

Jewish Response

Mr Alan Gold

Alan has written fifteen books which have been published internationally and translated into Asian and European languages. He is an opinion columnist and a literary critic for **The Australian, Good Reading** and the **Australian Jewish News**. In June 2000, he was the NSW **Human Rights Orator**, as well as the **B'nai B'rith Human Rights Orator** in Sydney and Melbourne. He is a visiting lecturer at the **Universities of Sydney and Western Australia**, and a regular lecturer and speaker on matters of literature, racism and human rights. Alan is Chair of the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies Holocaust Remembrance Committee.

Twenty years ago, there was almost no talk in the general media about global warming and climate change. Today, the media is full of it, but there is virtually no reference to the relevance of the beliefs of the major faiths.

Perhaps its because there are those who think that there is a disjunction between the antiquity of the Bible....be it the Jewish Old Testament, the Christian New Testament or the Islamic Koran....and the ecological crisis of the 21st century of Global Warming and the destruction of habitats and species. The perception in the public mind is that the formulations of our biblical ancestors, of Abraham and Moses, Jesus and Mohammed, have little relevance today except in matters of faith and belief. In the next few minutes, I'd like to touch on the very nature of our beliefs and the way in which the stewardship of the environment has been part of faith since its inception.

The mindset that the Bible is ancient history originates because men and women who form religious communities have believed that the word of God is immutable and unchanging. Yet for thousands of years, the leaders of religions have been interpreting the ancient testaments and finding cause to make them relevant to today.

Care and love of the environment was present as one of the foundation policies of the Old Testament. After all, the Five Books of Moses begins with God as Creator of the world and its creatures. Within the first few verses, God offers the stewardship of His creation to mankind. Genesis begins by telling of the perfection of God's creation before the world is

damaged by the footprint of humanity. Yet after only five chapters, God decides to destroy the world and everything in it, trusting only one man and his family, Noah, to build an Ark in order to save each species of plant and animal from extinction. In the Bible, Noah is known as the first husbandman and so even after the deluge, care for the environment is the foundation of God's plan. I should add that Noah is also known as the inventor of wine, but that's another story.

Also in the Bible, we are instructed to give our fields a sabbatical year. The Laws of Moses governed every seventh year when the fields must lay fallow. Why? Today we know that plant pathogens have difficulty surviving changing seasons; some transmute to spores in the depth of a cold winter, and if a certain plant fungus builds up from year to year within a crop, its progress will be completely halted by the introduction of the fallow year. It was a way of maintaining the health of the field, the crops and humankind.

This is just one example of the way in which Jews have been enjoined by God to be good shepherds not just of their flocks, but of the land as well.

In my own religion, the Five Books of Moses have been examined and analysed, interpreted and reinterpreted, scrutinized and evaluated for two thousand years. The Torah (the five books of Moses) became the Tenach with the addition of the words of the prophets and other writing; then Rabbis in Jerusalem and Babylon spent century after century writing Talmudic commentaries to interpret and make relevant the Bible for their own and future times. For the past hundreds of years, a spiritual movement based around a new reinterpretation has grown up called Chabad. And as if all that wasn't enough, our Rabbis and philosophers are continuing to speak, write and publish commentary to make the Jewish Bible relevant and contingent upon today's problems. Yes, Jews seek answers in their Bible to modern societal problems, but we also try to find out what answers

are to be found in such pressing issues as our stewardship of the environment and the global ecology.

Without wishing to speak on their behalf, I'm sure that the same can be said for Christianity, Islam and Baha'i.

So quite emphatically, the ancient religions have all taken a particularly modernistic approach to the problems of the environment, the ecology and the welfare of the human, animal and plant species.

Was it always like this? Well, the ethos of the Jewish people was forged in the furnace of exile. We are a people who have been exiled from our land more often and over a longer period than any other religion or race. We were first exiled from ancient Israel by enslavement in Egypt in 1500 BCE. In 600 BCE we were exiled again and returned fifty years later; and then we were dispersed throughout the world by the Romans in 70CE and only returned officially in 1948.

From our very beginning as a religion, our exiles mean that we were prevented from the care and management of our land. The experience of slavery, of exile, and frequent injunctions against owning land in other countries isolated us from our land and from the world. Yet by the covenant of Moses, we were told to be fruitful and multiply. And on the one day in which we were allowed rest...the Sabbath.....we were told to severely limit the use of the resources of the world. We were told to pray, to rest, to desist from work. Today, in a modern world of convenience, we are forbidden to turn on electricity, forbidden to pollute the environment by driving in a car or a bus, forbidden to create heat to cook food and to shop.

Was this injunction originally demanded by God in order to protect the environment? None of us knows the mind of God, but we knew from antiquity that the day of the Sabbath was to enable us to rest and to have a one-to-one relationship with God during prayer. Today, our Rabbis have interpreted this as meaning that we must not do any work ourselves, or create work for others. Was this to save the environment? Was it to

prevent, at least for one day a week, an addition to the carbon footprint and global warming? Like I said, who knows the mind of God?

Today, in Judaism, the *halakhah*, or Jewish law, prohibits wasteful consumption. When we waste resources, we are violating the commandment not to destroy, based on Deuteronomy Chapter 20. This astounding chapter has God telling the Israelite people, *“When in your war against a city you have to besiege it for a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy its trees wielding the ax against them. You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down.”*

So even in the extremis of war, the Jewish people have to act as husbanders of the environment. Our faith, our consciences and the very length of our existence, makes it incumbent upon every Jew to care for the environment.