



## Beyond the Sabbatical A Contemporary Jewish Response to Sustainable Development

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Rabbi Neil Amswych (United Kingdom) formed IDEA: Interfaith Dorset Education and Action, an interfaith environmental group that is now in touch with over 400 faith communities across Dorset, one of the UK's largest counties. As Principal Rabbi of Bournemouth Reform Synagogue, in 2011 he also guided the Movement for Reform Judaism to become the first movement in British Jewry to create and launch its own sustainability plan. His blog "A Bit of Bible, Baby and Biodiversity" attracts thousands of readers from around the world.

There is much that has been written on Judaism and Sustainability from a Biblical perspective, often focusing on the Sabbatical and Jubilee Years as well as the concept of an idyllic Biblical state – either that of the Garden of Eden, or that of the end of days when all shall live together in peace.

As laudable as the efforts to remind us all of a unifying vision may be, these commentaries are easy to ignore in the contemporary market-driven globalised society. Why would someone who regularly buys their fruit and vegetables from a supermarket after having had them flown all across the world be remotely interested that the ancient Israelites used to let their land lie fallow once every seven years? If our society is to develop sustainably it is either going to have to radically modify or completely abandon our current spending practices, so while remembrances of early Israelites letting the land rest for one year in every seven (Ex. 23:10-11) or visions of wolves lying down with lambs (Isaiah 11:6) may be religiously inspiring, they are not necessarily empowering in a practical sense today.

In the pages that follow, I explore some of the key elements of a different kind of vision that connects Jewish teaching with the Earth Charter – a vision based around the markets that people know as

opposed to the farming that they don't. Thousands of years of Jewish thought on this topic can never fully be encapsulated in just a few pages, though, so what follows is a light introduction only.

One key aspect of sustainability must be in the sustainable use of wealth, in particular, the market economy. In this regard, the Babylonian Talmud (Ta'anit 22a), dated around 500 C.E., provides a particularly prescient starting point for consideration:

"Some of the good things which Rav Chuna used to do: Every Shabbat eve he would send a messenger to the market who would buy up all the perishable vegetables which the gardeners had been unable to sell. These would then be thrown into the river. 'Surely he should have given them to the poor?' [it is asked]. 'No,' came the rejoinder, 'they would then get used to getting it free and would not come to buy in the future.' 'Perhaps he should feed them to the animals?' 'It seems that Rav Chuna holds that it is not permissible to feed food fit for human consumption to animals.' 'Perhaps he should not have bought them at all?' 'No – if nobody would pay them, then the gardeners would produce less in the future.'"

The initial response at Rav Chuna's actions is usually horror and Talmud clearly expects this reaction, hence it provides three differing questions and responses, all of which are clearly designed to calm our initial horror and to gently explain that the stability of the market is more important than the immediate needs of a few, a view which some might still find very challenging. Rav Chuna's society is like ours – those who eat the food are different from those who grow it, and for the rest of society to continue eating, those who produce the food need to continue to receive a fair and steady price for their goods. It would be an oversimplistic vision for us all to return to growing our own food exclusively – such visions are likely to end in mass starvations.

We therefore have a responsibility to make the food chain as sustainable as possible while maintaining its integrity. As such, our first priority is to ensure that, as with this excerpt, crops that are grown are used as much as possible for human consumption and not anything else. While Rav Chuna therefore suggests that crops that could be used for humans should not go to animals, a contemporary equivalent might easily be the growing of crops for biofuel instead of for food. Growing food crops to fill a motorised vehicle while others starve should be as perverse to us as feeding it to animals was to Rav Chuna. Moreover, Rav Chuna's vision is not one that deprives the poor, rather it has an overarching vision of turning individuals into consumers. His refusal to give the food to the poor is challenging but should be understood as part of a process of helping the poor regain financial and therefore social independence. This, too, is an important act of sustainable development – helping the poor (local or global) be able to fend for themselves and not have to suffer the indignity of having to follow the unsustainable whims of others who might grant them aid of some sort, as has happened many times in the past. Rav Chuna wants us all to be equal – he wants us all to be able to participate in the market, to buy our own food, to be able to fend for ourselves.

It is extremely important to note that his refusal to dump perishable food needs to be read in tandem with the Jewish responsibility to give to tzedakah, a term that is usually translated as 'charity' but which carries the connotation of 'justice,' a particularly relevant term since sustainability must be rooted in justice. Read out of context, Rav Chuna seems cruel but in context it is easily understood that during the rest of the week, Rav Chuna would have been giving the traditionally required 10% of his income to the poor – he would have been ensuring that they were being fed. However, this extract just shows that he would have done it in ways that did not harm the market. Just as the Earth Charter enjoins us to "eradicate poverty as an ethical, social, and environmental imperative," so Torah commands us to never harden our hearts or close our hands to the poor (Deut. 15:7).

We learn more about a potentially sustainable market economy from the following Talmudic quotation (Bava Batra 90b-91a):

Our Rabbis taught: It is not permitted to make a profit in eggs twice. [As to the meaning of "twice,"] Mari b. Mari said: Rav and Samuel are in dispute. One says: Two for one. And the other says: [Selling] by a dealer to a dealer.

While one Rabbi says that it is forbidden to make a 100% profit on a product, the other says something much more profound – it is forbidden to use what is often called a "middle-man" in trade. This provides an extraordinary challenge to the contemporary marketplace where an overwhelming majority of individuals will flock to a supermarket that gathers together the wares of many differing dealers and then will itself act as a dealer. There are many reasons why this is unsustainable, including carbon emissions from long-distance travel and trapping farmers in poverty by paying them the lowest price possible in order to win over more customers and take control of the market. The second opinion therefore leads us to an important consideration

for sustainability in the market – we should be buying directly from the producers and avoiding intermediary dealers.

This does not have to mean an end to globalised trade because by virtue of global communications we will always be able to buy products from others regardless of their location. What it does mean, though, is an end to the domination of the market by supermarkets. It means buying from producers, or collectives of producers, but not from companies that themselves have bought from those producers or collectives. Talmud (ibid.) actually specifies which products it believes should never be bought through an intermediary:

Our Rabbis taught: In Palestine it is not permitted to make a profit [as middleman] in things which are life's necessities such as, for instance, wines, oils and the various kinds of flour.

While this specification clearly relates to essential foodstuffs, it would surely be of benefit for us to consider the same for non-essential items as well in the creation of a sustainable society. But then which non-essential items are we allowed to buy? Is it possible to have a sustainable society when people cram their homes full of "stuff," only to throw it out years later, often because a newer model has been released into the market? Since our market is flooded with many more commodities than necessities, what should we spend money on? The great Rabbi Moses Maimonides (12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century) explains (Mishneh Torah: Hilkhoh De'ot, ch. 5, halakhoh 9-13) how he believes a Torah scholar – the ultimate person in his worldview – should spend their money:

... He provides for his family according to his means, yet without excessive devotion to this. His clothing should neither be that of kings nor that of poor men, but rather pleasant, ordinary clothing. His commerce shall be conducted in truth and faith...

This is another vision of sustainability – we do not need to compulsively "shop 'til we drop" but we can nonetheless acquire nice items of clothing. If people produce good clothing, we can buy it... we just don't need wardrobes stuffed full of nice clothes. We provide for our families, we give them the essentials, but we only do so according to our means. With this in mind, sustainable development surely needs a reappraisal of the concept of credit. If we all bought only that which we could afford and only from the producer directly, we would instantly have a more sustainable society. In the words of the Earth Charter, we should try to "adopt lifestyles that emphasize the quality of life and material sufficiency in a finite world." It is noteworthy that Maimonides says that the person provides for his family "according to his means" and not "according to their wants" since so much of our market is based on creating demand – indeed, the entire premise of the advertising industry is to make us want something that we previously did not want.

We have so far focussed on the economics of sustainability but a sustainable society needs to be created not just in the economic realm but also in the political, social and religious realms. It is hard to envisage the political realm embracing sustainability without the economic and social realms taking the lead, since politicians of our time invariably follow the markets and the voters. It is also hard to envisage the social realm taking the lead until the religious realm uproots the current underlying narrative of our society and supplants it with another more sustainable narrative. Such a narrative will essentially lead to a change from the mindset of NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) to what might be called IAMBY (It's All My Back Yard), and the key to such a shift is in creating a narrative that finds the mutual connectivity between human beings. Such is the task of the Earth Charter and also of Jewish teaching. Thus where we read in the Earth Charter that "...we are one human family..." we read in Talmud (Sanhedrin 37a) that "[Adam was created alone] for the sake of shalom among people

so that no-one might say to their fellow 'My father was greater than yours.'" Shalom is often translated as peace but it is a word that encompasses much more than the modern conception of peace as an absence of war. The Hebrew root letters sh-l-m carry the connotation of completeness, wholeness, soundness, friendship and unity. A particularly effective tool of social renovation or of creating a whole and healthy society, therefore, is to remind ourselves that everyone is family. To engage in any practice which oppresses another person on our planet, either by polluting their home, by locking them into poverty, or anything similarly oppressive, would therefore be impossible.

But while understanding that everyone is family can be an incredibly powerful sentiment, it's not necessarily enough to produce social change because of the differing perceptions that people have about family. What is needed is a sense of responsibility – as the Earth Charter says, "it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations." But what is the basis for that responsibility? Jewish tradition holds that "all Israel are sureties each for the other" (Babylonian Talmud Sh'vuot 39a). It understands that we are all responsible for the behaviour of others, a notion that challenges those in society today who say that we are all entitled to behave according to our own whim "so long as no-one gets hurt" (a phrase which usually means, "so long as no-one I know about gets hurt)."

This Talmudic injunction, though, is judgmental – it challenges us to work constructively with others to bring them to what we believe is a better way of behaving, it reminds us that we are responsible for each other's behaviour and that, therefore, we have a responsibility to help society by helping change the negative behaviour of others. It demands of us the judgment of positive and negative actions and of applying that judgment to others.

Central to the notion of sustainability is the concept that we can develop our community into one that answers the needs of today's individuals without compromising the needs of tomorrow's individuals. Already we have seen from Maimonides the important difference between wants and needs, but we have until now assumed that future generations have rights, and this is an assumption that at the very least requires consideration. Does someone not yet born have a right to a certain quality of life? Can they make a moral claim on the current generation? Exodus 21:22 tells us that "if people fight and one of them pushes a pregnant woman and a miscarriage results, without any other damage [to the mother] the one responsible shall be fined..." We then learn (21:23-24) that if a significant injury occurs to the woman, then the same injury shall be inflicted upon the one who caused it. What we learn from this is that those who are not yet born cannot be considered with the same rights as contemporary human beings but that we also do carry a moral responsibility toward their protection. Indeed, anyone who acts in such a way as to endanger the life of future individuals could potentially be fined. What would our society look like if we were able to fine those companies that endanger the future society with their pollutants? It would certainly be more sustainable.

While many Jewish perspectives on sustainability will focus on Shabbat, the Sabbatical and Jubilee years, this perspective has taken a significantly different approach, suggesting that a more productive Jewish sustainability ethos must at the very least consider including the following:

1. A sustainable and stable market economy based on a more direct relationship between producers and consumers;
2. An assessment by all people on what they actually need and basing a market economy around supporting those needs;
3. A recognition of the equality of all people and of their deep family bond; and
4. Awareness that we carry a moral responsibility toward generations not yet considered.

Religious communities have an extremely important role in the shaping of a sustainable society since religious narrative can pierce the soul and affect change in individual and communal behaviour more powerfully than any other narrative. One of our biggest challenges today, though, is communicating the message of sustainability effectively. With so many people today believing that religion is a matter of the world-to-come instead of the world here-and-now, clergy who are passionate about sustainability find their message frequently ignored. Too many congregants assume that we are simply jumping on a bandwagon instead of expressing foundational religious beliefs.

Perhaps the strongest way to communicate the message of sustainability is by normalising it, as opposed to making its validity a matter of public discourse – “How can we act sustainably?” is significantly more powerful than the continual “Do we really need to act sustainably?” The strongest way to normalise something in the faith communities is to show that everyone is talking about it, and this is perhaps best achieved by having differing faith communities come together to publicly declare their shared commitment to a common cause, such as sustainability. This bringing-together and normalisation is something we have achieved with IDEA: Interfaith Dorset Education and Action, an interfaith environmental group that is now in touch with over 440 differing faith communities on the South Coast of England. Recently nearly a quarter of these communities tentatively agreed to work towards an interfaith sustainability agreement. Interfaith dialogue in recent years focussed too strongly on how similar we all are whereas to successfully bring differing faith communities together, we have to acknowledge a common bond and then show our difference, not our similarity,

around that common bond. Preservation of the Earth and of humanity is a common bond. IDEA helps differing faith groups express how they will respond practically to that common bond through their own religious idiom. IDEA also set up a website, [www.eco-faith.org](http://www.eco-faith.org) which can be accessed globally to show how we share a common bond but express that bond differently.

People today are cynical, especially when it comes to change and even more so when it comes to change of the scale necessary for ours to become a sustainable society. By learning the lessons from our traditions and from contemporary documents such as the Earth Charter and by normalising the sustainability dialogue within those faith communities, perhaps ours will be “a time remembered for the awakening of a new reverence for life, the firm resolve to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace, and the joyful celebration of life.”