

## ***Tikkun olam* in the ecological perspective**

### ***Tikkun olam* w perspektywie ekologicznej**

**Key words:** Tikkun olam, repairing of the world, bal tashchit, pikuach nefesh, ecology, ban of destruction

**Słowa kluczowe:** Tikkun olam, naprawianie świata, bal taschit, pikuach nefesz, ekologia, zakaz niszczenia

#### **Abstract**

*Tikkun olam* is a significant religious term in all Jewish movements, meaning literally “fixing/ mending the world”. According to Kabbalah during the act of creation, a cosmic catastrophe occurred, and from that moment on began the process of repairing and rebirth. In modern times, the commandment to cooperate with God in an effort to repair the world and responsibility for the world is not limited only to the religious sphere, but it also refers to society and the environment. The theological and ethical foundations of Jewish ecology and environmentalism go back to the Hebrew Bible and the later Jewish tradition. They teach responsibility for the environment in various respects. The *bal tashchit* (prohibition of destruction) commandment acquires a special meaning in the context of contemporary ecological challenges as well as the *pikuach nefesh* rule i.e., the greatest moral obligation of every human being - to protect human life. The issue of these fundamental Jewish principles will be discussed in detail in their modern ecological dimension.

#### **Streszczenie**

*Tikkun olam* jest istotnym pojęciem religijnym we wszystkich odłamach judaizmu, oznaczającym dosłownie „naprawianie/naprawę świata”. Według

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Kabały w czasie aktu stworzenia nastąpiła katastrofa kosmiczna i od tego momentu rozpoczął się proces naprawy, odrodzenia. Współcześnie nakaz współdziałania z Bogiem w wysiłkach ku naprawie świata i wzięciu na siebie odpowiedzialności za otaczający nas świat, nie ogranicza się wyłącznie do sfery religijnej, ale dotyczy także społeczeństwa czy środowiska. Teologiczne i etyczne podstawy żydowskiej ekologii i environmentalizmu sięgają Biblii Hebrajskiej oraz późniejszej tradycji żydowskiej. Nauczają odpowiedzialności za środowisko naturalne w rozmaitych aspektach – np. w odniesieniu do ziemi i jej płodów, zwierząt i roślin, pokarmów, jakie z ziemi uzyskuje człowiek. Przykazanie *bal tashchit* (zakaz niszczenia) uzyskuje w kontekście współczesnych wyzwań ekologicznych szczególne znaczenie, podobnie jak zasada *pikuach nefesh*, czyli *największego moralnego obowiązku każdego człowieka - ochrony życia ludzkiego. Zagadnienia dotyczące tych fundamentalnych zasad żydowskich zostaną omówione szczegółowo w ich współczesnym wymiarze ekologicznym.*

*Tikkun olam* is a significant religious term in all Jewish movements. It is a key determinant of the roles to be played by the followers of the Mosaic religion (either progressive/ reformed, conservative and/or orthodox) in the world. Its meaning has evolved throughout the centuries and at present times its applicability is no longer limited only to religion and ethics but extends to various aspects of human life and presence in the world including, among others, ecology and environmental issues.

The purpose of this article is to present the origins of the concept of *tikkun olam* and its historical development, in particular with respect to the Jewish views on nature and the environment. Jews believe that Adam and his descendants received the Earth as a temporary gift from God and should protect and respect it. Therefore, the issue of the servant role of man towards the Earth and creation will also be discussed. For, according to the Torah, man must *l'ovdah ul'shomrah* (cultivate and nurture) in order to become an earthly ruler.

The issue of two fundamental Jewish principles related to *tikkun olam* will also be discussed in detail: *pikuach nefesh*, i.e., the greatest moral obligation of every human being – to protect human life, which today has a deeply ecological dimension, and *bal tashchit* – the prohibition of

destruction, which is strictly connected to the protection of the natural environment, plants and animals.

### 1. The concept of *tikkun olam*, its development and meanings

There is an ancient Jewish prayer recited by every observant Jew three times a day (at closing of *Shaharit*, *Mincha* and *Maariv*<sup>2</sup>) called *Aleinu Leshabeach*. It includes the following passage: “Therefore, we will hope to You Lord, our God to see speedily the glory of Your Might – to remove abominable idolatry from the earth & the false gods be utterly terminated, **to repair the world** with the Kingship of the Almighty<sup>3</sup>” („Aleinu” 2021).

The origins of *Aleinu* and concept of “repairing” contained therein are disputable. However, most Jewish scholars attribute the use of this phrase to 3<sup>rd</sup> century Babylonian scholar, Rav<sup>4</sup>, who, it is commonly believed, wrote the prayer *Aleinu* for the Jewish New Year service (Winberg, 2020). However, some argue that this phrase had been in use previously and Rav only edited it and/or implemented an existing and commonly known text into the prayer *Aleinu Leshabeach*. Some even derive the origin from the Joshua or indicate Ecclesiastes (1:15) where the root *t-k-n*<sup>5</sup> appears (Cooper 2013, 11). In Ecclesiastes (7:13) people

<sup>2</sup> Morning, afternoon and evening prayers.

<sup>3</sup> This is a traditional translation, contained in one of the popular siddurs (prayer books). Some modern translation proposes the alternative wording: “and so we put our hope in You, Adonai our God, to see your power revealed in its beauty, erasing that which is wicked, that which is false. To restore Creation under Your nurturing rule; that all life be able to call upon You, and even the evil will return to the light”. („Aleinu” 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Rav (3rd century C.E.), leading Babylonian amora and founder of the Yeshiva at Sura. His name was Abba b. Aivu, but he was also called Abba Arikha. He is generally known as Rav by reason of being “the teacher [rav] of the entire Diaspora” (Beer 2007, 118-119 {Bezah 9a, and Rashi thereto}).

<sup>5</sup> It is used there in the sense of straightening, repairing or fashioning. Rambam, commenting it in reference to Pirque Abot (1:2) states, that “with wisdom, and that is the Torah; and with enhancement of [good] traits, and that is acts of lovingkindness; and with the fulfilment of commandments, and that is the sacrifices [referred to in the

are commanded to care for God's deeds and creation. Commenting on it, midrash Kohelet Rabbah states:

Look at God's work - for who can straighten what He has twisted? (Ecclesiastes 7:13). When the Blessed Holy One created the first human, He took him and led him round all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to him: «Look at My works, how beautiful and praiseworthy they are! And all that I have created, it was for you that I created it. Pay attention that you do not corrupt and destroy My world: if you corrupt it, there is no one to repair it after you» („Kohelet Rabbah” 2021).

The term *tikkun olam* was explicitly used for the first time in Mishnah<sup>6</sup>, written down around the year 200 CE. Mishnah supplements, complements, clarifies and systematizes the commandments of the Torah. The contents of the Mishnah are the product of an ongoing process of elaborating and explaining the foundations, the details and the significance of the Torah's commandments (Wald 2007, 319-331). The rabbis, mainly in the treaty entitled *Gittin* („Talmud Bavli Gittin” 2017), developed and commented the Jewish law of *mipnei tikkun ha-olam* – “because of the welfare of society”, which originally regarded the practice of fair treatment of everyone and in every situation.<sup>7</sup>

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Mishnah as service] - there will be a continuous refinement of the world and ordering of its existence in the most complete way” („Pirqe Abot” 2021 {1:2}).

<sup>6</sup> Mishnah was edited by Rabbi Judah Ha-Nasi (the Prince, 135-220 CE), *rabbenu ha-kadosz* at the beginning of the 3rd century CE. Following the destruction of the Second Temple and later dispersion of the Jews into Diaspora (after Bar Kochba's revolt of 132-135 CE) Jewish survivors made the effort to codify and write down the so-called Oral Torah and the halakhic rules and commentaries, in order to preserve them for future generations. This process began long before the redaction of the Mishnah and continued throughout the Talmudic period (1st to 6th centuries CE) and beyond. It was the central literary document of the entire Talmudic period, providing the framework for the redaction of its companion volume, the Tosefta, and serving as the foundation for both the Jerusalem Talmud and the Babylonian Talmud. Through these works the Mishnah has shaped most of the actual practice of the Jewish religion down to the present day. It has also been included in the *heikhalot* literature.

<sup>7</sup> The treatise *Gittin* refers mainly to divorce issues. It is regarded that “the principle was originally devised to protect the rights of women in divorce cases and to shield them

Later, this concept was interpreted as participation in the mutual relationship with God who created the world. Once entrusted to the world for care, the people have to work with God in order to improve it, make it better and help others. This is the way in which people worship God and honour His creation. In other words, using modern terms, it can be described as referring to some kind of social change or process that is for the betterment of society or humanity or the world. It should be achieved by acts of justice and loving-kindness (*g'milut hasadim*), or equally through ritual observance, whether primarily through the internal work of an individual or through external deeds (Seidenberg 2019).

It is worth explaining that Judaism is not a single and unified religion, and it is significantly internally diversified.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the understanding and modern interpretation of *tikkun olam* may vary. For example, *tikkun olam* within Orthodox Judaism<sup>9</sup> was originally interpreted as the expectation and desire to overcome all forms of idolatry. It has always been treated as an important spiritual component, in the sense that making good in the world and making it a better place starts with personal development, ritual observance and following the laws of Torah. Non-Orthodox Judaism extended the religious meaning of *tikkun*

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from unscrupulous, recalcitrant, and extortionist husbands” (por. Cooper 2013, 12).

<sup>8</sup> Judaism is strongly divided, and the levels of orthodoxy significantly vary. There is no single leadership, no unified doctrine, provided and supervised by some unified bodies (as it is e.g., in the Roman Catholic Church). Moreover, the Judaism in its homeland, Eretz Israel (where orthodox Judaism plays the key role and the Rabbinate have substantial influence over religious matters) differs from the Judaism as it is in the United States, where the largest Diaspora outside Israel lives.

<sup>9</sup> “Orthodox Jews don’t perform *tikkun olam*, they yearn for it” Rabbi Binyomin Friedman of Congregation Ariel, said. “It is certainly not a commandment. It is a vision.” (Schechter 2018). On the other hand, it can be noted, as David Blumenthal, the Jay and Leslie Cohen Professor of Judaic Studies at Emory University states, “*tikkun olam* is one of many value-concepts in rabbinic Judaism and, yes, modern Jewish thinking has exaggerated the importance of *tikkun olam* in that whole picture of rabbinic values. Thus, which is more important study or prayer, good deeds or study, etc. When one picks only one value and makes it the MOST important value, one distorts the system – no matter which value one picks”.

*olam* with activism within various social areas, including politics, the economy, human rights and/or environmental matters. Such a “modern” concept of *tikkun olam* plays at present an important role at numerous congregations, including reformed, reconstructionist as well as conservative, masorti and/or modern Orthodox movements. The comments contained in this article are based principally on the US perspective, where non-Orthodox Judaism is predominant. The modern interpretation of *tikkun olam* has become an umbrella under which other Jewish values – *tzedakah* [charity], *g’milut hasadim* [acts of loving kindness], and *tzedek* [justice] – can be found. It has been extended to all aspects of everyday life and is no more limited to the religious sphere<sup>10</sup>.

The contemporary Hebrew term *tikkun olam* does not have a single meaning. As Cooper explains:

Different suggestions have been offered in a variety of contexts: preparing or correcting the world; ordering the world or society correctly; improving society; preserving the system as a whole; maintaining proper order in the Jewish community or the public interest; making the physical world inhabitable; healing, repairing, and transforming the world; and others (Cooper 2013, 11).

It is, therefore, very flexible, vast and open and in different ages, under different circumstances, and in different contexts, may receive different and new meanings. Nowadays, it definitely concerns also nature, environment and ecology. Also, the Hebrew noun *olam* “carries more than a single implication: world, society, community, universe, spiritual sphere, forever, and eternity” (Cooper 2013, 11).

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<sup>10</sup> Such an extensive use of the *tikkun* concept is sometimes criticised. Jewish journalist Jonathan Neumann states that “This religion of *tikkun olam* commands the allegiance of most non-Orthodox Jews (and some Orthodox ones), who make up the overwhelming majority of the American Jewish community. The dogma of this religion is appealingly simple: Judaism is *tikkun olam*, which is social justice, which is liberalism. The Jews are called upon to do no less — and no more — than cultivate a liberal paradise in America” (Neumann 2018).

After completion of the Talmud, this term was no longer frequently in use until it re-appeared in the kabbalistic<sup>11</sup> work of Sephardic rabbi Moses de Leon (13<sup>th</sup> century) titled *Zohar* and later further developed by Isaac Luria (16<sup>th</sup> century), who presented the mystical meaning of *tikkun olam*. As it can be briefly explained, the kabbalists believe that:

God contracted part of His infinite light [*Ohr Ein Sof*] – concealing Himself – to create the world. The vessels [*kelim*] of the first universe – *Olam HaTohu*, i.e., the «world of chaos» – shattered [*Shevirat HaKelim*] and their shards became sparks of light [*nezuzot*] trapped within the next universe – *Olam HaTikun*, i.e., «the world of rectification». Prayer, especially contemplation of various aspects of the divinity [*sephirot*], releases these sparks of God's light and allows them to reunite with God's essence. The «rectification» is two-fold: the gathering of light and of souls, to be achieved by human beings through the contemplative performance of religious acts. The goal of such repair, which can only be effected by humans, is to separate what is holy from the created world, thus depriving the physical world of its very existence, destroying the material universe (Fine 2020).

This “cosmic catastrophe”, as it is described by rabbi Jonathan Sacks<sup>12</sup>, “can be progressively healed by individual deeds which, though they seem small and local, «mend the world»” (Sacks 2014, 103). Contemporarily, such a way of understanding *tikkun* enables one to apply it to daily issues, small acts of kindness and small improvements of social policy. Sacks stresses that “there are complex tributaries that converge in the idea of *tikkun olam*, «mending the world», some theological, others mystical, combining in the imperative to ameliorate the human

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<sup>11</sup> Kabbalah is the traditional and most commonly used term for the esoteric teachings of Judaism and for Jewish mysticism, especially the forms which it assumed in the Middle Ages from the 12th century onward. In its wider sense it signifies all the successive esoteric movements in Judaism that evolved from the end of the period of the Second Temple and became active factors in the history of Israel (Scholem 2007)

<sup>12</sup> Sir Jonathan Henry Sacks (1948-2020) was a prominent British orthodox rabbi, philosopher, writer and public activist, scholar and human rights activist.

situation by constructive engagement with the world". He believes that "it is not a concept given to precise definition, still less is it spelled out in the crisp imperatives of Jewish law. But it bestows religious dignity on those, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, who work to eliminate the evils of the world [...], an act at a time, a life at a time (Sacks 2014, 110).

Again, following the times of Enlightenment, by the nineteenth century, *tikkun olam* had largely fallen out of use (Krasner 2014, 59ff). When it was revived in the twentieth century, its meaning had changed again. The earliest use of the term *tikkun olam* suggesting political involvement comes from interwar Europe. In 1932, Alter Hayim Levinson published in Warsaw a work entitled *Tikkun olam*. Its purpose was to encourage Jews to join the Agudas Yisroel political party (founded in 1912). The party was to be an organization that would unite observant Jews under one banner (Cooper 2013, 16) and a *tikkun*-based approach was supposed to be a way of achieving the political goals.

The first use of the phrase *tikkun olam* in modern Jewish history in the United States was by Brandeis-Bardin Camp Institute founder and educator Shlomo Bardin in the 1950s (Fine 2020), who interpreted it as a responsibility for Jewish people to work towards a better world. It can be also found similarly used by Alexander Dushkin and Mordecai Kaplan.

In our times, it was presented to a wide international audience during a meeting in Miami between Jewish leaders and Pope John Paul II on September 12, 1987. During that meeting Rabbi Mordecai Waxman, chairman of the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations stated that:

A basic belief of our Jewish faith is the need "to mend the world under the sovereignty of God" [...] To mend the world means to do God's work in the world. Your presence [the Pope's] here in the United States affords us the opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to the sacred imperative of *tikkun olam*, the mending of the world" (Krasner 2014, 59).



In the Middle East, before the State of Israel was founded, the new understanding of *tikkun olam* was propounded by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (Rav Kook, the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi<sup>13</sup>) and Rabbi Yehudah Ashlag.<sup>14</sup> They believed that *tikkun olam* was a political goal and not just a spiritual one. Ashlag stated that “it is not possible to fix the world [*l'takein et ha-olam*] in religious matters before securing for the world a *tikkun* of the economic system” (Ashlag 2021). He was also of the view that every individual needs to understand that his good and the good of the community are one, and only through this union the world may in the future come into its full *tikkun* (Ashlag 2009). Rav Kook was the one who rooted *tikkun olam* in what in modern times is called ecology, writing that “the holiness of Nature herself [...] is the foundation of *tikkun* for the entire world” (Seidenberg 2019). In this respect he was also very concerned about e.g., fair treatment of animals and strived for vegetarianism. He believed that:

...when the craving for meat is diminished and no longer demands the slaughter of animals for food, and when all exploitation of animals and their natural possessions will cease, is the outcome of adherence to mitzvot and the recognition of the motivations and intentions of those mitzvot (Kook 1961, 2).

*Tikkun olam* with respect to the environment as some propose, may start even with very small issues. The leader of the Jewish Renewal Movement, rabbi Arthur Waskow<sup>15</sup> urged people to:

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<sup>13</sup> Abraham Yehuda Kook (1865-1935), Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi of Palestine, prior to the establishment of the State of Israel, Orthodox, strongly supported the Zionist movement and Jewish settlement in Palestine, author of numerous works and commentaries, including *Orot* and many others.

<sup>14</sup> Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag (1885–1954) or Yehuda Leib Ha-Levi Ashlag, also known as the Baal Ha-Sulam – Orthodox rabbi, Kabbalist, author of commentary to *Zohar* (the Ladder), *Talmud Eser Sefirot*, *anim Meirov wMasbirot et.al.* *Propagator of the Isaac Luria's Legacy*.

<sup>15</sup> Artur I. Waskow (b. 1933) is a contemporary activist, educator, ordained rabbi of the reformed movement and Jewish Renewal activist. Author of many books and

...plant a tree somewhere as a small *tikkun olam* – fixing up the world – wherever the *olam* most needs it. Plant a tree in Vietnam in a defoliated former forest, plant a tree in Appalachia, where the strip mines have poisoned the forests. Go there to plant it; start a kibbutz there and grow more trees. Plant a tree in Brooklyn where the asphalt has buried the forest. Go back there to plant it and live with some of the old Jews who still live there (Krasner 2014, 79).

## 2. Principles fulfilling *tikkun olam*

*Tikkun olam* is strictly linked with other fundamental Jewish religious principles. Among them the most important are *bal tashchit* and *pi-kuach nefesh*, which can be regarded as guidelines for making *tikkun olam* real with respect to environmental issues.

### 2.1. *Bal tashchit* – the development of a Jewish environmental principle

*Bal tashchit* is possibly the most important Judaic religious principle directly relating to the relationship between man and his environment and its implementation in daily life is certainly the actual improvement of the world. Basically, its sense consists in the prohibition of any needless destruction and maximization of human welfare in a sustainable way. Therefore, the principle of *bal tashchit* is applied to the recurring water crisis in the land of Israel, and e.g., to the problems of climate change and loss of biodiversity. Its origin is, however, very ancient, and dates back to the very principles of the Hebrew Bible. The Torah forbids chopping down fruit trees in a time of siege (Devarim 20:19-20<sup>16</sup>),

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commentaries, one of the pioneers in creating Eco-Judaism.

<sup>16</sup> “When in your war against a city you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy its trees, wielding the ax against them. You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down. Are trees of the field human to withdraw before you into the besieged city? Only trees that you know do not yield food may be destroyed; you may cut them down for constructing siegeworks against the city that is

because fruits sustain life. Life, for Judaism, is the most precious value, demanding utmost protection and respect.

Throughout the centuries people have realized that the world is God's creation and a gift for humans and has to be treated with appropriate respect. A fruit tree bears fruits for reproduction and for nourishment of other creatures, thus it must be protected. It is a *mitzvah* [commandment]. Based on that in Jewish law [*halakhah*], this thinking was expanded to a general principle of *bal tashchit*, which means not to wantonly destroy anything. It can therefore be named the premier environmental *mitzvah* [good deed, imperative].

This biblical prohibition to destroy fruit trees was later expanded (as Maimonides explains) to the prohibition of breaking vessels, or tearing garments, or destroying a building, or clogging a well, or doing away with food in a destructive manner (Maimon 2021 {6:10}). Talmudic rulings on *bal tashchit* also prohibit the killing of animals for convenience, wasting fuel, and a minority opinion classifies the eating of extravagant foods when one can eat simpler ones as a violation of this precept as well. Furthermore, a water channel cannot be deflected from trees so that they wither. As medieval rabbis stress: "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" („Sefer HaHinukh" 2021 {529,1}). Further they note that "not so are the wicked, who are like demons, who rejoice in destruction of the world, and they are destroying themselves" („Sefer HaHinukh" 2021 {529,1}).

In modern times, the obligation of non-destruction may be accomplished by e.g., principles of reducing waste and pollution, reuse of resources and recycling. Therefore, *bal tashchit* in modern times expands to the battle against overfishing and deforestation and the prevention

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waging war on you, until it has been reduced" (Tanakh JPS Hebrew-English 2003, 419 {Devarim 20:19-20}).

of further destruction of the Earth in order to sustain life in all of its forms. In that regard, humans have to consider themselves stewards of the resources we have: not to consume so much that the next generation cannot grow.

## 2.2. *Pikuach nefesh* and stewardship of the Earth

*Pikuach nefesh* is the rabbinical term applied to the duty to save human life in a situation in which it is imperilled („Pikku’ach Nefesh” 2007, 152-153; „Jewish Concepts” 2021). The danger to life may be due to a grave state of illness or other direct peril [*sakkanat nefashot*], or indirectly, to a condition of health which, though not serious, might deteriorate and consequently imperil life [*safek sakkanat nefashot*].

*Pikuach nefesh* is also a biblical concept. It comes from Vayikra 19:16 (*Tanakh JPS Hebrew-English* 2003, 252), where humans are commanded to not stand idly by the blood of their neighbours. Classically, this means not allowing our neighbours, be they Jews or not, to be harmed by something we could have reasonably prevented.

*Pikuach nefesh*, the saving of a human life, is the rare value that usually overrides all other *mitzvot*. Therefore, in modern times such issues as climate change and its consequences, impacting the entirety of current lives have to be considered in the context of *pikuach nefesh*. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel<sup>17</sup> stated in reference to it:

If we are to be good stewards of the Earth, to repair it, we must choose to change. I am not advocating that we force everyone into some form of environmental utopia, but I do suggest we all try something in addition to what we do normally: look for more things to recycle, try a farm share, take transit to work – even if it’s just a couple of times a week, or maybe volunteering at a park clean-up. I am a believer in finding a way to do one more good thing – and if we all do, the world will be a cleaner and healthier place (Quodomine 2017).

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<sup>17</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972), reformed rabbi, philosopher and writer.

### 3. Stewardship of the Creation of God

Jews believe that God created the world [*Bereshit*] and gave human beings a special responsibility within creation to cultivate it, guard it and use it wisely. This role is known as stewardship. God gave man control of the environment, but humans should act responsibly, ensuring the environment is not treated improperly. Man has to work within creation and look after it. It is clearly stated in *Bereshit* 2:15: “and the Lord God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it” (*Tanakh JPS Hebrew-English* 2003, 3). There are two important Hebrew verbs used there, both are significant. The first is *le’ovdah*, which literally means “to serve it”. The human being is thus both master and servant of nature. The second term is *le’shomrah*, which should be translated as “to guard it.” This is the verb used in later biblical legislation to describe the responsibilities of a guardian of property that belongs to someone else. This guardian must exercise vigilance while protecting it and is personally liable for losses that occur through negligence. This is perhaps the best short definition of humanity’s responsibility for nature as it is stated in the Bible. There was a heated debate in the US in the sixties initiated by Californian scholar Lynn White, who attributed the responsibility for the environmental crisis to Judeo-Christian roots (White 1967), namely based on *Bereshit*. It was unfortunately misread by him in the way cancelling out any other biblical verses and commandments. Strong response was provided in subsequent years by many scholars, who underlined the stewardship and moral obligations of every human to the God’s creation (Loevinger 2008, 35-41).

It should be remembered that God emanates His presence and the genius of His creation everywhere and in even the smallest details and the Torah requires the utmost protection and respect for it. As famous Jewish medieval poet and one of the great Torah commentators, Abraham ibn Ezra, wrote in his poem, “God Everywhere”: “Wherever I turn my eyes, around on Earth or to the heavens/I see you in the field of stars/I see You in the yield of the land/in every breath and sound, a blade of

grass, a simple flower, an echo of Your holy Name” (Schwartz 2020).

Thus, not everything is permitted. There are limits on how humans interact with the Earth. The Torah has commandments regarding how to sow crops, how to collect eggs, and how to preserve trees in a time of war, just to name a few. When humans do not treat creation according to God’s will, disaster can follow. Explaining the complexity of the Jewish relationship to the environment, Arthur Waskow, indicated the following:

...perhaps the most profound Jewish statement about the relationship between human beings and the earth is bound up in two words of Hebrew – *Adam* and *Adamah*. The first means «human being»; the second, «earth». The two words are connected to teach us that human beings and the earth are intertwined. Neither the earth nor human beings run independent of each other; both are directly linked and have drastic and lasting effects on one another (Waskow 2003, vii).

God commanded Adam not to spoil or destroy the creation for if he did, there would be no one else to repair it. For that reason, many strict laws and regulations have been developed regarding the treatment of the environment and animals. One of the ways Jews try to heal the world is the sabbatical year [*shemitah*]. According to the Bible, every seven years, the land should be allowed to lie fallow, so that the natural ingredients in the soil can be replenished and better harvests can be expected in the future. While the laws of *shemitah* for Jews living in Israel are quite numerous and complex, there are four main commandments, among which the first commandment is that the land should rest, as the Torah says, “and the land shall rest a Sabbath to Hashem.” This occurs by people refraining from planting, pruning, ploughing, harvesting or engaging in any other form of working the land. Maimonides wrote that some of the laws of the Sabbatical Year “are meant to make the earth more fertile and stronger through letting it lie fallow.” (Maimon 1903 {3:39}). Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks comments based on this teaching state that “the Israelites were therefore commanded to conserve the soil by giving it

periodic fallow years and not pursue short-term gain at the cost of long-term desolation.” *Shemita*, as it is currently believed, demonstrates that the earth needs to rest as an ecological necessity, just as people need to rest as a spiritual necessity. In modern times it represents an ideal, an expanded perspective which seeks out meaning in all experiences and moves to treat the world around, and its fruits, with the sanctity they deserve. The world is sorely in need of wisdom that helps us learn to relate differently to the land. May the Jewish people manifest it themselves and share it with the world (Sendor 2021).

Cruelty against animals (*za'ar ba'alei hayyim* – pain of living thing) has also been prohibited since the times of Noah. The seven laws of Noah are the laws applicable to all humanity (and not only to Jews)<sup>18</sup>. The considerations and reflection on that prohibition are the fundamentals for modern reflection on promotion of vegetarianism and veganism. The rabbis (representing World Jewish Congress)<sup>19</sup> in the Jewish Declaration on Nature adopted in Assisi<sup>20</sup> in 1986 stated that:

...humanity's carnivorous nature is not taken for granted, or praised, in the fundamental teachings of Judaism. The rabbis of the Talmud told that human beings were vegetarians in earliest times, between creation and the generation of Noah. In the twelfth century Maimonides, the

<sup>18</sup> The Noachide Laws are seven laws considered by rabbinic tradition as the minimal moral duties required of all men by the Bible. While Jews are obligated to observe the whole Torah - 613 commandments, every non-Jew is considered a “son of the covenant of Noah” and he who accepts these obligations is considered a righteous person who is guaranteed a place in the world to come (Schwarzschild 2007)

<sup>19</sup> Signed by Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg, Vice-President, World Jewish Congress, the international organization that represents Jewish communities and organizations in 100 countries around the world of various denominations.

<sup>20</sup> President of WWF International, in 1986 Prince Philip issued an invitation to the leaders of the five major world religions – Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism to come and discuss how their faiths could help save the natural world. The meeting was held at Assisi in Italy, because it was the birthplace of St. Francis, the Catholic saint of ecology. From this meeting arose key statements by the five faiths outlining their own distinctive traditions and approach to the care for nature. The Jewish Declaration was among them.

greatest of all rabbinic scholars, explained that animal sacrifices had been instituted in ancient Judaism as a concession to the prevalent ancient practice of making such offerings to the pagan gods (...). The implication is clear: that Judaism was engaged in weaning people from such practices. Judaism as a religion offers the option of eating animal flesh, and most Jews do, but in our own century there has been a movement towards vegetarianism among very pious Jews. A whole galaxy of central rabbinic and spiritual teachers, including several past and present Chief Rabbis of the Holy Land, have been affirming vegetarianism as the ultimate meaning of the Jewish moral teaching („The Jewish Declaration on Nature” 1986, 14).

The said declaration also indicates that man accepted responsibility before God for all of creation, at the beginning of time. The humans were given dominion over nature, but God commanded them to behave with justice and compassion towards the rest of creation. The stewardship according to observant Jews consists in treating nature well. By that, human beings can regain the original state of harmony with all of creation, like the state described in the Garden of Eden. For that reason, Jews should not destroy anything that can be of benefit to humans. This includes animals, plants and natural resources.

It is worth mentioning here, as a kind of interesting fact, that Fania Lewando<sup>21</sup>, a pre-war distinguished chef in Poland, defined *tikkun olam* by food (among others), similarly to what Rav Kook was proposing with respect to vegetarianism. Her *opus vitae*, i.e., the first vegetarian kosher restaurant in Vilnius, was definitely the expression of making the world better place. In order not to hurt any being, she opted for vegetarian cuisine.

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<sup>21</sup> Fania Lewando, nee Fiszlewicz (1888 – 1942) ran a trendy, popular restaurant in Vilnius “Diet-Vegetarian Eatery” where Ashkenazi vegetarian dishes were served. She opened a culinary school. In the years 1936-1939 she was a Chief kosher chef at ocean liner Batory, author of the first European vegetarian cookbook written entirely in Yiddish. Lost during the war, the book was rediscovered in 2015 and published in Polish in 2020 (Lewando 2020).



Rabbi Julia Neuberger<sup>22</sup>, addressing the obligations of every Jew towards the world and society paraphrased an old teaching of the prominent Jewish sage Hillel and stated:

The old story of the non-Jew coming up to first Shammai and then Hillel and asking to be taught Judaism whilst standing on one leg appeals to me because the answer – do not do to a fellow human being what you would not have done to yourself- the rest is commentary, go and study it – really encapsulates what it’s about. If I had to boil Judaism down into a nutshell, I might express it differently – more perhaps in the words of one of the great influences on my life, though I never met him, Rabbi Marshall Meyer of congregation B’nei Jeshurun in New York City, but the principle is not so very different. This was his take: «They heard the sound of God moving about in the garden at the breezy time of day. And the man and his wife hid from God among the trees of the garden. God called out to the man and said to him, *ayechah*, where are you?» The answer should be *Hinzeni* – I am here, and I am ready to serve, and through You serve humanity, and work for *tikkun olam*, making the world, Your creation, a better place. The rest is commentary (Neuberger 2012).

Currently there is a significant number of organizations and associations within reformed Judaism, mainly in America, where the reformed movements are the most developed and predominant, striving for the improvement of the various aspects of our lives, in accordance with the call to “improve the world”, such as e.g., Religious Action Center (RAC) of Reformed Judaism or the Commission on Social Action (CSA) of Reform Judaism. Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) and the Union for Progressive Judaism (UPJ) are also very active and deeply involved in social, environmental and educational actions. This path should be widely and commonly followed around the world. *Tikkun olam* should be an aspiration for everyone. It has propelled Jews to see what is and transform it into what ought to be. It is embedded in the sacred covenant God makes with the Jewish people and it should become

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<sup>22</sup> Baroness Julia Neuberger (b. 1950), female reformed rabbi, British politician.

a call for every human irrespective of faith, denomination, race and/or gender. The CCAR, in particular, is very active and it has reaffirmed its commitment to environmental issues on many occasions, passing, among others, clear and strong resolutions on selected topics (1983 Toxic Waste, 1990 Environment, 1992 Biodiversity, 1996 Endangered Species or 2015 Climate Justice). Although “it is not our duty to finish the work, neither are we at liberty to neglect it”, as the Sages commanded in Pirque Abot 2:16 („Pirque abot” 2021).

#### **4. Tu Bi'Shevat**

A contemporary manifestation of the concern for environmental issues is the Jewish holiday called Tu Bi'Shevat (Benstein 2006, 179-182), which has in present times departed from its original religious meaning and has received a new, ecological dimension. It is nowadays considered a festival of nature, full of wonder, joy, acknowledgment and thankfulness for God's creation as people anticipate the renewal of the natural world. Linking these ideas and *tikkun olam*, during this festival the Jews consider the obligation to care for God's world, of which humans are the custodians, and the responsibility for sharing the fruits of God's earth with all. Originally, it was the date on which trees in Israel were determined to be mature enough for their fruit to be harvested. This date was also the New Year for the annual tithe [*ma'aser*], which refers to one-tenth of one's produce set aside as a religious offering. At present trees are planted in Israel every year on this holiday, which is also called the New Year for trees. It is based on the rule that – as the Talmudic sages explained in the Talmud – “it is forbidden to live in a town which has no garden or greenery” („Jerusalem Talmud Kiddushin” 2020 {4:12}).

#### **5. Summary**

Judaism has been developing a strong and sound relationship to ecology and environmental issues almost from its foundations. Basic rules and principles, as provided above, are contained directly in the Hebrew

Bible and have been interpreted in the ecological context not only in modern times, but for millennia, in both ancient and contemporary works and commentaries. Judaism has always perceived its basic role in the world as having a complex moral responsibility for the surrounding God's creation and its maintenance in the best possible condition. This obligation to mend/ fix the world has never been revoked. On the contrary, the modern world provides new challenges with respect to various environmental problems and Judaism cannot be and is not a mute and indifferent bystander. The actions undertaken both on various organized levels, by local campaigns as well as by every observant believer in his personal life may significantly contribute to the fixing of the world and encourage fellow believers and other faithful people, who inspire themselves in the biblical resources around the globe. That is what *tikkun olam* is all about.

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