

## JEWISH SOURCES ON PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT

*Prepared by Rina Cohen & Translated by Leah Aharonov for the Herczeg Seminar, May 2017*

“The Lord G-d took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it” (Genesis 2:15).

At the time that the Almighty created man in the Garden of Eden, He said to him: see how wonderful is all that I have created; I have created it all for you.

“When you lay siege to a city for a long time...do not destroy its trees by putting an axe to them, because you can eat their fruit. Do not cut them down. Are the trees people, that you should besiege them? However, you may cut down trees that you know are not fruit trees and use them to build siege works...” (Deuteronomy 20:19-20).

Maimonides also addressed this:

“Fruit-bearing trees must not be cut down outside of the city nor do we block their irrigation water causing the trees to dry up, as it says, ‘do not destroy her trees’ (Deuteronomy 20:19). Anyone who cuts down a tree received lashes. This is not only at times of siege, but anyone at anytime who chops down a fruit-bearing tree for destructive purposes receives stripes. The tree may be cut down if it is damaging other trees or it is damaging another’s field, or because the tree is more valuable for its wood than its fruit. The Torah only forbids wanton destruction” (Maimonides, Laws of Kings and Wars, Chapter 1).

The sources regard the environment in two ways: on the one hand, it is written, “And the land was given to humans” (Psalms) in order for them to do with it as they see fit; on the other hand, mankind must preserve the world of the Lord. This is expressed in the Midrash: “At the time that the Almighty created the first man, He showed him all the trees in the Garden of Eden and said, see how beautiful is all that I have created. I have created it for you so be sure not to destroy my world, because if you ruin it there is no one to repair it after you” (Midrash Rabba).

In Jewish Law there are several questions regarding the relationship of the Torah to the environment. The questions that are central to the ecological discussion revolve around the relationship of man to nature:

1. The relationship of man to his surroundings
2. Man as part of the world
3. Man as part of nature
4. Man as the “owner” of nature

Judaism recognizes man as a unique being, not only because of his intelligence, but primarily because he is a being with freedom of choice, and thus he is commanded to protect and develop the world of the Almighty.

While man must rule the world of the Almighty—as it is written, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it...”—at the same time he is given the responsibility for maintaining the wholeness of the world.