

Jewish Scripture

By Paul Reti, FEN member

"If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am 'I'? And if not now, when?"

"That which is hateful to you, do not do to others. That is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn."

These pearls of wisdom from Rabbi Hillel (the Elder) almost 2000 years ago apply not only to relationships between human beings but also to the environment in which we humans live.

Primary sources for Jewish environmental ethics are the two Genesis creation stories in the Torah. They set up models of human relationship with the rest of creation, and obligate Jews to tend and to protect the world. Genesis 2:15 tells us: *"The Eternal placed the human being in the Garden of Eden to till it and to tend it."*

The biblical concept of *shmitta* – having the land rest on its seventh year – provides a model of rest for the land itself. The concept of *peah* – leaving the corner of the field unharvested for the poor to pick themselves – connects ecological issues with the need for people to live free of hunger.

Protecting G-d's creation is a theme throughout subsequent Jewish philosophy, literature, liturgy and law. Scholars and rabbis from Maimonides to Reb Nachman of Bratzlav and from Rav Kook to Abraham Joshua Heschel have taught and written about this relationship.