

A Jewish perspective on the SDGs

Rabbi David Rosen, KSG, CBE

Judaism describes the Divine Revelation it espouses as Torat Chayim - the Torah (instruction) of life. The flourishing of life, above all human life is its goal, which the UN SDGs echo. However these aspirations as they are expressed in the Hebrew Bible, flow from the idea that this world is the Divine Creation, the work of a moral God, and that all human life is created in the Divine Image - sacred and with inalienable dignity.

The ancient Jewish sages understood the Biblical commandments “to cleave unto God” and “to walk in His Ways” to mean that we have to emulate the Divine Attributes (Imitatio Dei):-

“Just as He is gracious and compassionate, so you be gracious and compassionate” they tell us (TB Shabbat 133b.)

As the Psalmist declares (145:9), God’s “mercies extend to all His creatures”, and the Bible makes it clear that this merciful nature means a special care for the weakest members of society (See Exodus 22: 26 and 22.) which we are obliged to reflect in our own actions. Accordingly, the Hebrew Bible instructs us to pay special attention and concern to those whose dignity is vulnerable and are marginalized - the poor, the stranger, the widow and orphan. (The Talmud notes that the obligation to care for the stranger/sojourner is repeated thirty six times throughout the Pentateuch – more than any other charge.)

Thus the care for the physical wellbeing of all, as summarized in the SDGs, is fundamental to the understanding of the Torah, the Hebrew Bible, of what it means to be human and to behave as a human, created in the Divine Image.

This social doctrine regarding responsibility for one another and especially the vulnerable, also contains a clear view of the status of material resources and ownership.

At its foundation is the declaration in Leviticus 25:23 “For the earth is Mine (says the Lord) and you are sojourners and tenants with Me.” Human beings are no more than tenants on God’s land. In fact, all material gifts that we are granted in life, are given to us only as custodians. They are certainly for our benefit and those closest to us; but to the extent that we are blessed with such, it is our religious duty to use these gifts for the common good.

Similarly regarding our responsibilities towards our natural environment

The fact that “the earth is the Lord’s, and all that is in it” (Psalm 24:1) and that as mentioned, our eco-system is viewed as the Divine Creation, are imperatives in themselves for us to respect and care for our environment. However the idea of responsible custodianship of material resources is made explicit in the phrase in Genesis 2:15 “and He placed him in the Garden of Eden to work it and to preserve it “.

While the Hebrew word for “to work” “*l’ovdah*” is more accurately translated in this context as “to cultivate”; it may also be translated in terms of “development”. Thus this Divinely mandated purpose for humanity reflects the aspiration that we refer to today as “sustainable development”.

However there is additional meaning to this word, because its most frequent usage is in the sense of “service”. It therefore indicates a relationship of humanity to the Creation and all that is in it, as one of service, in keeping with the previously mentioned ideas.

Furthermore this Hebrew word *avodah* is also used in Jewish tradition to mean **Divine** service and thus our rabbis understood this phrase in Genesis not simply in a physical sense but also in a spiritual sense, a moral sense. Indeed as the Hebrew Prophets affirm, the concept of 'Divine service' itself must be understood not purely in the narrower meaning of prayer or Temple offerings; but also as service in the sense of obedience to and fulfilment of God’s word and way. Accordingly there is a profound connection between consciousness of the Divine Presence reflected in the Creation; and the sense of the moral law that gives it direction, purpose and ennoblement.

This is expressed beautifully by Emmanuel Kant:- "There are two things that fill my soul with holy reverence and ever-growing wonder. The spectacle of the starry sky that virtually annihilates us as physical beings and the moral law which raises us to infinite dignity as intelligent beings."

The idea of human ecological responsibility is summed up in a delightful little Midrash (the ancient Jewish works of homiletical exposition) on the book of Ecclesiastes (Kohelet Rabbah 7 Section 28):-

"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 in the Garden of Eden and said to him, "See my works, how fine and excellent they are, which I have created for you. Think upon this and do not corrupt or destroy my world; for if you corrupt it there is no one to set it right after you."

This homily contains three essential lessons. The first is the already mentioned fundamental principle of Divine ownership, yet a world that God has created for our benefit.

A second idea that emerges from this *Midrash* is a rather daring theological concept in the Jewish Tradition; namely, that humanity is a *partner* with God in the world. This is understood in many passages within the Talmud simply in the very capacities and skills with which humanity is endowed to transform the raw materials that God has created, into the various prepared foods, materials, clothing etc., for our pleasure, sustenance and wellbeing. Thus facilitating other’s capabilities in this regard, as the SDGs advocate, is in fact the religious duty of humanity.

But of course the idea implies even more than that. It emphasizes that God has given us the ability to maintain, sustain and improve our world; as well as the capacity to destroy it. This capacity, freedom of moral choice, relates directly to the Divine Image in which humanity is created that distinguishes human beings from the rest of Creation.

While humanity is given control of the natural resources, inanimate and animate; the commandments seek to direct us how to behave towards these responsibly and compassionately.

Accordingly while Judaism permits humanity to benefit from animal resources, it lays down extremely strict demands regarding the treatment of animals prior to slaughter and Judaism understands the prohibition against cruelty to animals to be a Biblical prohibition. This imperative is actually missing from the UN SDGs which does not specifically address our responsibilities towards sentient life. In fact, present day conditions and demands of the modern livestock industry and factory farming are not consonant with the aforementioned teachings and raise questions as to whether a carnivorous diet today can be considered ethically legitimate.

Furthermore, the livestock industry is the greatest source of pollution and waste of our environment. The UN study *Livestock's Long Shadow* and subsequent studies indicate that today's industrial production of food from animal sources causes not only more waste and destruction of the environment, but also causes more pollution than all forms of transport together globally.

And the most recent study of the EAT/Lancet Commission indicates that this consumption is bringing about what scientists have described as "the Sixth Great Extinction."

But the overall explicit teaching of this Midrash is one that we have already highlighted – that of human responsibility for our environment. While the very acknowledgement of our environment as the Divine Creation should itself prevent us from any wanton destruction and waste, Judaism derives the specific prohibition of such from Deuteronomy Chapter 20 Verse 19, which forbids cutting down fruit trees when laying siege to a city in a context of war.

The sages of the Talmud draw an *a fortiori* conclusion that if in a situation of war where human life is in danger it is prohibited to cut down a fruit tree; under normal conditions the idea of destroying anything that provides sustenance is even greater. This idea is extended by our rabbis to anything that can be of use and of value and thus the Talmud prohibits any wanton destruction (TB Kiddushin 32a) waste (TB Berachot 52b) pollution, and even to over ostentation and over indulgence (TB Hullin 7b; Shabbat 140b).

In other words Judaism sees as fundamentally religiously offensive, a lifestyle that Pope Francis has described as "a throw away culture".

These ideas of Divine ownership, partnership in Creation; and concomitant human responsibility; are perhaps most dramatically brought together within the Biblical concept of the Sabbath and the Sabbatical Year.

In the words of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (in his commentary on Exodus 20:10) ,one of the greatest rabbis of the 19th century :- "The Sabbath was given so that we should not grow arrogant in our dominion in God's Creation.... (to) refrain on this day from exercising our human sway over the things of the earth, and not lend our hands to any object for the purpose of human dominion. the borrowed world is, as it were, returned to its Divine owner in order to realize that it is but lent (to us)..."

The Sabbath is accordingly seen as a weekly restoration of the natural relationship both in relation to the Divine and in relation to our environment - social and ecological. While we are in fact commanded "six days shall you work" and to develop our human creative potential, there is nevertheless a real danger that our creative labor can take us over, subjugating and even stifling our social and spiritual potential.

Indeed in today's world even more than ever before, there is a danger that our technological capacities can become the be all and end all in what has often become a kind of modern idolatry.

However in order for the Sabbath to be a weekly restoration of our spiritual and ethical equilibrium it is of course not enough for it to be a reflection, it must be a practice.

In the words of Hirsch again:- " ... to cease for a whole day from all business, from all work, in the frenzied hustle and bustle of our time ? To close the exchanges, the workplaces and factories? (*we might add today, to switch off our computers, to do without our smartphones ?*) Great Heavens, how would it be possible - the pulse of life would stop beating and the world would perish! The world would perish? On the contrary, it would be saved." (*The Sabbath, in Judaism Eternal*)

Through its discipline, renewed consciousness, spiritual reflection and material celebration, deepening family and communal bonds, the Sabbath serves to restore, rebalance, and inspire our weekly lives

The Sabbatical year is an echo of the Sabbath day, and the most extensive passage in the Bible dealing with Sabbatical year, Leviticus Ch.25, is followed in the next Chapter by the promise of good rains and

harvests, prolonging our days on the earth and guaranteeing peace. This, the Bible explains, is the consequence of observing the Divine commandments. But if we disregard the Divine precepts, we face ecological disaster, failed harvests, no peace, but war and devastation.

The twelfth century scholar, theologian, philosopher and physician, Maimonides, could only explain this imagery in metaphoric terms. It only made sense to him as a metaphor for conveying the higher idea of spiritual and moral consequences to our actions, in a manner that even the most simple farmer in ancient Israel might have been able to grasp.

However today we can understand these texts more literally than ever before, because the consequences of human conduct on our eco-system are so strikingly evident. Human avarice, unbridled hubris, insensitivity and lack of responsibility towards others and towards our environment, have polluted and destroyed much of our natural resources, interfered with the climate as a whole jeopardizing our rains and harvests, exacerbating conflict and war, and threatening the very future of sentient life on the planet (see the reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change <http://www.ipcc.ch/>)

Never before have we been able to so vividly discern the connection between our moral values and conduct and the wellbeing of the eco-system as a whole.

This inextricable link between our social responsibilities and our environmental ones is very much reflected in the SDGs. But as Pope Francis has highlighted in his encyclical *Laudato Si*, we people of faith have to go further in highlighting this ethical interdependency and its consequences as flowing from our sense of the Divine in the other and in our world.

Indeed it is precisely the ethical wisdom of our religious heritages, already evident in the ancient Biblical Scriptures, that can and must provide the durable ethical foundations for the SDGs, as a vision for the flourishing of humanity and our earthly home, reflecting the glory of the Divine Power that created and animates it all.