The Genesis texts in this study trace the devolution of humanity’s two most important relationships, the relationship with the land and the relationship with God. Specifically, whenever one relationship degenerates so does the other one. Alongside these two relationships, one also sees the human relationship with the animals changing, from one of intimacy to one of “terror” on the part of the other animals as humans become predators.

The Exodus and Leviticus texts on the Shmitah (Sabbatical) year emphasize ideas and give textual clues that suggest Shmitah is a response to and a solution or tikun for the tragedy of Genesis. Here, when the right relationship with the land is restored, so too is the people’s relationship with God (‘I will become Elohim for you and you will become my people’). The relationship with the animals also transforms into a more Edenic one of sharing and living together, when all creatures, even the wild animals, have the right to eat the produce that grows without cultivation in Shmitah year.

The fundamental understanding that these texts drive at is that the goal and purpose of the Torah covenant, on a grand scale, is that the Israelites observe the Shmitah and Yovel (Jubilee) years, and that in doing so, they will repair the relationship with the Earth that was destroyed by the generations leading up to the flood. Essentially, the covenant with Abraham is meant to take one people and one land, and put them in right relationship with each other, in order to become a model for how humanity should live. That model society is created by the observance of Shmitah.

The importance of Shmitah is evidenced in the fact that according to Leviticus, if God has to choose between taking care of the people and taking care of the land, God will choose the land over the people. The land is not ‘promised’ to the Israelites except conditionally, based on whether they respect the land’s rights and do justice with her and through her. This is why, according to the rabbis as well as the author of Chronicles, neglect of the Shmitah year leads to exile.

Every human right, as the Torah understands it—the right to feed oneself and one’s family, the right to have equal access to resources, the right to be freed from debt and from slavery, and the protection of strangers—are all tied to the observance of Shmitah and the seven-year cycle. Social justice is fundamentally grounded in the idea of justice for the land, and for the Earth.

Rabbi David Mevorach Seidenberg

P.S. I started studying Shmitah and Yovel under a grant in 1982, after I became newly observant. I started teaching these texts on Genesis and Shmitah in 1993, when I prepared them for a tikun lel Shavuot. Since then, I have taught them many times at synagogues, at Teva Center and Kayam seminars, the Green Zionist Alliance, CAJE, Rabbis for Human Rights and other conferences, to educators, rabbis and lay people. Every time I teach them I learn new things. I hope the experience you have with these texts will also be rich.

Introduction for teachers

How to use these texts:

In order to emphasize the connections between the texts, the translation method used is ‘concordant’, that is, similar words in Hebrew are translated as much as possible by similar words in English. Strange phrases in Hebrew are also translated so as to sound strange in English. The goal is not just to trace the evolution of ideas about our relationship with the Earth, but also to provide a text that can be used for understanding and creating midrash, which often depends on specific phrasing and repeated words. For some phrases more than one translation is offered.

The texts themselves highlight which phrases and passages deal with our relationship to the land, and which deal with our relationship to the animals and to eating. (See key at the bottom of any page.) Commentary includes interpretations relating to questions of ecology and our relationship with the Earth or land, as well as interpretations that are simply elucidating or interesting. It also includes some discussion questions. Those comments that are most important for studying our ecological relationships are starred (*).

Though there is a particular picture that I hope readers will arrive at, the commentaries include not only interpretations that support that goal, but also some interpretations that contradict it.

Students should attain an understanding of how the Torah covenant can be interpreted ecologically, as well as learning other interpretations. My intention is for there to be enough material here for students to arrive at their own conclusions, independent of the author or the teacher.

A second, abridged version of these texts is available at neohasid.org/torah/genesis-shmitah/. It focuses on the recurring trope of the wild animal or chayah. It is both shorter (a single sheet) and less dense. What can be seen most clearly there is that our relationship with the other animals is a prism which reflects our relationship with the land and with God. In fact, the most explicit link between Eden and Shmitah is that we share the same food as the wild animals in both settings. The abridged version does not have commentary and teachers may want to use it in conjunction with studying this longer version.

This text study can also work for chevruta or paired study, where each partner takes turns reading aloud and explaining the text. I would also recommend for anyone teaching these texts to first study them thoroughly and to become familiar with the translation.

Many more resources on Shmitah are also available at neohasid.org/torah/genesis-shmitah/.

Key: underline = relation to the land; san serif = relation to animals/eating/food; bolded words have comments on them. The word ‘god’, uncapsulated, is used as a pronoun for God. Translation and commentary by Rabbi David Seidenberg; contact: reb davidb6@gmail.com, neohasid.org, ver 8.3
Genesis, Covenant, Jubilee and the Land Ethic  neohasid.org ©2021

a. Elohim said: Let us make a human adam in our figure like our image, and they will dominate/prevail yayirdu over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the beast b’veimah and over all the land and over every crawler crawling on the land. And Elohim created the adam in god’s* image, in Elohim’s image god created him, male and female god created them. And Elohim blessed them and Elohim said to them: Bear fruit and increase and fill the land and occupy her until v et ba’aretz v’kinnuhy and prevail urdu over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every animal crawling on the land kol bachayah baramotav al ba’aretz. And Elohim said: Here, I have given to you-all every plant/grass ‘eeyot seeding seed which is on the face of all the land and every tree which has in it tree-fruit seeding seed, for you it will be for eating, and for every animal of the land chayat ba’aretz and for every bird of the skies and for every crawler on the land in which there is a living soul nefesh chayah, every green plant yerek ‘eeyot for eating. And it was so. Gen 1:26-30

b. And Elohim saw all that god made, and here: very good v’binehov tov m’od. And the skies and the land were completed and all their hosts, and Elohim completed in the seventh day god’s work which god made. And in the seventh day Elohim stopped/ rested vayishbot from all god’s work which god made. And Elohim blessed the seventh day and made him holy, for in him god stopped from all god’s work which god created to do. Gen 1:31-2-3
c. Every growth of the field would yet be in the land and every plant of the field would yet grow, for v’nechmad Elohim had not caused rain on the land, and an adam to serve la’avod the ground was not…v’nechmad Elohim formed yegyizer the human ha’adam, dirt from the ground/ earth ‘agir min ha’adumah and blew in his nostrils a living breath nishmat chayyim, and the adam became a living soul nefesh chayah. V’nechmad Elohim planted a garden gan in Eden eastward and put there the adam which god formed, and caused to grow from the land every tree pleasurable nechmad for seeing and good for eating, and the life-tree in the middle of the gan and the tree of knowing good and bad/evil…V’nechmad Elohim took the adam and placed/ rested him in gan Eden to work her/to serve her and to watch over her l’ovedah ul’shomrah. And V’nechmad Elohim commanded over the adam, saying: From every tree in the garden eating you will eat; and from the tree of knowing good and bad, you will not eat from him, for in the day of your eating from him dying you will die. Gen 2:5-17
d. V’nechmad Elohim said: No good is the adam being by himself – I will make for him a help opposite him. And v’nechmad Elohim formed every animal of the field chayat basadeh and every bird of the skies and brought unto the adam to see what he would call to him…and the adam called names to every beast b’veimah and every bird of the skies and every animal of the field kol chayat basadeh, and for Adam no help opposite/corresponding to him was found. And V’nechmad Elohim built the side tzela’ which god took from the adam into a woman and brought her unto the adam. Gen 2:18-22

The Kabbalah teaches that the sin was not eating the fruit but separating the fruit from the tree. Once the fruit was ripe, they would have been invited to eat it:
e. The two of them were naked ‘arumim, the adam and his woman, and they were not embarrassed. And the snake was clever (naked) ‘arum beyond any chayat basadeb…and he said to the woman: Did Elohim even say, you-all will not eat from any tree of the gan?…And the woman said: Elohim said…from the tree in the middle of the gan you-all will not eat and will not touch…And the woman saw, that the tree was good to eat and he was desire for the eyes, and the tree was pleasurable for enlightening nechmad l’haskil, and she took from his fruit and ate and gave to her man with her, and he ate. Gen 2:25-3:6

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As a consequence of the fall, three relationships deteriorate: the one between God and humans, the one between woman and man, and the one between humanity and the land. Genesis until Abraham is essentially a history of the ongoing degeneration of these relationships.

f. And the eyes of them both were opened and they knew, that they were naked ‘eirumim …They heard the voice of YHVH Elohim walking in the garden and they hid, the adam and his woman, from the face of YHVH Elohim… YHVH Elohim called unto the adam and said to him: Where are you? Ayekah!…and god said: Who told you that you are naked? Is it from the tree which I commanded you against eating you ate?…Unto the woman your nostrils / your anger you will eat bread, until you return to the ground, because from her were you taken, for you are dirt and will turn back to dirt… YHVH Elohim said: Here the human has become like one from us to know good and bad. And now, lest he send out his hand and take also from the life-tree and eat and live for all time— YHVH Elohim sent him / threw him (them) out of gan Eden to work / to serve la’avo the ground that he was taken from ba’adamah other lakeach misham. And god drove out vayigashv the adam and made the k’ruvim dwell from the east of gan Eden and the glowing-hot sword turning itself, to watch over the life-tree’s path. Gen 3:7-24

g. Kayin said to Hevel his brother: it was while they were in the field, and Kayin rose up to Hevel his brother and killed him…And YHVH said unto Kayin: Where is Hevel your brother? And he said: I didn’t know! Am I the one watching over my brother? And god said: What did you do? The voice of your brother’s bloods, they scream unto me from the ground. Now you are cursed from the ground arrur atab min ba’adamah which split open her mouth to take your brother’s bloods from your hand. Because you will work / will serve ta’avo the ground, she will not add giving her strength. Shaken off and thrust out na v’nud you will be in the land. And Kayin said to YHVH: Great is my sin, beyond carrying. Here you have driven me ben getirashta ol today away from the face of the ground mip’nei ba’adamah and from your face I will be hid, and I will be na v’nud in the land, and it will be whoever finds me will kill me. Gen 4:8-14

h. YHVH said: My spirit will not strain in humanity ba’adam for all-time by reason that he is (they are) flesh…YHVH saw, that the human’s evil ra’at ba’adam in the land was tremendous, and every leaning of his (their) heart’s thought was only evil/bad all day. And YHVH drew-in yishvatem, for god made the adam within the land, and god was pained unto god’s heart. And YHVH said: I will blot out the human adam I created from off the face of the land, from human to beast to crawler to bird of the skies, for I am withdrawn against nichamiti my making them…And the land was ruined before the Elohim and the land was filled up with violence. And Elohim saw the land and here, her ruin, for all flesh ruined his way on the land. And Elohim said to Noach: The end of all flesh comes before me, for the land is filled with violence from before them. Here am I going to ruin them with the land. Gen 6:3-13

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The relationship between humanity and the land and animals is replaced by covenant. The animals are equal partners in this covenant, as is the land itself.

i. *Elohim* remembered Noach and all the animals ḳöl haṭḥayyāt and beasts which were with him in the ark... And *Elohim* spoke to Noach saying: Go out from the ark, you and your woman and your sons and your sons' women with you; every animal ḥṭayyāt which is with you, from all flesh of bird and beast and every crawler crawling on the land which is with you, going out with you, and they will swarm in the land and bear fruit and increase in the land... And Noach built an altar for *YHVH* and took from every cult-pure beast and from every cult-pure bird and made burnt-up-offerings go up... And *YHVH* smelled the pleasing smell and *YHVH* said unto god's heart: I will not add to cursing anymore the ground for the sake of humanity ba‘atvr ha’adam— for the human heart’s leaning is evil/bad from his youth, and I will not add anymore to striking down all life as I did. Throughoout all the land’s days, sowing and reaping and cold and hot and summer and winter and day and night will not stop/rest ṭa‘ishboty. And *Elohim* blessed Noach and his sons and said to them: Bear fruit and increase and fill the land. And fearing you and terror of you will be over every animal of the land ḥṭayyāt ha‘aretz and over every bird of the skies, in all that crawls the ground and in all the fish of the sea, into your hand they are given. All that crawls that is living, for you it will be for eating, like green plants I have given to you-all. Just the flesh with his soul nefše, his blood, you will not eat. And just your blood for your souls will I require, by the hand of every animal ḥṭayyāt and by the hand of every human...for in the image of *Elohim* god made the human. And you, bear fruit and increase, swarm in/through the land and increase in her. Gen 8:1, 8:15-9:7

j. And *Elohim* said unto Noach and unto his sons saying: And I, here I am erecting my covenant briti with you and with your seed after you and with the soul of every animal with you ṭa‘ishm, among the bird and among the beast and among every animal of the field ṭa‘ishm basadeh with you... all flesh will not be cut-off anymore from the flood waters, and there will be no more flood to destroy the land. And *Elohim* said: This is the covenant-sign which I am placing between me and between you-all and between every living/animal’s soul ṭa‘ishm ḥṭayyāt which is with you, for generations, all-time: my bow I have put in the cloud, and she will be a covenant sign between me and the land... and I will see her, remembering a covenant for all-time between *Elohim* and between all living/animal soul in all flesh on the land. Gen 9:8-17

At the Tower of Bavel, God scatters the people to force them to fulfill the mandate in the original blessing and the rainbow covenant: fill the Earth. Why, and why do the people resist doing so?

k. And all the land was one speech and single words ḍ’varim achadim... and they said: Let us build a city and a tower... lest we be scattered pen nefšez over the face of the land... And *YHVH* said: Let us go down and babble their speech there... and from there *YHVH* scattered them over the face of the land, and they stopped building the city. Gen 11:1-9

One interpretation of the covenant with Abraham is that after the flood, God has given up on creating a right relationship between adam and adamaḥ. Instead, God is trying to create a right relationship between one people and one land.

l. And *YHVH* said to Avram: Go for yourself / to yourself...to a land that I will show you...and you will be a blessing... and through you will be blessed all the families of the earth ṭa‘ishm ’p‘ḥot ha‘adamaḥ. Gen 12:1-3

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**Genesis, Covenant, Jubilee and the Land Ethic**

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**Page 3: The Rainbow Covenant**

* Elohim remembered Noach and all the animals.

The midrash uses this verse to show that God’s mercy and covenantal love extend to all the animals and not just humans. “Why were they rewarded? Because they kept their mitzvot—to preserve their species.” (Tanchuma)

**Swarms in the land.** A kind of super-fertility, where the animals would reproduce as quickly as bugs. See below.

* Cursing the ground for the sake of humanity. God forsweares destroying the land for humanity’s sake—severing the connection between people and the land that has driven the story thus far.

* Sowing and reaping... will not stop. Not stopping is the mark of a world that has abandoned the significance of Eden, where creation is completed through resting or stopping. The Sabbatical and Jubilee years restore exactly this: resting from sowing and reaping.

* Terror of you. This sounds like a kind of dominion, but according to to Gen. Rabhah, after the flood ṭa‘ishm, dominion, did not return. Rashi explains that when Adam called the animals they would come to him—so terror is dominion’s exact opposite. Domination and God’s image are connected in midrash—hence some say humanity was no longer in God’s image after the flood.

* All that crawls which lives, for you it will be for eating, like green plants. This is the end of the last vestige of Eden: not only will humans and the other animals not share the same food, but the other animals will become food.

**His soul, his blood.** The blood is the medium through which all our cells breathe, hence like the breath, it is the animating principle of the entire body, which is also called nefse. In <em>kaddish</em>, blood must be completely removed. In the case of a wild animal, the blood must be covered with earth, in a way which honors the mitzvot, in a kind of burial of the animal’s soul.

**By the hand of every animal.** The verse sounds like it means, ‘I will avenge any animal that kills a human’, but Rashi, Ramban and the ‘Talmud all say it means, ‘I will let the animals kill any person who kills another human’.

**The image of *Elohim*.** This is the only time God’s image is given ethical significance in Torah.

**Swarms through the land.** There are only two places where ‘swarm’ is used to describe human beings, here and in describing the fertility of the Israelites in Egypt. The Egyptian response was to be horrified.

**I am erecting my covenant with you and with every soul living with you.** The animals are equal partners in the covenant. A covenant binds those not present, i.e., future generations, and is for the sake of a greater whole, i.e., the land. ‘Covenant’ appears 7 times in the Hebrew.

* A covenant sign between me and the land. The land is fully a partner in the first covenant. It may even be the primary partner.

Scattered them...over the land. Practically speaking, humans are the only species that can adapt to virtually any environment on Earth. Is that related?

**Babble.** <em>V’aranab</em> is a pun on Bavel, Babylon.

Through you. The covenant with Abraham is the first covenant in which a human is the primary subject. The blessings of this covenant include all humanity.
m. Six years you will sow your land and gather your produce. And the seventh you will release tish'\text{m}tenah and forswear, and the poor of your people will eat and their remainder the animal of the field chayat basadeh will eat. So you will do to your vineyard and olive orchard. Six days you will do your works and in the seventh day you will stop, for the sake of your ox and your donkey resting ime'\text{an} yannach and your female servant's child and the stranger re-souling rayinafeish. Ex. 23:10-11

n. IIIll spoke to Moshe in Mount Sinai saying: Speak to Yisrael's children and say unto them: For you will come to the land which I give you and the land will rest/stop shabat, VIII'll's shabat/Sabbath-rest… In the seventh year the Sabbath's sabbath shabbat shabbaton will it be for the land, a Sabbath for VIII. Don't sow your field and don't prune your vineyard…And the shabat of the land will be for you for eating: for you and for your male servant and for your female servant and for your hired-worker and for your settler living-as-a-stranger with you toshav'kha bagarin imakh, and for your beast b'emtekha and for the animal which is in your land chayab asher b'artzekha, all of her produce t\text{v}n'\text{u}tah will be to eat. You will count for yourself seven Sabbaths of years, seven years seven times…on Yom Hakipurim you will make the shofar pass through all your land. And you will make holy the fifty-year year, and call out liberty/release d'\text{v}or in the land, to all those inhabiting her. It will be a Jubilee Yovel for you – you will return each man/person to his (their) tribe-possession, and each person will return to his (their) family…You will do my statutes, and you will watch over my judgments… and settle on the land securely l\text{a}ts'm\text{\text{\text{"}}t}ach, And the land will give her fruit and you will eat to be satisfied and you will settle securely on her…And the land you may not sell permanently lats'm\text{\text{\text{"}}t}ach for the land is mine ki li ba'aretz, for you are strangers and settlers by/with me ki gerim v'toshavim a\text{\text{\text{"}}}t\text{m} imadi. So in all the land of your tribe-posessions, redemption q\text{\text{\text{"}}}dah you-all will give to the land. Lev 25:1-24

o. If you will walk in my statutes and watch over my commandments and do them, then I will give your rains in their season and the land will give her produce q\text{\text{\text{"}}}dah and the tree of the field his fruit… and you will dwell securely in your land…And I will put/give peace in the land and I will uphold my covenant with you… and I will make myself walk in the midst of you and I will become Elohim for you and you will become my people… And if you will not listen… and if you will despise my statutes… to undo my covenant, even so will I do this to you… you will sow your seed for emptiness, for your enemies will eat it… I will set my face at you… And you will completely use your strength for emptiness, and your land will not give her produce and the tree of the land will not give his fruit… and I will send out against you the animal of the field chayat basadeh and she will make you childless… And if with this you will not listen to me and will walk with me in opposition b'keri, I will walk with you in a fury of opposition… and you will eat the flesh of your sons and your daughter's flesh you will eat… and I will desolate the land and your enemies will be desolate over her, those living in her. And you-all will I scatter in the nations… then the land will enjoy/desire yirze\text{h} her Sabbaths… All the days of her desolation she will rest what she didn't rest in your Sabbaths when you were dwelling on her… You will be lost in the nations and the land of your enemies will eat you… And those of you who are left… their uncircumcised hearts will be bent-to-shape… and I will remember my covenant with Yaakov and even my covenant with Yitzchak and my covenant with Avraham… and I will remember the land… These are the statutes and judgments and Tora which IIIll set between god and between Yisrael's children in Mount Sinai by Moshe's hand. Lev 26:3-42

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