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 animals as humans become predators.

The Exodus and Leviticus texts on the Shmitah (Sabbatical) year emphasize ideas and give textual clues that show that Shmitah is a response to and a solution or tikun for the tragedy of Genesis. Here, as 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 convivience.

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 year, and that in doing so, they will repair the relationship with the Earth that was destroyed in 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 a right relationship with each other, so as to be a model for how humanity should live. That model is created by the observance of Shmitah.

The importance of Shmitah is emphasized by 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 be fed, 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—are all tied to the observance of Shmitah and the cycle of seven years. The model of justice between human beings is fundamentally grounded in the idea of justice for the land, and for the Earth.

Rabbi David Mevorach Seidenberg

P.S. I have been teaching these texts on Genesis and Shmitah since 1993, when I first prepared them for a tikun leil 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. This is the first time I have created study sheets for these texts meant to be used independently by students and by other teachers. I hope the experience you have with these texts will also be rich. Please send me your insights and your feedback!

Key: underline = relation to the land; san serif = relation to animals or food; bolded words have comments on them. The word ‘god’, uncapitalized, is used as a pronoun for God. Translation and commentary by Rabbi David Seidenberg; contact: rebduvid86@gmail.com neohasid.org ©2010

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 midrashic interpretation, which often depends on specific phrasing and repeated words. For some phrases more than one translation is offered. (Note that God names are transliterated rather than translated. Note also that British conventions for quotes are followed.)

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 the key at the bottom of any page.) The commentary includes interpretations that relate to questions of ecology and our relationship with the Earth or land, as well as interpretations that are simply elucidating or interesting (and, I hope, fascinating). It also includes occasional 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 come away both with a sense of how the Torah covenant can be interpreted ecologically, as well as a sense of other possible interpretations. My intention is that there 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 (one sheet long) is also available, which focuses on the recurring trope of the wild animal or chayah. It is both shorter and less dense, divided into many more sections by themes. What can be seen most clearly there is that our relationship with the 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 contexts. The abridged version does not have commentary and should be studied in conjunction with this longer version.

Any portion of this text study can be done in chevruta or paired study, where each partner takes turns reading the text out loud and explaining it. It is recommended that someone teaching these texts first study them thoroughly for themselves in chevruta or in a group setting.
a. Elohim (God) said: Let us make a human adam in our figure like our image, and they will dominate/prevail rayirda over the fish of the sea and over the bird of the skies and over the beast b’heimab 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 said to them: Bear fruit and increase and fill the land and occupy her until’u et ba’aretz v’kislishug and prevail wr’du over the fish of the sea and over the bird of the skies and over every animal crawling on the land kol bachayah baromest’ al ba’aretz. And Elohim said: Here, I have given to you-all every plant/grass ’eav seedung seed which is on the face of all the land and every tree which has in it tree-fruit seedling, 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 ’eav for eating. And it was so. Gen 1:26-30

b. And Elohim saw all that god made, and here: very good v’binech 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 yishbot 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 VIIII (Adamah, Haeshem, Lord) Elohim had not caused rain on the land, and an adam to serve the land was not… VIIII Elohim formed rayitgeir the human ba’adam, dirt from the ground/earth ’afar min ba’adamah and blew in his nostrils a living breath nishmat chayim, and the adam became a living soul nefesh chayah. VIIII 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… VIIII Elohim took the adam and placed/rested him in gan Eden to work her/to serve her and to watch over her l’aredh ul’shomrath. And VIIII 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. VIIII Elohim said: No good is the adam being by himself – I will make for him a help opposite him. And VIIII Elohim formed every animal of the field chayat basadeb 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’heimab and every bird of the skies and every animal of the field kol chayat basadeb, and for Adam no help opposite/corresponding to him was found… And VIIII Elohim built the side tzqila’ 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 a’reumim, the adam and his woman, and they were not embarrassed. And the snake was clever a’reum 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’hashkel, and she took from his fruit and ate and gave to her man with her, and he ate. Gen 2:25-3:6

Key: **underline** = relation to the land; *san serif* = relation to animals or food; **bolded words** have comments on them. The word ‘god’, uncapitalized, is used as a pronoun for God. Translation and commentary by Rabbi David Seidenberg; contact: rebduvid86@gmail.com neohasid.org ©2010
Genesis, Covenant, Jubilee, Shmitah and the Land Ethic

page 2: Exile from the Earth

* Cursed is the ground for your sake. This can mean 'for your benefit'. Usu. translated 'cursed…because of you'. The connection between adam and adamah remains strong as both are cursed together. Could cursing the ground with the humans help them to do tshuva, to return to God?

Eat the grass of the field. This could mean cultivated plants or specifically grains (which are grasses). Many see this story as a parable about hunter-gatherers being supplanted by agriculture. Rambam, uniquely, thinks the humans ate grain (i.e. grass seeds) before, but now ate the grass itself. (See above in a, on 'I have given to you-all')

Like one from us. A midrash interprets this to mean 'like one separated away from us'. The humans are separate from God, some say, because after eating from the tree of knowing (tree of knowledge), their knowledge of good and bad becomes mixed up, that is, they experience good and bad in the same times.

Lest he send out his hand. The human was supposed to first eat from the life-tree (tree of life). How might gaining awareness of good and bad make it impossible to eat from the tree of life?

To serve the ground from where he had been taken. The place where the human being was first created. The humans are not simply thrown out of Eden but are brought somewhere where they have a special connection to the ground: their birthplace.

Drove out. Vayigaresh. The human is exiled from the garden, but not from the ground. The root ged means 'to divorce'.

Scream from the ground. The second sin is against the ground as well as against Hevel. 'Hevel' can also mean empty breath, as in the book of Eccles.

* Cursed from the ground. This can mean, 'cursed away from the ground' or 'cursed by the ground'. The language indicates something radically different from what happened before, when the ground was 'cursed for the sake of' the humans.

Shaken off and thrust out. Kayin's punishment is to be completely disconnected from the land.

You have driven me away from the face of the ground. The connection between human being exiled from the garden, and the pain from the ground is that the humans are not simply thrown out of Eden but have a special connection to the ground: their birthplace.

* The human's evil in the land… blot out the human from off the face of the land… the land was ruined. The sin is against the land; God's response is to cleanse the land. There is no ambiguity about this aspect of the flood.

And Elohim saw. Like Sedom (Sodom), and like in Egypt, when God saw the Israelites enslavement, 'seeing means understanding with empathy and compassion.

Noach. When Noach is named, his father says: 'This one will comfort us yinachamuin from the works and the pain of our hands from the ground which Vayigash cursed.' Instead, Vayigash is the one who is 'vayigash'.
The relationship between humanity and the land is replaced by a covenant. A covenant is a contract which is binding on those who are not present, i.e., future generations, and is for the sake of a greater whole, i.e., the land and all the animals. The animals are equal partners alongside the humans in this covenant.

i. Elohim remembered Noach and all the animals kol ba'chayab 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 chayab 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 Elohim and took from every cult-pure beast and from every cult-pure bird and sent up burnt-up-offerings with the altar. Elohim smelled the sweet smell and Elohim said unto god's heart: I will not add to cursing anymore the ground for the sake of humanity ba' aver 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. Throughout all the land's days, sowing and reaping and cold and hot and summer and winter and day and night will not stop/rest la yishbutu. Elohim blessed Noach and his sons and said to them: Bear fruit and increase and fill the land. And a fearing of you and terror of you will be over every animal of the land chayat ha'aretz and every bird of the skies, everything which crawls the ground and all the fish of the sea, into your hands they are given. All that crawls which lives, for you it will be for eating, like green plants I have given you to-you all. But just the flesh with his soul nefesh, his blood, you will not eat. And just your blood for your souls will I require, by the hand of every animal chayab and by the hand of every human…for in the image of Elohim god made the human. And you, bear fruit and increase, swarm through the land and increase in her. And Elohim said unto Noach and unto his sons saying: And I, here I am erecting my covenant with you and with your seed after you and with the soul of every animal with you I every soul living with you kol nefesh ba'chayab itchem, among the bird and among the beast and among every animal of the field kol chayat basadeh with you…and 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 this covenant-sign which I place between me and between you and between every living / animal soul kol nefesh chayab which is with you, for generations, for all-time: my bow I have set in the cloud, and it will be a covenant sign between me and the land…and I will see her, remembering the covenant for all-time between Elohim and between all flesh on the land. Gen 8:1, 15:9-17

In the story of the Tower of Bavel, God scatters the people in order to force them to fulfill what was in the original blessing and in the rainbow covenant: fill the Earth. Why do the people resist doing it? Practically speaking, humans are the only species that can adapt to virtually any environment on Earth. Is that related?

j. And all the land was one speech and single words d'varim achadim...and they said: Let us build a city and a tower…lest we be scattered pen nefatz over the face of the land…And Elohim said: Let us go down and babble their speech there…and from there Elohim 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 adamah. Instead, God is trying to create a right relationship between one people and one land.

k. And Elohim 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 kol mish'p'hot ha'adamah. Gen 12:1-3

Swarm through the land. ‘Swarm’ usually refers to bugs. There are only two places where it is used to describe human beings, here and in the description of how fertile the Israelites were in Egypt. The Egyptian response to seeing humans swarmed was to be horrified.

I am erecting my covenant with you and with every soul living with you. All the animals are equal partners in the rainbow covenant alongside human beings.

* It will be a covenant sign. The land is a partner in the first covenant. It may even be the primary partner.

Babble. V'neshab is a pun on Bavel, Babylon.

Through you. The covenant with Abraham is the first covenant with God in which a human is the primary subject. The blessings include all humanity.

Families of the earth. Or the soil. After the flood, ‘Noach, man of the soil ish ha'adamah, began, and he planted a vineyard.’

Key: underline = relation to the land; san serif = relation to animals or food; bolded words have comments on them. The word 'god', uncapselalized, is used as a pronoun for God. Translation and commentary by Rabbi David Seidenberg; contact: rebduvid86@gmail.com neohasid.org ©2010
m. VII  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 shavat, VII’s shabbat/Sabbath-rest... In the seventh year the Sabbath’s sabbath shabbaton will it be for the land, a Sabbath for VIII. Don’t sow your field and don’t prune your vineyard... And the shabbat of the land will be for you 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 hagarim imakh, and for your beast b’hemetekhu and for the animal which is in your land chayat asher b’aretzekha, all of her produce tuv’atab 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’vor in the land, to all those inhabiting her. It will be a Jubilee Yovel for you – you will return each man to his tribe-possessions, and each man will return to his family... You will do my statutes, and you will watch over my judgments... and settle on the land securely laviyotach. And the land will give her fruit and you will eat to be satisfied and you will settle securely on her... The land you may not sell permanently latz’mitut, for the land is mine ki li ba’aretz, for you are strangers and settlers by/with me ki gerim v’toshavim atem imakh. So in all the land of your tribe-possessions you will give redemption g’ulah to the land. Lev 25:1-24

In n there is a three-fold progression in which eating is turned inside out: ‘If you will not listen...the animal of the field will make you childless...You will eat the flesh of your sons and your daughters...The land of your enemies will eat you’. 

n. 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 y’vulah and the tree of the field his fruit...and you will dwell securely lavatot in your land...And I will set 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 make 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...I will set my face against you...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 hasadeh 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...then the land will enjoy/desire tirzeh 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 Torot which VIII set between god and between Yisrael’s children in Mount Sinai by Moshe’s hand. Lev 26:3-42

* The animal of the field will eat. The Shmitah year emphasizes that the wild animals will eat the Sabbath produce along with the people. Similarly in m we read ‘the animal which is in your land’. The one other time when animals and people share the same food is in Eden. Halakhically, in order for animals to be able to share the Shmitah crops, fences were breached and gates were left open.

* In Mount Sinai. The midrash asks, ‘What does Shmitah have to do with Sinai’? (Rashi’s answer is that all the details of the laws, even those dependant on the land, were taught at Sinai.) From an ecological perspective, the answer is clear: The whole purpose of the Sinai covenant is to restore us to a right relationship with the land.

* The Sabbath’s sabbath. The ultimate Shabbat—the purpose of Shabbat. One might say that Shabbat is just practice for Shmitah and Jubilee.

Yom Hakipurim. Unlike other years, the Jubilee begins on Yom Kipur. Why?

* Seven years seven times. The Torah emphasizes seven again and again. It can mean renewing the cycle of creation. How do you interpret it?

Call out liberty. The verse on the Liberty Bell.

My statutes. Especially the laws of Shmitah and Jubilee. The rest of the laws, important in themselves, are also a supporting frame for these laws. See below in n.

* The land is mine, for you are strangers and settlers with me. This is the inverse of property rights: even land we can never lose is not ours.

Redemption. This can mean freedom, spiritual redemption, or messianic redemption. It can also mean redemption from debt or out of debt.

The land will give her produce and the tree...his fruit. The symbol of security is the fruit tree, which gives to us freely, without any loss to itself.

I will become Elohim for you. Is God not God until then? Rather, only after our relationship with the land is restored, can we encounter God in fullness.

* Your land will not give her produce. If you don’t release the land, she may be yours, but will not give to you. If you do, and she is not yours, you will live with her in peace.

* The land will enjoy her Sabbaths. The land has a right to rest. All rights for the poor and the animals, for freedom from debt and slavery, stem from this right.

* She will rest. Acc. to 2 Chr 21 the people were exiled in Babylonia “to fulfill VIII’s word...until the land enjoyed her Sabbaths; all the days of her desolation she rested...” The rabbis also say that exile comes into the world because of neglecting the Shmitah year (Pirkai Aroyt).