

## Towards Sustainable Development – Reflection Memo

The Midrash<sup>1</sup> teaches, “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 that you do not spoil and destroy My world—for if you spoil it, there is no one after you to repair it.’”

The world we inhabit and enjoy is a world of beauty. It is also a world of finite resources, many of which require a delicate balance of temperature and moisture to flourish.

In Genesis 1:28, we are told that the world is ours to fill and to subdue. Genesis 2:15 explains that the earth is ours to work and to preserve. The mastery in Genesis 1 encourages us develop science, technology, medicine, culture and spirituality as well as the growth and advantage of our species. The conservation in Genesis 2 demands that we temper our impact upon the planet. It is ours to cultivate and nurture, not ours to ravage, exploit, despoil and destroy.

These words, directed to the first human beings establish a universal mandate to look to the interests of our environment. A century ago, we might have limited this to our planet. Now, as we understand our atmosphere and explore outer space, we must include responsibility for satellite junk and all other potential contaminants we project to the farthest reaches of our universe.

In subsequent passages, the Bible admonishes us to look to the welfare of the soil and fauna; against animal cruelty, against wanton destruction. While Deuteronomy recognises that the poor will not cease from the land, communities and individuals are versed with responsibility for charity and welfare, provisions for the impoverished and marginalised; education and human dignity.

While critics of the Bible denigrate the text for references to slavery and sacrifice, Torah scholars expound from the scriptures relevant codices for contemporary living. From language which was meaningful and elevating to the reader of two thousand years ago comes doctrine to edify the lives of 21<sup>st</sup> Century citizens.

The Bible establishes a duty of care to our workers. The duty extends to impoverished individuals who were forced by circumstance to sell themselves into service. Exploitation was finite; time off mandated; so, too, the opportunity to nurture a family and trade for oneself in one’s own time. If the master had a pillow, the slave must have one too. Today, we must apply these principles to our labourers on the threshold of poverty in the coffee plantations or in the third world clothing factory. They must be provided the wherewithal for personal growth and feel their lives improve through

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<sup>1</sup> Kohellet Rabba 7,13 (Rabbinic Commentary & Fable c8th century)

their productive effort. The directors of companies who go home to fluffed pillows must strive to ensure that workers down the production line are lifted out of slums into sanitary living.

The laws of the Sabbatical and Jubilee years introduce principles for the reduction and remission of debt. These are established with the admonition that “All the world is Mine”, reminding the entrepreneur that ultimately all wealth is held on trust and should be applied to the betterment of God’s world.

Jewish religious law covers all areas of commercial activity; competition, product liability, honest representation, investment and partnerships, corporate responsibility, severance payments and pensions. Derived from Biblical verses and interpreted over the centuries, sometimes where Jewish communities have had autonomy and other times where they have depended on the fragile goodwill of their hosts, these laws have evolved with circumstance with a view to core guiding principles. They are realistic and workable. They provide security and prospects of growth for both employee and employer. They advance human dignity through the highest regard for all human life. They look for this generation to plant and resource a better world for the future generations which will follow.

As religious law, these principles are binding upon adherents. However, they are also valuable and informative to all who see their role as contributing to a better world. Business ethics workshops where religious texts and examples are studied alongside real-world examples and modern research are popular as a forum for personal and professional development as well as networking opportunities.

Within the Jewish community, I have lectured on social responsibility, the environment, education, charity and welfare. I have also addressed these topics in inter-faith events. The Global Foundation and the Rome Roundtable offer an opportunity to introduce this learning to boardrooms; the chance to inspire and influence the influencers.

The Talmud tells of a man who saw an elderly farmer planting a carob tree. “what point?” he asked. “It won’t bear fruit for seventy years and you will be long dead!” The elder responded, “just as I enjoy the fruits of trees planted by preceding generations, it is my pleasure and responsibility to plant for the generations who will follow.” Of course, we must plant and invest for the future. Moreover, we should welcome the opportunity for our initiatives and dialogue today to take roots in our corporate structures, thereby shaping the growth of responsible, sustainable and godly enterprise from primary producers through to shareholder; from today to world our children and grandchildren will go on to inherit.

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