

# JEWISH AND ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVES ON SAVING THE ENVIRONMENT

The following remarks were delivered by Rabbi Lance Sussman, the Senior Rabbi of Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel in Elkins Park, Pa. and Dr. Mohammad Ali Chaudry of Basking Ridge, N.J., President of the Center for Understanding Islam, to an audience of North American and European Muslims and Jews during the Mission of European Imams and Rabbis to the United States in July, 2009.

## RABBI LANCE J. SUSSMAN

Rabbi Lance J. Sussman, Ph.D., was born in Baltimore, MD. He attended the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and graduated from Franklin & Marshall College in Lancaster, PA in 1975 with honors. Rabbi Sussman received his ordination from the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in 1980 and earned a Ph.D in Jewish History in 1987. Rabbi Sussman served Temple Concord in Binghamton, NY and was an Associate Professor of History at Binghamton University – SUNY where he served as Chair of the Judaic Studies Department. In July, 2001, Rabbi Sussman moved to Elkins Park with his wife Liz and their five children following his appointment as the eighth Senior Rabbi of Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel. Rabbi Sussman is the author of numerous books, articles and reviews specializing in the field of American Jewish history.

The great 20th Century American rabbi and thinker Abraham Joshua Heschel described Judaism's response to existence as "radical amazement". Indeed the Torah does not assume the 'givenness' of existence but records our tradition's radical amazement that there is anything at all.

While philosophers of the Middle Ages weighed arguments as to whether the universal was eternal or created at a particular point in time, all recognized the reality of a transcendent power, which shaped the universe. In so doing, they affirmed the Torah's stunning proclamation:

Kee Tov or "It is good".

When God looks at creation, God says "Kee tov", thereby refuting prevailing ancient view of nature as both chaotic and malevolent.

The Torah begins not with an account of creation, but with a realization of our createdness. It depicts the human being as a reflection of the image of God as the perfect steward of creation. We have been charged with this responsibility because of our ability to think, work and value what God has given to us. We were created to take care of ourselves, one another and our world in wise and responsible ways. In Judaism, the institution of Shabbat at the end of the creation story clearly demonstrates the responsibility of stewardship of the world in a profound way. We are taught that everything needs to be refreshed; people, animals, tools and the earth itself. What is true of the week is also true of a cycle of seven years and a cycle

of seven sets of seven years. In Judaism, God created time so that we can partner with the Eternal to be stewards. That stewardship is shaped by other Torah principles. One principle is ba'al tashchit –not to be wasteful and a second one is the principle of kindness to animals.

Early in the history of the modern environmental movement, Judaism, Christianity and Islam were all blamed for everything wrong humanity has ever done to the environment. These theoreticians wrongly argued that the Abrahamic faiths mandated humanity to subdue and subjugate nature and to exercise an arrogant dominion over the plant. I would argue that the opposite is true; that we are urged to proclaim how magnificent are God's handiwork and His deeds.

At the beginning of the Torah, there is the parable of the Tower of Babel. In learning to work together as stewards, we are not called upon to build a new tower, but instead to tend God's garden quietly, respectfully and reverentially. Our tradition tells the story of Honi the Circle-Drawer who saw an old man planting trees and said, "Why are you planting trees, old man? You won't live to see them grow. The old man replied, "I plant trees because others planted for me, so I am planting for others who will follow me." With this parable in mind, let us too learn to plant for our children and grandchildren.

## Concrete Ideas for Saving the Environment from Rabbi Sussman and Dr. Chaudry

Tree planting—Synagogues and mosques across the continent should come together one on one on Arbor Day, April 30, 2010 to plant trees. The Arbor Day Foundation ([www.arborday.org](http://www.arborday.org)) has a list of tree planting organizations in each state and instructions as to how organizations can get involved.

Synagogues should invite members of the mosque with which they are twinned—including the children of the mosque--to come and help take care of the gardens at the synagogue. Adults and children of the synagogue should visit the mosque and tend the plants and flowers there.

In this country, organizations have the opportunity to help keep roadsides clean and free of litter. You see signs along the highway saying, 'This stretch of roadway is maintained by Kiwanis.' Wouldn't it be wonderful if a synagogue and a mosque came together to work on cleaning up roadways, parks and other public lands.

These ideas are only a start. We believe that synagogues and mosques working together can find many ways to help improve environmental conditions in the towns and cities they share.

### DR. MOHAMMAD ALI CHAUDRY

Born in Pakistan, Dr. Mohammad Ali Chaudry graduated from the London School of Economics with honors in Economics and Econometrics in 1967 and earned a Ph. D. in Economics from Tufts University. After moving to New Jersey, Chaudry began a long career at AT&T, where he worked in Strategic Planning and served as the CFO of the Public Relations Division. From 2004-2006, Chaudry served two terms as a member of the Township Committee in Bernards Township, New Jersey and as Mayor in 2004, making him the first Pakistani born Mayor in America. Chaudry teaches courses on both Business and Islam at Rutgers University. The co-founder and president of the Center for Understanding Islam, Chaudry is presently at work on a textbook on Islam and Muslims.

Greetings of peace and God's blessing. I am honored to be speaking to so many scholars about what the Qur'an says about the Environment and the traditions that Prophet Muhammad—Peace Be Upon Him—established for us to follow with regard to dealing with the Environment. Essentially, what that boiled down to was our responsibility to act as stewards, just as Rabbi Sussman said.

In the Qur'an, God tells the angels, 'I am going to create human beings to be stewards of the Earth'. So that means that we are here in a role of responsibility. God created everything in the heavens and earth, and he has asked us not only to take care of it but to do so tenderly with love and care, in order that it should flourish and survive, not only for our own benefit, but for future generations as well. This understanding is especially apt today, when so much of nature is at risk.

Allow me to share a few verses from one chapter of the Qur'an, Chapter 55 or the Surah Ar-Rahman, which is very beautiful in describing what God has created, how He asks us to look at nature and what there is in the natural world for us to benefit from.

*(Allah) Most Gracious! It is He Who has taught the Qur'an. He has created man: He has taught him speech (and Intelligence) The sun and the moon follow courses (exactly) computed; And the herbs and the trees-both (alike) bow in adoration. And the Firmament has He raised high, and He has set up the balance (of Justice), In order that ye may not transgress (due) balance. So establish weight with justice and fall not short in the balance. It is He Who has spread out the earth for (His) creatures: Therein is fruit and date-palms, producing spathes (enclosing dates): Also corn with (its) leaves and stalk for fodder and sweet-smelling plants. Then which of the favors of your Lord will ye deny? [The Holy Qur'an, Surah Ar-Rahman (55:1 – 12)]*

Many times in that Surah, after reminding us of every blessing He has given to mankind, God asks, "Then which of the blessings (favors) of your Lord will you deny?" as though He is saying to mankind, "You will forget what your responsibilities are. We are asked to look at the birds, the trees and how a seedling becomes a tree. It brings forth leaves and fruit and then falls down and grows up again. It points to how the sun and the moon move in their assigned orbits; how, in fact, everything in nature is created with balance. We are constantly reminded to remember that we need to maintain balance in our lives as well.

In Surah Ya Sin, chapter 36 of the Qur'an, God says:

*And [yet,] they have a sign [of Our power to create and to resurrect] in the lifeless earth which We make alive, and out of which We bring forth grain, whereof they may eat; and [how] We make gardens of date-palms and vines [grow] thereon, and cause springs to gush [forth] within it, so that they may eat of the fruit thereof, though it was not their hands that made it. Will they not, then, be grateful? (Surah Yasin- 36:33-35)*

*Limitless, then, in His glory is He in whose hand rests the mighty dominion over all things; and unto Him you all will be brought back! (Surah Yasin- 36:83)*

This is a wonderful world we live in and with great blessings of God, the Ever-Compassionate. It was created by God and we are given the privilege of enjoying it, but we are not the owners of it and not allowed to do what we wish with it.

We should not forget as the Qur'an says,

*'(it is He) Who has appointed the earth a resting-place for you, and the sky a canopy; and causes water to pour down from the sky, and brings forth by it out of the fruits a sustenance for you...'(Surah Baqara 2: 22)* and then He said:

*"Eat and drink the sustenance provided by God, and do no evil or mischief on the earth."( Surah Baqara 2:60)*

The Qur'an addresses directly the concepts of balance and moderation; that we can enjoy God's blessings, but we must do everything in moderation and not in a wasteful manner. As Rabbi Sussman has noted, the Torah tells us the same, which is why Allah speaks of all the children of Adam, not only of Muslims, Jews or Christians, but all the Children of Adam.



The Qur'an says,

*'O Children of Adam! Look to your adornment at every place of worship, and eat and drink, but be not prodigal. Lo! He loves not the prodigals.'*  
(Surah Al-A'raf: 31)

In addition, there are many examples of the Prophet Muhammad—and many sayings attributed to him, about how we are to maintain the Environment, keep it clean, protect it and help it to flourish. One of such stories is a simple reminder of how each of us can make a difference. The Prophet Muhammad, Peace be Upon Him, saw a person wasting water while performing his ablutions to get ready for prayer. The Prophet said to him, "Use water with caution; do not be extravagant." On another occasion, the Prophet advised his followers, 'Even at the bank of a rushing river or canal, water should not be used unnecessarily.' Just because it is there, it doesn't mean you should waste it. The message is that we must practice conservation even in the middle of abundance.

The Prophet Muhammad said,

"Faith has many branches, the most excellent of which is a declaration of faith (of belief in God). The humblest (branch) is the removal of harm; of what is injurious from the path." In this light, we are reminded if we see a thorn in the path of any person, we are enjoined to remove it.

One day, the Prophet was sitting with his companions and said, "Be mindful of the Street." When they asked him what he meant, he told them that they should be respectful of the environment in which they live, including the people who live around them. As I said, one of our duties is to remove anything in the way of people or anything that is injurious to the environment.

One way to repair injury to the environment is through the planting of trees, and the Prophet has talked many times about the importance of planting trees. Look at the balance trees create in the atmosphere. The need for trees grows constantly and the Prophet took part in many tree plantings with his companions in Medina after he moved there. He reminds us, "If you are fearful of the Day of Judgment coming and you have a seedling in your hand, plant it." The Prophet said: "There is none amongst the Muslims who plants a tree or sows seeds, and then a bird, or a person or an animal eats from it, but is regarded as a charitable gift for him."

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Both of our traditions say that we are here as stewards of the Earth and as Children of God, so we need to do everything possible to save the Environment and to help the people sharing the world with us to do their best to save the Environment. ■