The Week

נֹחַ
NOACH

TWO FIGURES frequently compared in rabbinic writings are Noah and Abraham. Of the two, Abraham invariably comes off better.

While we refer to ourselves as the children of Jacob, of Isaac and of Abraham, we do not go back to an earlier generation and speak of ourselves as the children of Noah. Indeed, the term *b'nei Noach* is taken to refer to the peoples of the world at large.

What was it about Noah that left him falling short of the mark? Was it that he saved only himself and his family, whereas Abraham argued with God for the salvation of *all* those threatened with destruction at Sodom and Gomorrah?

While that is certainly possible, there may be another reason. As the flood was subsiding and the earth was beginning to return to normal, Noah got drunk and did something (the rabbis do not tell us what) that did not redound to his credit.

This failing — of having risen to the challenge without sustaining the achievement — marked him out as being unsuitable as progenitor of God's chosen people.

The Psalmist puts it thus: "Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord, and who may stand in His holy place?" Ascending the mountain is one thing; being able to remain there requires an extra effort.

As we bid farewell to Tishri, we should ask ourselves whether we can live up to the resolutions we made, or whether we shall be the ones to let the memory fade until it is revived again in eleven months' time.

Who will be able to carry forward the piercing sound of the shofar throughout the year to sustain the important decisions we make about our lives? Which of us will live up to our designation as *b'nei Avraham* and who will remain merely *b'nei Noach?*

Rabbi IAN GOODHARDT

CALENDAR

Friday, October 19 (Tishri 30), **First day Rosh Chodesh Marcheshvan,** Sabbath begins in London at **5.45**; Manchester **5.50**; Tyneside **5.44**; Glasgow **5.53**.

Saturday, October 20 (Marcheshvan 1), **Second day Rosh Chodesh Marcheshvan.** Portion of the Law (Torah) Genesis 6: 9 to 11: 32 and Numbers 28: 9-15. Portion of Prophets (Haftara) Isaiah 66: 1-24.

Sabbath ends in London at 6.45; Manchester 6.55; Tyneside 6.51; Glasgow 7.02.

Friday, October 26 (Marcheshvan 7), Sabbath begins in London at **5.30**; Manchester **5.35**; Tyneside **5.28**; Glasgow **5.37**.

NOTABLE DAYS

5751	1990	
*Rosh Chodesh Marcheshvan	Sat	Oct 20
Rosh Chodesh Kislev	Sun	Nov 18
Chanucah 1st day	Wed	Dec 12
*Rosh Chodesh Tevet	Tues	Dec 18
Fast of Tevet	Thurs	Dec 27
	1991	
Rosh Chodesh Shevat	Wed	Jan 16
Tu Bishvat	Wed	Jan 30
*Rosh Chodesh Adar	Fri	Feb 15
Fast of Esther	Wed	Feb 27
Purim	Thurs	Feb 28
Shushan Purim	Fri	Mar 1
Rosh Chodesh Nisan	Sat	Mar 16
Fast of Firstborn	Fri	Mar 29
Pesach 1st day	Sat	Mar 30
Pesach 7th day	Fri	Apr 5
Holocaust Memorial Day	Thurs	Apr 11
*Rosh Chodesh Iyar	Mon	Apr 15
Yom Atzmaut	Thurs	Apr 18
Pesach Sheni	Sun	Apr 28
Lag b'Omer	Thurs	May 2
Yom Yerushalayim	Sun	May 12
Rosh Chodesh Sivan	Tues	May 14
Shavuot 1st day	Sun	May 19
*Rosh Chodesh Tammuz	Thurs	Jun 13
Fast of Tammuz	Sun	Jun 30
Rosh Chodesh Av	Fri	Jul 12

*The previous day also is observed as Rosh Chodesh.

The telephone number of the Board of Deputies' Central Inquiry Desk and the Communal Diary is 071-387 4044.

Crisis Line counselling service: 081-203 6211.

Jewish Social Services' volunteer bureau: Sheilah Goodman, 081-458 3282. Ombudsman: 081-458 9820.

Our duty to preserve nature

Following "This Common Inheritance," the Government's White Paper on the environment, Chief Rabbi-elect Jonathan Sacks examines the Jewish approach to ecological issues

TOWARDS the end of the 1980s, environmental concerns moved fast from obscurity to the top of the political agenda. Throughout Europe, green parties sprouted and attracted widespread support.

Politicians of the Right and Left announced their conversion to the cause and competed to establish their ecological credentials. It bore all the signs of a passing moral fashion.

But the issues will not go away. If anything, they will increasingly dominate public debate in the 1990s. For as other dangers recede, we may come to feel that the greatest threat to human civilisation is now no longer war but peace, not the pursuit of ideology but the pursuit of affluence.

In the past few years, the entire political map has had to be redrawn. State socialism is being dismantled in the Soviet Union. One East European country after another has turned towards democracy and the free market. There has been a slowdown in the nuclear arms race and the end of the Cold War.

But no sooner has the nuclear threat receded than we have become aware of the ecological threat of the "greenhouse" effect. As capitalist and Communist states alike have been moving from collectivism to individualism, we have begun to fear the effects of unregulated economic growth: depletion of natural resources, destruction of rain forests, industrial pollution, damaging aerosols and car-exhaust emissions, and a host of other threats to the quality and viability of life. We have moved from the politics of confrontation to the politics of conservation.

These are issues on which a religious, especially a Jewish, voice should be heard, for they overturn some of our most deeply-held assumptions.

For centuries, we have believed that science was the key that would unlock the bounties of nature. Today, we are fearful that it will destroy its ecological balance.

Economics was the discipline that would allow us to plan and maximise growth. But environmental questions cannot be answered by conventional economic theory. For they pose the *ethical* dilemma of how to weigh the future against the present. By what principles shall we restrain growth for the sake of generations yet unborn?

Environmental ethics touch on the most profound features of the human situation: our relationship to nature, our responsibility to posterity, and the limits to our exploitation of natural resources.

These issues are in the deepest sense religious and they are addressed by the Torah from its opening chapters. Judaism's guidelines remain directly relevant today.

Few passages have had a deeper influence on human civilisation than the first chapter of Genesis. Through its momentous vision of creation, we see the universe as the work of God.

Man is its final and supreme creation, the only being made in God's image. Nature has been handed over to his dominion. He is commanded to "fill the earth and subdue it" and "rule" over the animals.

It was the nineteenth-century sociologist Max Weber who argued that this chapter laid the foundations of Western rationalism and ultimately of the scientific revolution. Against paganism, the Torah set forth a vision in which nature was not sacred.

It rejected mythology and magic. The world was neither unfathomable nor intrinsically hostile to man. Without this background, suggested Weber, the scientific enterprise might never have got under way.

But there lies the problem. Turning Weber's theory on its head, radical ecologists have suggested that Genesis is not the answer to our present crisis, but its cause.

If we are given the unrestricted right to subdue the world, there is nothing to prevent the "rape of nature." Instead, they call for a new paganism which worships the earth as a living organism, with its own personality and rights.

John Passmore, the Australian philospher, has shown that this approach is doubly mistaken. First, it proposes a cure worse than the disease. To turn our back on technology will not improve but substantially reduce human welfare, now and in the future. What is needed is not less science, but a more far-sighted view of its effects.

■■■

Secondly, it misreads Genesis. For immediately after reading of man's powers we are given, in the second chapter, a statement of man's responsibilities.

Adam was placed in the garden, we are told, "to serve it and guard it." Man is not only the *master* but also the *guardian* of nature. This is perhaps the best short definition of the ecological imperative as Judaism understands it.

A guardian is entrusted with property that does not belong to him. His task is to take charge of it and eventually return it to its owner intact.

So it is with nature. The world is not ours. "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof," a fact of which we remind ourselves every time we make a blessing. It has been handed into our safekeeping only on condition that we maintain it undespoiled.

But Judaism has seldom been content with broad statements of principle. To be effective they must be translated into the life of society. The Torah does this in two ways: through education and legislation.

Each age adds its own commentary to the Torah. And we can now see the three great commandments of *periodic rest* — Shabbat, the sabbatical year and the jubilee year — as powerful forms of environmental education.

On Shabbat, we are commanded to renounce our manipulation of the world. It is a day that sets a limit to our intervention in nature.

The earth is not ours, but God's. For six days, it is handed over to our management. On the seventh day, we symbolically abdicate that power. No secular equivalent remotely rivals Shabbat as a day of "green" consciousness.

Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden: "See how beautiful are My works," said the Lord

What Shabbat does for man and the animals, the sabbatical and jubilee years do for the land. It, too, has its right to periodic rest.

This is a theological idea, but, as Maimonides pointed out, it has a sound ecological basis. Land which is over-exploited eventually loses its fertility. *Yishuv ha'aretz,* the settlement of the land, means conserving its resources and not pursuing short-term gain at the cost of long-term desolation.

There are other commandments, too, which restrain our interference with nature. The Torah groups together three prohibitions: against crossbreeding livestock, planting a field with mixed seeds and wearing a garment of mixed wool and linen. It calls these rules *chukkim,* or "statutes." Nachmanides, and later Samson Raphael Hirsch, gave this word a novel interpretation.

They understood *chukkim* to mean laws which respected the integrity of nature. To mix different species, argued Nachmanides, was an affront to the Creator and an assault on the creation.

Hirsch put it more arrestingly. *Chukkim* were laws which embodied the principle that "the same regard which you show to man you must also demonstrate to every lower creature, to the earth which bears and sustains all, and to the world of plants and animals."

Hirsch was what today would be called a "deep" ecologist. He believed that there is such a thing as "justice" towards nature and that the world cannot be subordinated to the interests of man.

It was a view shared by the great mystic, Rabbi Abraham Kook, who held that animals have rights and that one should not needlessly even pick a flower. "All of creation," he said, "sings a song."

These are extreme views. But as well as educating towards them, the Torah provided the basis for direct environmental legislation. The source here was the command in Deuteronomy against destroying fruit-bearing trees in the course of war: against what we would now call a "scorched earth" policy.

The rabbis understood this not as a limited provision, but as an example of a more general imperative. They extended it to peace as well as war, to indirect as well as direct destruction, and to other objects as well as trees. In Jewish law, one may not needlessly destroy anything of potential human benefit.

To be sure, conservation is not an absolute value. Halachah permits the destruction of natural resources in the course of constructive projects that will ultimate enhance human welfare. But the onus of proof is on the developer.

And there remains a deep-seated reverence for trees in Judaism, expressed in modern times by the afforestation of Israel and the celebration of Tu Bishvat, the "new year" for trees. No Jew should be indifferent to the destruction of rain forests.

Beyond conservation, the rabbis extended the Torah's rule that waste should be disposed of far from human habitation. They banned garbage disposal that interfered with crops or amenities, pollution of the water supply and activities that would foul the air or create intolerable noise in residential areas. The biblical provision for open space around the levitical cities is one of the earliest examples of town planning.

■■■

So Judaism contains detailed precedents of environmental legislation, as well as commands that educate us in respect for and restraint towards nature as God's creation.

Admittedly, environmental ethics has not yet received the same intense halachic treatment as has medical ethics. Probably that is because medical decisions are taken by individuals, while environmental decisions are usually taken by governments.

An individual turns to halachah for guidance. Governments rarely do. But it is not because Judaism regards ecological issues lightly. On the contrary.

Tikkun ha'olam, perfection of the world, is one of the mandates of the halachah. Maimonides repeatedly insists that we cannot pursue spiritual ideals without first ensuring our physical survival. That has always needed long-term planning and the decision to limit consumption in the present for the sake of the viability of the future.

Judaism categorically rejects two attitudes to the environment. One, associated with the Stoic-Christian tradition, is that we have no moral duties towards nature. The other, drawn from some Eastern religions, is that nature is holy and to interfere with it is sacrilegious.

The first allows technology to run rampant, while the second turns its back on it altogether. Neither extreme, we believe, does justice to the challenge of human civilisation.

God, said Isaiah, did not create the world to be desolate: He formed it to be inhabited. He gave man the intelligence to control nature. Therein lies his dignity. But He charged him with the duty of preserving nature. Therein lies his responsibility.

The rabbis put it simply. They said: when God made the first man, He took him to see all the trees of the garden of Eden. He said to him: "See how beautiful are My works. All that I have created I have made for you. But be careful that you do not ruin My world, for if you do there is no one else to put right what you have destroyed." Surely a moral for our time.