

**God's Ecology**  
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Back when I was in studying to become a rabbi – really not that long ago – I spent a summer as intern working for the Sierra Club in their Los Angeles field office. I believed then – as I believe now – that our community by and large has taken too passive a stance on environmental issues affecting our world. While it's true that the environment shouldn't be the most prominent issue on our communal agenda, it's also true that it should not be absent.

Young and ambitious as I was, I thought spending time working for one our nation's premier conservation groups would help me understand the issues more deeply and give me a more first-hand appreciation for environmental advocacy. I met extraordinary people, learned a great deal about the day's pressing issues, and I've retained my membership and my interest ever since.

One of things I learned was that, like any industry, environmentalists have their own language and their own lingo. Among environmental philosophers, there are two camps: The ecocentric approach – not to be confused with the egocentric approach – and the anthropocentric approach. The econcentrists believe that our system of values begins and ends with nature. Man has no more primacy in the natural world than any other creature. Thus they argue for or biospherical egalitarianism – everyone and everything in nature shares an intrinsic equality.

Anthropocentrists, on the other hand, place human beings at the top of any environmental flow chart. How we treat the environment is contingent directly on human need and human utility.

What I'd like to suggest this morning is that Judaism offers an alternative dialectic. To help tease it out, I'd like to do a little learning with you this morning. I want to study a Rashi with you from the end of our parsha, but it requires a little introduction.

To get there, I want to turn to one of the most important sources in the Torah for the notion of environmental sensitivity.

**דברים פרק כ:יט**

כי תצור אל עיר ימים רבים להלחם עליה לתפשה לא תשחית את עצה לגדה עליו גרון כי ממנו תאכל ואתו לא תכרת כי האדם עץ השדה לבא מפניך במצור:

*When in your war against a city you have to besiege it 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. Are trees of the field human to withdraw before you into the besieged city?*

Now – the last seven words of this pasuk are actually a little difficult to translate. If you try to read the pasuk literally, it really makes very little sense: *For man is a tree of the field to withdraw from you into the besieged city.*

We need help.

There are two approaches I'd like to share with you. The first is Rashi's:

#### רש"י דברים פרק כ

כי האדם עץ השדה - הרי כי משמש בלשון דלמא. שמא האדם עץ השדה להכנס בתוך המצור מפניך להתייטר ביסורי רעב וצמא כאנשי העיר למה תשחיתנו:

The word *ki* functions here as a rhetorical question: Would one think that a tree is a human being capable of fleeing into the besieged city such that one should treat him like the enemy whom he subjects to hunger and thirst? Why destroy it?

According to Rashi, the pasuk is asking this question. Is the tree a human being? Is he your enemy? Presuming the underlying cause of this battle is just, we don't have to like it – but we understand it. There's a utility in waging war against enemy combatants. We're out to vanquish our enemies before they vanquish us. But the tree? The innocent tree? What did he do? He did nothing. So, writes Rashi – there is no justification for its demolition. Wanton destruction is prohibited.

Now – how would you answer the question of why? Why is it prohibited? The Torah doesn't actually say. And neither does Rashi. So keep this question in the back of your mind for a just moment. By contrasting this Rashi to the approach of the Ibn Ezra – it will at least be obvious what Rashi is *not* saying.

#### אבן עזרא דברים פרק כ

כי האדם עץ השדה, והטעם: כי חיי בן אדם הוא עץ השדה. וכמוהו: כי נפש הוא חובל (דברים כד, ו), כי חיי נפש הוא חובל. ואותו לא תכרות. דבק עם לבא מפניך במצור. הנה לא תשחית עץ פרי שהוא חיים לבן אדם, רק מותר שתאכל ממנו, ואסור לך להשחיתו כדי שתבא העיר מפניך במצור. והעד על זה הפירוש שהוא נכון, שאמר וכרת ובנית מצור. The trees of the field are the lifeblood of human beings. Do not destroy the fruit tree for it provides sustenance to man. What is permitted to you is consumption alone. It is forbidden to destroy it as part of the siege.

Ibn Ezra doesn't read the pasuk as a rhetorical question. He reads it as a statement: כי האדם עץ השדה – a person is a tree inasmuch as he depends on the tree to be able to live. It's a prohibition against a scorched earth policy. Kill the tree and you'll be killing the people. Now we have an explanation: Killing the tree is prohibited because we care too much about the people who need the tree.

In environmental lingo, this is anthropocentrism. Be respectful of the environment because human beings need it. And of course, by extension, when there is a constructive need for the tree, its use is most assuredly permitted.

The absence in Rashi of the human component is striking.

I'd like to suggest that Rashi has something else in mind. It all goes back to the beginning:

#### בראשית פרק ב פסוק טו

ויקח יקוק אלהים את האדם וינחהו בגן עדן לעבדה ולשמרה:

We have two charges. The first is anthropocentric: To work God's earth so that it yields the produce that enables us to live.

But also simply לשמר – to preserve it – not just for another generation of people – but because doing so bespeaks an appreciation for what God has created – even if it accords us no tangible benefit.

This is what I would call a theocentric approach. And this I believe is Rashi's position. We're the custodians of God's beautiful world simply because this was the divine mission with which we've been entrusted. It's not about utility; it's about stewardship.

Now we're ready to learn the Rashi on our parsha. It's so beautiful and so profound.

#### שמות פרק כ:כא

ואם מזבח אבנים תעשה לי לא תבנה אתהן גזית כי חרבך הנפת עליה ותחללה:

*When you make for me an altar of stones, do not build them hewn, for you will have raised the sword over it and desecrated it.*

#### רש"י שמות פרק כ

ותחללה – הא למדת, שאם הנפת עליה ברזל חללת, שהמזבח נברא להאריך ימיו של אדם, והברזל נברא לקצר ימיו של אדם, אין זה בדין, שיונף המקצר על המאריך. ועוד, שהמזבח מטיל שלום בין ישראל לאביהם שבשמים, לפיכך לא יבא עליו כורת ומחבל. והרי דברים קל וחומר ומה אבנים שאינם רואות ולא שומעות ולא מדברות על ידי שמטילות שלום אמרה תורה לא תניף עליהם ברזל, המטיל שלום בין איש לאשתו, בין משפחה למשפחה, בין אדם לחבירו, על אחת כמה וכמה שלא תבואהו פורענות:

This teaches that if one raises steel over it, he has desecrated it. For the altar was created to extend the life of man and steel was created to shorten the life of man. It is not fitting to raise that which cuts life short over that which lengthens life.

And what is more: The altar brings peace to the relationship between the Jewish people and our Father in Heaven. Therefore, one may not bring a weapon into its presence. This teaches a lesson *a fortiori*. Stones do not hear, see or speak. But because they have the function of peace-making, the Torah protects them by prohibiting steel from coming into contact with them. Imagine, then, the protection afforded one who creates peace between husband and wife, between families or between two friends. Certainly such a one will never be subject to bad tidings.

The first half of the Rashi captures what we've termed this theocentric approach. There's no meaningful difference in the structure or utility of the altar as a result of using steel to hew the stones. In fact, the Ramban writes, if you want to hew the stones with something else, that's fine. The final product is essentially irrelevant. What we care about is the process. In God's ordered world, it would constitute a violation to bring together two forces that are so diametrically opposed.

In God's home, we need to protect those ancient stones from being exposed to man's most destructive forces. We're שומרים – we're the keepers of God's pristine garden. The sword has no

place in the sanctuary of life. If there's a force that threatens to do violence in God's world, it's our duty to prevent it from doing so.

But in the very next breath, Rashi captures the second sentiment: We keep the sword away from the stone to teach a powerful human lesson. It's an anthropocentric interpretation. The halacha is but a metaphor. We only care about those stones inasmuch as they teach us how to relate to other human beings. For if in the capacity of serving as a peacemaker the stone is rewarded, how much more so the human peacemaker?

Of course Judaism rejects ecocentrism. We believe firmly in the notion that only human beings are created **בצלם אלוקים** and that the world was created first and foremost for humankind. But at the same time we recognize that our charge vis-à-vis the environment is exclusively self-serving.

Someone once wrote a letter to Rav Yaakov Emden and asked him the following question: "We've outgrown our shul and we need to expand. But the only direction in which to expand our building is to the east. And to the east of the shul is a grapevine. Are we permitted to uproot it?"

Of course the answer came yes. Only senseless destruction is prohibited. Where there is a constructive benefit, uprooting the tree is permitted.

Someone wrote a similar letter to the Chasam Sofer. The answer was the same. But he added that if it's at all possible to replant the tree, every effort should be made to do so.

These conversations capture the full sweep of our conversation this morning. It's exactly the right question. The sensitivities are perfectly placed. But the values are equally well-aligned.

For such is the duality of our ongoing mission: both **לעבדה ולשמרה** – to serve as exemplary custodians – not only to use and preserve our world for the elevation of mankind, but to think of ourselves as the privileged keepers of God's garden. Like the stones of the mizbeah, every one of God's creations is endowed with the capacity for holiness. And so is each one of us.