

The Torah's Commandments and Ecology

By Rabbi Yuval Cherlow

Beyond the fundamental principle of the Image of God as the source of Man's responsibility towards the environment, one can refer back to the commandment of *kil'ayim*, discuss it as a continuation of Man's existential experience as being created in His Image, which is also often called upon to retreat. The commandment of *kil'ayim* demands that Man desist from unlimited development of his technological skill in the fields of agriculture because of a Higher Principle – the fact that he must conduct himself within Creation's framework. The significance of the limitation emanating from this commandment is the call to Man to recognize that he is part of a World Created, and although he has been placed by the Master of the World in charge of the conquest thereof, he must also diminish his presence as part of this principle. The address of diminishing is the Master of the World, but its significance is the environment.

Another source which can serve us in establishing Man's responsibility to the world is the Ramban's second explanation for the commandment of *shilu'ach haken*: "...or the text does not allow to cause destruction by sterilizing the species even though it allowed killing them, and indeed one who kills the mother and the sons in one day or takes them when they are about to fly it is as if he exterminated that species" (Ramban on Deut. 22:6). The obligation to preserve the various species thus arises as an **halachic** obligation, and even though this commandment does not prevent the eradication of various species, it guides Man to responsibility towards them and caution not to completely wipe them out.

Another commandment which establishes said responsibility is the prohibition of *bal tashchit*, as explained by *Chinuch*:

...[the idea behind this] negative commandment is not to cause any damage, such as burning or tearing a piece of clothing or breaking a vessel for no reason...

The root of the commandment is known, which is to teach ourselves to love the good and the useful and stick to them, and through this the good will stick to us and we will distance ourselves from anything evil and from anything involving destruction, and this is the way of the pious and the people of action who love peace and share the happiness of others and bring them closer to Torah, and will not waste even a single mustard seed in the world, and any loss or destruction they see will distress them, and if they can save anything from destruction they will do anything they can to do so...(Mitzvah 529)

Man's image is what stands at the center of this commandment, not the environment. The author of the *Chinuch* does not tie this commandment to Man's responsibility towards His world, but rather to the question of Man's good qualities, specifically the Man who loves the good and the useful and distances himself from all evil. However, this commandment can become a far broader existential source, one which expands Man's experiences in his world.

We are slowly reaching a reality when we will no longer have a choice about whether to be responsible towards the environment. It will cease to be a spiritual-existential question but a real and present life-threatening danger. The self-aware bearer of the Image of God does not wait for the crisis becomes acute before acting. He acts out of his deeply held belief that he bears responsibility to the world. He does not come to help the environment as one who is coerced by danger but as one who is a part of creation, wishes it the best and is responsible for its existence. Man's Image of God thus contains profound tidings for the future.

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