependent and helpless creatures conditions the way they treat the weak of the human species. There is a moral correlation between the prohibition on muzzling the ox when he treads out the corn, denying it the opportunity to graze (Deuteronomy 25:4), and the injunction to allow a man to eat grapes in his neighbor's vineyard to his heart's content (Deuteronomy 23:25). Though a man can exercise restraint, the text is sensitive to the temptations of human nature.

The compassion towards the feeling and life of sentient creatures moves us closer to the vegetarian ideal of Eden, where human beings were given only "every seed-bearing plant... and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit... for food" (Genesis 1:29), and to the messianic vision of the carnivorous beasts becoming herbivores, when "the lion shall eat straw like the ox" (Isaiah 11:7). In the last days, as in the first, the life of sentient creatures will not be taken.

Rabbinic tradition explicitly declared that consideration for the pain caused animals is Biblical law ("Tza'ar ba'alei hayim de'orayta" Bava Metzia). The mode of slaughtering animals was designed to cause the animal the least possible pain. The blade of the knife must be sharp as a razor, the two strokes of the knife must be rapid in continuous motion, back and forward without even a moment's delay.

The earth is lent to human beings, but not as if they were lords of the land, but as stewards of the Lord's estate. Precisely because the "earth is the Lord's," people may not do with it as they wish. "The land is not to be sold in perpetuity" (Leviticus 25:23). The surrender of ownership to God places restraints upon the use and exploitation of the earth. The Biblical prohibition against destroying any fruit trees in conducting military operations (Deuteronomy 20:19) was expanded by the rabbis into a general prohibition against wanton destruction (bal tash'hit).

Central to Behar is the jubilee, the 50th year in which the slaves and their families are emancipated and property restored to its original owners (Leviticus 25:8-19). The jubilee is a cosmic year of tshuvah a return to the harmony and wholeness of creation. Slaves are free and property reverts to their owners on a Day of Atonement for all creation. Cosmic tshuvah includes the repair of individual men and women, society as a whole, and the land itself. The jubilee return dramatizes the interdependence of creation and, as Leviticus 25:10 states, "proclaims liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof."

Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis is spiritual leader of Valley Beth Shalom in Encino, California, and founding chairman of the Jewish Foundation for Christian Rescuers.