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## **The environment in Jewish law**

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Selected Reform Responsa

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## SELECTED REFORM RESPONSA

Walter Jacob

Most of these responsa are a representative selection from more than one thousand American Reform responsa published by the Central Conference of American Rabbis and the Hebrew Union College Press. The responsa entitled "The Environment and Property Right," "Early Zionism, the Biblical Landscape and Ecology," "Torah Ark and Ecology," and "Recycling Sacred Books and the Genizah" have not been previously published. We are grateful for permission to publish them.

QUESTION: I am interested in seeing what Judaism has to say about environmental protection versus property rights. (C.D.S., Philadelphia, PA)

ANSWER: The Jewish tradition has very little to say about wild lands. While it deals with protection of nature, it concerns itself exclusively with developed areas. That is true of the famous section in Deuteronomy (20:19f.), which demands that fruit trees not be destroyed in a time of siege. In other words, although there is temporary advantage to be gained by the destruction of fruit trees, both in making the siege easier and in denying those settled in the city of access to food, this destruction is to be denied in order to protect the land for the longer term. What is at stake here is not really an interest in the natural world, but a desire to look at long-term human existence versus human war gain. Fruit trees, after all, in contrast to wheat and barley fields, take years to mature and so should not be destroyed.

- 11. *Mah She'atit*, VII, No. 10 for an excellent translation and commentary on the text.
- 12. *A Treasury of Responsa*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1967), No. 43.
- 13. On the subject of artificial insemination see Rabbi Walter Jacob, "Jewish Involvement in Genetic Engineering," dated March 1980, in *Questions and Answers*, (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1980), p. 10.

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