We've Got the Whole World in Our Hands

(Begin audio)

[music]

Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by HUC Connect, the Hebrew Union College's online platform for continuing education. I'm Joshua Holo, your host.

JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast, and our conversation with Rabbi Yonatan Neril. Rabbi Neril, raised in the Reform Movement in NFTY is now an Interfaith Environmental Advocate, and the founder and current director of the Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development, a non-profit organization based in Jerusalem. He has spoken at the World Economic Forum in Davos, multiple UN climate conferences, the Parliament of World Religions, and he co-authored the bestselling book, Eco Bible. Rabbi Yonatan Neril, thank you for joining us on the College Commons Podcast.

Yonatan Neril: It's great to be here.

JH: Let's start off with a brief introduction to Eco Bible. In a nutshell, what is it?

YN: So, Eco bible is a book that I co-authored with Rabbi Leo Dee. It's an ecological commentary on the Torah, on the Hebrew Bible. Volume 1 is on Genesis and Exodus. Volume 2 is on Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. In total, it's a commentary on 400 verses. We have a lot of Rabbinic teachings from the Jewish tradition, and we have a lot of ecological statements from environmental scientists as it's a combining of religion and ecology, faith and science. And we've now distributed it to hundreds of Rabbis, priests and pastors in the US and Israel and elsewhere.

JH: I'd like to confront the use of scripture as a religious enterprise for social or political ends. How do you relate to religious voices who focus on aspects of the Bible or for that matter, their respective religious texts that run counter to our sense of ecological stewardship?

YN: I think that a theology of conquest and domination fits hand in glove with the dominant paradigm of consumerism and materialism. In other words, there's definitely a tendency in different religious practitioners of different religions today to embrace a very human-centered view of the world and to embrace a materialistic lifestyle together with a religious lifestyle. And part of what we're trying to reveal in this book, as well as through the work of my organization,

the Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development, is that God wants us to care for creation. God gave us the planet. And in Genesis 2:15, it said that God placed the human being in the Garden of Eden to serve and conserve it. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks translates it.

[foreign language]

YN: And we have this mandate, and we're living in a time called the Anthropocene of where humans are having a major impact on planet earth. The earth is warming, it's heating up. Here in Jerusalem, it's been another record month of heat. And we believe that the time has come to apply Bible and faith-based teachings to our current situation. That from my perspective, is really the purpose of religion, is to speak to the most pressing issues facing us today. And so therefore, we're trying to show that through Rabbinic commentaries on the verses from the Midrash, from the Jewish world tradition, the Talmud, and for the Millennia, that there is something deep in the Torah that relates to ecology and the time has come to bring it out.

JH: I appreciate your connection between the domination model of the human role in planet Earth's destiny with some of the consumerist tendencies and politics and approaches to civic and political life. What about however the opposite, the relatively, let's call it anti-environmental religious positions that actually focus on the ephemeral quality of physical existence and use that notion of physical reality as a mere illusion or temporary holding pattern as a reason to not take the physical world so seriously or to encumber ourselves with its care?

YN: Yeah. I think that that is one tendency among some religious adherence. It's interesting, when I was in college, I went to India and was in Northern India in a Western Tibet, a place called Ladakh. And I went to a Buddhist monastery there and I saw them destroy a mandala, this beautiful sand artwork that they made. And I don't think that Buddhists in their view that the world is a federal are at the forefront of ecological damage on planet Earth. In fact, if I were to rate people, religious adherence, Buddhists are probably doing better than some others. But there is a tendency amongst some other religious adherence to say that it doesn't matter what we do to planet earth because God is just gonna wave a wand and take care of all of our problems, or the Messiah is gonna come and all the extra carbon in the atmosphere is just gonna go away and all the plastic pollution is gonna go away. And maybe they're right and I actually hope that they're right because that would mean that the temperature on the planet would go down.

YN: But if they're wrong, then it will have been a huge theological mistake for which the current and future generations will pay a price. And so, I do think that we need to think about the here or the now. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik taught in comparison to Descartes who said, "Cogito, ergo sum." I think therefore I am. That Rabbi Soloveitchik taught that in the Jewish tradition we learn I am, therefore I am responsible. In other words, God created the human being. And when Cain kills Abel, and God says to him, "What happened?" Well, the lesson that we learned from that is that Cain needs to take responsibility, that we are responsible for our actions. And there's even a Midrash from the Jewish world tradition that says that when God created the world, God showed Adam the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to him, "Everything I created, I created for you. See how beautiful and praiseworthy are my works. Be careful not to destroy or degrade

them for if you do, there will be no one after you to repair it." And I think that teaching, which was from about 1500 years ago before we had a global ecological crisis, can teach us that we do need to take responsibility.

JH: Let's talk about the other side of the coin, particularly of the title of your organization, Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development. Talk to us about the development part of sustainable development. What is the goal of development as you understand it, and what might you bring to the conversation in the context of sustainability?

YN: I chose that title about 18 years ago. If I were to choose the title today, I would probably choose something more like Faith Earth Alliance. But sustainable development is a catch phrase today that is very well known, and the UN has actually defined that term through 17 sustainable development goals, the SDGs, among them, climate action and ending poverty and water for all and action on gender. But the way that we sort of focus our work has been on ecological sustainability. And that there's this idea that sustainable development isn't just about physical development such that, to raise the material standard of living of people on earth, but it also has to do with spirituality. The ecological crisis is a spiritual crisis. It's not just about the birds and the bees, the trees and the toads. It's about how we live as spiritual beings in a physical reality.

YN: And therefore, for us to have sustainable development, we need to bring on board the biggest NGO on planet Earth, which is religion. Religious institutions have huge landholdings, media outlets, educational institutions, and moral authority, and we need to bring them on board for sustainability. There's been this idea that religion is one thing and ecology is another thing, that there's no connection between the two. But I believe that the two go hand-in-hand that when we do an ecological act, it's also a spiritual act, like do not waste or destroy is one of the 613 commandments in the Jewish tradition. And not wasting or destroying is also an ecological action.

JH: I'd like to go back, this correlation or connection between a domination approach to planet Earth and capitalist consumerism. It was a very fertile idea that you raised. I wanna add a third element. There is an argument that I would say, in the culture, that posits that, yes, domination is correlated to consumerist materialism, but that yes as well, it correlates to a certain kind of science to be counter poised with religion, but a kind of science that has discovered countless things that have improved the human condition, including longevity and health and what have you. So, as we think about religion, which you so articulately raised as a major force in charting the course of human experience and the experience of the planet, is there something different going on with respect to science? And is it possible that science might be wedded to some of the aspects that you consider destructive, such as the domination model and the materialist model?

YN: Yeah. I think that you're onto something. And I've also read a little bit in this regard that within the scientific paradigm, there's a view of trying to see everything as separate. Amitav Ghosh talks about this a bit in his book, The Nutmeg's Curse, which is really a book about the mindset that has given a rise to the ecological crisis. And within that scientific approach, it's a

reductionist, it's trying to reduce things to their most elemental source. And so, in one hand that's enabled us to find bosons and quarks and these subatomic particles. On the other hand, that approach has also led to a sense of separateness. Whereas an ecological approach and a spiritual ecological approach is an approach that emphasizes interconnection and interdependence, that God is one, the source of all being is one.

YN: And we live in this creation where we're all interconnected. And therefore when I use a disposable product, well, that has an effect on others. Even if it's hard for me to see that. And when I put carbon into the atmosphere, it affects people and it stays in the atmosphere for 100 years. And so part of the work that I'm involved in is to try to promote this worldview of interconnectedness and interdependence, because I believe that that's a spiritual shift that humanity needs to make. The Zohar, the mystical Jewish text states that the human being has five levels of soul. Nefesh, Ruach, Neshama, Chaya and Yechida. And within those five levels are another five levels. So it's like we have 25 levels of soul, and the consumer society operates at the lowest level of soul, where these physical pleasures are very attractive. But as we raise our level of soul awareness, we will come to see the connection between other people and the connection between more than human species, that the 10 million species on planet earth that we are in a relationship with.

[music]

JH: The College Commons Podcast belongs to HUC Connect, the online platform for continuing education from the Hebrew Union College. HUC Connect includes webinars, syllabi for community learning, and masterclasses for HUC alumni with interviews, expert panels and classroom materials on topics ranging from the arts to civil society, Israel, and much more. Check us out @huc.edu/hucconnect. Now back to our interview.

JH: I'd like to shift the conversation to another component of the title of your organization, and that is interfaith. Share with us the teaching from some of the religions that you collaborate with, teachings that have most reframed your thinking about sustainability and stewardship.

YN: So, Pope Francis wrote a book called Laudato Si', On Care for Our Common Home. It's called an encyclical. And he published it in 2015. And interestingly partly because of the influence of some cardinals who focus on the Hebrew Bible, there's actually a lot in there about Genesis and Exodus. But one thing that Pope Francis talks about is the rapidification of society, which he sort of put his finger on how people who are now in their 40s or 50s or older can really sense how human society has become much more fast paced in terms of people traveling, but also just in terms, scrolling down a feed on social media or opening one's email and seeing dozens of messages. This is sort of a root issue within the ecological crisis because Pope Francis is talking about how we've moved from a slower-paced society that's more in touch with nature to a faster paced one.

YN: There's actually a powerful movie called Koyaanisqatsi, came out about 40 years ago. Koyaanisqatsi is a Hopi word that means life out of balance. And it shows video footage of nature in regular speed, and then it speeds it up. And so the forests are swaying a little more

quickly and the clouds are moving faster. And then it shows video footage of New York City in regular speed and then fast motion. And the viewer sort of gets the sense of life out of balance when human society is shown in fast forward. So, that's the teaching that I take from Pope Francis about the need to slow down and within the Jewish tradition, we have Shabbat of resting, and I believe that especially now with the iPhones and Androids the need to take a break from technology has become even more important.

JH: Tell us what you think is Judaism's superpower in terms of thinking and acting ecologically. And when I say Judaism, I don't necessarily mean scripture. Any aspect of our civilization, culture, history, that is just an incredibly powerful tool for moving this agenda forward.

YN: Well, I think one tool is the Sabbath, to take a day of rest without actively using technology. I think that's very powerful. I don't think that's sufficient though. As I understand it, the ecological crisis, it has spiritual roots like greed, arrogance and short-term thinking. And it has spiritual solutions like humility, long-term thinking, caring for other creatures, caring for other people. So, there's a verse from the Hebrew prophets [0:16:31.1] ____ "Walk humbly before God." And so this emphasis on its humility. What does it mean to tread lightly on this planet? I think that's an important line of spiritual teaching that we need to emphasize in our time. There's another teaching from the Jewish tradition, [0:16:47.6] ____ "Who is the wise person?" [0:16:50.3] ____ "The person who sees the outgrowth of their action." And this ability to think long-term. We're living in a society where businesses tend to think short-term in terms of their profit margin and providing returns to shareholders. We have political systems that also think short-term, especially in democratic countries where it's a very short-term political horizon. And I think there's a key role for religious institutions to play in helping humanity to think more long-term. What is the world gonna look like in 10 years based on our current lifestyle? What's it gonna look like in 20 years, in 50 years? These are important things that I think religious institutions can help us with.

JH: On the flip side of the coin, what do you think is Judaism's Achilles heel that prevents us from thinking and acting ecologically and assuming our responsibility to improve?

YN: It's an interesting question. If you were to teleport Abraham to this moment, or Moses and seeing the ice sheets melting and the hurricanes intensifying and the deserts expanding, what would they say at this moment? We are now firmly embedded within consumer society. Most Jews have a deep connection to the current lifestyle which has spread around the world over the past several decades. And part of the challenge with ecological crisis is that it's about addiction. Humanity is addicted to fossil fuels, humanity is addicted to sugar, and there are many other addictions, not even to speak about drug use. And it's very hard to kick an addiction. And that's where religious clergy and institutions have an important role to play, is how do we get out of this addiction? I'll share with you a teaching from Eco Bible that the book of Genesis talks about a war of four kings versus five kings, a regional war in the Middle East.

YN: And the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah were defeated and they fled into bitumen pits. Bitumen is a type of a fossil fuel. It's this viscous very thick liquid. And they got stuck in these pits. And according to the Midrash, the Jewish world tradition, they were pulled out of these pits

by Abraham. They couldn't get out of the pits themselves. And to my mind, this is a deep teaching about the prophet of God pulling these materialistic kings of Sodom and Gomorrah out of the fossil fuels. So in our times, I think that that's our Achilles heel, but no challenge is too great. This is the test that we have today.

JH: I take your point about the addiction, as a fellow addict to sugar, at least not to mention coffee and other things. I appreciate the depth of the challenge that is sort of rendered in the idea of addiction. I do wanna circle back, however, to Judaism. I wanna ask us as a Jewish institution, the Hebrew Union College, Jewish Institute of Religion, I wanna ask you as a Rabbi, which is to say, official Jews were owning our Judaism in an official capacity. What does Judaism have to answer for? What has Judaism contributed to the wrong side of this debate?

YN: I would say that it's not just Jews. So I first wanna make that caveat. And there is an interesting book that's published by a professor at the University of Notre Dame called Anointed with Oil, Christianity and Crude in Modern America. But the book talks actually about Christians, Jews, and Muslims and this embrace of fossil fuels over the past 180 years since oil was first drilled in Baku, Azerbaijan in 1841. And of how, for example, in Israel today, if you are to look at where Israel is getting its energy, so much of its energy is coming from gas, which is drilled in the Mediterranean Sea. And there's been a pretty strong embrace of this from different sectors of Israeli society. But that's a vulnerability in terms of the current threat from Hezbollah. And actually the Houthis just said that they're gonna now target those gas rigs. And so, if we're to sort of look back at the past century of Rabbinic teaching and preaching in relation to fossil fuels, if someone reviewed a PhD thesis on that topic, I would imagine that there hasn't been so much of a challenge from a Jewish perspective of humanity's embrace of fossil fuels.

JH: You articulate the collective and the individual power that we hold. But do you sometimes despair for the genuine power of the individual to improve our situation?

YN: I'd like to just share a quick story that the Nobel Laureate, Toni Morrison told the young boy who approaches an elder woman with a bird in his hands. And he says to the woman, "Can you tell me whether the bird in my hands is alive or dead?" And she realizes that the boy is gonna play a trick on her because if she says that the bird is dead, then he will open his hands and the bird will fly away. And if she says the bird is alive, then he will close his hands and crush the bird. So he has got her coming and going. And so she thinks to herself for a minute, and she says to the young boy, "I don't know whether the bird in your hands is alive or dead. All I know is that the life of the bird is in your hands." And I believe that's our situation today, that each of us has the world in our hands, and we need to think of ourselves as stewards. Each of us is Noah, each of us is Noah's wife, Naamah. And the earth is our collective ship, and we can all do something so that this continues to be a thriving planet. It is indeed in our hands.

JH: I'd like to close out with a question I often ask at the end of an interview, which is the question of surprise. When you did your research for and wrote Eco Bible, what did you learn that surprised you?

YN: There's a lot of gloom and doom in terms of what's going on. And so one thing that surprised me was just sort of this undercurrent of hope that Rabbi Nachman of Breslov said, [0:23:20.7] ____ "Never give up hope." And Rabbi Amorai asked, "Where is the Garden of Eden?" He replied, "It is on Earth." And Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks of blessed memory wrote, "Hope is a human virtue, but one with religious underpinnings. And its ultimate, it is the belief that God is mindful of our aspirations with us in our foundling efforts, that God has given us the means to save us from ourselves. That we are not wrong to dream, wish, and work for a better world. Hope is the knowledge that we can choose, that we can learn through our mistakes and act differently next time." I believe that this line of thinking and encouragement is really a counterpoint to some people who say that there's nothing that we can do and that all hope is lost, that we're already over the cliff.

YN: Which I don't think is the case, and I don't think anyone knows that. And so I sort of find encouragement in these Rabbinic teachings that say that, "Well, we got to do what we can do." And Maimonides said, "We gotta think of ourselves as a sort of 50% guilty and 50% innocent, and any act that we take will sort of tip the scales." And that's the power of the individual. And that's an important Jewish value, that the individual can make a difference. But I think especially with the ecological crisis, this is a time where we need to empower ourselves. We need to think about where do each of us have power? Where do our institutions have power, and how do we use that power so that the next generation inherits a thriving, sustainable, and spiritually aware planet.

JH: Well, on that note, Rabbi Yonatan Neril, thank you so much for joining us for your conversation and for the work you do on behalf of the planet and our shared destiny.

YN: Thank you very much for having me.

JH: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of the College Commons Podcast, available wherever you listen to your podcasts. And check out HUC Connect, compelling conversations at the forefront of Jewish learning. For more information about all that HUC Connect has to offer, visit huc.edu/hucconnect.

[music]

(End of audio)