

# TO RULE OR TO GUARD?

## WHAT IS OUR RESPONSIBILITY TOWARD THE ENVIRONMENT AS JEWS?

This guide considers the following sources. We recommend distributing them and asking everyone to watch/read them before the session:

Article: Raising My Child in a Doomed World, by Roy Scranton

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/16/opinion/climate-change-parenting.html>

Video: Jewish Veg Rabbinic Statement:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=318&v=TlBmDtokj](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=318&v=TlBmDtokj)

### OPENING EXERCISE:

*Take a look at the following consumer choices and habits which are aimed at environmental health and sustainability. Use a check mark to indicate how likely you are to take on a given behavior.*

	<b>I already do this</b>	<b>I would consider doing this</b>	<b>I would never do this</b>
Composting			
Going zero waste (by not using single-use plastic goods and packaging)			
Lowering the temperature of my thermostat to 65 in the winter.			
Buying a more fuel-efficient car			
Adopting a vegetarian diet			
Adopting a vegan diet			
Taking fewer trips by airplane			
Commuting by bicycle			
Having fewer children			

**FROM THE TORAH:**

*Jewish tradition speaks in multiple voices. It even offers two different accounts of the creation story. Consider the following texts from Genesis:*

**Genesis 1:26**

And God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. They shall have dominion over [or "rule"] the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth.

**Genesis 2:15**

And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to work it and to guard it.

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**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- (a) Genesis 1:26 states that people have "dominion" over the earth, and Genesis 2:15 states that people are responsible for "guarding" the earth. What is the difference between those two postures towards the earth?
- (b) How do either or both of these verses shape your understanding of our obligations toward the environment?

**FURTHER SOURCES FROM OUR TRADITION:**

*Now consider these later sources, from our ancient rabbis. In the first source, the author is playing with the fact that the word for "dominion" has the same root (y-r-d) as the word "to go down."*

**Bereishit Rabbah 8:12**

"and they shall rule over the fish of the sea": Rabbi Chanina said, "if he merits it then [God says] have dominion, while if he does not merit, then [God says] he will be taken down." Rabbi Ya'akov of K'far Chanin said, "If [the human acts] in Our image and likeness [then] 'he will rule,' if [the human acts] not in Our image and likeness [then] 'and he will be taken down.' Rabbi Ya'akov of K'far Chanin said further, "the [righteous person] who is in Our image and likeness will come, and rule over [wicked people and animals] who are not in Our image and likeness."

**Tosefta Sanhedrin 8:4**

Man was created last... Why was he created last? So that he not become haughty. He is told: A gnat preceded you in the act of creation... Another explanation: So that he immediately begin his meal. They drew an analogy. To what may this be compared? To a king who built a palace, dedicated it, and prepared a meal, and then afterwards invited guests.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What do you think it means that if we act in God's image, we will rule, but if we don't then we will be taken down? How would you apply this to our current relationship with the environment?
- (b) The Tosefta explains that humans were created last so that they would not become haughty in relationship to the rest of the earth. When are times when we/you have been haughty in your relationship to the earth?
- (c) When would it mean to act like a guest in God's palace?

**TORAH THROUGH A MODERN LENS:**

*We recommend that you choose one of the following two texts for discussion.*

**Option 1**

**Responding to Current Conditions**

*This section refers to an article by Roy Scranton, entitled "Raising My Child in a Doomed World" which is available here: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/16/opinion/climate-change-parenting.html> If the article was not distributed prior to this discussion, please take a few minutes to read it now.*

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) The author's perspective in this section is grim and somewhat fatalistic. What is your reaction to this attitude?
- (b) The author talks about ways to reduce global warming that requires drastic behavioral changes- avoiding flying and having fewer children. Judaism contains tradition which also suggests drastic behavioral changes- keeping kosher and abstaining from all electricity on Shabbat to name a few. As a Reform Jew, how do you feel commanded to act with respect to the environment? What restrictions would are you willing to place on your behavior?

The author writes:

Living ethically means understanding that our actions have consequences, taking responsibility for how those consequences ripple out across the web of life in which each of us is irrevocably enmeshed and working every day to ease what suffering we can. Living ethically means limiting our desires, respecting the deep interdependence of all things in nature and honoring the fact that our existence on this planet is a gift that comes from nowhere and may be taken back at any time.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What would living more ethically look like in your life?
- (b) How does this quote relate to the verses in the Torah and commentaries about people's relationship to the earth?

**Option 2**

**Kashrut and the Environment**

Watch this video:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=318&v=TIBmDtokj](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=318&v=TIBmDtokj)

Jeremy Benstein writes, in *The Way Into Judaism and the Environment*:

Probably the best-known Jewish value concept and collection of [Jewish legal traditions] regarding environmental responsibility are those grouped under the heading of *bal taschit* (literally “do not destroy”), which prohibits many forms of waste, destruction, vandalism, and the like... While *bal taschit* relates primarily to inanimate nature, such as plants and resources, the central value that informs relationships with animals is *tza'ar ba'alei chayim*, the prevention of cruelty to animals. The fact that we use animals in our lives and derive benefit from them is a fact of our “animal” nature- it's how the world works. But the ways in which we use them, the choices we make, express our humanity.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Have your eating habits changed in any way as you have learned about the impact of factory farming on the environment and on animal welfare? Do you think they should? Why or why not?
- (b) In the video, Rabbi David Rosenn states, “You need to understand veganism as the *kashrut* of the 21st century.” Does this resonate with you? What would your version of 21st century *kashrut* look like? Would it make any difference for you to see your food choices as Jewish choices, as opposed to simply ethical ones?

- (c) Rabbi Wolpe declares: “When you raise your children with a plant based diet, in a generation they will look at tofu or at seitan and think ‘this is Jewish food’ “ Do you think we should shift notions of Jewish food to be environmentally friendly and/or ethical? Why or why not?
  
- (d) What is the connection between the ideas in this video and the texts from Genesis that we started with?