

June 1990/Sivan 5750

\$2.00

CHAI TODAY

**Marriage:
What if you mess up?**

**Legitimacy of
Trade Unions**

Saving the World



SAVING THE WORLD

By Dr. Norman Lamm



The New Awareness

The unprecedented growth of science and technology which has become one of the chief characteristics of Western civilization, is today the subject of profound and trenchant criticism. The very success of technology threatens to become its undoing. Students of ecology now alarm us to the dangers that an unrestrained technology poses for the delicate balance of nature on which the survival of the biosphere depends. Ever since the publication of Rachel Carson's *The Silent Spring*, the public has become more and more concerned about the possible consequences of man's unthinking interference in and disruption of the natural processes which make life possible on earth. Polluted air, dirty water, littered landscape, an environment contaminated with impurities from radioactive strontium to waste detergents—all of these place in jeopardy not only the quality of life, but the very survival of many or all species, including the human. Sheer necessity has caused ecology to emerge from its

ivory tower of pure science to pronounce a great moral imperative incumbent upon all mankind—to curb its arrogant and mindless devastation of nature.

The case for the ecological movement is obvious and beyond dispute. One point, of the many cogent ones made in the growing literature on the subject, is worth repeating here. René Dubos has reminded us that we still know precious little about pollution. Seventy percent of all the precipitate contaminants in urban air are still unidentified and, twenty to thirty years hence, those who are today below the age of three will undoubtedly show varying signs of chronic and permanent malfunction. Man is clever enough to conquer nature—and stupid enough to wreck it and thereby destroy himself.

The Theologians' Masochism

Unfortunately, the ecology issue has itself inspired a new pollution problem—a fall-out of silliness in the theological environment. It has now become almost a dogma of the *avant-*

garde cognoscenti, who only a short while ago were telling us that the Bible is an impediment to the search for knowledge and the advancement of science, that the cultural provenance of man's technological rapaciousness and extravagant exploitation of nature is the Biblical mandate to man to "subdue" the earth. In the 1970's, some writers were asserting that religion is responsible for our dirty planet, and that the solution requires another one of those "major modifications" of current religious values. Such exhibitions of moral masochism have, regrettably, become commonplace.

Were it not for the uncritical acceptance granted to these ideas, and the prominence of the organs in which they were disseminated (from *Science* to the *New York Times*), it would have been best to treat these comments with studied neglect. However, since they were given wide currency, they may at least serve as a convenient excuse to examine the sources of the Jewish tradition—Biblical and midrashic, halachic and theological to discover whether

these sources possess any resonance for the ecological values that will in all likelihood, and with justification, become part of the culture of Western man.

The Biblical Perspective

The starting point for a religious consideration of man's relations with his natural environment is the divine blessing to man in Genesis 1:28: "... be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air and over every creeping thing that creepeth on the earth." This is the passage that, it is asserted, is the sanction for the excesses of science and technology, the new ecological villains. "And subdue it" is proclaimed by theologians as the source of man's insensitivity and brutality to the subhuman world, as "dominion ... over the fowl of the air" is equated with the right to foul the air.

The Limitations of Subdual

It does not take much scholarship to recognize the emptiness of this charge against the Bible, particularly as it is interpreted in the Jewish tradition. The Torah's respect for nonhuman nature is evident in the restrictions that follow immediately upon the "subdue" commandment: man is permitted only to eat herbs and greens, not to abuse the resources of nature (Gen. 1:29). Fur-

vegetarianism by placing selective restrictions on man's appetite for meat. His right to "subdue" nature is by no means unlimited.

Man and Earth

Man's commanding role in the world brings with it a commensurate responsibility for the natural order. He may

***Man's commanding role in the world brings with it
a commensurate responsibility for the natural order.
He may rule over nature, not ruin it.***

rule over nature, not ruin it. Adam is punished for his sin by the diminution of nature's potencies: thorns and thistles, sweat of the brow, enmity between the species, complications in the relations between the sexes, the ultimate victory of earth over man (Gen. 3:15-19). The upsetting of the balance of nature, man included, is a curse. Cain, too, is punished by alienation from nature. The blood of his slain brother is soaked up by earth, corrupting it and disturbing its peace, and the retribution is in kind: "When thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee its strength; a fugitive and wanderer shalt thou be on the earth (Gen. 4:12)." Ten generations later the world is filled with "violence" (chamas), "for all flesh has corrupted their way on the earth," and, hence, "behold, I will destroy them with the earth." And in the

than by dumping into streams or littering the countryside (Deut. 23:13-15).

Perhaps the most powerful expression of the Bible's concern for man's respect for the integrity of nature as the possession of its Creator, rather than his own preserve, is the Sabbath. This institution was never understood by Judaism as solely a matter of rest and refreshment. It pointed primarily to the

relationship between man, world, and G-d. The six workdays were given to man in which to carry out the commission to "subdue" the world, to impose on nature his creative talents. But the seventh day is a Sabbath; man must cease his creative interference in the natural order (the Halacha's definition of melachah or work), and by this act of renunciation demonstrate his awareness that the earth is the L-rd's and that man therefore bears a responsibility to give an accounting to its Owner for how he has disposed of it during the days he "subdued" it. The same principal underlies the institutions of the Sabbatical and Jubilee years. The Sages of the Mishnah (Talmud, Tamid, end) interpreted the words of the Psalmist, "a song for the Sabbath day" (Ps. 92), as "a song for the hereafter, for the day which will be all Sabbath." Thus, for the Rabbis the weekly renunciation of man's role as interpolator and manipulator, and his symbolic gesture of regard for nature, was extended into a perpetual Sabbath; hence, a new insight into Jewish eschatology; not a progressively growing technology and rising G.N.P., but a peaceful and mutually respectful coexistence between man and his environment.

***The Talmud mentions that Jews should be taught
when very young that it is a sin to waste even
small amounts of food...Nothing that the L-rd
created in the world was superfluous or in vain;
hence, all must be sustained.***

thermore, this mastery over nature is limited to vegetables for the first ten generations. Vegetarianism yields to carnivorousness only after the Flood when, as a concession, G-d permits the eating of meat to the sons of Noah. Even then, the right to devour flesh is circumscribed with a number of protective prohibitions, such as the warnings against eating blood and taking human life (Gen. 9:2-6). The laws of kashrut, the Biblical and rabbinic dietary rules, preserve the kernel of that primeval

eschatological vision of Isaiah, the restoration of man to primordial harmony in and with nature is the prophet's most powerful metaphor for the felicity of the Messianic redemption. "And the wolf shall dwell with the lamb ... and a little child shall lead them ... They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain (Isa. 11:6-9)."

We find Biblical legislation to enforce pollution abatement in the commandment to dispose of sewage and waste by burial in the ground, rather

The Orders of Creation

This respect for the inviolability of Nature extends not only to Nature as a whole but to its major segments as well. The original identity of species must be protected against artificial distortion and obliteration. This confirmation of the separateness and non-interchangeability of its various parts may be said to lie at the heart of some of the less

rationally appreciated Pentateuchal commandments—those prohibiting the mixing of different seeds in a field, of interbreeding diverse species of animals, of wearing garments of mixed wool and linen.” Here the Bible demands a symbolic affirmation of nature’s original order in defiance of man’s manipulative interference. Perhaps never before have these laws been as meaningful as in our times when the ecology of the entire planet is in such danger, when entire species are threatened with extinction, when man has become capable of “ecocide.”

Interestingly, one of the major Biblical sources of the laws forbidding such intermingling of species is immediately preceded by the famous commandment, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” Reverence for the integrity of identity is common to both laws. Respect for the wholeness of all man’s autonomy must lead to respect for the wholeness of all the Creator’s works, mute nature included. This autonomy of nature is known in rabbinic literature as *sidrei bereisit*, the “orders of creation.” The rabbinic attitude to these “orders of creation” is manifest in the following passage:

Our Rabbis taught: once there was a man whose wife died and left him with a nursing child. He had no money to pay a wet-nurse. A miracle happened and he developed two breasts like a woman and he nursed his child. Said R. Joseph: “Come and see, how great is this man that such a miracle should have been performed for him.” Said Abaye to him: “On the contrary, how lowly is this man that for his sake the orders of creation should have been altered (Shabbat 53b).”

The orders of creation are the manifestations of the act of creation, the juridical warrant for divine ownership of the universe, and whosoever interferes with them is “a lowly person.”

Thou Shalt Not Destroy

The Biblical norm which most directly addresses itself to the ecological situation is that known as *bal tashchit*, “thou shalt not destroy.” The passage reads:

When thou shalt besiege a city a long time, in making war against it to take it, thou shalt not destroy the trees thereof by wielding an axe against them;

for thou may eat of them, but thou shalt not cut them down; for is the tree of the field man that it should be besieged of thee? Only the trees of which thou knowest that they are not trees for food, them thou mayest destroy and cut down, that thou mayest build bulwarks against the city that maketh war with thee, until it fall (Deuteronomy 20:10-20)."

The specific mention in the Biblical passage of destroying by “wielding an axe” is not taken by the Halachah as the exclusive means of destruction. Any form of despoilation is forbidden by Biblical law, even diverting the irrigation without which the tree will wither and die. Again, it was assumed that the Torah was enunciating a general prin-



ciple in the forms of a specific and extreme case.

Similarly, the mention of “fruit trees” was expanded to include almost everything else: “And not only trees, but whoever breaks vessels, tears clothing, wrecks that which is built up, stops fountains, or wastes food in a destructive manner, transgresses the commandment of *bal tashchit* (‘thou shalt not destroy’), but his punishment is only flogging by rabbinic edict.” Likewise, is it forbidden to kill an animal needlessly or to offer exposed water (presumed to be polluted or poisoned) to livestock.”

The sages of the Talmud made a general prohibition against waste: “Whoever breaks vessels, or destroys food, violates the prohibition of *bal*

tashchit” (Maimonides, *Hilchot Melachim* 6:10). *Bal tashchit* prohibits the destruction, complete or incomplete, direct or indirect, of all objects of potential benefit to people. The Talmud (*Berachot* 52b) mentions that Jews should be taught when very young that it is a sin to waste even small amounts of food.

According to Rabbi Aron of Barcelona from the 14th century (author of *Sefer Hachinuch*) the purpose of the commandment is to train man to love the good by abstaining from all destructiveness. “For this is the way of the pious . . . they love peace, are happy when they can do good to others and bring them close to Torah, and will not

cause even a grain of mustard to be lost from the world . . .”

The Talmudic and midrashic traditions continue this implicit assumption of man’s obligation to, and responsibility for, nature’s integrity; Nothing that the L-rd created in the world was superfluous or in vain; hence, all must be sustained. An aggadah often repeated in the literature, says that G-d created the world by looking into the Torah as an architect into a blue print. Creation, the Rabbis were saying, is contingent upon the Torah or, the survival of the world depends upon human acceptance of moral responsibility.

Man as Creator

Within this framework, it is impor-

tant further to elaborate on the relation of man to nature in order to provide the value foundation for the moral imperatives that issue from ecology. "And subdue it" certainly implies a mandate to man to exercise his technological talents and genius in the upbuilding of the world and the exploitation of nature's resources. From the days of R. Saadia Gaon and R. Sabbatai Donnola, a tradition of interpretation has understood the Biblical term "the image of G-d" to include, if not primarily to signify, man's capacity for creativity: just as the Creator is creative, so has His imaging creation been endowed with the same propensity. This creative urge is man's glory, his very G-d-likeness. In a remarkable passage we read that Tur-nus Rufus, a pagan Roman general, asked R. Akiva which was more beautiful (or useful): the works of G-d or the works of man. Holding some stalks of grain in one hand, and loaves of bread in the other, R. Akiva showed the as-tounded pagan that the products of technology are more suited to man than

the results of the natural process alone. So did R. Akiva proceed to explain the command-ment of cir-cumcision; both world and man were created incomplete, G-d having left it to man to perfect both his en-vironment and his body. Simi-larly, the com-mand-ments, in general, were given in order that man thereby purify his character, that he at-tain spiritual perfection. Man, the cre-ated creator, must, in imitation of his Maker, apply his creative abilities to all

life: his natural environment, his body, his soul.



When R. Shelomoh Eger, a distin-guished Talmudist, became a Hassid, he was asked what he learned from R. Menachem Mendel of Kotzk after his first visit. He answered that the first thing he learned in Kotzk was, "In the beginning G-d created." But did a re-nowned scholar have to travel to a Hassidic Rebbe to learn the first verse in the Bible? He answered: "I learned that G-d created only the beginning; every-thing else is up to man."

The Dangers

However, this doctrine which teaches man's discontinuity with and superiority to the rest of the natural order, must not be misconstrued as a sanction for man to despoil the world. First, while he is beyond the merely natural, he also participates in it; he is an intersection of the natural and the divine (or supernatural). Man remains inextricably tied to nature even while he is urged to transcend it. Man is a crea-ture, and the denial of his creature-liness turns his creative powers to sa-tanic and destructive ends. Second, the very nature of the concept of the image-hood of man implies the warning that he must never overreach in arrogance. He may build, change, produce, create, but he does not hold title to the world, he is not the "King of the world," an appellation reserved for the Deity, be-cause the original all-inclusive creation was exclusively that of God, and mortal

YOUR KASHRUS QUESTIONS ANSWERED

 *A service of* 
KOF - K
KOSHER SUPERVISION
Call (201) 837-0500

**For a copy of
KOF-K GUIDE TO KASHRUS
send your name and address
and \$1.00 to
cover postage and handling to:
KOF-K — KIS
1444 Queen Anne Road
Teaneck, NJ 07666**

man has no part in it. His subordinate role in the cosmic scheme means that nature was given to him to enjoy but not to ruin—a concept reinforced by the law that before deriving any benefit or pleasure from the natural world, such as eating or drinking, one must recite a blessing to the “King of the world”: an acknowledgment that it is God, not man, who holds ultimate title to the universe. Hence, without this blessing-acknowledgement, it is as if one stole from G-d (Berachot 35a).

That man’s role as co-creator with G-d must not be exaggerated we learn from the following Talmudic passage: “The Rabbis taught: man was created on the eve of Sabbath. Why? So that the Sadducees (i.e. heretics) should not say that G-d had a partner in the act of creation of the world (Sanhedrin 38a). This statement does not contradict that of R. Akiva who declared man’s actions more beautiful, or suitable, than those of G-d, hence emphasizing the religious sanction of man’s creative office. Man remains a partner of G-d in the ongoing creative process. However, here we must distinguish between two Hebrew synonyms for creation: *beriah* and *yetzirah*. The former refers to creation *ex nihilo* (something from nothing) and hence can only be used of G-d. The latter describes creation out of some preexistent substance, and hence may be used both of G-d (after the initial act of genesis) and man.” God has no “partners” in the one-time act of *beriah* with which He called the universe into being, and the world is, in an ultimate sense, exclusively His. He does invite man to join Him, as a co-creator, in the ongoing process of *yetzirah*. Hence, man receives from G-d the commission to “subdue” nature by means of *yetzirah*-functions: but, because he is incapable of *beriah*, man remains responsible to the Creator for how he has disposed of the world.

Man the *yetzirah*-creator, according to the teaching of Halachic Judaism, is responsible to G-d the *beriah*-Creator not only for the raw material of the natural world into which he was placed, but is responsible as well for protecting and enhancing the civilization which he himself created. “Subdue it” is not only not an invitation to ecological irresponsibility; it is a charge to assume additional moral responsibility, not only for the natural world as

such, but even for the man-made culture and civilization which we found when we were born into this world.

creative resources in order that it yield up to him its riches. But alongside the mandate to work and subdue it, he was

Man the yetzirah-creator, according to the teaching of Halachic Judaism, is responsible to G-d the beriah-Creator not only for the raw material of the natural world into which he was placed, but is responsible as well for protecting and enhancing the civilization which he himself created.

Conclusion

Perhaps the most succinct summary of what we have said concerning the role of Man and Nature before G-d, is given early in the Biblical narrative where we are told of G-d placing Adam in the Garden of Eden—which, from its description in Scripture, was a model of ecological health. “And the L-rd G-d took the man and put him into the Garden of Eden to work it and watch over it.” The undefiled world was given over to man “to work it,” to apply to it his

appointed its watchman: to guard over it, to keep it safe, to protect it even from his own rapaciousness and greed. Man is not only an *oved*, a worker and fabricator, he is also a *shomer*, a trustee who, according to the Halachah, is obligated to keep the world whole for its true Owner, and is responsible to return it in no worse condition than he found it.” ■

Dr. Norman Lamm is president of Yeshiva University, NY. Dr. Lamm has written six books including Torah Lishmah and Faith and Doubt.

No Jewish home should be without it.

Timely.
Provocative.
Informative.
Discover The
Jewish Homemaker!

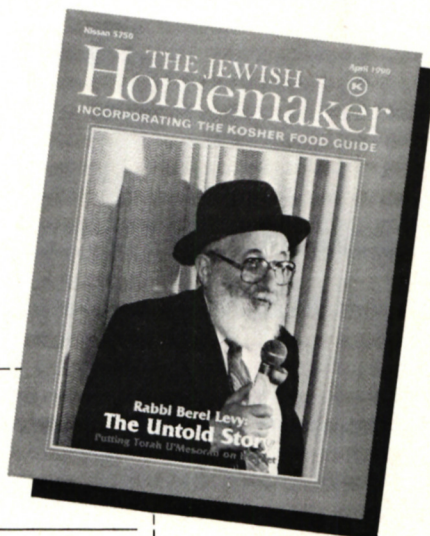
Subscribe Now!

Please send me one year at \$10⁰⁰
or 2 years at \$18⁰⁰.
I'll look forward to receiving
all 5 issues per year!

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ ST _____ Zip _____



Make checks payable to: The Jewish Homemaker, 705 Foster Ave., Brooklyn, NY 11230