

Jewish Texts as Resources on Global Climate Change

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1. Judaism has always recognized that **the stakes are high**, and we can't afford to make too much of a mess:
"God led Adam around all the trees of the Garden of Eden. And God said to Adam: 'See My works, how good and praiseworthy they are?! And all that I have created, I made for you. [But,] be mindful then that you do not spoil and destroy My world – for if you spoil it, there is no one after you to repair it.'" (Midrash Qohelet Rabbah 7:13; ca. 8th Century C.E.)
2. Remember **whose Earth** we're messing up in the first place, and what we're supposed to be doing with it:
"The Earth is God's, and the fullness thereof; the settled land, and its inhabitants." (Psalm 24:1)
"The land shall not be sold forever; for the land is Mine; you are strangers and sojourners with me." (Leviticus 25:23)
"God placed the human in the Garden of Eden, *l'ovdah* (to serve/till) *u'l'shomrah* (and to guard/tend it)." (Gen. 2:15)
3. **Conservation:** Wasting anything is a shame, especially when it's so easy to use less electricity or get better mileage or...
Bal Tashchit: "When you besiege a city...do not destroy (*lo tashchit*) any of its trees..." (Deuteronomy 20:19)
Rav Zutra said: "Whoever covers an oil lamp, or uncovers a naphtha lamp, transgresses the law of *bal tashchit*."
(Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 67b, on actions that make fuel burn inefficiently. See energy conservation & emissions standards!)
"Righteous people ... do not waste in this world even a mustard seed. They become sorrowful with every wasteful and destructive act that they see, and if they can, they use all their strength to save everything possible from destruction. But the wicked ... rejoice in the destruction of the world, just as they destroy themselves." (Sefer HaChinuch 529; 13th Century)
4. **Justice / Equality:** We in the US are 5% of the world's population, yet cause ¼ of all greenhouse gases. And who will rising sea levels and other effects of climate change harm most? Poor people in developing nations.
"*Tzedek tzedek tirdof* -- Justice, justice, you shall pursue, in order that you may live..." (Deuteronomy 16:20)
"God loves righteousness and justice; the Earth is full of God's loving-kindness." (Psalm 33:5)
"Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor ... Love your neighbor as yourself." (Leviticus 19:16, 19:18)
5. **Preserving Life:** Climate change will likely cause the spread of new diseases, longer heat waves, more intense hurricanes, agricultural losses...
"One is forbidden from gaining a livelihood at the expense of another's health." (R Isaac b. Sheshet, Resp. 196, 14thC)
"Shabbat, like all the *mitzvot*/commandments, is pushed aside by danger to human life." (Rambam, MT Zmanim 2:1)
6. Saving **Endangered Species:** Everything's part of the plan, yet global warming moves too fast for most of Creation to adapt, threatening many species and whole ecosystems.
"Even those creatures you deem superfluous in the world – like flies, fleas, and gnats – nevertheless have their allotted task in the scheme of Creation (*seder beresheet*)." (Midrash Exodus Rabbah 10:1)
"It should not be believed that all beings exist for the sake of humanity's existence ... [rather,] all the other beings, too, have been intended for their own sakes..." (Rambam / Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* III:13; 12th Century, Egypt)
7. The **Precautionary Principle:** Precedents for doing something "drastic" even in an uncertain situation
"When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof, so that you do not bring bloodguilt on your house if anyone should fall from it." (Deuteronomy 22:8 – from which the Rambam deduces, "Similarly with all potentially dangerous objects. Remove them far from yourselves and from the way of the community." [MT Hilchot De'ot], 12th Cent.)
"A burning coal/object left in a place where the public can be injured by it – one is allowed to extinguish it [even on Shabbat], whether it's of metal or of wood." (Yosef Caro in *Shulchan Aruch*, Orech Hayim 334:27; 16th Century Tzfat)
"A sick person in danger – we attend to all their needs on Shabbat, at the advice of skilled local healer. If there is a doubt whether or not we need to violate the Shabbat for them – or if one doctor says to, ...but another doctor says there's no need – we violate the Shabbat for them, since [even] doubtful danger to human life pushes aside the Shabbat." (Rambam, MT Zmanim 2:1, continuing the quote above at #5. Replace "doctor" with "scientist," and "Shabbat" with "corporate profits"?!)
"... We don't need an expert [to save a life by violating other laws like Shabbat], since ... [even] doubtful danger to human life [makes the law] lenient. And it's forbidden to delay the thing [treatment]..." (Tur, 14thC Spain, OH 328 – to which Caro adds, "the one who rushes to do so, look, this is praiseworthy! But the one who [stops to] ask, look, this is a murderer.")
8. In **Conclusion:** "See, I have set before you this day life and death, blessing and curse – and [you should] choose life, in order that you and your children may live." (Deuteronomy 30:19)