

# The Peoplehood Papers 14

November 2014 | Cheshvan 5775

## Sustainability and Jewish Peoplehood



# **The Peoplehood Papers 14**

November 2014 | Cheshvan 5775

## **Sustainability and Jewish Peoplehood**

## **Sustainability and Jewish Peoplehood**

### **The Peoplehood Papers 14**

Editor: Shlomi Ravid

Assistant Editor: Dasee Berkowitz

Sponsored by the Commission on the Jewish People, UJA-Federation of New York

Design and Production: Stephanie & Ruti Design

Printed in Israel 2014

Published by the Center for Jewish Peoplehood Education

[publications@jpeoplehood.org](mailto:publications@jpeoplehood.org)

# Table of Contents

<b>General Editor's Note</b>	<b>5</b>
Shlomi Ravid	
<b>Sustainability and Jewish Peoplehood – An Introduction</b>	<b>6</b>
Jeremy Benstein	
<b>Peoplehood With Purpose: A Renewable Light Unto the Nations</b>	<b>11</b>
Yosef Israel Abramowitz	
<b>Celebrating the Mystery: A Vision of Re-Enchantment for Judaism and the World</b>	<b>14</b>
Nina Beth Cardin	
<b>The Intersection of Jewish Identity, Jewish Values and Global Sustainability</b>	<b>18</b>
Sandy Cardin	
<b>Opening Our Eyes, Celebrating Interdependence and Evolving Jewish Ecological Wisdom</b>	<b>21</b>
Shamu Fenyvesi Sadeh	
<b>Rising to the Spiritual Challenge: Meeting the Test of Climate Change</b>	<b>25</b>
Mirele B. Goldsmith	
<b>Inscribe Them on Your Doorposts and Gates: Stewarding Sustainable and Just Jewish Space</b>	<b>27</b>
Rachel Jacoby Rosenfield	
<b>The Shmita Year as a Laboratory for Jewish Sustainability</b>	<b>31</b>
Einat Kramer	
<b>Jews and the World: Steering a Middle Course</b>	<b>34</b>
Clive A. Lawton	
<b>Judaism as a Model of Continuity in the Face of Globalization</b>	<b>37</b>
Micha Odenheimer	
<b>A Meditation on <i>Adamah</i> and <i>Ahavah</i></b>	<b>40</b>
Rabbi Michael Paley and Jina Davidovich	

<b>Intersectional Justice and Intersectional Peoplehood: A Shmita Vision for Jewish Identity Education</b>	<b>43</b>
Robin Moss	
<b>Climate, Shmita and Consumption</b>	<b>47</b>
Sid Schwarz	
<b>Sustainable Israel-Diaspora Engagement through Sustainability</b>	<b>50</b>
Jay Shofet	
<b>A Sabbath for the Land and the People – Rav Kook’s Shabbat Ha’aretz and The Peoplehood Potential of Shmita</b>	<b>53</b>
Yedidya Sinclair	
<b>Future Ethics: The Moral Imperative of Sustainability from a Jewish Covenantal Perspective</b>	<b>56</b>
Rabbi Lawrence Troster	



## From the editor

**Shlomi Ravid**

Peoplehood Papers 14 is dedicated to the topic of Peoplehood and Sustainability.

We decided to provide the Siach Network a public platform to grapple with the challenge of sustainability through the Peoplehood lens. With *shmita* as the framework, authors from different disciplines consider what sustainability means for the Jewish People in the 21st Century. Some take an activist stance and call on us to renew our commitments to renewable energy sources and debt forgiveness to relieve the lives of the most vulnerable amongst us. Others understand sustainability in more spiritual terms, an opportunity to reconnect with the *adamah* and to remember that we are stewards not masters of the earth. Still others consider the ways in which a focus on environmental issues can be 'common ground' to rally around and unite the ever growing disconnect between Jewish communities in Israel and world Jewry. Through their different perspectives, each author reminds us of the essential ingredients which make Jewish peoplehood vibrant - a focus on our collective mission as Jews, a rootedness in a common text, and creative thinking around how to continue to forge the connection between us, even when it feels tenuous.

We sincerely hope that this exchange will inspire a conversation about the integration of our responsibility as Jews to our universe and to our collective mission as a People. We thank our Siach colleagues for their inspiring contributions. We welcome your comments and responses and look forward to continuing the conversation at [www.jpeoplehood.or/blog](http://www.jpeoplehood.or/blog).



# Sustainability and Jewish Peoplehood – An Introduction

**Jeremy Benstein**

At first glance, the idea of connecting the concepts of sustainability and Jewish peoplehood might be puzzling; they seem to pull in different directions. Peoplehood is an inward looking idea about what it means to be Jewish and connected to a Jewish group, the survival and flourishing of that group, as well as threats and opportunities relating specifically to the Jews. In contrast, sustainability is a global idea: it's about the survival and flourishing of the human race, even the whole planet, and in its universality is often "color-blind", unconcerned with and often even dismissive of issues of identity and cultural values, in the face of threats to the health and well being of all people's and the world in which we all live.

As we say in Hebrew – *nahafoch hu!* – On the contrary. The connections between the two are multiple, deep and run in both directions. In fact, they are the bread and butter of the five-year-old coalition of scores of organizations and hundreds of activists on three continents that make up Siach - A Jewish Environmental and Social Justice Conversation, which initiated this collaboration to explore these connections. The authors of the papers in this brief anthology are essentially addressing one or both of the following questions:

- **What do Jewish values/culture/group identity have to offer those who struggle and strive to further the agenda of sustainability in the world?**
- **And conversely, how can the discourse of sustainability enrich and empower those who wish to promote Jewish peoplehood?**

But, first, it behooves us to define our terms.

Sustainability can be a difficult concept to work with. It can mean many things to many people. In addition to its many legitimate definitions and uses, moving from mainstream and reformist to more radical, critical and visionary, it is also often pulled in different directions for political or commercial reasons. For us, "sustainability" refers to a broad social and political agenda that has at its core the vision of a just society with a robust

democratic economy and a healthy environment, now and for future generations. It is important to emphasize that sustainability is much more than economic efficiency, or a cleaner environment. It's about building a society that can sustain us and our children, materially and spiritually, now and in the future; together with the awe-inspiring world in which we live and of which we are a part.

This publication is dedicated then, to sustainability in the context of our collective ethos as a people.

This is not about narrow rubrics such as "Judaism and the environment," or rehearsing familiar teachings on "tikkun olam." Nor is it about sustainability as a personal value of individual Jews. It is about looking at the concept through the collective prism of our people's mission in the world. Many consider sustainability – and the shockingly unjust and unsustainable nature of the society that we have built – to be the central moral challenge of our age.

One answer then to the questions above is that we as a people simply cannot remain indifferent to an issue as huge as sustainability: averting widespread environmental catastrophe in the form of the climate crisis and other threats, while simultaneously closing the ever-widening social gap, and working toward justice and fundamental rights for all. As Rabbi Michael Paley and Jina Davidovich write:

"If the Jewish narrative works it has to do more than simply keep us together as a people. It also has to guide us to practice restraint – in the way our laws command us – so that the earth can observe its cycles and renew itself."

This can be done in many ways. One of them is through promoting environmental solutions, everywhere, but especially in Israel, as activist and entrepreneur Yossi Abramowitz writes below:

"There is no higher fulfillment of Jewish mission than to save the majesty of God's creation and to do so as individuals as part of a global Jewish collective with a national platform called the State of Israel...we must transform ourselves from the misunderstood Light Unto the Nations, as Isaiah beckoned, to a Renewable Light Unto the Nations..."

Jay Shofet reinforces this point in his essay, emphasizing that sustainability is a unique portal into an inspiring Israel for Jews everywhere:

"[A] polluted, gridlocked Holy Land is no beacon to anyone. An exporter of solar energy and a clean-tech superpower, with open spaces for enjoyment and green belts around our livable cities –well, that is an Israel to rally behind."

But of course, we're not just talking about Israel. Rabbi Sid Schwartz writes forcefully about the challenges facing the American Jewish community:

"We need to confront the one "dirty" little secret of our community. There is no single bigger threat to ongoing environmental degradation than consumption and the affluence of the Jewish community makes us among the world's most avid consumers... Jews cannot lead by example on the planet's existential challenge unless we start addressing our community's excessive rate of consumption...the key to following a more sacred and ethical life is the discipline that comes from accepting limits to indulging our voracious appetites for whatever we want, whenever we want it."

And there are also other reasons and approaches. Micha Odenheimer, of Tevel Be'Tzedek, working in communities in the developing world, writes about how Judaism has positive models and content to offer people there, struggling for their own identities, as well as for justice and general well-being:

"Jewishness provides, for many of the groups we work with, a model for integrating particularism with universalism, the sustaining of identity with the skillful navigation of the new global world, drawing on our prophetic teachings and ethical precision in order to make the world more sustainable and equitable."

Sandy Cardin of the Schusterman Foundation tackles the issue from the other direction, emphasizing the need to appeal to younger generations of Jews in compelling, relevant and inspiring ways:

"Our future depends on our ability to inspire generation after generation of young people to take an active role in making the world a better place. Achieving this vision relies on our ability to help young Jews embrace their Jewish identity and ultimately link the values they hold as global citizens to Jewish values. Indeed, we have seen how eye-opening it can be for young Jews to learn that Jewish text and teachings implore us to work toward a sustainable future for all humanity by enacting the values of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world), *derekh erez* (civility and humanity), *chesed* (mercy and kindness) and others."

It's no accident that this collection of essays features one particular "mitzvah" that has become the dominant socio-environmental frame for Jewish discourse in our generation: shmita, the year of release. Einat Kramer, spearheading the Israeli Shmita movement, writes that current shmita work:

"[B]y creating new connections with the roots in ancient customs, is reviving the fundamental spirit of the Law as it widens its interpretation. Furthermore, this creative effort contributes to Jewish peoplehood as it furthers values and actions that are equally relevant to Jews in Israel and around the world. Thus shmita, classically defined as part of the category of mitzvot that are only applicable in the Land of Israel, may now be viewed as a growing set of practices and commitments developed every seven years in Israel, a place that will serve as a laboratory for sustainability ideas and practices that may radiate across the globe."

Yedidya Sinclair echoes this sentiment forcefully:

"[T]here has clearly been a resurgence of interest in shmita both in Israel and in the Diaspora. While these movements have emerged in parallel, they have benefited from a cross-pollination of ideas through the recent Siach conferences, which brought together social justice and environmental activists from Israel and the Diaspora for annual discussions. Shmita is simply an idea whose time has come, and with its creative growth both in Israel and the Diaspora, has unique potential to promote the value of peoplehood that spans geography, politics and other axes of division."

And Robin Moss sums it up nicely when he writes:

"Sustainable development occurs at the intersection of social justice, environmental protection and a fair economic system....the genius of the shmita vision is that it says that only when all three of these actions are carried out – only at the intersection of these three kinds of justice – can there be a real, holy sense that we are living out our Jewish values."

Finally, as the 2013 Pew study states, as quoted by Sandy Cardin in his essay: "being Jewish was most attractive if it spoke to and connected with another part of someone's identity." To put it another way: to be authentically true to ourselves we must be true to something greater than only ourselves. Mirele Goldsmith expresses this eloquently, when she writes:

"Jews may disagree about the application of Jewish ethical teachings to various problems, but all streams of Judaism hold fast to a few key moral principles; that life is sacred, that every person has dignity and value, and that it is our human task to contribute to the redemption of the world. There is a purpose to Jewish life that goes beyond pursuit of our self-interest as individuals and even as a collective."

More answers to these questions and more follow in this collection of papers. Read on.

**Jeremy Benstein is a founder and deputy director of the Heschel Center for Sustainability in Israel, and active in the Siach collaboration. He holds a bachelor's degree from Harvard, a master's degree in Judaic Studies and a doctorate in cultural anthropology from the Hebrew University on social-environmental activism. He is the author of *The Way Into Judaism and the Environment (Jewish Lights, 2006)*, is married to Dr. Annabel Herzog, and lives in Zichron Yaakov.**



# Peoplehood With Purpose: A Renewable Light Unto the Nations

**Yosef Israel Abramowitz**

The convenient truth about the Jewish people is that when we put our minds and capital to work, we can make miracles happen. There is no more noble cause than saving humanity itself, ensuring that God's covenant not to wipe out the planet with rising waters will be – in some small measure – because of our actions. It is for this purpose that we have been created, that we have survived, that we have flourished. There is no higher fulfillment of Jewish mission than to save the majesty of God's creation and to do so as individuals as part of a global Jewish collective with a national platform called the State of Israel.

Saving the earth itself from climate change, and the billions of people and animals on it, is not just environmentalism and sustainability. It is ethical global survival. Of the trillions of cosmic opportunities for life to flourish, this third rock from the sun may be the only expression, the only experiment, to grace the universe with the possibility of collective moral choice.

As Jews, we must transform ourselves from the misunderstood Light Unto the Nations, as Isaiah beckoned, to a Renewable Light Unto the Nations.

Our first fundamental challenge is to ensure that the Jewish state, which is home to eight million plus people, becomes carbon neutral. Unfortunately, the government's stated goal is for only 10 percent of Israel's energy by 2020 to be generated by renewables, primarily solar. This is unacceptable. The European Union, most of whose member countries have half the sunshine of Israel, has set a goal of 20 percent renewables by 2020 and they are going to reach it.

If Israel sets a goal of 40 percent renewables by 2025, it would capture the imagination of our youth, entrepreneurs, scientists, philanthropists, and financiers in Israel and around the world. It would cast Israel not only as a responsible nation but also as a shining example of what can be accomplished by coordinated global action. Israel, as Saul Singer teaches, can be a platform for solving global problems. With new systems for energy

storage, Israel could be the first economy to transform from burning carbon to solar for 100 percent of her energy needs.

There is plenty of sunshine and land in the Negev and Arava deserts to power this revolution. But world Jewry has failed to weigh in on Israel going solar beyond today's measly 2 percent of its current energy. A true expression of sustainability and peoplehood would be for world Jewry to demand of Israel to accelerate her green energy program and to do so in the interests of the good name of the Jewish people.

But to have the moral authority to demand that of our Jewish state, each family and community must put its own house in green order. Every Tu Bishvat can be the time when every family and community calculates its carbon footprint and does its annual carbon offset—either by planting trees in Israel, impact investing in solar fields in Israel and worldwide, or thru programs like TerraPass or CarbonFund.org. Nigel Savage of Hazon challenges us to be the first carbon-neutral people on the planet. And because climate change is a global problem, world Jewry can focus our offsets in Israel and this can be a shining example that all peoples and all countries can go carbon neutral.

This year we happen to be celebrating shmita, the environmental sabbatical that occurs every seven years in the Land of Israel. This is the last shmita before climate change becomes irreversible, so the imperative for the Jewish people to act now is historic.

I believe that all of our religious leaders of every stripe and color need to declare carbon a sin, since it leads to death and destruction. Just ask the two million displaced people in the Philippines from the typhoon last year that was super-charged by the warming waters of the Indian ocean and the higher sea levels due to the melting of our ice caps. Just ask the families of the 6,300 people who perished in the same storm. With business continuing as usual, next time it can be 20 million displaced and 63,000 drowned.

The Jewish community and the State of Israel need to go electric in our vehicles. Buying a conventional car during shmita should be sin. (At least get a plug-in hybrid!) And as with all sins, they should be avoided or compensated for, hence the carbon-offsets.

Every synagogue, JCC, school, and institution should figure out its footprint, put solar panels on its own roof – with great new naming opportunities – and also set aside funds to invest in Israeli renewable science centers or companies. Furthermore, Partnership 2000 communities (created between Israeli and world Jewish communities) could adopt mirror strategies. When the solar panels are named in Boston, a similar array can be named in Haifa, Boston's sister city. Jewish buildings worldwide and Israeli homes and buildings should adopt green building codes, for which they can have the privilege of

hanging on their doorpost a green mezuzah that certifies to the world that the building complies with best environmental practices.

Israel, as a public face of world Jewry and Jewish values, must not only declare herself a responsible member of the world community when it comes to greenhouse gas emissions but also provide leadership on this front. We are a small people who have historically played critical and catalytic roles to advance morality in civilization. Nothing would be more Jewish and would affirm the power of peoplehood than to lead by example to save the planet from desecrating God's great name by ruining Creation.

**Yosef Abramowitz was named the 21st most influential Jewish person on the planet by the Jerusalem Post in 2014 and currently heads Energiya Global Capital, an impact investment platform that provides healthy returns to investors while advancing the environmental and humanitarian goals of providing affordable green power to underserved populations. Yossi is also winner of the Covenant Award for Excellence in Jewish Education, a Wexner Fellow, and founder or co-founder of many Jewish on-line initiatives. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife Rabbi Susan Silverman and their five children and can be followed on Twitter @KaptainSunshine and blogs at peoplehood.org.**



# Celebrating the Mystery: A Vision of Re-Enchantment for Judaism and the World

**Nina Beth Cardin**

This much is uncontested: sustainability is a bedrock concept, even if it is wrapped in a milquetoast term. Without a doubt, life depends on sustainability. We have known this for millennia: “Then God said, ‘Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.’ And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it” (Genesis 1).

Bearing; fruit; seed. There can hardly be a set of more jam-packed verses on fertility and sustainability in the whole Bible. And for good reason. Without it the world would have stalled the moment God stopped speaking. Without seed and procreation (day three, part two; Genesis 1:11-12), and the environment in which to grow and thrive (day three, part one; Genesis 1:9-10) the world is sterile, static, stagnant and ultimately dead. A vibrant creation needs the means and the environment to reproduce itself. So it has been from the beginning of time; so it remains today.

But if sustainability is the necessary grounds upon which we must build our lives why is it so hard to “sell”? To many, it seems about as enticing, and as force-fed, as cod liver oil. While the reasons for this attitude are no doubt complicated, I would argue that one main reason is our alienation from and subsequent commodification of nature. Food comes from food stores and shoes come from shoe stores, light comes from a switch. The connection between all that we eat, purchase, use and their sources has been severed. Our primary relationship to nature is as consumers. Even when we go places to view radiant sunsets and camp in the cool of the mountains and see soaring vistas, we do this as consumers (grateful ones but consumers nonetheless) of the commodity of nature.

Yet, simply reminding the human race that all life, all things, all breath, all consciousness hinges and hangs upon the stuff of a healthy earth, and that earth is a living entity with needs of its own, is not sufficient. Knowledge might awaken and alert us to reality, but

it often fails to move us to act. We must work to re-enchant our experience of nature, to fall in love with and celebrate nature again. To create a sustainable society we must become individuals who don't just accept and abide by the limits of nature but celebrate and thrive in the ways of creation.

This should be Judaism's contribution to the world's move toward sustainability. Despite the classic Jewish fear that the exultation of nature will be confused with the adoration of the Creator, Judaism celebrates nature as a potent partner in our sacred earthly enterprise.

"You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands" (Isaiah 55:12).

"Then Judah became His sanctuary, Israel His dominion.

The sea saw and fled, the Jordan turned back.

The mountains skipped like rams, the hills like young sheep"

(Psalm 114).

"If you follow my decrees and are careful to obey my commands, I will send you rain in its season, and the ground will yield its crops and the trees their fruit. Your threshing will continue until grape harvest and the grape harvest will continue until planting, and you will eat all the food you want and live in safety in your land" (Leviticus 26).

And of course there is the author of Job, that magisterial booster of nature's awesomeness who could barely confine his paean of nature (and God) to six chapters to express the grandeur of the created world and the humble place of humankind in it:

Do you know the balancings of the clouds, the wondrous works of the one whose knowledge is perfect, you whose garments are hot when the earth is still because of the south wind? Can you, like him, spread out the skies, hard as a molten mirror? (Job 37:16-18).

There is no end to the soaring poetry of nature in this book; the verses and chapters just keep tumbling out.

True, we are eons ahead of the author of Job in our understanding of the universe's secrets. We can peer into the soul of the atom and map the vastness of space. But we do not grasp the force of gravity nor begin to know the cradle of the Big Bang. Being and Life are still mysteries. And awesome. It is a desecration to become too casual with nature, too bold, too pushy, and too confident.

If nature were re-enchanted, as it deserves to be, we would be more inclined to treat it differently. We could not blithely gouge the ores out of the earth or decapitate its mountains or topple its forests if we are captivated by nature's aged grandeur and humbled before the millions of years that contributed to its substance, the stuff we now call "resources," the stuff of our lives.

To become captivated, we must know the earth, not just the theory of it, and not just the disassembled elements of it, not just through nature specials on TV or in pots in our homes, but also through the particularity that greets us when we walk out our doors each morning. We must track its ebb and flow through the seasons; know it as a personality in our lives and not just a medium to get through from home to office.

A friend of mine once told me about the discipline of "sit spot," a quiet place where you sit for 15 minutes a day, every day if possible, and see the details of the constant but changing world around you. It is similar to the artist's discipline of sketching the same still-life object 100 times. After drudging through the surface sameness the first dozen times, you break through to the discovery of minutiae that surprise and delight. The familiar becomes reassuring instead of boring, and the new is awakening.

That is what our blessings help us do. They are our ritualized "sit spots." We don't recite *ha-motzi* – the blessing over bread – over the idea of food. We recite it upon holding – and immediately consuming – this particular bit of food at this particular time. We don't recite a blessing for trees upon the thought of fruit trees but upon seeing the blossoming of that first tree on that morning walk on that day in the spring. It is in gaining this sense of intimacy through particularity that nature regains its enchantment. When it does, it becomes precious to us once again. And protected. "We know enough of our own history by now to be aware that people exploit what they have merely concluded to be of value, but they defend what they love" (Wendell Berry, "Life is a Miracle").

To live knowing the world as a gift in its wholeness and singularities is to live knowingly in a world of beneficence. To live in the presence of such beneficence should lead to an attitude and state of gratefulness. And an attitude of gratefulness should lead us to handle the gift well. For while we are today's beneficiaries, there are others with identical claims yet to come. We cannot claim primacy, or worse, exclusivity of use, which our culture of consumption erroneously and dangerously fosters.

"Honesty demands the recognition that no matter how ingenious and powerful we become, we live, if we live at all, at the mercy of a creative life spirit. Agribusiness, on the other hand, [and we can add any industry that treats earth's gifts as consumable and disposable commodities without restraint] and as British agrarian Sir Albert Howard

observed, lives by the principle of banditry: 'The using up of fertility is a transfer of past capital and of future possibilities to enrich a dishonest present: it is banditry pure and simple'" (Norman Wirzba, *The Paradise of God: Renewing Religion in an Ecological Age*, 75).

Judaism, like all religion, dwells in the realm of the spirit, which is where the solution to sustainability lies. But Judaism builds the spiritual on the foundation of the material. Through our judicious and intentional use of our blessings, based on actions in the material world and through our attention to our particular slice of nature as a proxy for the whole, we can offer a re-enchanted vision of nature to the world. And bring back the desire to care for and protect it.

**Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin lives in the Chesapeake Watershed and works as a sustainability activist and advisor in the Jewish and interfaith communities.**



# The Intersection of Jewish Identity, Jewish Values and Global Sustainability

**Sandy Cardin**

When I was asked to write an essay on sustainability, Jewish and global, I immediately thought of our greatest renewable resource: young people. Indeed, our future depends on our ability to inspire generation after generation of young people to take an active role in making the world a better place.

When it comes to young Jews, in particular, our role is two-fold: to engage and empower them to devote their time and talent to strengthening the Jewish community and to put Jewish values at the forefront of their efforts to serve the common good.

Achieving this vision relies on our ability to help young Jews embrace their Jewish identity and ultimately connect the values they hold as global citizens to Jewish values. Indeed, we have seen how eye-opening it can be for young Jews to learn that Jewish text and teachings implore us to work toward a sustainable future for all humanity by living out the values of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world), *tzedek* (justice), *derekh eretz* (civility and humanity), *chesed* (mercy and kindness) and others.

Yet, without a strong sense of connection to these values, these teachings remain words on a page.

Methods for forging this connection have evolved significantly over the last three decades. Until recently, the field of Jewish engagement was often focused on programs whose principal goal was to help make "Jewish" someone's primary identity.

In the mid 1990's, a study on emerging Jewish identity made clear that this was not the way many people viewed themselves. Instead of choosing just one identity, people held multifaceted and multiple identities, often unaffected by religion. As a result, by the early 2000's, many began modeling an approach of finding new ways to bring people to Judaism.

Recently, our collective approach shifted again. Perhaps best illustrated by the 2013 Pew study on Jewish Americans, many within the Jewish community have realized that being Jewish was most attractive if it spoke to and connected with another part of someone's identity.

In particular, the Pew study showed that 22 percent of self-identified Jews do not affiliate with the Jewish religion. This percentage has grown over the years and is highest among Millennials at 32 percent. At the same time, it showed that more and more Jews, especially in the younger generation, identify as "community Jews," crediting a shared heritage and culture and strong Jewish values that encompass the values they hold as global citizens.

What this means is that rather than leading people to Judaism and Jewish life, we need to bring Judaism to people. We need to help people infuse Jewish identity into how they live, love, work and play.

This approach is proving successful in helping to make Jewish thoughts and traditions applicable to the lives young Jews already lead. It has also helped people translate Jewish values into a broader framework, enabling them to see their interests, passions and causes in a Jewish context and inspiring them to take action.

Through our work, we are seeing young Jews find new and innovative ways to use technology to serve people living with disabilities, to marry local cuisine and sustainable food practices, to employ art and music to breathe new life into old cities. When asked where they draw their inspiration, many talk about the connection to their Jewish roots and values.

In particular, we are seeing young Jews use Amplifier, a newly launched giving circle platform, to rethink philanthropy; form communities of service through Repair the World, an organization working to make service central to Jewish life; and forge meaningful connections to Israel through organizations like TAMID Israel Investment Group.

Additionally, we are seeing participants of the Schusterman REALITY program tap into Jewish values as a way to shape and grow their leadership capacity. By providing them with meaningful Jewish experiences, these young adults who have a passion for social justice are exploring what it means to approach their work through a Jewish lens, all while building a network of like-minded peers eager to support each other as they set their sights on making a difference in their communities.

The efforts of young Jews to create a more just and sustainable world add to a robust Jewish legacy of affecting change. Historically, Jews have played an important role in

bending the arc of history toward justice, marching alongside civil rights activists and continuing the fight for an inclusive society.

But despite significant achievements, past and present, our work is cut out for us. As funders and Jewish organizational professionals, it is up to us to build on these trends and capture the imagination of young Jews so that they might continue to be leaders and change makers on a global scale.

It is especially timely to have this discussion during a shmita year for Jews—a year in which farmers refrain from working their land in favor of more bountiful harvests down the road. The concept of shmita speaks to all who are hard at work sowing the seeds of a sustainable future. As professors Avi Sagi and Yedidya Stern wrote, “Shmita is a call to set apart a bubble in time,” a time to foster care, compassion and partnership. Now is our moment in time, our chance to lay the groundwork for supporting generations of young Jews who will ultimately shape the future we imagine.

For inspiration, we need only draw upon the words of Honi the Circlemaker. It was Honi who first offered a Jewish definition of sustainability when he declared that “just as our parents planted for us, so we will plant for our children.” Our founder Lynn Schusterman adopted this mandate 25 years ago, and together with peers, partners and friends we will continue to work toward its fruition.

**Sandy Cardin is the President of the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, a global organization committed to igniting the passion and power in young people to create positive change in the Jewish community and beyond.**



# Opening Our Eyes, Celebrating Interdependence, and Evolving Jewish Ecological Wisdom

**By Shamu Fenyvesi Sadeh**

Many years ago I worked with science teachers who were encouraged to get their students exploring stream ecology by using a curriculum focused on 'water chemistry'. I have met very few middle school students whose hearts sing when they hear the words water chemistry. I have met thousands of kids and adults who were excited to learn about 'mountains', 'forests', 'rivers', 'nature' and 'the farm'. Language matters.

As someone whose primary work for the last 25 years has been creating experiences that foster a sense of awe, ecological interdependence and responsibility, I have long been in search of the right words to use. What language invokes and inspires unity with all life, connection with the sacred whole?

Before the term 'sustainability' came into wide use, 'environment' and 'conservation' were common language. Yet environmental protection and conservation of natural resources are cold and technical terms, seeming to refer to things outside of ourselves, outside of culture and the human search for meaning. They suggest technical and managerial solutions to what is a deep crisis of values. These words, like 'water chemistry', do not have deep resonance in our souls.

In the 1980s the United Nations helped give shape to the environmental movement by defining 'sustainability' in a holistic way; using the three nested circles of economy, society and environment. Sustainability is by definition holistic. For example, sustainable agriculture includes resting and rebuilding exhausted soils, providing living wages for farm workers, and enacting policies that foster equitable and affordable land ownership. Torah scholars and students of Jewish texts, does this last example ring any bells for you? Our religious lives center around a text that describes an ancient holistic agrarian society. Laws about Shabbat include giving rest for the soil and our workers, and are linked to the cyclical redistribution of land. In this context, the interdependence evoked by the concept of 'sustainability' seems 'kosher', literally a good fit.

I am offering awareness, interconnectedness and evolution as three frames of Jewish wisdom for sustainability. By awareness I mean the ways in which our stories and our rituals encourage us to open our eyes and see beyond our limited perception of reality. Interconnectedness reflects the ways that Judaism sees soil and soul, ritual life and food, land ownership and business conduct as part of a sacred whole. Evolution refers the ways in which we are constantly adapting to the changing conditions around us as individuals and as a community.

**Awareness**      The stories from the Torah that I find most compelling are those about a shift in perception: Hagar in a moment of desperation lifting her eyes and seeing a well, Moses stopping to see a bush burning but not being consumed, Jacob's post-dream realization that 'God was in this place and I did not know it.' I think about the morning blessing "who opens the eyes of the blind" and all the ways that we are blind; to the deeper emotional and materials needs of our family members and neighbors, to the web of life – maple trees, spiders and fungus and soil microbes – that keep the water clean and make the soil fertile. Part of the crisis we find ourselves in is a crisis of how we see the world; a crisis of selective blindness.

Here at Adamah and Teva we have been reviving traditional blessings for seeing mountains, smelling fragrant plants, and hearing thunder, and creating new blessings for everyday wonders of the forest and farm where we live. When we run environmental education programs we hang a large poster in the main hall which reads "Ma rabu ma'assacha ya" ("How great our your works Yah") and has a large blank space for students to write or draw their discoveries of the day. I agree with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel who taught that the sense of wonder is the root of all religion. We need to cultivate radical amazement to become spiritually and ecologically whole.

**Interconnectedness**      One way of understanding the toxins in our water, rising inequality and a destabilized climate, is as a crisis of fragmentation. It is because we have lost the belief and understanding that the world is connected by a complex web of relationships: human, God, neighbor, land. In other words, it is because we see cheap food products, industrial agriculture, human health, and the disappearance of monarch butterflies as separate issues that we find ourselves in this bind.

The iconoclastic philosopher Ivan Illich, the poet farmer Wendell Berry and many others have critiqued the culture of fragmentation, specialization and commodification in which

we live. As we hand over large parts of our lives to specially trained professionals we become passive consumers of food products, entertainment, education, and spiritual programming. We lose touch with the trees and birds, with our own learning and personal growth, and with primary experiences like harvesting and cooking food, singing, and teaching ourselves and others new skills. When we grow or cook food, gather community in prayer or song, or learn to use hand tools we become empowered to make connections.

As an ancient, land-based tradition equipped to govern all aspects of life in a pre-modern society, Judaism has many tools to combat fragmentation with interconnectedness. In the garden of Eden we learn that we humans, *b'nei* and *b'not* Adam, children of Adam, were formed from the dust of the earth, the 'Adamah.' Our very name and identity as humans is from the earth. Our burial customs ensure our bodies get returned to the earth.

Our Shabbat practices dictate rest for the animals, servants and strangers among us. Laws governing agriculture such as 'peah' and 'leket' address greed, land ownership, poverty, and the idea that the land ultimately belongs to God. Our actions, both as individuals and the policies and directions that we adopt as a society, have far-reaching consequences that demand our attention.

After questioning the nature of God's justice, the prophet Job is taken on a whirlwind tour of all creation. He is left in humbled awe of the great circle of birth and death, drought and rainstorms, vultures, ostriches, and the singing stars of morning. Job gains a new perspective on the place of humans in the big world. In a similar vision, the great conservationist Aldo Leopold spoke of 'thinking like a mountain'; understanding – as much as us small-minded humans can – the complex long-term interconnectedness that governs life on the planet.

**Evolution**        By evolution I am referring to our ability to survive thousands of years of historical change through adaptation, developing new streams of Jewish theology, and the learning and personal growth that each of us goes through every day. Arthur Green in his book 'Radical Judaism' does a beautiful job of putting the God of creation at the center of a simultaneously new and old Judaism. He suggests that the unfolding evolution of life on the planet is the great story of revelation, and that we can understand God as the inner being of that unfolding. This expression of Jewish theology helps us remain rooted in the tradition while responding in meaningful ways to the new understandings of the ecological age in which we live.

Judaism as a religion and culture has embedded within it the wisdom of adaptation. We have evolved as a culture to survive the destruction of the Temple, the Diaspora, and the emergence of science. We are a resourceful people. We need to call on our resourcefulness to respond to the great challenges of sustainability. I think Green's vision of evolution and revelation is one of these key adaptations.

And we are a tradition that believes in learning, growth and transformation. Rabbi Nachman taught that each of us makes the journey our ancestors did: from slavery to liberation to revelation. We each have a personal journey to travel as our communities are evolving. God as the unfolding being of the world is our partner in the process of spiritual transformation.

For the past 10 years I have directed the Adamah Fellowship at the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center. Awareness, interconnectedness, and evolution are not just conceptual musings but are based on my experience working with young Jews at Adamah and at Teva. We use a progression of experiences to build spiritual practice, intentional pluralistic Jewish community, and ecological and leadership skills. Hoeing beets, climbing a mountain, and praying are ways we become more present and open our sense of awareness to the world around us. To learn interconnectedness we bless and eat food we have harvested, we study permaculture and shmita, learn our creation myths, and how to get along in community. Once we have practices that help us to see more clearly, and we understand our place in the web of life, we can rise to meet our emerging selves, and to offer our contribution to our evolving tradition.

**Shamu Fenyvesi Sadeh co-founded Adamah and has farmed, sung and taught there since 2004. He appreciates the daily hands-on life in community and getting the chance to think and learn big picture in terms of Judaism, sustainability and spirituality.**



## Rising to the Spiritual Challenge: Meeting the Test of Climate Change

**Mirele B. Goldsmith**

Climate change is the biggest challenge to sustainability that the world has ever faced, but many Jewish leaders have barely taken notice.

I realized just how far we have to go when I attended a meeting just a few weeks after Hurricane Sandy devastated New York City. The topic was how to address trauma caused by the storm, which killed 117 people in the United States and left tens of thousands homeless. After the formal presentations were completed, the chairperson opened the floor for questions from the audience. A woman stood up and, in a voice full of emotion, asked the panel to address how the Jewish community would be taking action to prevent climate change, which, if left unchecked, would likely contribute to future disasters.

The chairperson dismissed the question as irrelevant to the subject of the meeting.

This Jewish leader could not have been more wrong. Climate change is not irrelevant to Jewish life; rather we risk making Jewish life irrelevant if we ignore it. Like every other community on earth, we are in physical danger. But even more importantly, the climate crisis is a spiritual test Jewish communities must pass.

By now, the physical dangers are well known. Hurricane Sandy was a sneak preview of the future in which climate change will continue to alter the weather. Higher temperatures are already loading storms with extra energy and rising seas mean more flooding from storm surges. Heat waves that are occurring every summer are less dramatic than hurricanes, but still deadly. Studies suggest that, if current emissions hold steady, excess heat-related deaths in the U.S. could climb from an average of about 700 each year currently, to between 3,000 and 5,000 per year by 2050 (CDC). Jews are at risk as individuals and, as we learned in New York, the infrastructure of Jewish life – synagogues, Jewish community centers, and old-age homes – are vulnerable. In other parts of the world, including the Middle East, the dangers are even greater. In areas experiencing increased drought, people are forced to migrate as their livelihoods disappear. Violence and conflict are destabilizing governments. Changes in the climate are making many chronic problems worse, including hunger and disease.

Jewish communities would be wise to prepare for these physical risks, but it is even more critical that we rise to the spiritual challenge. At its heart, the climate crisis is a moral problem. People in the rich countries of the world, where most Jews live, caused the warming of the atmosphere by burning fossil fuels for energy. Cheap energy made industrialization possible, and brought us tremendous benefits in material abundance, healthier and longer lives, and even educational and cultural opportunity. And now, as the bill is coming due, we have the means to protect ourselves from many of the effects of climate change. But the poorest of the poor around the world, who had no part in causing the problem and have not benefited from industrialization, do not have the means to escape the danger. As Jews we know that we have a responsibility to recognize the harm we have caused and to do our utmost to make it right.

As Hillel taught, the essence of Torah is to love your neighbor as yourself. Loving our neighbors who are most vulnerable to the effects of climate disruption means doing everything we can to support a rapid transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources. Jewish communities can educate members to make their homes more energy efficient, purchase electricity from renewable energy suppliers, and stop investing in fossil fuel corporations. Even more important is to use our votes and our collective influence to persuade governments to enact ambitious policies to address climate change. This includes domestic policies to favor renewable energy, as well as support for a strong international agreement that will place binding limits on greenhouse gas emissions, offer financial support for the most effected nations, and provide a voice in climate deliberations for the most vulnerable.

Jews may disagree about the application of Jewish ethical teachings to various problems, but all streams of Judaism hold fast to a few key moral principles; that life is sacred, that every person has dignity and value, and that it is our human task to contribute to the redemption of the world. There is a purpose to Jewish life that goes beyond pursuit of our self-interest as individuals and even as a collective.

The climate crisis is a spiritual test. Jewish communities have everything we need to pass it. The only question is will we try?

**Dr. Mirele B. Goldsmith is an environmental psychologist, educator and activist.**



# Inscribe Them on Your Doorposts and Gates: Stewarding Sustainable and Just Jewish Spaces

**Rachel Jacoby Rosenfield**

***Mishkan*** In Genesis, God places humans in the Garden of Eden to till and tend the land. Yet we the descendants of Adam and Eve spend 90% of our time indoors.<sup>1</sup> In fact, one of our first undertakings when exiled from the Garden is to lay brick and mortar. The construction of the Tower of Babel demonstrates profound moral failure as we exhibit a lack of humility and humanity, building a tower that reaches God's heavens while, according to *Midrash*, caring more if a brick falls from the tower than a human being. Perhaps we are ultimately punished for this action not only for our hubris and disregard for human life, but also for our failure to till and tend, for carelessly exploiting the resources of the created world.

There is clearly a wrong way to build. But we are also shown a right way. God's instructions about how to build the *mishkan* (tabernacle) demonstrate creativity parallel to God's own. In fact, rabbinic interpreters have noted the linguistic parallels between the creation narrative and the description of the building of the *mishkan*. Construction can be inspiring, participatory and holy, and as builders and stewards of constructed environments we can fulfill our promise as creators in the Divine image. When we build right and well, God dwells among us – our spaces are elevated in holiness.

Our contemporary Jewish lives are largely lived in sanctuaries, social halls, classrooms and homes. What does it mean to build dwelling places "right" today? In addition to the *mishkan*, our tradition offers us several paradigms related to building, such as *mezuzah* and parapet, from which we might derive an ethical framework for environmentally sustainable and just spaces – a framework that also applies to the sustainability of the Jewish life within their walls.

---

<sup>1</sup> The US Green Buildings Council reports that people in the US spend 90% of their time indoors. [www.usgbc.org](http://www.usgbc.org)

**Mezuzah** Jewish and environmental sustainability are both sweeping, generation-crossing pursuits that require daily vigilance. Sustainability is about living our most profound and dynamic values repeatedly, visibly and out loud: not just caring for the world or our community for the sake of our children, but demonstrating along the way *how* and *why* we are doing so. A commitment to sustainability, whether Jewish or environmental, prompts a dynamic, evolving and daily conversation with our children in words and actions.

Our tradition recognizes the importance of engaging in such enduring conversations, symbolized by the mezuzot that we affix to the doorframes in our homes and expressed in the words of the *Shema* and *V'ahavta* rolled up inside. The rituals associated with this prayer, and the content of the text itself, remind us that Jewish values should permeate our day-to-day actions. The prayer instructs us to affix its words to our body (which we do in the form of *tefilin*) and to our doorposts (mezuzah). But these physical talismans are not enough; we need to recite the words within them, in the evening and in the morning, when we lie down and when we rise up and as we walk through the world. Nor is reciting these words to ourselves enough: we must teach them to our children. In other words, this central tenet of Judaism should be integrated into every aspect of our lived experience through physical symbols, ritual objects, and words of prayer, study, and relationship. Through writing, posting, acting on, and living our values they become enduring.

The presence of mezuzah transforms our built spaces into places of embodied values. Our buildings are not complete without mezuzot. Mezuzah is not an accessory; its presence and its message are fundamental to Jewish life. Now picture a recycling center established at the entrance to a Jewish communal space with the words of Ecclesiastes 1:4 inscribed on the wall above, "One generation goes and another comes, but the earth remains forever." This installation serves as an "eco-mezuzah," expressing the commitment of those who dwell within to be attuned to the daily choices we make within our homes and institutions – the food we buy, the temperature we keep our homes, the waste we recycle – and inviting others to be part of this conversation. Our living spaces should embody our values and engage the participation of those around us.

**Parapet** However, we should not think that our buildings end at the doorframes, walls and roofs. The built spaces where we live as families and communities do not exist in isolation; they are part of any expanding urban forest. Our buildings make demands on the planet, which provide material for their construction. They also make demands of the communities that live in their shadows. How we

construct and maintain these edifices are not merely a matter of caring for, educating and demonstrating our values to the people within their walls. These decisions are a matter of protecting and sustaining human life.

What is the responsibility of a community for the health and safety of its neighbors? A biblical building code offers us guidance:

When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet (fence) for your roof, so that you do not bring the bloodguilt on your house if anyone should fall (*ha-nofel*, lit. the faller) from it (Deuteronomy 22:8).

This code is concerned for the person who might inadvertently get too close to the edge of a roof and fall off (*ha-nofel*). The very notion of parapet acknowledges an interactive and potentially hazardous relationship between buildings and the world beyond. The parapet protects by creating safe boundaries.

However, in today's urban environments, there are hazards that cannot be contained by walls. One such danger is the "heat island effect." The mostly blacktopped buildings that make up our cities, and the asphalt pavement that lines the avenues between them, make our cities hotter and the air dirtier. Whenever we replace a patch of green with a built space we eliminate the capacity of that soil to absorb excess rain, those trees to filter and clean the air we breathe, and that grass to cool the ambient temperature. In places where the air quality is further diminished by the emissions caused by heavy traffic, asthma and other pulmonary disease rates increase.

As we consider human health and safety in light of such uncontainable impacts, we recognize that the physical parapet in the form of a wall, no matter how high and thick, cannot contain this hazard nor protect people from its effects. When we apply the concept of parapet to the contemporary built environment, the idea of a physical barrier around the parameter of the roof seems inadequate. Parapet embodies a more expansive responsibility to mitigate the negative impacts of our buildings on the communities surrounding them and beyond. *Ha-nofel* is not just the person who might fall off the roof; she is the asthmatic child who inhales the air that our buildings exhume.

As Jewish communities, we need to cultivate a heightened awareness of our responsibility to *ha-nofel* and the part we might play in preventing injury. Painting our rooftops white or planting green roofs is a beginning. When fully realized, the directive to construct a parapet also touches on decisions about the raw materials we use to build and where we send our physical waste. In addition, this expanded understanding compels us to advocate for policies that will ensure the health and safety of humans and the planet. Building

such a parapet begins with heightened awareness of the impacts of our buildings, the plight of ha-nofel and our responsibility to act.

Our tradition offers us paradigms for stewarding the built world justly and humanely. Imagine if Jewish communities embraced these principles in the spaces in which we live and congregate. What if we asked ourselves as a matter of course: How are we living out our values as stewards and builders on a daily basis? How are we making these choices part of the deep exchanges we have with our children? How are we acting to ensure health and justice beyond our walls? In answering these questions with integrity and purpose, we will establish dwelling spaces and sustain communities elevated in holiness.

**Rachel Jacoby Rosenfield was the founder director of the Jewish Greening Fellowship and currently serves as director of Experiential Education at the American Jewish World Service.**



# The Shmita Year as a Laboratory for Jewish Sustainability

**Einat Kramer**

I have been thinking about and working on Jewish sustainability for many years, and could easily write a theoretical essay with my many thoughts on the subject. Yet this is not any time, but rather the beginning, not only of the one-in-seven-year opportunity to observe the mitzvot of shmita, but moreover, the first shmita year in which a large-scale comprehensive effort is underway to reinterpret these mitzvot and render shmita relevant to contemporary Israeli society. So I would like to begin not with ideas but rather with events and actions taking place right now in honor of the shmita year.

Here are seven examples of many events and projects underway, under the auspices of **Israeli Shmita**, a broad platform of organizations, businesses, and public institutions that seeks to restore the meaning of the shmita year as a time of personal reflection, learning, social involvement, and environmental responsibility in Israel:

- An online Time Bank enables one to “give up” time and to volunteer on behalf of youth at risk, disadvantaged families, and others in need, based on one’s availability and skill set.
- Beit Avichai, a center for Jewish Israeli creativity, is leading a think tank for cinematographers, designers, and new media specialists to explore shmita and create innovative productions on the subject.
- A financial recovery program, spearheaded by MK Ruth Calderon, engages philanthropists, banks, and professional consultants (Pa’amonim, Ezra Migad, Hasdei Lev, and others) in helping needy families settle their debts and begin the journey toward financial recovery. A fund has been established that enables the public to contribute to the financial recovery program.
- The Mirkam youth group – a network of secular and religious communities – has initiated a collective “disconnect” from Facebook for the sake of real social interaction, face to face, with dialogue groups for young people from diverse backgrounds.

- The Israeli Shmita Sukkah, a tent-like traveling meeting place, began its year-long journey across Israel, with a reading and lending library, a recycling center (including a special container for the remains of shmita produce) and above all, an open space for shared thinking and discussion on how to create sustainable social change in the spirit of shmita.
- The Jewish National Fund has integrated activities in its forest and nature tours, stressing the ecological, social, and Zionist aspects of shmita.
- Hikes for gathering wild plants and learning how to cook with them revive ancient practices during the year in which farming and cultivating ceases.

Significantly, only the last two examples relate in some way to the agricultural aspects of shmita, which lie at the heart of the Torah verses regarding the sabbatical year. One of the hallmarks of **Israeli Shmita** is the attempt to apply the spirit of shmita to a mostly non-agrarian society. This effort has completely changed the focus of the year. Until now the laws of shmita had lost most of their meaning, since few farmers actually let their plots lie fallow, and erasing loans was deemed impractical already in ancient times (under Hillel's *prozbol*). Indeed, two main methods for rendering produce "kosher for shmita" today actually circumvent the law, by either selling the land to a non-Jew or importing produce from abroad, since the laws of shmita apply only to Jewish-owned land in Israel. Ironically both of these methods for observing shmita actually weaken the connection between the people of Israel and the land.

**Israeli Shmita**, by creating new connections with the roots of the ancient customs, is reviving the fundamental spirit of the Law as it widens its interpretation. Furthermore, this creative effort contributes to Jewish peoplehood as it furthers values and actions that are equally relevant to Jews in Israel and around the world. Thus shmita, classically defined as part of the category of mitzvot that are only applicable in the Land of Israel, may now be viewed as a growing set of practices and commitments developed every seven years in Israel, a place that will serve as a laboratory for sustainability ideas and practices that may radiate across the globe.

The shmita year is part of a cyclical system which conditions the consciousness of an entire nation regarding how to relate to the building blocks of life: land and possessions, work, the Creator, and the "other" – our neighbor, the poor person, the convert, the stranger, and animals. shmita challenges the Western consumer mindset, confirming that the source of our strength and blessing does lie beyond us – the land rests, we refrain from working the land, and God provides. Shmita is an opportunity to step back for a year from the overload of work (agriculture, in the past) for the good of the family, community, culture, and spirit. It is a time for learning and dreaming on a personal,

communal, and national level. From an environmental perspective, shmita offers the radical perspective of seeing our role in Creation as more than just utilitarian – a chance to acknowledging the gifts of nature, and to allow natural resources to replenish after overuse. Debt forgiveness, the financial aspect of the shmita year, encourages us to re-examine our economic structures and to give vulnerable members of society a chance to start over.

Back to the list of initiatives and projects that opened this essay: they have all stemmed from a process of thinking and planning that began years before the current shmita year, successfully gaining the support and involvement of government ministries, organizations, businesses, and individuals from diverse secular and religious backgrounds. The most exciting aspect of the list is that it is a growing and dynamic one. Every week new initiatives are born, so that the year to come will generate more and more sustainability projects whose effects will continue way beyond the seventh year, in the spirit of Leviticus 25:21:

"Then I will command My blessing upon you in the sixth year, and it shall bring forth produce for the three years."

**Einat Kramer is the founder and director of Teva Ivri, leading the "Israeli Shmita" initiative.**



## Jews and the World: Steering a Middle Course

**Clive A Lawton**

One of the ways in which Judaic approaches to a range of social issues differs from common Western ones is that Jewish answers often like to sit in the midst of ambivalence. The desire for purity of thought and approach is endlessly balanced by 'on the other hand...'

Nowhere is this clearer than on the two key fronts of shmita – agricultural and environmental legislation and responses to debt and material inequality.

Pausing briefly to note that these are only connected in the consequential halakhic frameworks – their link is not obvious in the Torah and, for example, the assumption that all shmita legislation applies only in the land of Israel is not directly supported in the matter of debts and loans – it is tempting especially for those on the Left to see in this material support for their environmental passions or anti-capitalist critiques.

But in fact, this legislation does not call upon us all to care more for the Earth continuously or redistribute wealth overall, but to take periodic corrective action – and then continue pretty much as before. Torah does not seem to mind at all about doing whatever is necessary to get the maximum amount of stuff out of the earth or allowing loans and debts to proceed, as people seem to feel the need.

In this article I shall look at how some seem to try to bend Torah to fit common 'leftie (?)' preferences. But similarly and equally, the Torah doesn't allow heartlessness either. The simple prescriptions of the market are resisted too. Though 'the poor might always be with us' (to quote a different Testament!) the Torah is visibly not happy about it. In fact, Torah seems to refuse such easy prescriptions in either direction. It wants us to struggle endlessly with the contradictions and challenges of human drives, rather than try to suppress them into some idealized imagined paradise and Eden-like world.

Just as havdala insists on the need for both sides of a dichotomy in order for the world to work well, so too does shmita seem to support a back and forth between the six years of

intense activity, allowing human drives to push forward vigorously, then to be balanced by one year – one year only, mind! – of taking stock and stopping.

So the Torah goes to the heart of farming and finance and says that it's fine to work both as hard as you can, but they're not yours to abuse endlessly and sometimes you've got to let those who have gone without back into the game.

To be explicit then... we all know that progress in health, comfort and freedoms is often prompted by horrible causes. War and competition frequently are the strongest spurs to developments, which ultimately benefit swathes of mankind. Should we then shut all that off in order to make the world a kinder gentler place? Even at the cost of curtailing or even preventing possible improvements in our lives from which we now thoughtlessly benefit, such as more certain longevity, a capacity to go where we like, eat what we like, communicate instantly with whom we like and so on? Some certainly would like that, and see such Torah legislation as giving them support. After all, they say, returning to a world with less rapacious consumption – the extreme reduction of air travel, access to a more basic diet and the rest – would enable the world to recover itself, and many invoke a sort of personification of the world (a little pagan, I always think!) in order to drive their point home.

From this perspective too, we are often told that the kind of industrial/commercial, materialistic lives we lead are bad for us and we'd all benefit from cutting back, even severely. Some holding such views might even be prepared to be pretty fascistic in their enforcement of such changes. After all, the desperation of their fears might seem to justify equally desperate measures.

And therein lies its problem. Attempts to hold people back from things they know they can do/have cannot be achieved without significant compulsion. All oppressive regimes have found so and I can see no reason why any attempts in this direction would be any the less ultimately aggressive 'or the greater good'.

But the alternative is no more attractive. Several years ago, a British Labour Party government minister was quoted as saying 'We are very relaxed about people being filthy rich' in an attempt to reassure voters that the Labour Party was not against people striving to 'better themselves' and wouldn't bash them with major tax hikes for the rich. And such reassurances helped to get the Labour Party re-elected in the UK after 18 years out in the cold.

But such unbridled indifference led to growing inequality and increased resentment. People did not seem to feel any happier about their rising wealth because they could

always see others far wealthier than them. Oddly – but on reflection, obviously – most people are happier if they think they live in a fair(ish) world.

So here then is the dilemma. If we let the world run away with itself and humankind's most base instincts then it will become cruel and dangerous for us all. But if we try and force people to be fair one to another then it will become either repressive or regressive.

As is often the case, the Talmud tells the tale... Shimon Bar Yokhai, the great mystic rabbi of Roman times, decided to conjure up the *Yetzer haRa* (the Evil Inclination) and kill it in order to abolish death and destruction. Using kabbalistic incantations he succeeded and there before him stood the mighty dragon-like Yezter haRa. But, it seems, he hadn't thought much beyond this and didn't really know what he wanted to do next, so he locked it in a cage till he could figure out his next steps. But then a strange thing happened. People stopped trading in the markets, the hens stopped laying and all manner of ordinary striving and activity ceased. Bar Yokhai realized that actually even the *Yetzer haRa* is necessary in the world – and so he painted its eyes with an ointment to blind it, in order to ameliorate its worst excesses, and then let it out of the cage. As it bounded out again, life restarted in all its messy excitability.

This is, I think, what the Torah is attempting, to paint the eyes of our worst behaviors without killing them off.

If sustainability means leaving things as they are or trying to hold them still – or even turn them back – then I doubt we can find Torah sanction for it. But if the opposite means that people should be left to achieve whatever they like without regard to the consequences or our responsibility to give others a fair go from time to time, then the Torah won't support you either.

Sorry if that's difficult or contradictory or inconsistent or paradoxical – but hey, that's the wonderful world of Torah, which demands of Jews at least that we be more subtle and complicated than simple people would like us to be.

**Clive Lawton is one of the founders of Limmud and still heavily involved in it. Clive is a prize-winning educator, writer and broadcaster, working worldwide in the fields of educational development, diversity, integration, community development and organization and team development.**



# Judaism as a Model of Continuity in the Face of Globalization

**Micha Odenheimer**

For the past seven years, Tevel b'Tzedek has been exploring what sustainability could mean in the context of the too often heartbreaking vulnerability of the extreme poor in the globalizing world. In the face of so many failed interventions in the world of international development, we asked ourselves the following questions: How can we treat poverty in the 2/3rds world at its root? How can we truly transform the situation for those who are tragically vulnerable, while strengthening, not destroying, their own culture and way of life? And no less important: How can we train a generation of Israeli and Jewish young leaders to truly understand and embrace these crucial goals as part of the core of our spiritual and cultural identity?

Inevitably, because of who we are and how we are perceived, our work is done with a consciousness that we are representing Israel and the Jewish people. We believe that our approach resonates profoundly with Judaism and the Jewish experience, not just in a general "tikkun olam Judaism believes in helping others" kind of way, but in principles and methodologies that are reflected all the way down to the smallest details of our work.

Part of what distinguishes Judaism from other spiritual approaches is in its refusal to separate body from soul, theory from practice, physical from spiritual. In a profound way, the Hebrew Bible, from the expulsion from Eden through the Prophets, is the story of humanity's, and then the people of Israel's, search, under constant threat of exile, to have a home, physical and embodied as well as spiritual. It is the search to live permanently on and with the land, "as the days of the heaven upon the earth."

With this story imprinted in our spiritual DNA, it is perhaps not surprising that, after four seasons of work in urban slums, with street children, orphans, and trafficked women, we came to the conclusion that to reach the *source* of poverty we would have to work in the rural villages. As is the case nearly everywhere in the two-thirds world, the villages in Nepal and Burundi, home to 80% of its population, are in crisis, first of all, in terms of food. Because of environmental degradation, population growth, loss of traditional agricultural practices, the loss of forested areas and migration of its labor force, villagers

are not producing enough to feed their families. The lack of good educational and health systems serving rural populations also contribute to the crisis and instability of the villages. Yet to be pulled into urban poverty is a form of exile: migrants lose their land, but also their thickly woven life-giving threads of friendships and associations drawn from their ancient culture and their deep knowledge of their human and natural environment.

Tevel goes into village areas to work for 3 to 5 years in order to forestall this exile. We don't believe that everyone should stay in the village; sometimes—unfortunately, all too rarely—the city can offer unparalleled opportunities for education and advancement for lucky, persistent villagers. But we also don't believe that people should be driven from their homes into the anomie and dislocation of urban slums because they lack food, education, health services, and most of all the knowledge and skills to act together as a living community during these times of transition, globalization and crisis. And we also know that within a few short years, as the communications infrastructure grows in countries like Nepal and Burundi, nearly infinite quantities of information and knowledge will be available within the village itself—and unpolluted farming land in places of exquisite, unpolluted beauty, will find its true value.

How does our approach differ, and how is it rooted in Jewish wisdom on sustainability? Firstly, we recognize the power and significance of the organic structures of community in transforming the world—echoing the lessons of the Jewish experience throughout history and the teachings of our tradition. Using a combination of local, professional staff and Israeli and Jewish volunteers, we help communities double or triple their food production (almost always with organic methods), from women's groups for empowerment, micro-saving, literacy, income generation, and the improvement of nutrition and health, working with the local public schools on early childhood development and teaching methodologies, and with our own homegrown youth movement on leadership and a wide array of issues. At the same time, everything we do is meant in the end to strengthen inclusive community institutions which themselves know how to adapt and change so that when we leave, the village continues to flourish and transform. We have already succeeded in doing this in two remote and marginalized areas—after phasing out a year and a half ago, they continue to surprise us with their growth and accomplishment.

The discourse about international development today is often dominated by the notion that what is needed to fight poverty are clever new technologies—quick techno fixes—and the unleashing of market forces. This approach disconnects body from soul, individual from community, heart from mind—and usually ends with the appropriation of the technology by the stronger families, castes or individuals at the expense of others, once again widening the inequality gap. Our experience—and our tradition—have taught us that authentic change requires time and consistency, local knowledge, and the flowering

of a networked, connected leadership committed to the common good. As the Torah's extensive social justice laws, such as periodic land reform and the commandment to give interest-free loans to the poor tell us, our tradition is focused on preventing the development of societies in which inequality reigns.

Another surprising effect of the Jewish component of our approach is the extent to which the local staff and villagers we work with appreciate our approach to ethnic identity: that we are devoted to our own tradition and way of knowing without the need to missionize, that we connect with them as a particular group with its own history building solidarity with another particular group, not Westerners coming in the name of "universal reason" or "universal religion." In fact, the developing world is a mosaic of tribes and ethnicities, all searching to continue to draw strength from their origins while connecting to the global world in a healthy and enriching way. The need for both recognizing and valuing cultural uniqueness while concurrently connecting to an encompassing global ethic is of great urgency today. Surprisingly, despite Jewish self-doubt about continuity, Tevel's Jewishness provides, for many of the groups we work with, a model for integrating particularism with universalism, the sustaining of identity with the skillful navigation of the new global world. Searching for, and articulating, a sensitive, modern articulation of this balance between universalism and particularism is part of Tevel's mission.

Especially with our volunteers—both international (Jewish) and national (Nepali and Burundian)—part of our strategy for sustainability is to broaden horizons so as to understand the world in a new way. We present to our participants a broad picture of the world and its power structures, emphasizing the often only partially understood underpinnings of the forces that determine conditions for people all over the world, including the poorest populations. Our primary, but not exclusive, focus is on the world economy and the process of economic globalization. We discuss the history of economic globalization, and argue that globalization in its current form is not simply the result of innovations in science, technology and communications; but it emerges from a set of value-laden assumptions about human nature.

The Jewish people, in Israel and the Diaspora, drawing on our prophetic teachings and ethical precision in order to make the world more sustainable and equitable: if we can make this vision a reality, we can change everything—for the world, for ourselves, and for the future of humanity.

**Micha Odenheimer is the founding director of Tevel b'Tzedek, an Israeli organization working in Nepal, Burundi and Haiti for sustainable development of communities of the extreme poor. Micha is a writer, journalist and ordained post-modern orthodox rabbi.**



## A Meditation on *Adamah* and *Ahavah*

Rabbi Michael Paley and Jina Davidovich

“If then you obey the commandments that I enjoin you this day, loving the Lord, your God, and serving God with all your heart and soul, I will grant the rain for your land in season – the early rain and the late rain” (Deuteronomy 11:13).

This sentence begins the second paragraph of the central *shema* prayer. As moderns, the literal meaning of the phrase seems impossible. While there is often a tendency toward magical thinking in religion, the connection between meteorological events and the human relationship to the Divine seems opaque. Do we really believe that our personal piety can affect the weather?

Moral action and the earth are, in fact, linked from the very beginning of the Biblical narrative. Adam, the earthling who is named for and made out of the earth (in Hebrew, *adamah*) has a dramatic relationship to the natural world. “To Adam God said: because you did as your wife said and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed be the ground because of you, by toil shall you eat of it all the days of your life” (Genesis 3:17). What did the earth do to deserve such a punishment? It should have been Adam who was cursed due to his transgression.

But to see the earth and Adam as separate entities is to entirely miss the Torah’s linguistic sleight of hand: Adam is the land, and the land (*adamah*) is merely an extension of Adam. When God punishes the land for Adam’s sin, He does not deflect the punishment from Adam onto an external entity, but rather, strikes Adam at the center of his being. In this moment, humankind and the land relate to God as a single unit: they thrive together, and they suffer together.

In the next significant Biblical narrative, that of Cain and Abel, Cain, who is called “the tiller of the soil,” becomes the villain, while Abel, the nomadic shepherd, is the glorified victim (4:2). When Cain, the land-lover, sacrifices his fruits to God, he is rejected; but when Abel sacrifices from the best of his flock, he is accepted. Why? This response seems particularly unwarranted when Cain’s dedication to the land is based on the charge that God gives to humankind in the creation story. In the second chapter of Genesis, God

tells Adam, after placing him in Eden, that his purpose is to till the land and tend to it ("*l'avdahu'leshamrah*"). Why then, is Cain spurned for being just that: the protector and cultivator of the land? This question is highlighted in the well-known phrase, "Am I my brother's keeper?" After Abel's murder, Cain responds to God's question about Abel's whereabouts with another question: Why should he be the keeper of his brother, when he was simply told to be the keeper of the land?

Cain's punishment for fratricide is to become the nomad that his brother was, leading him to lose his connection to the land. Ironically, he becomes the manifestation of his brother's name: *havel* – ephemeral, impermanent, nothingness. This narrative poses a shift in the primacy of the relationship between humans and God; now, with Cain distanced from the land that had been so essential to his father Adam, his relationship with God – even if tumultuous – has become everything. In the divorce between Cain and the land, the cracks in man's relationship with the *adamah* begin to form while the ties between human and Divine grow stronger.

In the Adam and Cain narratives, both characters see the consequence of their sin as a punishment that is associated with the land. Adam's sin leads the land to be cursed, and Cain loses his connection to the land altogether. Here we have a formula: man sins and land suffers. When the land suffers, humans can see their wrongdoing and rectify the sin. But then what of Noah? After God destroys the earth with the flood He promises not to destroy the land again. Noah then knows that his actions will be without environmental consequence. But with that disconnect, what will provide the moral barometer for sins against the earth? Noah is called *ish ha'adamah* (9:20), the man of the land, but based on God's promise, if Noah chooses to live in opposition to the land, neither he nor the land will see the repercussions.

The arc of the Genesis narrative – from Adam to Noah – creates a chasm between earthling and earth. And even in the later chapters, when the Jewish people are promised the land of Israel – a move that may have reconnected humankind and the land – it is most often referred to as "*eretz*," a word synonymous with *adamah*, but free of the linguistic tie between human and earth. It is only in Deuteronomy, with the above verse, that humankind and land are brought back together. Here, as in the times of Adam, our fate is inextricably linked to the fate of the land: if we follow the commandments, the rains will come and the land will flourish; if not, it will suffer and we will perish.

Still, we are moderns. Can we trust that ascribing to Biblical and rabbinic mandates will ensure agrarian success?

From *kashrut* to *Shabbat*, the commandments cause us to practice restraint: we are asked not to labor, not to till the earth, and even to refrain from constructing sacred places during specific times. Seemingly, according to our verse, this intentional restraint in our lives brings the rain. But we live in a culture of excess, how can we hope to bring either early or late rains when restraint is nearly an archaic notion?

Now, for the first time in human history, we can begin to chart the actual impact of human action on the climate. This is no longer a magical notion. Armed with this information, there must be a moment in which we can detect the impact of our actions on the earth. Because of our actions once again the blood of the *adamah* is on the hands of adam.

But our religion is not simply one of restraint, for the verse tells us not only about the commandments, but also about love of God. In our verse we are able to equate humankind's relationship with God with its relationship to the land. While our relationship to the land is based on the restraint inherent in observing the laws and statutes, our relationship to God is one of unbounded, unrestricted love. In this way, we balance the dialectic between restraint and boundlessness, not only relating to God, but also acting ourselves in a Godly manner as we place boundaries on and love in the world, much in the way God does during creation.

For the Jewish narrative to work it has to do more than simply keep us together as a people. It also has to guide us to practice restraint so that the earth can observe its cycles. As the rains change over Israel and around the world, the practice of ritual holiness will allow us to see the earth as distinguished and distinctive. This understanding of the *shema* will help us to sustain our climate, as the next destruction will not be by the hand of God but from our own hands. And perhaps, with enough restraint and much love, this small people can influence all earthlings to see their kinship with the earth and renew their *ahavah* for the *adamah*.

**Rabbi Michael Paley is the Pearl and Ira Meyer Scholar in Residence at UJA-Federation of New York.**

**Jina Davidovich is the Program Associate in the Educational Resources and Organizational Development Department at UJA-Federation of New York.**



# Intersectional Justice and Intersectional Peoplehood: A Shmita Vision for Jewish Identity Education

By Robin Moss

What might sustainability have to do with Jewish peoplehood? As well as the obvious answer – namely that sustainability is a necessarily collective endeavor (at least if it is to move beyond the ineffectual or the tokenistic) – I wish to propose a deeper answer. It seems to me that peoplehood, like sustainability, has to be intersectional, and I believe that the values of shmita might help us to understand this better.

In the Book of Leviticus<sup>1</sup>, in the midst of a host of other commandments about how people should treat one another, we read that every seven years, there will be a year of shmita (release), today usually called a sabbatical year. It is described as a “Shabbat for the land” and is linked to yet another cycle of seven, the 49th (or 50th) year, the yovel (Jubilee).

Further elaborations in Deuteronomy give us three clear actions to be undertaken during *shnat shmita* (the shmita year):

1. Letting the land [of Israel] lie fallow
2. Release of slaves
3. Erasure of debts

(*Shnat yovel* [the jubilee year] is even more radical, involving the transfer back to its original owner of all land and perhaps of all property. The rabbis managed to find a way to circumvent yovel, perhaps terrified of its revolutionary potential...)

What a fascinating trio of actions! I want to highlight two important aspects of them.

Firstly, they map neatly onto three core conceptions of justice. The fallow land is related to *environmental* justice, the idea that we must think of our impact on the world around

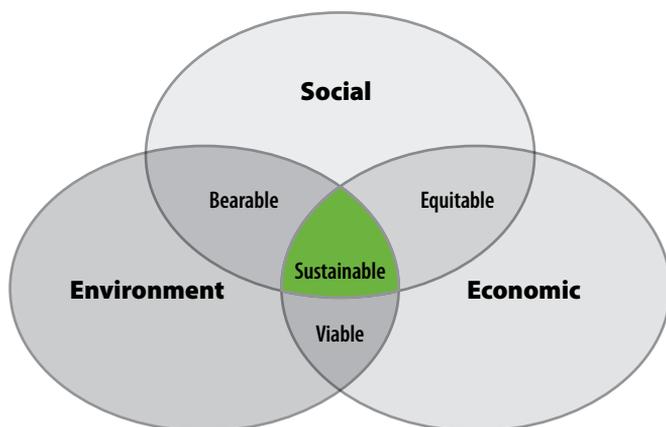
---

<sup>1</sup> Shmita is first mentioned in Exodus 23, expanded upon in Leviticus 25 and further elaborated in Deuteronomy 15 and 31

us as well as on other people. The release of slaves is a form of *social* justice, because power relations between people can cause potential injustice. The erasure of debts is part of *economic* justice, the imperative for us to ensure that money and commerce aids, rather than hampers, fairness in society. Shnat shmita, at least in its biblical understanding, forces us to see that justice has (at least) three sides to it.

Secondly, the genius of the shmita vision is that it says that only when all three of these actions are carried out – only at the *intersection* of these three kinds of justice – can there be a real, holy sense that we are living out our Jewish values. Releasing slaves is important, but ignores the oppressive nature of debt. Giving land the time to recover from human agriculture is virtuous, but only if one also confronts the effects of an unjust social order as well. Even focusing on two of the three is not enough: without a way to free people of debt periodically, people will continue to be enslaved (literally or figuratively) by those who have accumulated money and property (often, those with land – hence the need to let that land lie fallow). If we give the land a rest and erase debts, but ignore the plight of slaves, we seem to offer no hope to the socially disempowered that after the shmita year, it will not just be “business as usual”. And finally, as crucial as attending to the needs of people and the economy are, if we ignore the land (more generally, the environment), we will quickly find its degradation will cause humans a multitude of problems.

This shmita intersectionality is all the more remarkable for anticipating, by thousands of years, contemporary understandings of sustainable development. Consider the following graphic from Wikipedia<sup>2</sup> (picked because it is free to share, in keeping with the values of shmita):



---

2 File at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Sustainable\\_development.svg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Sustainable_development.svg), accessed 1 October 2014

This is from the article on sustainability, and reflects the post-Brundtland Report<sup>3</sup> consensus that sustainable development occurs at the intersection of social justice, environmental protection and a fair economic system. Perhaps Brundtland should have just read her Bible!

The insight offered by shmita into the true nature of sustainability can be mapped onto work in the area of Jewish peoplehood. There are a number of possible trios that could take the place of social, environmental and economic. I am thinking about:

1. *Personal, communal, national* – much work in Jewish peoplehood programming focuses on getting Jews to consider their own Jewish identity, how that identity interacts with their community and then, on the largest scale, how it is part of a national Jewish collective identity. This was certainly the way that my Zionist youth movement educated me when I was growing up.
2. *People, land, state* – many programs, particularly those that take Jews to Israel itself, try to build a sense of the Jewish collective, of the Jewish connection to place (to the Land of Israel specifically, though sometimes also the particular Jewish histories of other places) and to the actual political entity that is the State of Israel. My experience is that Birthright is premised on this model of education.
3. *Past, present, future* – conceptually, other programs try to build an individual's connection to the Jewish past, and then show them the reality of the Jewish present before inviting them to be part of a Jewish future. This is perhaps the framing of March of the Living, for example.

And there is likely many other possible schema.

It should be immediately obvious what the intersectionality insight enables us to understand in these cases. A true appreciation for Jewish peoplehood requires one to engage, in each of the above triplets, with *all three simultaneously* in order to truly grasp the power of the peoplehood proposition. To take the example of the first: a Jewish identity that is solely inward-looking is narcissism; a Jewish identity that finds its expression exclusively within a particular Jewish community is self-limiting; and a Jewish identity that is only collective will never have the resilience to thrive through periods when individual convictions clash with the needs or actions of the nation. And even any pair will not be enough. Surely one of the lasting legacies of the Zionist revolution is that few modern Jews could imagine Judaism without a national identity. Similarly, those

---

3 The report can be read at [http://conspect.nl/pdf/Our\\_Common\\_Future-Brundtland\\_Report\\_1987.pdf](http://conspect.nl/pdf/Our_Common_Future-Brundtland_Report_1987.pdf), accessed 1 October 2014

who associate with their community and the nation, but neglect to reflect upon what this means to them as individuals, will often find them in a values dilemma very quickly, and disengage. Finally, while I suppose you could conceive of the Jew with an individual and a national identity, but who felt part of no community, it would seem strange and isolating. Judaism is so intrinsically tied to notions of association with others – with family, minyan, chevruta, *kehilla* (community) etc.

The very best programming, then, must be intersectional. It must recognize that all three peoplehood elements are important and needs to work (by providing resources, content, texts, reflective spaces, experiences and conversations) to nurture all three at once. And I think there is one final point. Far too much programming in the area of peoplehood is siloed. For example, there is an entire ecosystem of young adult Jewish identity trips to Israel – Birthright being the most prominent example. But if we recognize that young adults are part of multiple social realities – family, university, locality, peer group, synagogue etc – why are there not (anywhere near as many) family educational trips to Israel? To take another example, when we teach young people Hebrew in the Diaspora, it is seen as a different “subject” (at least in most day schools and synagogues) to Jewish studies. Why are we separating linguistic identity from religious or ethnic Jewish identity? Only through intersectional programming – that is holistic, intentional and experiential – will we be able to inculcate a lived and living sense of Jewish peoplehood into the lives of Jews around the world.

So next time we are planning a program – a class, a trip, a seminar, or a curricula – perhaps we can think about within which trio of conceptual frameworks our Jewish peoplehood paradigm works. And then, just as the vision of intersectionality provided by *shmita* can illuminate a richer sense of sustainability, so too might it help us to conceive of an aspirational and inspirational educational vision for peoplehood.

**Robin Moss works as the Israel Engagement Educator for UJIA, based in London. In this capacity, he supports youth movements, schools, chederim, student groups and other educators to translate their vision of Israel into engaging, compelling and outstanding programming. He is also a trustee of Liberal Judaism.**



# Climate, Shmita and Consumption

**Sid Schwarz**

There are times when even atheists have trouble denying that there is a “hand of God” at work in history. How else to explain the coincidence of the largest ever gathering of humanity to assemble around the world to highlight the urgency of global action on climate change the week before Rosh Hashana 5775, a *shmita* (Sabbatical) year.

Organizers will tell you that the motivation for setting the September 21, 2014 date for the Peoples Climate March in New York City was the convening in that city of the U.N. General Assembly. Indeed U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki Moon offered his support for the march, keenly aware of the abysmal failure of the U.N. Global Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in 2009 and hoping for better results at the next such conference scheduled for Paris in 2015. If we can take one message away from over 300,000 marchers in New York and an estimated 600,000 people mobilizing on the same day in 162 countries it should be that world leaders have to get past the “blame your neighbor” mentality that has prevented meaningful policy action by the international community on the issue of global warming.

One would hope that Jews who gathered for the *yamim noraim* (the High Holidays) might have heard their rabbis connecting these non-violent citizen-led demonstrations to Jewish themes. The most obvious connection was that 5775 is a year of *shmita*. Thanks to the leadership of organizations like Hazon in the United States and Teva Ivri in Israel, more than any time in my memory, this year *shmita* was elevated from an obscure Biblical practice to a Judaic principle that could hardly have more relevance to the world in which we currently live.

In the diaspora, where few Jews derive their livelihoods from agriculture, there has been a wider framing of how Jews might observe the Sabbatical year. In a brilliant and creatively conceived manifesto called *Envisioning Sabbatical Culture*, author Yigal Deutscher sets out specific action items focused on three areas: community food systems, community economic systems and community design systems, the latter essentially ideas of how we can rebuild the ethos of “the commons” in western societies that are so much driven by individualism.

Because Israel provides a laboratory for how we might actually implement the Jewish concept of shmita throughout an entire society even more exciting possibilities are emerging. Under the banner of the Israel Shmita Initiative the Ministry of Welfare is considering how debt forgiveness can be extended to the poorest sectors of Israeli society so that they can have an opportunity to become full partners in Israel's robust economy. The Ministry of Education is implementing curricula about shmita in the school system. And the Ministry of Environment is calling for a moratorium on open sea fishing so fish stocks can regenerate for the future. Fisherman affected by this moratorium can receive compensation from the government, an example of a State's ability to incentivize certain kinds of behavior.

Of course it is one thing for organizations to mount messaging campaigns, put out manifestos and issue action plans. It is another thing to get people to change behavior. While we can take pride in the number of Jewish organizations that have taken leadership roles in different facets of the environmental movement we need to confront the one "dirty" little secret of our community. There is no single bigger threat to ongoing environmental degradation than consumption and the affluence of the Jewish community makes us among the world's most avid consumers. In the same way that the United States is poorly positioned to lecture China and India on their rising levels of industrialization, Jews cannot lead by example on the planet's existential challenge unless we start addressing our community's excessive rate of consumption.

America represents only 5% of the world's population but it consumes more than 20% of the world's food, water and energy. Because consumption is directly correlated to wealth, we know that Jews make up the highest category of consumers in America. Jews will take pride in Israel's booming economy but that economy also has given rise to the fourth highest rate of income inequality in the industrialized world. The proportion of income earned by Israel's most wealthy is 14 times greater than Israel's poorest citizens. The average proportion in the rest of the industrialized world is 9 to 1.

It is time for us to assign a moral value to the consequences of our over-consumption of everything, both as individuals and as a people. The best morality play for this lesson comes in the book of Numbers chapter 11. The Israelites are, at this point in the Biblical narrative, wandering in the desert and romanticizing their recollections of Egypt as a place where food, particularly meat, was abundant. In the desert God was providing a vegetarian option – manna – on a daily basis, and a double portion on Friday so that no collection had to be done on Shabbat. But the manna had become stale (pun intended) and the people called for a return to Egypt just so they could eat meat. Consumption had become more important than freedom.

Moses looks to God for some relief from the people's ongoing complaints and God complies by sending a flock of quail that conveniently drop out of the sky in the vicinity of the Israelite encampment. The quail is both a response to an outcry and a test. And the Israelites fail the test. They consume so much quail so quickly that a plague overtakes the tribe and thousands die, many with the meat of quail still in their mouths. Our ancestors ate themselves to death. The Torah calls the place of this incident, *Kibrot Taavah*, the graves of consumption. It may foreshadow our own future. The graves of consumption, indeed!

It is exciting to think that one way the Jewish people might be linked across national and geographic boundaries might be with an old/new ethic built around the ideas embedded in the concept of shmita. But part of this effort needs to include learning that the key to following a more sacred and ethical life is the discipline that comes from accepting limits to indulging our voracious appetites for whatever we want, whenever we want it. As we see more and more evidence of the world's ecosystem spinning out of control in a way that might be irreversible we must realize that most of this is a result of human activity. Both human beings and the planet pay a steep price for a life without limits. We are digging our own graves of consumption.

We live in a world of great wealth and great poverty. The gap between the haves and the have-nots continues to grow. Jews have a long and proud tradition of carrying forward the ethic of the Biblical prophets calling us to ally with "the stranger, the orphan and the widow", essentially the most vulnerable among us. But if we are to "walk the talk" in the realm of living more gently on the planet so as to preserve the beauty and abundance of God's creation we must be prepared to adopt lifestyles that are more modest, more humble and more sustainable.

**Rabbi Sid Schwarz is a senior fellow at Clal and the international director of the Rene Cassin Fellowship Program, a program focused on Judaism and human rights with hubs in New York, London and Israel. He is the author of *Judaism and Justice: The Jewish Passion to Repair the World and Jewish Megatrends: Charting the Course of the American Jewish Community*.**



# Sustainable Israel–Diaspora Engagement through Sustainability

**Jay Shofet**

Today, unsurprisingly, according to surveys in the North American Jewish community, environmental issues are among the top concerns and philanthropic giving areas of the younger generation. Fortuitously at this very moment, the maturation of the Israeli environmental movement and its confluence with the most potent trends of “start-up nation” has presented Israel-Diaspora relations with a whole new bridge for engagement, one that is just beginning to be recognized and utilized. By the “environmental movement” I mean not just the NGO’s, but the wider policy community and “shareholders” in the broadest sense, including the entrepreneurs and innovators of Israel’s renewable energy and clean-tech industries, now key drivers of start-up nation. These are the actors who provide a new and more sustainable platform for engagement among Israelis and their co-religionists abroad. This platform, which includes traditional philanthropy, also transcends it.

The Israeli environmental NGO’s have recently matured into a movement that reflects, for the first time, a social movement with which North American Jews are familiar. It is, like the movement spurred by Rachel Carson in the ‘60s and galvanized by Bill McKibben today, rooted in nature preservation and now motivated by climate change and sustainability. In the last decade in Israel, environmental education and recycling were mainstreamed; municipalities elected green parties and signed climate change pacts; consumer culture and veganism became issues; and the founding of The Israel Green Building Council and the Movement for Israeli Urbanism vaulted sustainable building in sustainable cities into the discourse. The social protests of 2011 brought to the fore the inherent social justice and cost-of-living issues involved in public transportation and land-use policies.

Perhaps most strikingly in the last few years, like America, Israel is becoming an exporter of fossil fuels; environmentalists are concerned about the potential impacts of Israel’s undersea natural gas bonanza on the marine environment and on Israel’s tepid commitment to develop renewable energy. Further, current battles are underway – just

like in New York and Pennsylvania – to prohibit fracking for oil shale reserves in central Israel and the Golan Heights. Like American Jewish activism historically, issues of social justice and public health today motivate Israeli environmentalism. It is concerned not just with the ecosystems of this planet, but with the quality of life on it – particularly for vulnerable populations – and in that, is true to the eternal Jewish value *tikkun olam*.

This is good news for the Israel-Diaspora relationship, which, at least since the 1980's, has been a history of the leadership of Diaspora Jewry seeking ways to engage a rank and file increasingly disaffected from the Zionist endeavor. Fundraising for traditional Israeli development needs has lost its urgency, and overall allocations to Israel have been in decline. True, Birthright has been hugely successful in at least limited engagement with Israel for a new generation – but sustaining that engagement requires a Jewish community, which recognizes the everyday passions of program returnees and provides myriad outlets for connecting them to Israel.

Fortunately and inevitably, new areas of engagement are coming to the fore, and the Israeli third sector landscape in the new millennium is a crowded one. World Jewry is flush with new, or newly bon-ton, causes and organizations: the American-Israel Cultural Foundation in Tel Aviv is branding Israel an “art-up nation” of diversity and excellence in the performing and visual arts, while at the Ruderman Foundation and other NGO's like Shutaf in Jerusalem, a new generation of disability activists are tapping into the deep historical current of Jewish involvement in this field.

Traditional philanthropic support for environmentalism and sustainability in Israel is now a crossroads. The growth and maturation of the Israeli environmental movement means that ever-more green NGO's will clamor for a still-limited pool of philanthropic dollars. Yet The Jewish National Fund in the US has shown that, as a platform for philanthropic engagement, the environment in Israel is still potent, perhaps more than ever. No longer counting on your Bubbe's *pushka*, the JNF has diversified its original message of tree planting to engage its donors in water issues, sustainability, green innovation and environmental education. Although several long-time North American foundations are no longer active in the environmental field for a variety of reasons, some European funding and Israeli donors are picking up the slack. Over 45,000 households in Israel are dues-paying members of, and donors to, Israel's largest and oldest environmental NGO, The Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel; and tens of thousands more in Israel support Greenpeace every year.

Many young, concerned environmentalists are looking beyond traditional philanthropy for more, well, sustainable ways of fighting climate change and protecting our natural resources. Acting as “impact investors”, these social entrepreneurs support through

financial investments Israel's innovative, start-up sectors of renewable energy , water management, clean-tech, smart-grid and energy storage. These investors are in some cases willing to accept a lower initial return-on-investment than would be otherwise achievable in the financial markets in order to "do good" with their financial investments, not just their philanthropic dollars. Israeli innovations in these new fields of start-up nation, like the microchips, biomed, and telecommunications sectors before them, but perhaps even more dramatically, will benefit the lives of billions in the developing world and in the industrialized economies too. With the coming-of-age of the next generation of American Jewish donors, sustainability and environmentalism will no doubt find their place as a vital concern of not just their Israeli-centered philanthropy.

Increasingly, this nascent sector is learning to stand on its own feet. At least one Israeli company is already building solar fields to supply power to largely un-electrified rural sub-Saharan Africa. In telecommunications, these countries leapfrogged over the industrial-revolution era of landlines right to the digital's age's cell phones. Similarly, instead of coal or fossil fuel-based power plants, these countries first electrical grids will be smart, and powered by renewables. That is a business plan, and a road map to mitigate the effects of climate change, that investors and environmentalists together can embrace.

Social justice, peace, religious pluralism, the arts, disability rights – are all valid concerns in Israel and legitimate, necessary areas of Diaspora Jewish involvement. But a polluted, gridlocked Holy Land is not a beacon to anyone. An exporter of solar energy and a clean-tech superpower, with open spaces for enjoyment and green belts around our livable cities –well, that is an Israel to rally behind. Traditional philanthropy, impact investing, and corporate social responsibility all have a role to play, both in safeguarding Israel's natural environment and as avenues of engagement. Sustainability is the roadmap to our future, on this planet, in Israel, and as a vital bridge to the Diaspora.

**Jay Shofet is Director of Partnerships and Development at The Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel, and the former Executive Director of The Green Environment Fund.**



# A Sabbath for the Land and the People – Rav Kook’s Shabbat Ha’aretz and The Peoplehood Potential of Shmita

**Yedidya Sinclair**

“As Farmers and Field Rest, a Land Grows Restless” New York Times Headline about the shmita year in Israel”, October 8th 2007

“In Israel, Values of a Holy Respite are Adapted for a High-Tech World” – New York Times Headline about the shmita year in Israel, September 24th, 2014

The current shmita (Sabbatical) year, 2014-5 represents a remarkable renewal of the possibilities of shmita. After several decades in which the public face of shmita in Israel has been manifested in deepening disputes between rabbis and religious communities over kosher certification, the present shmita year has seen a proliferation of programs that stress the sustainability and social justice dimensions of shmita.

This shift enables shmita to become a unifying force in the life of the Jewish people. Whereas previously, shmita was, for diaspora Jews, mostly irrelevant (and occasionally embarrassing, when awareness of the political-religious squabbles around shmita in Israel intruded on the wider world, such as in the 2007 Times article) now shmita in Israel is beginning to express values that many diaspora Jews share and embrace.

I have been fortunate to view this shift over the past year through the prism of producing a book comprising an annotated translation of Rav Kook’s “Shabbat Ha’aretz,” a key, classic text on shmita. Preparing and promoting this book has included speaking at conferences on shmita in Israel, the UK and US, and undertaking a two-week, ten city speaking tour to talk about the book in the US. This journey took me to synagogues and JCCs, farms and federations, rabbinical schools and environmental organizations, from Orthodox to Reconstructionist and audiences with a very wide range of political views on Israel. From this perspective I have been able to view the response of diverse Jewish communities to the renewal of shmita.

In this short reflection, I will first outline briefly the nature and importance of Rav Kook's work on shmita, then list a couple of personal observations on the peoplehood-related significance of the current shmita year.

*Shabbat Ha'aretz*, published by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook on the eve of the 1909-10 shmita year, is undoubtedly the most important and influential book on shmita to have appeared in the modern era. It is indispensable to understanding how shmita is currently observed and not observed. The context, arguments and aftermath of *Shabbat Ha'aretz* remain formative forces upon the status of shmita in the State of Israel today.

In advance of the 1909–10 shmita, Rav Kook, who was then Chief Rabbi of Jaffa, saw that the rigorous observance of the commandment to cease agricultural work for a year could starve the pioneering Jewish farmers and uproot the precarious foothold they had established in the Land of Israel. He therefore permitted the farmers to sell their land to non-Jews for the duration of the shmita, allowing them to work and avoid impoverishment. This permit, known as the *Heter Mechirah* had first been issued for the pioneering farmers of Israel during the shmita of 1888–9.

In *Shabbat Ha'aretz*, Rav Kook provided a thorough halachic grounding of the practice, which had the effect of essentially institutionalizing the heter (permit). Within the book is a rigorous and detailed halachic treatment of what was and wasn't to be done in the shmita of 1909–10 and why. However, Rav Kook prefaced the book with an introduction that is a poetic and mystical paean to the possibilities of shmita. The introduction is an ecstatic effort to render the reminder, as vivid as possible, of what shmita could one day become.

In the prefatory section, Rav Kook paints a picture of Shmita as enabling a renewed connection to the divine life force in each individual and within us collectively. Like Shabbat, shmita quiets the tumult of the intervening periods and restores a more authentic relationship to ourselves, to each other, to nature, and to God. Its observance reveals the unique weave of socio-economic relationships that the Torah would have us pattern. The Jubilee year is a revelation of the cumulative insight and holiness that we will have achieved in the previous seven shmita cycles. Its ideals of liberty and emancipation bear universal meanings for the whole of humanity.

*Shabbat Ha'aretz* became a defining piece of Religious Zionist psak halachah (halachic decision-making) and has served as a lightning rod for controversy between Religious Zionists and Haredim (ultra-religious) about the proper parameters of halachic innovation in Israel – hence the growing controversy. Yet throughout *Shabbat Ha'aretz*, shines a vision of how shmita could be much more than it is today. Rav Kook believed in

the power for social and spiritual reawakening embodied in shmita. He hoped that the temporary leniency he was proposing—enabling the land to be sold and shmita effectively not observed—was actually one step on the journey towards the eventual and full renewal of shmita. As he wrote in Shabbat Ha'aretz: “We must recognize that we are obligated to strive with all our strength so that in the end the sabbatical year will be increasingly observed in all its holiness.”

I conclude with two anecdotal observations based on my recent experience as a bridge between the Israeli and Diaspora experiences of preparing for and beginning shmita.

First, news of the shift towards socially and environmentally progressive shmita projects in Israel was met with tremendous enthusiasm and excitement at the US venues I visited. The current shmita year represents a sea change from the main mode of observing shmita in Israel, which was, in one way or another, by not observing it, towards an era where Israelis are starting to seriously ask, “how do we actually observe shmita? How do we actualize these extraordinary values and teachings in hi-tech based economy?” Initiatives such as a joint project of government banks and NGOs to bring 5,000 families out of crippling long term debt through a combination of partial debt relief, rescheduling of loans and counselling on financial planning have proliferated. They represent creative adaptations of core shmita values to a 21st century economy.

Most of the audiences I spoke to leaned toward the left of the American Jewish political spectrum where environmental concern tends to correlate (for complex reasons) with a critical stance towards Israel. Among these audiences, I sensed a feeling of desperation to learn of developments in Israel with which they could proudly identify. These innovations in shmita served that purpose.

Moreover, there has been a resurgence of interest in shmita both in Israel and in the Diaspora. While these movements have emerged in parallel, they have benefited from a cross-pollination of ideas through the recent Siach conferences, which brought together social justice and environmental activists from Israel and the Diaspora for annual discussions. Shmita is simply an idea whose time has come, and with its creative growth both in Israel and the Diaspora, has unique potential to promote the value of peoplehood that spans geography, politics and other axes of division.

**Yedidya Sinclair is Vice President of Research at Energiya Global and also serves as Senior Rabbinic Scholar for Hazon. His translation of Rav Kook's Introduction to Shabbat Ha'aretz was published by Hazon in September 2014.**



## Future Ethics: The Moral Imperative of Sustainability from a Jewish Covenantal Perspective

**Rabbi Lawrence Troster**

The impending disaster of climate change is primarily an ethical crisis. The human exploitation of the earth's resources has been made possible by the unprecedented power and scope of modern human technology but this same technology has also caused extensive environmental damage. One third of the world's population is living longer and better than any time in human history but another third is still living without adequate drinking water or sewage disposal. And while many believe that the solution to human poverty is more economic growth, the earth's biosphere cannot sustain the kind of development that has been practiced to this point in human history.

It is possible to graphically illuminate this problem. The website [www.myfootprint.org](http://www.myfootprint.org) uses twenty-one questions about one's lifestyle to calculate a person's ecological footprint and compare it to the national average of one's country and to a global "sustainable footprint," which is the biological carrying capacity of the Earth (approximately 43 acres per person). Most people in developed countries have an ecological footprint far above the sustainable average and it is not unusual for the website to disclose at the end of the questionnaire that, "if everyone on the Earth lived the way you do, it would require 5 more planets worth of resources."

It is understood that what is required is sustainable development which is defined as "meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." But sustainability can be understood as not only the economic or technological means to solve world poverty and the environmental crisis, but also as a moral system which can strike at the heart of the inequities now expressed by our present economic system. Approximately twenty percent of the world's population consumes eighty percent of the resources while producing eighty percent of greenhouse gases. And it is usually communities of color who suffer disproportionately from environmental harm while receiving the fewest benefits of the exploitation of

natural resources. These populations also lack the political or social power to be part of environmental decision-making even when it adversely affects them. These inequities are called environmental injustice or even environmental racism.

Sustainability as a moral system has two axes: spatial and temporal. The spatial dimension is the ethical connection to all people (and even all life) in the present generation whose needs must be met. These needs can only be met if there is an equitable distribution of resources which itself cannot be achieved without the equal participation in decision-making. The temporal dimension is the ethical connection to future generations whose needs will be jeopardized by the over-consumption of the present generation. For example, the carbon dioxide that is emitted today from fossil fuel energy production will remain in the earth's atmosphere for between one hundred and a thousand years, impacting the climate of many future generations. These two ethical dimensions create an interconnectedness, which counters the disconnection between people and the Earth which is a consequence of modern technology. For example, because many of our consumer goods are produced in distant countries and often bought through online stores, we may no longer know who made these products, where they were produced, how the people who made them were treated, or what the environmental impact of the products' manufacture was. Sustainability as a moral system asks us to think about all these issues when we consume energy or buy goods and services. It asks us to have empathy for all life in the present and future and to think of ourselves as part of a moral community beyond ourselves.

The Jewish theological analogy to moral sustainability is the *brit* or covenant. In the Hebrew Bible, covenant is the central expression of the human relationships with each other and with God. Although it is often expressed in a legal form, covenant also has an emotional component: each party to the agreement "loves" the other as part of the loyalty necessary to the fulfillment of the covenant requirements. There are several kinds of covenant. The inter-human forms are found in treaties between sovereigns and vassals; marriages, business transactions and political collectives.

The human/divine covenants are first found between God and all of humanity in the early chapters of the book of Genesis such as after the Flood where God agrees never to again destroy the Earth but also demands that humans practice certain basic ethical standards (Genesis 8:20-9:17). However, the most important divine/human covenant in the Hebrew Bible is the one made between God and the people of Israel, first found in the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 12) and then, more expansively, in the Sinai covenant (Exodus 19-23). Throughout the rest of the Hebrew Bible, the question of the people of Israel fulfilling or violating this covenant is a central theme. The character of both of these kinds of covenant implies a collective destiny either of the whole of humanity or

of the people of Israel; a destiny that transcends generations (Deuteronomy 29:13-14) and privileges the common good over the individual right of action.

The Jewish concept of covenant has created the whole dynamic of Jewish peoplehood and the feeling of a common destiny of Jews with one another in the present generation and between generations. Our connection to our ancestors is expressed in our sacred texts, rituals and liturgy. We recite at the Passover Seder, "In each and every generation people must regard themselves as though they personally left Egypt..." Our central values come from this collective story of our redemption from slavery. We proclaim that "all Israel is responsible for one another." And we are constantly concerned with the continuation of the Jewish people in future generations.

While the covenant has been primarily used to express the particular values of the Jewish tradition, it is possible to utilize this concept to express a universal ethic of sustainability because in its original form the covenant was created as an agreement between God and all humanity at the time of Noah. But even the particular covenant of Sinai between God and the Jewish people contains within it the moral expressions of justice, protection of Creation, collective good, empathy and moral concern for future generations.

An apt expression of this collective responsibility given the dangers of climate change is found in a rabbinic midrash:

*Israel is a scattered sheep* (Jeremiah 1:17). Why are the Israelites compared to a sheep? Just as if you strike a sheep on its head, or on one of its limbs, all its limbs feel it, so, if one Israelite sins, all Israelites feel it. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai taught: It is to be compared to people who were in a boat, and one of them took a drill and began to drill a hole beneath him. His companions say, "Why are you doing this?" He replied: What concern is it of yours? Am I not drilling under myself? They replied: But you will flood the boat for us all! (Midrash Leviticus Rabbah, 4:6)

The environmental crisis is a universal crisis that threatens all human life and civilization. Without a solution to this crisis, there will be no Jewish people. It is therefore imperative for the survival of the Jewish people that the moral imperative of sustainability, expressed in both particular and universal forms be the basis for significant action to protect the Creation that God gave into our care to preserve for future generations.

**Rabbi Lawrence Troster is the Rabbinic Scholar-in-Residence of GreenFaith, the interfaith environmental coalition in New Jersey and is the coordinator of Shomrei Breitshtit: Rabbis and Cantors For the Earth.**



**The Peoplehood Papers** provide a platform for Jews to discuss their common agenda and key issues related to their collective identity. The journal appears three times a year, with each issue addressing a specific theme. The editors invite you to share your thoughts on the ideas and discussions in the Papers, as well as all matters pertinent to Jewish Peoplehood: [publications@jpeoplehood.org](mailto:publications@jpeoplehood.org)

Past issues can be accessed at [www.jpeoplehood.org/library](http://www.jpeoplehood.org/library)

**The UJA-Federation of New York** cares for those in need, rescues those in harm's way and renews and strengthens the Jewish people in New York in Israel and around the world. **The Commission on the Jewish People** is dedicated to building connections among the diverse elements of the Jewish People and develops and supports efforts to forge linkages among Jews wherever they may live and support Israel as a vibrant, democratic and pluralistic Jewish state.

**The Center for Jewish Peoplehood Education (CJPE)** is a "one stop" resource center for institutions and individuals seeking to build collective Jewish life, with a focus on Jewish Peoplehood and Israel education. It provides professional and leadership training, content and programmatic development or general Peoplehood conceptual and educational consulting. [www.jpeoplehood.org](http://www.jpeoplehood.org)

**Siach** is a network created with the ambitious goal of enabling Jewish social justice and environmental professionals from North America, Israel and Europe to network, engage, and explore their shared identity, mission, and commitment to Jewish values and to each other. It is an international partnership between three leading Jewish organizations: **Hazon** in the US, **JHub** in the UK and **The Heschel Center for Sustainability** in Israel and is graciously funded by the UJA Federation of NY.

**UJA** Federation  
of New York



המרכז לחינוך לעמיות יהודית  
The Center for Jewish Peoplehood Education