



# Sustainable Growth A Jewish-Israeli Approach

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*In the hour when God created the first human being, God took him and let him pass before all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to him: "See my works, how fine and excellent they are! Now all that I have created, for you have I created it. Think upon this and do not destroy and desolate My world for if you corrupt it, there is no one to set it right after you."*

*Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:28*

# Fundamental Jewish Perspectives on Society, Economics, and Environment

## 1. A World of Symbiotic Relationships

Modern economics assumes that the purpose of the market mechanism is the linear distribution of resources by those who have (or produce) them to those who lack them. The Torah, however, teaches about a different network of relationships.

” אֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדוֹת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ בְּהִבְרָאָם, בְּיוֹם עֲשׂוֹת ה' אֱלֹקִים אֶרֶץ וְשָׁמַיִם.  
 וְכָל שִׁיחַ הַשָּׂדֶה טָרֵם יִהְיֶה בְּאֶרֶץ, וְכָל-עֵשֶׂב הַשָּׂדֶה טָרֵם יִצְמַח,  
 כִּי לֹא הִמְטִיר ה' אֱלֹקִים עַל-הָאָרֶץ, וְאָדָם אֵין לְעַבֵּד אֶת-הָאֲדָמָה.  
 וְאָדָם יִעֲלֶה מִן הָאָרֶץ וְהִשְׁקָה אֶת כָּל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה.  
 וַיִּצְרֶה ה' אֱלֹקִים אֶת הָאָדָם עֶפְרָם מִן הָאֲדָמָה, וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו נְשָׁמַת חַיִּים,  
 וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה.” (בראשית ב ד - ז)

These are the generations of the heaven and of the earth when they were created, in the day that God made earth and heaven. No shrub of the field was yet in the earth, and no herb of the field had yet sprung up; for God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was not a human to till the ground; but there went up a mist from the earth, and watered the whole face of the ground. Then God formed human of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and human became a living soul.

This excerpt from the Book of Genesis describes the origin of the human-earth relationship. According to the text, Creation cannot develop without the integration between earth, rain, and the work of human. Yet the things that the earth needs – water and human – are created from the earth itself: the mist rises from the land and the human is created from the earth. Rather than a system of “resources” and “consumers,” the Torah defines a system of mutual relationships. The earth is barren on its own, as are the water and the human; only when each element of Creation reaches beyond its individual boundaries is growth achieved. **A view of Creation as a network of symbiotic relationships has cultural and moral implications that can and should inform the existing science of economics.**

In the accepted model of economics, the existence of one thing comes at the expense of the existence of another. The story of Creation – and many other proclamations found in Jewish mysticism and philosophy – teaches us that everything must work in partnership. Narrow vision and skewed intentions can corrupt any relationship: mutual responsibility between the rich and poor can deteriorate into patronizing relationships; employer-employee relations can degenerate from cooperative into exploitative; and lender-borrower relations walk the fine line between helpful assistance and profit-driven usury.

**The well-being of society and the economy depend on the nature of the relationships between the givers and the receivers of the world – are they shallow, utilitarian affiliations or deeper, more complex webs of mutual giving and receiving?**

## **2. Growth and Development as a Human Obligation and Responsibility**

Modern economics has evolved on the assumption that natural resources are the property of the human species. This point of view provides no ethical tenet of restraint; only the devastating repercussions of exploitation bring people to wonder about the limitations of appropriate use. According to Judaism, natural resources do not belong to humans – they have been entrusted into our hands for wise use.

וַיִּקַּח ה' אֱלֹקִים, אֶת-הָאָדָם; וַיִּנְחֵהוּ בְּגֶן-עֵדֶן, לְעַבְדָּהּ וּלְשָׁמְרָהּ.

*God took the man and placed him in the Garden of Eden to till and to tend it (Genesis 2:15).*

Seeing natural resources as a trust and the development of the world as an obligation begets a different way of relating to nature and use of its resources. On the one hand, humans are commanded to work the land – that is, to develop civilization. On the other, they are entrusted with the responsibility to protect it from destruction and overutilization. A world view in which people can do whatever they want with their possessions is foreign to Judaism, in which the foundation of obligation and responsibility lie at the basis of any concept of possession.

### **3. A Culture of Giving**

Because of the danger that people might feel pride and ownership toward natural resources, the Torah outlines a code of behavior designed to remind them that his ownership of property is temporary and partial. Because the Torah was given to an agricultural society, most of the commandments limit the Jewish person's rights to produce and fields. For example, the commandment of Peah (corner) obligates the person who is harvesting the field must leave one corner untouched for the poor. The commandments of Leket (gleaning) and Shachacha (forgotten) require the farmer to leave for the poor that which falls on the ground during the time of harvesting, or that which is forgotten in the field when the harvest is collected. The commandments of the Sabbath and the Sabbatical years, which designate cessation of the work of humans one day a week and once every seven years, serve to further lessen the degree to which our identity revolves around our possessions and domination of the world.

These commandments refine the urge for ownership, redirecting it to cooperation and acceptance of responsibility. In certain circumstances humans are required to relinquish their right to possession and to recognize that the field and its produce belong to God. In every place where humans enjoy nature's bounty, the Torah demands a sacrifice, asking them to relinquish their status as creators and owners of these blessings of abundance.

The intricate web of relationships between human beings can create abundance in a place where classic economics sees lack. According to this line of thought, for example, even immaterial giving may also constitute a substantial part of the economic process, as the Talmud (Baba Batra 9, 70:2) states:

*Rabbi Yitzchak said that one who gives a coin to the poor is blessed with six blessings and the one who appeases is blessed with 11 blessings.*

## 4. A Moderate Society by Design

לא תחמד, בית רעה; לא-תחמד אשת רעה, ועבדו ואמתו ושורו וחסמו, וכל, אשר לרעה.

*You shall not covet thy neighbor's house; you shall not covet thy neighbor's wife, nor his man-servant, nor his maid-servant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is your neighbor's. (Exodus 20:13)*

This mandate is one of the Ten Commandments, placed side by side with the prohibitions of murder and theft. In a society in which the individual is viewed as an integral part of the whole, covetousness – to want the material possessions of your neighbor (and to act to acquire them) – is a fundamental prohibition. In such a society, every member is expected to reach beyond personal ambitions in consideration for the greater good. A derivative of a greed-free society is the ability and desire to “accumulate” internal values such as justice, kindness, and equality in place of superfluous material possessions. “Quality of life” is thus measured not only by material comfort and success, but also by the scope of creative activity, meaningful relationships, and infrastructure of charity and justice.

## II

# Practical Tools for an Ethical Economy and Society

The following pages outline individual, communal, and national norms and institutions that may inform modern outlooks on economics. We have included both ancient principles found in the Torah and contemporary, Jewish values-based suggestions.

## 1. Shabbat 2.0: Progressive Messages for the Consumer Age

שְׁמוֹר אֶת יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְּשׁוֹ כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ.  
שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲבֹד וְעָשִׂיתָ כָּל מְלֶאכֶתְךָ וְיוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שַׁבָּת לַיהוָה - לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה כָּל מְלֶאכֶה  
אֲתָה וּבִנְךָ וּבִתְּךָ וְעַבְדְּךָ וְאִמְתְּךָ וְשׁוֹרְךָ וַחֲמֹרְךָ וְכָל בְּהֵמָתְךָ וְגִנְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ לְמַעַן יָנוּחַ עַבְדְּךָ וְאִמְתְּךָ כְּמוֹךָ.  
וְזָכַרְתָּ כִּי עֶבֶד הָיִיתָ בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וַיִּצְאָךָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ מִשָּׁם בְּיַד חֲזָקָה וּבְיָרֵעַ נְטוּיָה  
עַל כֵּן צִוָּה ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת.  
(דברים ה"ב-ט"ו)

*Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a Sabbath unto God, on which you shall not do any manner of work. – neither you nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your man-servant, nor your maid-servant, nor your ox, nor your ass, nor any of your cattle, nor the stranger that is within your gates; that your man-servant and your maid-servant may rest as well as you. And you shall remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and God brought you out by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.*

Shabbat, the weekly day of rest, is one of the gifts the Jewish tradition has given to humanity. A weekly rest day was a hard-fought victory in many industrialized economies. Rest is a necessary component of a healthy human culture.

But the Jewish Shabbat is more than just a day of rest for the worker. One who observes Shabbat refrains not only from work, but also from the unbridled consumerism that dominates modern culture. In most of the western world, the cultivated desire for “more” has created a market for excess (in products, packaging, and pollution). Where identity is shaped by spending habits, culture is characterized by feelings of dissatisfaction and lack; this in turn leads to wide gaps between those with the means to fill their lack and those without. Furthermore, where economies force individuals to self-identify based on consumer habits, the ability to interact with others is compromised. The development of human relationships is crucial for general well-being; Shabbat provides an opportunity to stop relating to things, and start relating to people.

Thus, the weekly day of rest has value both as a shared cultural institution and as a foundation for social justice. Shabbat provides a protected space for developing elements of culture that are often marginalized in the weekly cycle of creativity and consumerism: family, community, art, spirituality, and the like. Stepping away from the commercial realm also creates an opportunity to evaluate the implications of our consumer habits – to acknowledge that one person’s purchase of a product represents another person’s (typically one from a lower socioeconomic level) hard work.

Environmental and social justice activists are constantly announcing special events to raise awareness; examples include “no car day,” “buy nothing day,” and “no telephone day.” The Jewish tradition has mandated such a day since the beginning of time – a space in time that benefits both nature and human society.

Just as sustainable planning of physical spaces necessitates laws and regulations to protect the public, sustainable management of time serves the public by demarcating different “spaces” in time. In a world where homogeneity dominates our notions of both time (24/7) and space (the global village), the “sacred space” of the Sabbath day provides a welcome respite and an important tool for development of sustainable culture.

*The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time. It is a day on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation, from the world of creation to the creation of the world. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel*

### **Shabbat Today**

Many activists seek to influence local decision-makers to limit the opening of shopping centers on Shabbat in an effort to curb consumerism and create a meaningful and accessible space in time for all residents of the State of Israel.

## 2. Shmita – A Collective, Inclusive Sabbatical Year

שֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים תִּזְרַע שְׂדֵךְ וְשֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים תִּזְמַר כַּרְמְךָ וְאַסַּפְתָּ אֶת תְּבוּאָתָהּ  
וּבשָׁנָה הַשְּׁבִיעִית שַׁבַּת שַׁבְּתוֹן יִהְיֶה לְאַרְץ שַׁבַּת לַיהוָה  
שְׂדֵךְ לֹא תִזְרַע וְכַרְמְךָ לֹא תִזְמַר.  
(ויקרא כה ג)

*Six years you shall sow thy field, and six years you shall prune thy vineyard, and gather in the produce thereof. But the seventh year shall be a Sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a Sabbath unto the Lord.*

*(Leviticus 25:3)*

The ancient mandate of Shmita (Sabbatical) obligates every farmer in the Land of Israel to leave his field fallow once every seven years, give up his produce, take a break from constant manipulation of the land, and allow every person (and even animals) to enter his field to partake in God's blessing. The Sabbatical year also heralds the nullification of financial debts, whereupon people receive an opportunity to start a new period of six years of financial freedom.

**The basic premise of the Sabbatical year is to take a collective break from the race of production and profit once every seven years, and to fill this time with spiritual, social, and communal content.**

The Torah relates to the Sabbatical year primarily in the context of an agricultural society. A contemporary approach to the Sabbatical year expands the concept to include the additional sectors of education, industry, and commerce. It is no secret that growth and prosperity are the fruit of diligence; yet they do not need to arise from a breathless, incessant race. With the rate of technological development far exceeding public capacity to keep up, a deliberate break in the cycle of production would provide a healthy balance. In light of longer life expectancy and delayed retirement age, a break once every seven years can minimize burnout and serve as a basis for a sustainable pension model.

Furthermore, the Sabbatical year offers a unique opportunity to achieve equality regarding possession of assets. While the Biblical model relates to fields and produce; a contemporary model suggests that the assets of culture and knowledge should be accessible to all during the entire course of the Sabbatical year. At the end of the Sabbatical year, the Jewish nation gathers in Jerusalem for a collective reading of the Torah – a commandment known as “HaKhel,” or Convocation. In the Sabbatical year it is possible to organize national and international “HaKhel” gatherings that deal with spiritual and social issues that are relevant to the economy and to the greater public.

**Where the Sabbatical year is observed, the break provides an opportunity for the following: self-evaluation to ensure that growth is sustainable; attention to spiritual, family, and educational matters; deeper thought about technology and commerce; and enrichment of workers with other experiences.**

### **The Sabbatical Year Today**

The agricultural-cultural knowledge embedded in the Jewish tradition should be made accessible to the public so that it may inform sustainable development efforts in Israel. The Sabbatical year, as well as the Jubilee year (which has not been addressed in this paper) is a revolutionary model, whose actualization requires careful groundwork. Though it is a utopian goal, the possibility to implement it is not out of reach.

The principles of the Sabbatical year must be developed in accordance with the character and abilities of today's society. As a first step, based on clause 98 of the Zero Document, we suggest the Israel invest in the development of curriculum and teacher training on the topic of Jewish sustainability.

The next Sabbatical year will take place in 5775 according to the Hebrew calendar (around October 2014 to September 2015) – plenty of time to organize cultural celebrations, educational and social programs, and economic initiatives for a nation-wide, modern-day observance of this important principle.

### 3. Bal Tashchit – “Thou Shalt Not Destroy..”

כִּי תִצּוֹר אֶל עִיר יָמִים רַבִּים לְהִלָּחֵם עָלֶיהָ לְתַפְסָּהּ  
לֹא תִשְׁחִית אֶת עֵצָהּ לְנִדַּח עָלֶיהָ גִּרְזוֹן  
כִּי מִמֶּנּוּ תֹאכַל וְאֵתוֹ לֹא תִכְרֹת  
כִּי הָאָדָם יֵעֵץ הַשָּׂדֶה לְבֹא מִפְּנֵיהָ בַּמִּצּוֹר.  
(דברים כ' יט)

*“When you shall besiege a city a long time, in making war against it to take it, you shall not destroy the trees thereof by wielding an ax against them; for you may eat of them but you shall not cut them down; for is the tree of the field man, that it should be besieged by you?”*

*Deuteronomy 20:19-20*

This verse provides the basis for many laws under the heading bal tashchit – the principle that forbids humans from committing acts of wanton destruction. The Sefer HaChinuch, a 13th century explanation and discussion of each of the 613 commandments, finds an even deeper teaching embedded in the mitzvah:

*The purpose of this mitzvah is to teach us to love that which is good and worthwhile and to cling to it, so that good becomes a part of us and we will avoid all that is evil and destructive. This is the way of the righteous and those who improve society, who love peace and rejoice in the good in people and bring them close to Torah: that nothing, not even a grain of mustard, should be lost to the world, that they should regret any loss or destruction that they see, and if possible they will prevent any destruction that they can. Not so are the wicked, who are like demons, who rejoice in destruction of the world, and they are destroying themselves.*

*Sefer HaChinuch, #529*

Thus, the Sages describe the words that God said to Adam after creating him:

*In the hour when the Holy One, blessed be He created the first human being, He took him and let him pass before all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to him: "See my works, how fine and excellent they are! Now all that I have created, for you have I created it. Think upon this and do not destroy and desolate My World, for if you corrupt it, there is no one to set it right after you."*

*Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:28*

One straightforward reflection of bal tashchit is the awareness that great care must be taken in the disposal of food. Historically prominent in only the most traditional societies, this concept has survived as an explicit value in Judaism. The Talmud explains:

*“Whoever breaks vessels or tears garments, or destroys a building, or clogs up a fountain, or destroys food violates the prohibition of bal tash'chit.”*

*Kiddushin 32a*

In the western world, tremendous amounts of uneaten scraps and rotten food are thrown away every moment. In some places, produce is intentionally destroyed in order to reduce supplies and thus maintain a high market price. The lack of sensitivity regarding food disposal results in exaggerated production, increased pollution, and waste of resources. Furthermore, with two thirds of the world population suffering from hunger, throwing away edible food and perpetuating inflated pricing systems is intolerable. Bal tashchit represents a more conscious, ethical approach to food production, consumption, and disposal.

A closer inspection of our economic system reveals a more complex implication of this commandment. In nature, the seasons and ecological systems are cyclical; resources serve multiple and repeated purpose, and are recycled back into the earth. In contrast, our economic system functions primarily in a linear fashion – resources are exploited, manufactured into single-use products, and returned to nature in non-renewable state. The laws of bal tashchit can inform the way we think about and use the planet's resources, encouraging responsibility on the part of both producers and consumers of material goods.

### **Bal Tashchit in Practice Today**

On both a personal and communal level, bal tashchit can be embodied by taking responsibility for material goods from “cradle to cradle,” through energy efficient manufacturing, separation of waste, composting and recycling. By committing to create and purchase goods and services that generate ecological, social, and economic value, we can change the face of local and global marketplaces and minimize the damage done to future generations.

## 4. Stewardship for Future Generations

*See, I have set before you this day life and death, blessing and curse – and [you should] choose life, in order that you and your children may live.*

*Deuteronomy 30:19*

The most widely quoted definition of sustainable development was developed in the United Nations in 1987: “Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Traditional Judaism, rich with motifs of intergenerational responsibility, has always embodied this concept. A famous Talmudic tale relates:

*Once Honi was walking along the road when he saw a man planting a carob tree. Honi asked, ‘How long before it will bear fruit?’ The man answered, ‘seventy years.’ Honi asked, ‘Are you sure you will be here in seventy years to eat from its fruit?’ The man replied, ‘I found this world filled with carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted for me, so I will plant for my children.’*

*Babylonian Talmud Taanit 23a*

### **The modern State of Israel is taking steps to guarantee the well-being of future generations.**

In March 2001, the Knesset, Israel’s parliament, established a five-year National Commission for Future Generations. The Commission’s scope included natural resources, education, health, technology, law, development, demography, and other matters of concern to future generations. The Commission sought to a) galvanize a collective shift from short-term survival strategies to long-term planning, b) empower the Knesset to legislate long-term planning, and c) include the future in present legislation. The initiative met with widespread support within the Knesset and inspired other nations to establish similar programs.

In a similar vein, Israeli Knesset members proposed a law to establish a Fund for Future Generations with the royalties from a recently discovered reserve of natural gas. The law sees this resource as a deposit given to the State of Israel to benefit its children and the world. With proper management, Israel can fund a long-term plan to improve the education, health, and welfare systems, strengthen higher education, protect the environment, implement a modern public transportation system, and more.

### **Planning Today for the Future**

Out of concern for future generations, we suggest that Israel reestablish the Future Generations Fund and to use it to improve the state from both a social and environmental perspective. Resolution 33 of the Zero Draft calls for creation of an international platform for knowledge sharing about the design and adoption of green economic policy within various countries; Resolutions 35-36 encourage the presentation of knowledge and experience from various countries in the area of green economy and sustainable development. Accordingly, we suggest that Israel reintroduce the Future Generations Fund and the National Commission for Future Generations, using ideas and principles in the Jewish tradition to create a political reality that considers future generations.

## 5. Intentional Communities

”דע מאין באת, ולאן אתה הולך, ולפני מי אתה עתיד לתת דין וחשבון” (פרקי אבות ג א)

*Akavya ben Mahalalel said, “Reflect upon three things and you will not come to sin: 1. Know from where you came 2. Know where you are going 3. And know before whom you are destined to give an accounting for you actions.*

Most communities in the world are the fruit of natural circumstances: people happen to live together in a neighborhood or in one community. But there are also “intentional communities,” those formed on a common vision. The Jews are well-known for their common destiny – the Nation of Israel is one of the original “intentional communities.” Every year during the Passover Seder, Jews around the world acknowledge their shared history and common purpose in the world. From the Exodus until today, the Jewish people have experimented with endless variations on the theme of community, resulting in an unusually strong capacity for community organizing.

The famous experiment of the Kibbutz movement is a modern manifestation of the ancient Jewish theme of communal living. A 21st century version of the kibbutz is just one of many intentional communities that have appeared on the Israeli social map in recent years. These intentional communities create a socially and environmentally aware culture that can serve to replace the prevalent culture of profit-driven consumerism. They are typically situated in socially and/or geographically peripheral areas out of an desire to strengthen the fabric of society, make quality education accessible to vulnerable populations (as is mentioned in Resolution 98 of the Zero Draft).

### **Communal Living Today**

We need to strengthen the Israeli intentional communities and channel the Jewish renewal often associated with them to other global efforts to develop responses to climate destruction and economic instability (such as “Transition Towns” and other models of ecological resilience). In order to create a platform for sharing knowledge and experience in the field on an international scale, we must utilize partnerships between local authorities in different places in the world, as suggested in Resolution 62 of the Zero Draft

For the past two decades, the world has sought ways to enable the human species to continue to develop and grow in a manner that will sustain the planet's resources and protect its ecosystems. The rich tradition of the people of Israel, who gave the world the Hebrew Bible (Torah), understands the role of human beings as interwoven with other living things into the fabric of Creation. Many ideas in the Torah offer novel and far-reaching approaches to issues of sustainable growth and development, the central topic of the 2012 International Summit on Sustainable Development[YD1] .

This position paper offers a Jewish-Israeli response to the Zero Draft for the +20 Summit, which emphasizes the cultural significance of sustainable development and urges the nations of the world to adopt a holistic approach that will guide humanity to a life in harmony with itself and with the natural world.

*Where there is no vision, the people perish.  
Proverbs 29:18*