

# Climate Shabbat Chevrotah

## Ancient Jewish texts & the Climate Challenge

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### *1. Mishneh Torah, Neighbours 11:1*

#### **What is the original quote?**

He who makes a threshing floor\* in the midst of his domain. Or a privy\*\*. Or does work which raises dust and particles of earth and they go out from them and harms his neighbor. He must distance himself in order that he does not harm by dust, or by the smell of the privy, or the dust in order that he do no harm to his neighbor. Even if it is the wind that carries the particles of earth to his neighbor in the time that he is doing work, or causing the tow or the chaff to go out from these and harms his neighbor; he is obligated to distance in order not to touch and they cause him harm. And even by means of an ordinary wind, because all these instances are similar to doing damage with one's arrows.

If, however, the acts which he performs in his domain damage his fellow while he is in the process of performing them it is as if he has injured him directly. To what can this be compared? To one who stands on his own property and shoots arrows into his fellow's courtyard and claims, "I am doing it on my premises".

\* a floor used to process grain crops

\*\* an outdoor bathroom

#### **Questions**

1. How do you interpret the text's statement about "doing work which raises dust and particles of earth"? Can this be seen metaphorically, and if so, how?
2. The concept of 'neighbor' is significant in this text. In a globalised world, who is our neighbor? What does this imply about our responsibilities?
3. Consider the line about "shooting arrows into his fellow's courtyard." What is the comparison the text is making?
4. What are the "arrows" we might be shooting today with regards to the environment?
5. The text talks about harm that one may cause to a neighbor "even by means of an ordinary wind." How might this inform our understanding of unintended consequences of our actions on the environment?

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## 2. *Vayikra Rabbah 4:6*

### What is the original quote?

Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai taught: It can be compared to people who sit in a boat and one of them took a drill and began to drill under him. His fellow passengers protested to him: "What are you doing?!" He said to them: "What do you care? Am I not drilling under me?!" They said to him: "You are sinking the whole boat with us in it!"

### Questions

1. Who or what can the boat represent in today's context?
2. The man drilling in the boat argues that he's only affecting his own space, echoing sentiments we often hear about personal freedoms. How does the text challenge the notion of 'individual actions' in a shared ecosystem?
3. What are the ethical implications of the other passengers' response? Does their shared plight necessitate a shared response, and what could that look like in tackling global climate challenge?

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## 3. *Kobelet Rabbah 7:13*

### What is the original quote?

Look at God's work - for who can straighten what He has twisted? When the Blessed Holy One created the first human, He took him and led him round all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to him: "Look at My works, how beautiful and praiseworthy they are! And all that I have created, it was for you that I created it. Pay attention that you do not corrupt and destroy My world: if you corrupt it, there is no one to repair it after you."

### Questions

1. God takes Adam on a tour of Gan Eden to demonstrate the beauty and praiseworthiness of creation. Is it possible for us to reconnect with the beauty of nature in the 21st century - a modern, urbanised world?

2. "It was for you that I created it." How does this statement inform our sense of entitlement or responsibility when it comes to natural resources and the environment? Can entitlement and stewardship coexist?
  3. "If you corrupt it, there is no one to repair it after you." What weight does this statement hold in the context of irreversible environmental damage, such as exceeding planetary boundaries or causing climate change? How does this warning affect your own sense of ethical responsibility toward the world?
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## 4. *Chasidic folktale - Wetting the Blade*

### What is the original quote?

After the Ba'al Shem Tov passed, a new shochet\* took his place. He was well-learned in all the laws and followed them scrupulously. He sharpened his knife, knew just where to hold the neck, how to make the cut.

He noticed, though, that a man would watch him as he slaughtered the chickens, and shake his head in disapproval. After several days, he asked the man what he was doing wrong: "I wet the blade, I sharpen it, I make the smallest, quickest cut, just as I learned from the Ba'al Shem Tov. What am I doing that's upsetting you?"

The man, who remembered watching the Ba'al Shem Tov prepare for and slaughter animals, shook his head: "It is true, you wet the blade and sharpen it. But where you use water to sharpen your blade, the Ba'al Shem Tov used his own tears."

\* a Kosher slaughterer

### Questions

1. Why did the Ba'al Shem Tov use his tears to wet the blade?
2. Both the new shochet and the Ba'al Shem Tov technically adhered to the ritual law. How does this story differentiate between 'following the law' and 'living the spirit of the law'?
3. How might a practice of maintaining deep empathy and gratitude in everyday actions contribute to a more harmonious relationship with the natural world?
4. The new shochet is watched and ultimately corrected by a member of the community. Did the community member have the right to tell him off? Why might he have felt inclined to do so?

**Supporting text: A Kavanah for Chocolate & Coffee, by Rabbi David Baum**

This piece of chocolate that I hold in my hand is much more than what it seems. As I hold it, smell it and feel the texture of it, I know that I have helped to bring the workers who planted and picked the cocoa beans that made this chocolate a chance to create their own lives; to be self-sufficient.[1] The taste of this chocolate is the taste of freedom and dignity. Holy Blessed One, I ask that you help me realize my potential as a partner in creation with You – that with this small piece of chocolate along with this small bag of coffee, I can help create a more just world, a world where what we ensure that no one is oppressed with the foods we buy and sell.