**The Carob Tree of the Twenty-First Century**

Dr. Vered Tohar and Professor Adi Wolfson

In the Babylonian Talmud, we find the following well-known homily involving Ḥoni ha-Ma’agel:

One day, [Ḥoni] was walking along the road when he saw a man planting a carob tree. Ḥoni said to him: This tree: after how many years will it bear fruit? The man said to him: It will not bear fruit until seventy years have passed. Ḥoni said to him: How do you know that you will live seventy years so that you may enjoy this fruit? The man said to him: I found a world full of carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted [them] for me, I am planting for my descendants. (Ta’anit 23a)

In the original, the homily appears in the context of a discussion about the Return to Zion and the seventy-year Babylonian exile; the question debated is whether seventy years is a brief or a lengthy period of time. In this article, we wish to divert the discussion from its original historical and transcendental context to the connection between the Jewish world and the climate crisis, from the specific perspective of responsibility and intergenerational reciprocity. This homily, as we interpret it, first and foremost represents the principle of intergenerational reciprocity, which holds that all of us depend not only upon nature but also upon one another. It affirms the importance of preserving the planet for our own sake and for that of posterity.

To get there, we wish to dwell on a marginal detail in the story: the botanical fact that the female carob tree gives fruit only once every six years. It is inconceivable that the Tannaim, who lived in a society that had been agricultural since time immemorial, taught this story and placed it in writing without realizing that it contained erroneous information. Still, we seize upon this detail, of all things, to illustrate the conceptual web that unites the cluster of agricultural homilies in the Talmud, which ultimately deal with the delicate tapestry of humankind and its environment, and the commitment of the contemporary Jewish world to assume responsibility for the struggle to surmount the climate crisis.

Accordingly, in this piece we propose that the homily of Ḥoni and the planter of the carob tree be read as a universal allegory that pertains to our current climate crisis and the intergenerational responsibility of Jewry to be leaders in the struggle to deal with it. This reading interprets the story as a homily about assuming ecological, personal, and intergenerational responsibility.

In the late twentieth century and, even more forecefully, in the twenty-first century, “climate change” and “global warming” have been singled out as the greatest environmental threat to the globe and to humankind, and have been promoted to center-stage among environmental struggles. The steady increase in average temperatures around the globe in the past century has precipitated major climate changes worldwide—extreme changes in weather that are causing natural disasters such as deluges, mudslides, and droughts. Climate changes are also responsible for the melting of polar icecaps and rising ocean waters that may subject coastal cities to inundation. Rising average temperatures and declining average rainfalls are also exacerbating desertification around the world, causing deserts to expand and inducing aridity in soil that renders it unable to sustain agriculture. Global warming is also causing harm to a range of species, driving some to extinction while allowing other species, invasive ones, to flourish. These phenomena collectively are leading to hunger, water shortages, and local and global tussles over resources that are forcing large population groups to migrate in search of sources of sustenance.

The UN report entitled “Our Shared Future,” presented by the Brundtland **C**ommission in 1987, urged us to respond to the needs of the present without impairing future generations’ ability to meet their own needs. Another document, “Agenda 21,” presented at the global summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 in an attempt to establish a new agenda for the twenty-first century, is also based on the principle of intergenerational justice. These two constitutive documents, in addition to innumerable international discussions, climate summits, and global agreements, further underscore the need for immediate joint action to save the earth and humankind.

Intergenerational responsibility is also a key concept in the perception of sustainability. Sustainability is defined as the ability of nature to endure processes and the ability of processes to maintain stable existence over time while weighing their environmental, social, and economic aspects. What this means is that an equilibrium must exist between nature’s ability to continue sustaining natural systems (life cycles, food chains, and so on) and support life around the globe over time, and the development and needs of a certain population (human or other) that depends on these processes. Simply put, it denotes the way life should be lived today so that tomorrow’s generations will be able to live under conditions at least equal to ours.

The Talmudic homily of Ḥoni and the planter of the carob tree illuminates the interrelationship of human and nature at several levels. It illustrates the sensitivity of Jewish culture, as far back as the literature of the Sages, to the reciprocity of humankind and nature; it also, however, relates to each generation’s active responsibility for posterity. It emphasizes that life on this planet is the outcome of responsibility shared by people wherever they are, a responsibility that began at the dawn of humankind and should last forever. The Sages understood the principle of sustainability, even though they did not call it by name. All these levels of understanding are ultimately captured in the planter’s remark: “I found a world full of carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted [them] for me, I am planting for my descendants.”

As we face a reality replete with crises and seek effective and plausible ways of taking action, we may summon the profusion and wealth of pro-ecology Jewish sources to impart systematic teachings on the topic. From this standpoint, the treasures of Jewish culture can undoubtedly provide broad underpinnings, in value and educational terms, for our struggle with the climate crisis. This struggle may be structured coherently, as an outgrowth of the underlying values of Jewish culture that are implanted in its canon texts; accordingly, in effect, it is already built into the worldview of this culture. Due to the profound ancient nexus of the People of Israel and the Land of Israel, and the perception of miracle that typifies the sustainability of the nature of the Land of Israel in the Sages’ homiletics, the values of Jewish culture can and should serve as spearheads for the war of consciousness against the climate crisis.

We conclude with another well-known homily that substantiates the great miracle of nature and humankind’s participation in it—not only in the future, as in the legend of Ḥoni, but right now as well:

Rami bar Yeḥezkel happened to come to Bnei Brak. He saw goats grazing beneath a fig tree and honey oozing from the figs and milk dripping from the goats, the two liquids mingling. He said: This is the meaning of “flowing with milk and honey.” (Ketubot 111b)

Like Rami bar Yeḥezkel, let us teach our children to observe the minute details and learn to appreciate and protect them. As members of the Jewish people who once knew how to mobilize collectively for the promotion of global humanistic agendas, we believe that now, too, we must not be bystanders. Today as before, the Jewish voice should be heard. It is within our ability to be an important and meaningful motivating force in the struggle with the climate crisis. Nurturing a carob tree is an ancient Jewish principle; let us now mobilize it for the greater global interest.

**Dr. Vered Tohar is a researcher of Hebrew literature and Jewish culture at the Department of Jewish Literature, Bar-Ilan University.**

**Professor Adi Wolfson is a researcher at the Green Processes Center, Shamoon College of Engineering (SCE), and an environmental activist in Israel.**