

# The Jewish Approach to Ecological Balance

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Expanding on the second question, Jewish tradition holds every living thing (and even inanimate objects) as containing a certain amount of wonder, as if there is a secret hiding inside of everything, yearning to be recognized, revealed and even protected. In our tradition, trees are to be respected. Just as there are human rights and animal rights, there are tree rights. For instance, you can't just wantonly chop down a tree. In order to sensitize farmers (and the rest of us, too), and to prevent us from relating to a tree as a "fruit factory", every seventh year during the Sabbatical Year (Hebrew: Shmittah), the pruning of trees is forbidden. Trees deserve a vacation too. A similar law in Judaism has to do with circumcision. But not the circumcision that you are thinking of; rather the circumcision of trees! How do you circumcise a tree? Simple... don't eat its fruit for the first three years. In Judaism, the fruit of the tree's first three years is called orlah, or "uncircumcised." The fruit is set aside, prohibited for human consumption or utilization. As if to say: remember, trees are not machines, they are alive! You cannot just use them as you want. They have an independent existence which goes beyond serving humans. Respect it!

In the story of Creation, the first human was placed in the middle of the Garden of Eden "to work it and to preserve it." In the Temple-era, a farmer would bring his first fruits up to Jerusalem and give them as an offering, as if to say "Not because I'm a good farmer are these fruits here today, but there is a higher force responsible." Still today, we tithe fruits in the Land of Israel, as if to say "We're not the owners of the land, but only its caretakers." This, also, constitutes a symbolic recognition that the Land of Israel really belongs to its Creator and not to its human masters.

Moreover, Judaism went one step further: Trees deserve not only a vacation from humans, but a Birthday Party too - their own New Year. And so, we celebrate Tu B'Shvat, although all the trees in Israel still seem asleep. However, not everybody notices the half-way mark in winter. Not everybody notices trees. You have to be sensitive to notice these things. The same is true with humans. Some people are so wrapped-up in their own affairs that they don't notice other people, including those less fortunate than themselves. The Jewish tradition often tries to sensitize us to the needs of others: other humans, other living things, other objects.

*"An olive tree that sheds its fruit is painted over with red and filled in with stones; the stones hold the tree in place, and the red color is so conspicuous that it attracts the attention of wayfarers and they ask for mercy upon it."*

*(Talmud Hullin 77b)*

Doesn't that sound a little far-fetched? Asking for mercy, praying for a tree? It certainly didn't seem silly to our ancestors... and perhaps this ancient idea can be relevant to our society too; if we can open our hearts to trees and even pray for those trees that are less fortunate, perhaps we'll be able to do the same for other human beings. Social justice...can start with trees.