

Jewish Teachings on Sustainability
Sustainability and Spirituality Forum, First Congregational Church
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First, I'd like to thank Hugo Steensma for inviting me to offer a Jewish perspective on the issues of sustainability and stewardship, as well as offer thanks to our other speakers for enriching all of us with their respective approaches to this essential truth.

But before I offer a Jewish perspective, let me first say a word or two about that perspective's basis – Jewish tradition.

There's an old saying which I think sums up Judaism very nicely: "Two Jews, three opinions." Exactingly ethical and profoundly ambiguous, Jewish religious tradition can be a conceptual challenge even for those who are born into it. It's actually more a code of conduct or way of life than a belief system, centered on the performance of *mitzvot* – "sacred obligations." Our rabbis teach that by focusing our minds on the holiness inherent in everything around and within us, the mitzvot connect us to G-d through right action in the world.

A parenthetic word about G-d: While Jewish religious tradition teaches that the essence of G-d is unity, it also teaches that there are as many interpretations of that unity as there are interpreters. But interpretation is second to action: one teaching quotes G-d as saying "If you forget about me but keep My mitzvot, very well – for My mitzvot will lead you back to me."

Although 10 mitzvot tend to get all the press, there are actually 613 of these sacred obligations: positive mitzvot, or things we should do, and negative mitzvot, or things we shouldn't do. Some are what we might call "obviously holy" – we should refrain from murder, adultery and idolatry. But we're also supposed to keep honest weights and measures, pay our employees on time, and let draft animals nibble on the crops they're plowing. A slight majority of the mitzvot deal with Temple service – laws of sacrifices, the priesthood and so forth – but since the destruction of the Second Temple more than 1900 years ago, only some 270 of the mitzvot are generally considered to be observable – with 26 applying specifically to Eretz Israel, or the land Israel.

In researching tonight's presentation, I was amazed to discover that more than 70 mitzvot concern sustainability – what the Book of Genesis calls "l'ovdah ul'shomrah," or serving and protecting creation. For example, remitting debts and giving the land a complete rest every seventh year – no plowing, pruning or harvesting; waiting three years before eating the fruits of a newly-planted tree; not eating or drinking to excess; and not gathering all of a vineyard's ripe grapes at harvest time. The "reasoning" behind this is simple – as a 10th-century commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes teaches, G-d told Adam and Chava "Look at My works! See how beautiful they are, how excellent! For your sake I created them all. See to it that you do not spoil or destroy My world – for if you do, there will be no one to repair it after you."

Repairing the world – in Hebrew, “tikkun olam” – is thus one of our major responsibilities as G-d’s co-partners in creation. “Tikkun olam” is based on the principle that the world’s perfection only exists in potentiality, and that it’s up to us to make the potential actual – to find and liberate the sparks of holiness that wait inside of everything. This requires not only that we pay close attention to everything around us, no matter how seemingly mundane, but that we do so with an eye to its ultimate Owner. “The land is Mine,” G-d says in the Book of Leviticus, “You are but strangers resident with Me.”

Some mitzvot use ritual to reinforce this sense of transience. For example, from sundown Friday to Saturday night, Shabbat teaches us every week to cease from creating and to appreciate creation. The festival of Sukkot, where we build and live in shaky booths for eight days during early autumn, connects us to our essential fragility. But while tikkun olam is rooted in the perceived connection between ourselves, creation, and G-d, it only attains full flower when coupled with action – even if it seems futile at the time. This is illustrated by the following story from the Talmud:

On a hot day, an old man was planting carob seedlings in his garden when he was heckled by his neighbor.

“Are you nuts?” the neighbor asked. “You’re eighty years old. The trees will mature in about fifty years – you’ll be long dead by then, and never taste their fruit.”

Without looking up, the old man replied, “I’m not planting them for me – I’m planting them for my grandchildren.”

Another ancient tradition teaches that tikkun olam is one of the keys which will bring Moshiach, or the Messiah, who traditional Jews believe will herald humanity’s long-anticipated Golden Age. However, one rabbi offered this advice: “If you’re planting a tree and Moshiach arrives, finish planting the tree before you greet Moshiach.”

This all sounds simple, but everyone in this room knows it isn’t. Tikkun olam, repairing the world, can seem overwhelming – after all, there is so much work to be done, and it can often seem as though we’re the only ones doing it. In that spirit, I’d like to close with a quote from Rabbi Tarfon, who was born around the time the Second Temple was destroyed:

“The day is short, and the task is great; the laborers are lazy, the wages are abundant, and the Master of the house urges on ... It is not incumbent on you to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.”