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THE HUMAN BEING AND THE ENVIRONMENT IN DIFFERENT CULTURES

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Abstract

Judaism and the Environment: Humanity's Place in Creation

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam present in their scriptures actual laws—sacred or divine, as you wish—for environmental protection. However, their conception of time and place is not similar, but profoundly different, even though they share a common starting point, the Garden of Eden, where nature was pristine, pure, and above all sacred. However, this alone should not be taken to mean that they share the same attitude toward nature and our surroundings.

For Judaism, humankind is contained within the environment of which it is an integral part. However, space is not sacred as such; it is the places remembered in the Bible with their historical events that make a place holy, not in itself, but for what happened there. Consider, for example, the burning bush before which Moses had to remove his shoes because the divine presence had been manifested there, or more simply the Jewish holidays, which are occasions to be celebrated because they commemorate significant events for the people of Israel and coincide with the cycles of nature.

In any case, the Jewish religion contains many precepts with practical indications that encourage respect for the environment: the concept expressed many times in the Torah is that the earth does not belong to man but to the Lord, and that it is up to man to cultivate and care for it. The Sabbatical year, during which man was not to work, served to let the fields and the land rest, and to remember that nature provides everything needed for everyone. Indeed, in Judaism, it is not wrong to use natural products; consider the image of the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey, which are products for human life. The kosher diet also draws its origins from respect for animals, which were to be slaughtered in a manner that minimized their suffering. However, despite these precepts, nature is not the fundamental element for Judaism; it is only partially so, since human beings are moral subjects above plants and animals, and it is thanks to these characteristics that man defines his place in the world and carries out his actions in history. It is from the ethical relationship that man has with the earth that the well-being of the latter is generated, while the latter will devour man if his moral actions deviate from divine precepts. The earth, therefore, is only one element in the triadic relationship formed by people, land, and Torah (the law), which must coexist in a common balance for the good of the world.

We will explore the concept of the Promised Land in the Jewish vision and its implications for civic and environmental sustainability.

1. Introduction

The three monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—present in their scriptures actual laws—sacred or divine, as the case may be—for environmental protection. However, their respective ecological concepts are not similar, but profoundly different, even though they share a common starting point: the origin of man in the Garden of Eden. However, this alone should not be taken to mean that they share the same attitude toward nature and our surroundings.

What does Judaism have to say about the environment?

Jewish monotheism has an ecological position toward the created world, but not toward nature as a single and separate entity. To fully understand Judaism's environmental message, one must read the verses of the Torah, which, among other things, can be considered a treatise on civic and environmental education that guides, directs, and regulates the moral behavior of the Israelites on their journey to the Promised Land. Because this land is holy, like all Creation, and is a divine gift, not the property of man, it must be respected, and mankind must prove worthy of this gift. Indeed, the gift of the land to the Jews will be realized only in responsible respect for the covenant made with Abraham and his generation, which was historically extended to future generations.

Within this framework of ethics and intergenerational, individual, and collective responsibility, the concept of sustainable development unfolds, a concept that in Judaism transcends time and intersects with all relationships within Creation. It is therefore man who manages nature and history, even if not always consciously and predictably; indeed, for Judaism, the role of ethics is the heritage of man, as only he in the world is capable of a moral conscience.

In all this, Judaism differs from movements like Deep Ecology,[1] as it is closer to environmentalist thought, promoting an ethic and human sensitivity toward all aspects of life: from nutrition (*kosher*, dietary laws) to plant care (*bal taschit*, do not destroy), to respect for animals (*tzarar balè chayim*, compassion for animals), and to attention to noise and environmental pollution.

It should be clarified that in Judaism there is no separate notion of nature as a single entity, as it is considered within a set of relationships between God and humanity, which vary according to the different behaviors of humanity throughout its development. Nor is it permitted for humans to abuse nature at will to fulfill their utilitarian goals. In fact, the *halakhah*, Jewish law, is entirely geared toward controlling human aggression and impulses, as self-control is fundamental to Jewish spirituality.

Since Jewish monotheism has a position toward the created world but not toward nature as a single entity separate from it, the right question to ask is: for Judaism, what place does man occupy in Creation, and what kind of behavior should he adopt in it?

[1] The Deep Ecology movement eschews environmental ethics, emphasizing awareness of other life forms around us, understanding that individual well-being is inseparable from global well-being. This will create an inevitable harmony with all life forms, resulting in an automatic communion of interests between humans and the biosphere.

2. Man's Place in Creation

First of all, it must be clarified that the Hebrew of the Torah does not have words that correspond to our terms "cosmos," "world," "nature," or "environment," but uses the expressions "heaven and earth" (Gen 1:1; 2:4; Ps 115:15; 121:2), or the expression "all," "the all" (kol, ha-kol: Ps 8:7; 103:19; Jer 10:16). The universe is never considered a reality in itself, but always in relation to G-d—and therefore it is a Creation willed and made by the Creator—and always also in relation to man.

For Judaism, man is contained within the environment of which he is an integral part; however, in the Torah, it is not space but places that are emphasized with their historical events, making them holy not in themselves but for what happened in those places. In the Jewish conception, every place on earth is sacred, but above all it becomes so according to the events that have taken place there, closely linking nature and history together. For Judaism, the sense of place has a profound and central religious significance, as physical terrestrial spaces such as deserts, mountains, burning bushes, and trees become meeting places between the divine and humanity. Places, therefore, are something that has to do with memory, with emotions, with relationships, as they are a woven fabric of connections. Consider, for example, the burning bush before which Moses had to remove his shoes because the divine presence had manifested itself there, or more simply, the Jewish holidays, which are occasions to be celebrated because they commemorate significant events for the people of Israel and coincide with the cycles of nature. For Judaism, therefore, only in one place can the encounter between the human and the divine occur, and the earth becomes the place par excellence, the container of this relationship. The sacred scriptures use different terms to express the concept of earth and soil, and each term conceals a different meaning:

- *adamah*: (red, blood) commonly understood as earth, is the entire earth created by God for humanity;

- *eretz*: is the geographical space connected to the *berit*, the covenant between God and Abraham (Gen. 12:1, 4), in the name of which the people of Israel were freed from Egypt by Moses. This term refers to a historical-cultural process with a programmatic objective that involves all future generations.

Humanity must protect and cultivate the land, which exists in a relationship of interdependence between humanity and the Lord. Indeed, it is in the dynamic between Land-People-Torah—three interdependent and systemic relationships—that lie the Jewish principles that govern the world's well-being and define humanity's role in Creation. These interconnected relationships are found throughout the Torah; from the very beginning of human history, it can be seen that our relationship with transcendence and the land is a constant dynamic that changes and evolves over time, under different conditions depending on the situation. In the Creation story contained in Genesis 1, G-d gives a blessing to the animals of the air and those of the waters, saying:

"Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth" (Gen. 1:22).

This is the same blessing that the Lord also imparts to humans (Gen. 1:28), thus highlighting the solidarity of all living creatures in their growth and inhabiting the universe. God has granted them to inhabit the universe, and the relationship between humans and animals is first and foremost one of similarity, solidarity, and the sharing of living space.

Precisely for this reason, the creation of plants and animals is "good," and that of humans is "very good," and all creatures are destined for the seventh day, the day on which they find destiny and fullness of existence. It must also be remembered that the world exists as a place, as the home of humans and all living beings. However, unlike the latter, Adam, a name derived from the word *adamah*, meaning earth, has the task of cultivating and caring for his primordial place, the Garden of Eden, as it is said:

"The Lord God put the man in a garden to till it (avad) and keep it (shamar)" (Gen. 2:15).

Since man is created in the image and likeness of G-d (Gen. 1:26) to be God's image in the world, he is therefore a co-partner with G-d in Creation. It is man who must continue Creation as the culmination of God's work, because:

"Let him have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth" (cf. Gen 1:26). The blessing given by G-d also expresses this responsibility once again.

It is written:

"Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (Gen 1:28).

Filling the earth does not mean trampling it, nor multiplying without measure, but inhabiting the earth so that it becomes a dwelling place for man. The verb "to subdue" (*kavash*) can certainly mean "to tread upon, to sexually dominate," but in this case it means "to explore, to observe." And as for the verb *radah*, erroneously translated as "to dominate," one should not forget that it indicates the action of a king who rules his people, guiding them and governing them with a view to *shalom*, a full and peaceful life! It is certain, however, that these two verbs do not signify the exercise of an oppressive, arbitrary, violent, and vindictive power: it is not possible to see in these verbs an invitation to the exploitation and destruction of the earth, because if man is Lord of Creation (Ps. 8), he is so as G-d's agent; the earth is not his, it continues to belong to G-d. This command to subjugate the earth and dominate the animals is given to a man who is not a carnivore, but has received from G-d as food "every herb, every seed, and every fruit that grows on the earth" (Gen. 1:29), therefore this dominion does not involve the killing of animals. Beings that have soul, *nefesh*, life with blood, cannot serve as food for humans, because in G-d's creative will, the cosmos thrives on a relationship based on absolute respect for life.

3. The systemic relationship between G-d, humanity, and the earth[2]

In the Torah, whenever humans break their bond with the earth by violating the divine prescriptions connected to it, they will be punished by the earth, which in turn will free itself of their presence by rejecting them. In this way, earth and nature become a single system of communication between humanity and the divine. Let us now examine the dynamic that unites G-d, humanity, and Creation.

[2] This systemic triad is transformed in the relationship between the people, the land and the Torah after the promulgation of the law at Sinai.

In the story of the first Creation, defined as "cosmic," where it says: *"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,"* the Lord creates and places each element in a precise place, with a precise function, bringing order to the primordial chaos.

"God said: Let there be light, and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. He called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night." And there was evening and there was morning, one day (Gen. 1:3).

In the second account of Creation, defined as "earthly," it is written:

"These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created, when the Lord God made the earth and the heavens" (Gen. 2:4).

Here is the story of man and woman from the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve's transgression is an act that disrupts the harmony between the Creator, human beings, and nature, as man claimed to take G-d's place by transgressing the divine command and refusing to recognize himself as a limited being. The consequence of the desire for immortality that brought about this transgression is the expulsion of the primordial couple from the Garden of Eden. This situation gives rise to a new positioning of humanity and a new relationship with the earth, allowing humans to remember their function and place in Creation. In Genesis, humans lose their relationship with *adamah*, the earth, and thus undermine their relationship with divinity. To restore this relationship, it is necessary to reposition humans in an earthly state of toil, suffering, and hard work that reminds them of the functions of their earthly life. In Jewish tradition, this episode never speaks of sin, but rather of the realization of one's human and mortal life. It is written:

"But by the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground from which you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3:19).

Throughout the Torah, the element first affected by human transgression is the earth. It rejects man if he transgresses divine commands, but responds positively if the laws are respected, promising fertility, abundant harvests, rain, and prosperity.

The earth, therefore, is the element that mediates between man and the divine, reacting according to human actions; in this sense, man's ethics toward Creation defines his relationship with the earth and with the Creator.

4. Ecological Precepts for the Earth

From the current and historical perspective of Deuteronomy, it is primarily G-d who establishes a covenant with the Israelites, binding them to human action. For its part, Israel leaves Egypt to create a new society, different from that of Egypt. In Deuteronomy, on the eve of entering Eretz Israel, Moses refers to the promise made to Abraham: *"They shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and to do love"* (Gen. 18:18). He then reviews some of the most important aspects of collective and individual life: hence the interest in social and political life, in the plant and animal world, the norms of justice, the appointment of leaders of the people, the rule of proposing peace before declaring war and of not destroying the environment, the norms for respecting workers, animals, and nature.

The norms or precepts, *mitzvot*, are rules with which man can discipline his chaotic impulses, defining his boundaries and understanding his place in the world. With respect to nature, they are expressed above all through the care of the earth, as it is sacred, contains all the elements of Creation, and belongs not to man but to the Lord. The land must be cultivated and rested for seven years before sowing again.

Let us now look at the main *mitzvot* regarding the earth and all that it contains, such as plants and animals.

4a. Plants and Trees

The close connection between man and the environment is also found in numerous passages of the Torah, such as the prohibition against destroying (*bal-tashid*) fruit trees around cities during sieges (Deut. 20:10-20).

Plants are of great importance in Judaism, as this religious culture originated in the desert, where vegetation and trees were vital for the survival of both humans and animals. Since the very beginning, man's place has been in the Garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it. It is no surprise, then, that one of the Jewish holidays is dedicated to trees: *Tubishvat*, the New Year of Trees, celebrating the earth's fruitfulness. During this holiday, it is traditional to eat the fruits of the seven species with which the Holy Land was blessed: barley, wheat, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and dates, thanking the earth for its fertility.

In Israel, it is traditional to plant a tree every time a child is born: a cedar for each boy and a cypress for each girl. Thus, the trees grow with the children, and when they marry, they will build the wedding canopy with branches from their trees. The famous verse, *"For man is like a tree of the field"* (*Ki haadam etz hassadé*) (Num. 20:19), provides the answer. Beyond the ecological message that shines through in the verse, we must try to grasp the common elements: the tree, firmly rooted in the earth, from which it draws nourishment, develops harmoniously until it produces fruit that, once consumed by man, brings him a sense of "pleasure" and "delight."

Human life is indeed comparable to that of a tree, in that human life takes on meaning if it is promising, prolific, and creates a future, messages, and values that man will be able to pass on to his descendants, who will in turn be able to enjoy the moral and spiritual "delights" left to him. This is actually just one of the traits of the human being, whose spiritual, intellectual, and moral development is based, in principle, solely on the strength of its roots and the quality of the "soil" in which they are anchored. Just as a tree has no future unless it is firmly rooted in the earth, and will not bear fruit unless it is cared for and protected, there can be no future for human beings without a solid history of traditions and faith, nor without constant attention to their individual and social development. Furthermore, the tree achieves perfection through its fruits, which are the purpose of its very existence and its crowning glory.

In this regard, Jeremiah states:

"...to what can he be compared he whose wisdom surpasses his works? To a tree whose branches are many, but whose roots are few; when the wind comes, it uproots it and overthrows it; as it is said: 'He will be like a shrub in the desert, and will not know when good weather comes;' his dwelling will be in the aridity of the desert, in the uninhabitable salt land" (Jeremiah, 17-6).

"But he whose works surpass his wisdom, to what can he be compared? To a tree with few branches but abundant roots, which even if all the winds of the world were to blow against it, could not move it from its place, as it is written: He will be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by a stream; it will not know when the heat comes, its leaves will remain green, and it will not have to worry about the season of drought, for it will continue to bear fruit" (Jeremiah 17:8).

In Judaism, the concept of planting trees is so important that this activity should not be interrupted even if the Messiah is coming. In fact, there is a *Midrash* that says: "If you are planting a tree and they tell you, 'The Messiah has come,' first plant the tree, and then go to receive the Messiah."

The Torah prohibits cutting down fruit trees during the siege of a city (Deuteronomy 20:19-20), and according to the Sages, this is connected to the prohibition against destruction in a broader sense, as reported many times in the Talmud. Indeed, although the Torah refers only to fruit trees, the prohibition of *bal tashchith* (not to destroy) extends to all acts of wanton destruction of something useful or valuable. In this sense, even consumerism is considered a form of needless destruction. All this demonstrates an environmentalist interpretation, however, according to Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsh:

"... the prohibition against destruction also extends to objects belonging to the person himself. The prohibition is a global warning, not to exploit his status in the world to destroy without reason... man must make prudent and wise use of the world." (S.R. Hirsh.Horeb, 2002. The Soncino Press, Jerusalem, pp. 279-80).

The ecological nature of this interpretation is partly confirmed by the fact that the prohibition is formulated in the context of war, meaning that even in emergency conditions, this prohibition is truly important. In particular, the protection of the natural environment must be the responsibility of the entire community, and the short-term needs of individuals or the community must be subordinated to the long-term needs of the entire human race. However, Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089-1164), a medieval Spanish scientist, proposed a decidedly anthropocentric interpretation: that fruit trees should not be destroyed because human life depends on them. In contrast, Rashi, an acronym for Rabbi Shlomo Yitzaqi, a famous French biblical commentator (1040-1105), advocates an ecological opinion on the same topic, stating that defenseless trees must always be respected. As mentioned previously, in Judaism, different views on the same topic often coexist, and all are equally accepted.

It should also be noted that *mitzvot* toward the land and nature are never ends in themselves but are very often linked to acts of social justice. The Torah, in fact, commands many acts of *zedakot* (justice) for the poor, such as the commandment of sowing, or the sabbatical year, during which every seven years the fields must be left fallow, and no one may sow, plant, cut, or reap their own crops. All this reminds people that they can only temporarily enjoy the land that belongs to the Lord. In this year, the earth's produce will be *res nullius*, and the poor will be able to enjoy it. However, it is permitted to provide the necessary care for plants to prevent them from dying, such as eliminating parasites. Even in these precepts, a period of rest, like the sabbatical, is always preceded by the productive use of nature and working the land, thus these two opposing moments alternate and coexist harmoniously.

4b. Symbolic Trees

The Tree of Life (in Hebrew *עץ החיים, Etz haHa'yim*) symbolically represents the laws of the Torah and of the entire universe (some authors compare it to the Tree of Life mentioned in Genesis 2:9). The Tree of Life can be seen as a representation of the process of Creation, which puts into action, both in the

Macrocosm (the Universe) and in the Microcosm (the Human Being), creative energies or powers emanating from the Creator.

The *Menorah*, the seven-branched candelabrum of the Jewish Temple, whose seven candlesticks symbolize the seven days of Creation and the seven planets;

Fig 1. La Menorah

This is the only object of worship, along with the Ark of the Covenant, for which the Lord offers Moses a precise description of the form to follow, demonstrating its importance. In the Pentateuch, it is described as a stylization of the almond tree, a symbol of the tension of life typical of Judaism. It also recalls Aaron's rod, which blossomed in the desert with almond blossoms. The almond, with its ovoid shape, the ancestral symbol of life, protects the sacred and spiritual space with its shell. The sacred value of this lamp is also indicated by the fact that its shape resembles the wild plant called moriah, which grows in the desert and is very fragrant.

Fig 2. The plant died in bloom in the Sinai Peninsula

Moriah is also the name of the mountain where Abraham was called to sacrifice his son Isaac.

The coat of arms of the State of Israel (סמל מדינת ישראל in Hebrew) is also used in synagogues today. While the background of the shield is always blue, the menorah, olive branches, and the inscription can

be white or gold. It consists of a shield on a blue field bordered in white, inside which is a Menorah (Hebrew: מנורה) flanked by two olive branches. Below the Menorah is the word "Israel" in Hebrew.

Fig 3. The coat of arms of the State of Israel

4c. Animals

In a normal society, animals exist in addition to humans, and contrary to what some philosophers claim, even animals have a *nefesh*. "The righteous person knows the soul (*nefesh*) of his animal" (Proverbs 12:10) and cannot abuse it at will. One must be careful not to consider animals equal to humans, but to be aware that they are sentient beings. They may not think or speak, but they certainly feel and are capable of distress. Taking every possible care not to cause pain to animals (*tza'ar ba'alè chayim*) is a *mitzvah*.

Here are some examples:

"Do not muzzle an ox when it is treading out grain," and similarly for humans we find*: "When you come (to work) in your neighbor's vineyard, you may eat as many grapes as you want to satisfy your hunger. However, you may not put them in a container that you may have. When you come (to work) in your neighbor's grain field, you may take the grapes." "You may not plow the ears of corn with your hand. However, you may not lift a sickle (for your own benefit) in your neighbor's grain field."* (Deut. 23:25, 26).

The principle is identical in both cases: it is cruel to deny someone who is working it the opportunity to eat part of the food. The parallel is instructive: animals also have feelings and must be respected.

"Do not plow with an ox and a donkey together: cruelty must be avoided; an ox is stronger than a donkey, and asking a donkey to do the work of an ox is unfair. But this rule can be seen in a broader context, that of respect for nature: *"You shall not plant two kinds of grain in your vineyard; if you do, not only the crops you plant but also the fruit of the vineyard will be defiled. You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey together. You shall not wear clothing of wool and linen woven together."* (Deut. 9:12).

5. Concluding Remarks

The entire Creation is inherently good, but the Creator has purposely left us room to improve His work. Thus, all human activities "under the sun" are an opportunity to fulfill this mission that gives purpose to the existence and life of human beings.

Environmental sustainability in Judaism is achieved through *Tikkun Olam* (Hebrew: **תיקון עולם**, literally "repairing the world"). In Jewish teachings, this is considered any activity aimed at improving the world, bringing it closer to the harmonious state for which it was created. Everyone can be involved in "*tikkun olam*" in various ways, from the governor of a state promoting peace and justice to a child picking up a piece of paper on the ground, and any good deed aimed at socio-environmental well-being. Therefore, not only works that can repair existing damage, but also those that improve the current state of things, preparing the world to enter the final era for which it was created.