



## The Glory in Creation: Valuing Biodiversity

### *Hebrew/English Source Sheet*

*This material was prepared by Rabbi Yonatan Neril and Evonne Marzouk of Canfei Nesharim, as part of the Jewcology project.*

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## Biography of the Ramban

*Since the teachings of the Ramban are central to understanding a Jewish perspective on species preservation, his biography (from the Bar Ilan Responsa Project) is included here:*

Rabbi Moses ben Nachman (Ramban, Nachmanides) was born in Gerona, Spain in 1194 C.E., and died in Israel in 1270 C.E. Ramban was the outstanding Torah authority of his generation. After he left Spain, his famous disciples, Rashba and Rabbi Aaron Halevi (to whom the Sefer Ha-Chinuch is often ascribed), took over as spiritual leaders of Spanish Jewry. Ramban's multifaceted literary activities included commentaries on the Bible and Talmud, halachic codes, responsa, works on mysticism and philosophy, and sermons. In 1267, in the aftermath of a public debate with the apostate Pablo Christiani, which was forced upon Ramban by the king and Christian clergy of Catalonia, and decided in favor of the Christians from the outset, Ramban was banished from Spain. At age 73, Ramban took the difficult and dangerous trip to Israel and fulfilled his life's dream of settling in the holy land. There Ramban restored the Jewish community in Jerusalem, which had previously been destroyed by invading Tartars. Accordingly, Ramban is considered the father of modern Jewish settlement in Jerusalem. Like Maimonides and many other Spanish rabbinic scholars, Ramban was a practicing physician.

### I. Creation and Species

בראשית פרק א פסוק ד

וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאוֹר כִּי טוֹב וַיַּבְדֵּל אֱלֹהִים בֵּין הָאוֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ:

#### Genesis 1:4, Judaica Press translation

And G-d saw the light that it was good, and G-d separated between the light and between the darkness

רמב"ן בראשית פרק א פסוק ד

וקיומם יקרא "ראיה" ... והענין להורות כי עמידתם בחפצו, ואם החפץ יתפרד רגע מהם יהיו לאין. וכאשר אמר בכל מעשה יום ויום וירא א-להים כי טוב, ובששי כאשר נשלם הכל וירא א-להים את כל אשר עשה והנה טוב מאד, כן אמר ביום הראשון בהיות האור וירא א-להים כי טוב, שרצה בקיומו לעד:

#### Ramban to Genesis 1:4, translated by Rabbi Yaakov Blinder (bracketed words are his additions)<sup>1</sup>

And [the establishment of] the permanent existence [of those things] is called "seeing [that it is good]" ... The idea is to indicate that the continued existence of all things is by [G-d's] desire, and that if His desire would depart from them for an instant, they would cease to exist. And just as [Scripture] says for each act, day after day, *And G-d saw that it was good*, and on the sixth day, when everything was finished, it says, *And G-d saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good* (v. 31), so did He say on the first day, when the light came into existence, G-d saw [that the light] was good, [meaning] that He willed its permanent existence.

בראשית פרק א פסוק יא

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים תְּדַשְׁא הָאָרֶץ דְּשֵׂא עֵשֶׂב מִזֵּרִיעַ זֶרַע עֵץ פְּרִי עֹשֶׂה פְּרִי לְמִינֵוּ אֲשֶׁר זֶרְעוּ בּוֹ עַל הָאָרֶץ וַיְהִי כֵן

#### Genesis 1:11, Judaica Press translation

And G-d said, "Let the earth sprout vegetation, seed yielding herbs and fruit trees producing fruit according to its kind in which its seed is found, on the earth," and it was so.

<sup>1</sup> Ramban—Nachmanides/ Commentary on the Torah, Volume 1—Genesis, part 1, p. 33, Mesorah Publications: New York, 2004

ויאמר א-להים תדשא הארץ דשא - גזר שיהיה בתולדות הארץ כח הצומח ומוליד זרע כדי שיהיה המין קיים לעד:

**Ramban to Genesis 1:11**, translated by Rabbi Yaakov Blinder (bracketed words are his additions)<sup>2</sup>

*G-d said, 'Let the earth sprout forth sprouts'* [Until this point, each thing came into being by G-d decree, 'Let such-and-such come into being.' Here, however, with regard to the vegetation, G-d did not use the formula, 'Let there be vegetation;' rather, He said, 'Let the earth sprout forth sprouts.' Why did G-d address His command to the earth rather than to the vegetation itself?]

[G-d] decreed that there should be [incorporated] into the nature of the land a capability of sprouting [vegetation] and bearing seed, so that the [various] species of [vegetation] should exist forever.

בראשית פרק א:לא-ב:א

וַיִּרְא אֱלֹהִים אֵת כָּל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וְהִנֵּה טוֹב מְאֹד וַיְהִי עֶרֶב וַיְהִי בֹקֶר יוֹם הַשְּׁשִׁי:  
וַיִּכְלוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ וְכָל צְבָאָם:

**Genesis 1:31-2:1, Judaica Press translation**

And G-d saw all that He had made, and behold it was very good, and it was evening and it was morning, the sixth day. Now the heavens and the earth were completed and all their host.

רמב"ן בראשית פרק א פסוק לא

והנה טוב מאד - הוא הקיום כאשר פירשתי (לעיל פסוקים ד, י, יב).

**Ramban to Genesis 1:31**, translated by R' Yaakov Blinder<sup>3</sup>

*And behold, it was very good:* [Ramban explains the connotations of this statement:] This [expression denotes] permanent establishment, as I have explained [above, on verses 3,10, and 12, regarding the phrase *that it was good*].

### Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think the capability of reproduction (ie, sprouting) was included in creation rather than having G-d create each thing individually?
2. Do you think there is ever anything in the world that G-d would NOT consider good? If so, how?

## II. Manifold Creation

ויקרא רבה (וילנא) פרשה כב סימן ב

ורבנן אמרי ויתרון ארץ אפילו דברים שאתם רואים בעולם מיותרין כגון זבובין פרעושים ויתושים אף הן בכלל ברייתו של עולם דכתי' (בראשית ב) ויכולו השמים והארץ וכל צבאם

**Midrash Rabbah - Leviticus 22:2, Soncino Translation**

Our Rabbis explain the text, 'And the superfluities of the earth' (Eccl. 5:8) as signifying that even things which seem to you superfluous in the world, such as flies, fleas, and gnats, are also included in the scheme of the creation of the world; as it is written, "And the heaven and the earth were finished, and all the host of them" (Gen. 2:1).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 49

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 81

**Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat 107b**, translation from Encyclopedia Judaica. Keter Publishing House Ltd. Jerusalem, 1971.

“The Holy One Blessed Be He sits and sustains all creatures, from the horns of the wild ox to the eggs of lice.”

#### בראשית רבה (וילנא) פרשה י

ז רבנן אמרי אפי' דברים שאתה רואה אותן שהן יתירה בעולם כגון זבובין ופרעושיין ויתושיין אף הן בכלל ברייתו של עולם הן, ובכל הקב"ה עושה שליחותו, אפי' ע"י נחש, אפי' ע"י יתוש, אפי' ע"י צפרדע, רבי תנחומא אמר לה בשם רבי מנחמה רבי ברכיה בשם רבי חלבו רבי אחא הוה משתעי הדין עובדא חד בר נש הוה קאים על כף נהרא, חמא חד עורדען טענה חדא עקרב ומגיזה יתיה נהרא וכיון דעבדת שליחותיה אחזרתא לאתרה

**Midrash Bereshit (Genesis) Rabbah 10:7**, Soncino translation

Our Rabbis said: Even those things which you may regard as completely superfluous to the creation of the world, such as fleas, gnats, and flies, even they too are included in the creation of the world, and the Holy One, blessed be He, carries out His purpose through everything, even through a snake, a scorpion, a gnat, or a frog. R. Aha related this story: A man was standing by the bank of a river when he saw a frog bearing a scorpion and carrying it across the river; as soon as it had carried out its commission, it carried it back to its place.

#### מתנות כהונה לבראשית רבה יז:

בכלל ברייתו: יש בהם צורך וגם המה עיקר הבריאה.

**Minchat Kehuna to Midrash Bereshit (Genesis) Rabbah 10:7**, translation by R' Neril

*Included in His creation:* there is a need for them, and they too are essential in creation.

#### קהלת פרק ה פסוק ח

ויתרון ארץ בפל היא הוא מלך לשדה נעבד:

**Ecclesiastes 5:8**, translation adapted from that of Judaica Press and R' David Sears

And the superiority of the earth is in everything; even the King is subservient to the field.

#### ויקרא רבה, פרשה כב (דפוס וגשל)

ורבנין אמרי ויתרון ארץ [בכל הוא] (קהלת ה, ח). אפילו דברים שאתה רואה אותן, כגון זבובים, ופרעושים, ויתושים, אף הן בכלל ברייתו של עולם, דכתיב, ויכלו השמים והארץ וכל צבאם.

**Midrash Vayikra Rabba 22:2** (Wagshal edition), translation adapted from that by Rabbi David Sears

“And the superiority (yitron) of earth [is in everything]...” (Ecclesiastes 5:8).

The rabbis said [and rendered the word yitron interpretively]: Even creatures you see on the Earth [that seem superfluous (meyutarin)]<sup>4</sup>, such as flies, gnats, and mosquitoes, they, too, are part of G-d's creation, as it is written, “And [G-d] finished the heavens and the earth and all the legions [works].”

#### ויקרא רבה (וילנא) פרשה כב סימן א

(קהלת ה) ויתרון ארץ בכל היא ... ר' יהודה אמר אפילו דברים שאתם רואין יתרון לעולם אף הן בכלל הנייתו של עולם הן סיבא למעבד חבלא סיבוא למסוך נגיא

**Midrash Rabbah - Leviticus 22:1**, (Vilna edition), translation adapted from Soncino translation

“And the superiority (yitron) of earth is in everything...” (Ecclesiastes 5:8)... Rabbi Judah said: Even things that seem to you superfluties in the world are also included among the things that are a benefit to the world; bast is

<sup>4</sup> The Hebrew word 'yitaron' (meaning lofty or superior) contains within it the root 'yeter,' which is the same root as the word 'meyutar,' or superfluous. [Note of the editor]

for making ropes, twigs are for hedging gardens.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף עז עמוד ב

אמר רב יהודה אמר רב: כל מה שברא הקדוש ברוך הוא בעולמו לא ברא דבר אחד לבטלה. ברא שבלול לכתית, ברא זבוב - לצירעה, יתוש - לנחש, ונחש - להפפית, וסממית - לעקרב.

**Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat, p. 77**, Soncino translation.

Rab Judah said in Rab's name: Of all that the Holy One, blessed be He, created in His world, He did not create a single thing without purpose. [Thus] He created the snail as a remedy for a scab; the fly as an antidote to the hornet[‘s sting]; the mosquito [crushed] for a serpent[‘s bite]; a serpent as a remedy for an eruption. and a [crushed] spider as a remedy for a scorpion[‘s bite].

תהלים פרק קד פסוק כד

מִה רַבּוּ מַעֲשֵׂיךָ יְיָ יְהוָה בְּלֹם בְּחָכְמָה עָשִׂיתָ מְלֵאָה הָאָרֶץ קִנְיָנֶיךָ:

**Psalms 104:24**, translation from The Jerusalem Bible. Koren Publishers: Jerusalem, 1992

How diverse are Your works, Oh Lord! You make them all with wisdom, the world is full of Your possessions.

ויקרא פרק כב פסוק כה

וְשׂוֹר אוֹ שֶׁה אֶתְּךָ וְאֶת בְּנֵי לֹא תִשְׁחָטוּ בְּיוֹם אֶחָד:

**Vayikra 22:28**

An ox or sheep you shall not slaughter it and its offspring in one day.

**Rabbi Samphson Raphael Hirsch (19<sup>th</sup> century, Germany), Fourth Letter of Ben Uziel**, translated by Bernard Drachman

Not yours is the earth, but you belong to the earth, to respect it as Divine soil and to deem every one of its creatures a creature of G-d, your fellow-being...

ספר מורה הנבוכים חלק ג פרק יג (תרגום מהערבית)

לא נאמין בנמצאות כולם שהם מפני מציאות האדם, אבל יהיו ג"כ שאר הנמצאות כולם מכוונות לעצמן לא מפני דבר אחר.

**Maimonides (12<sup>th</sup> century, Egypt), Guide of the Perplexed 3:13**, translated by Shimon Pines

"It should not be believed that all the beings exist for the sake of the existence of man. On the contrary, all the other beings too have been intended for their own sakes and not for the sake of something else."

**Discussion Questions:**

1. Can you think of an example of something in creation that might be considered superfluous by some, but has an important purpose?
2. What is the benefit of having such a vast and diverse set of species?

### III. Noah and the Raven

תלמוד בבלי מסכת סנהדרין דף קח עמוד ב

בראשית ח'+ וישלח את הערב, אמר ריש לקיש: תשובה ניצחת השיבו עורב לנח, אמר לו: רבך שונאני ואתה שנאתני. רבך שונאני - + מן הטהורין שבעה, מן הטמאים שנים. ואתה שנאתני - שאתה מגיח ממין שבעה ושולח ממין שנים, אם פוגע בי שר חמה או שר צנה לא ?נמצא עולם חסר בריה אחת

**Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin, p. 108b**, Soncino translation

And he sent forth a raven (Genesis 8:7). Resh Lakish said: The raven gave Noah a triumphant retort. It said to him, 'Your Master hates me, and you hate me. Your Master hates me — [since He commanded] seven [pairs to

be taken] of the clean [creatures], but only two of the unclean.<sup>5</sup> You hate me — seeing that you leave the species of which there are seven, and send one of which there are only two. Should the angel of heat or of cold smite me, would not the world be short of one kind?

#### בראשית רבה (תיאודור-אלבק) פרשה לג

ויצא יצוא ושוב ר' יודן בשם ר' יודה בר' סימון התחיל משיבו תשובות, אמר לו מכל עוף שיש כן לא תשלח אלא לי, אמר לו מה צורך לעולם לך, לאכילה לקרבן, ר' ברכיה בשם ר' אבא אמר לו הקב"ה קיבלו שעתיד העולם ליצרך לו, אמר לו אימתי, אמר לו עד יבשת המים מעל הארץ עתיד צדיק אחד לעמוד וליבש העולם ואני מצריכו להן הה"ד והעורבים מביאים לו לחם ובשר וגו' מלכים א', יז ו)

#### Midrash Rabbah - Genesis 38:4, Judaica Classics Library translation

“ 'And it went forth to and fro' R. Judan said in the name of R. Judah b. R. Simon: It began arguing with him [with Noah]: 'Of all the birds that you have here you send none but me!' 'What need then has the world of you?' he [Noah] retorted; 'for food? for a sacrifice?' R. Berekiah said in R. Abba's name: The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him [Noah]: 'Take it back, because the world will need it in the future.' 'When?' he asked. 'When the waters dry off from on the earth' (ib.). He replied: 'A righteous man will arise and dry up the world, and I will cause him to have need of them [the ravens],' as it is written, And the ravens ('orbim) brought him bread and flesh, etc. (I Kings XVII, 6).

#### Discussion Question:

What does this source teach us about our relationship to things we seem not to need?

## IV. Maintaining the Integrity of Species

#### ויקרא פרק יט פסוק יט

אֶת חֲקֹמֵי תִשְׁמְרוּ בְהִמָּתְדָה לֹא תִרְבִּיעַ כְּלָאִים שָׂדֶךְ לֹא תִזְרַע כְּלָאִים וּבְגָד כְּלָאִים שֶׁעֲטָנוּ לֹא יַעֲלֶה עָלֶיךָ:

#### Leviticus 19:19, Judaica Press translation

You shall observe My statutes: You shall not crossbreed your livestock with different species. You shall not sow your field with a mixture of seeds, and a garment which has a mixture of sha'atnez shall not come upon you.

#### רמב"ן ויקרא פרק יט פסוק יט

והטעם בכלאים, כי השם ברא המינים בעולם, בכל בעלי הנפשות בצמחים ובבעלי נפש התנועה, ונתן בהם כח התולדה שיתקיימו המינים בהם לעד כל זמן שירצה הוא יתברך בקיום העולם. וצוה בכחם שיוציאו למיניהם ולא ישתנו לעד לעולם, שנאמר בכולם "למינהו" (בראשית א), והוא סיבת המשכב שנרביע בהמות זו עם זו לקיום המין כאשר יבואו האנשים על הנשים לפריה ורביה. והמרכיב שני מין, משנה ומכחיש במעשה בראשית, כאילו יחשוב שלא השלים הקב"ה בעולמו כל הצורך ויחפוץ הוא לעזור בבריאתו של עולם להוסיף בו בריות...

#### Ramban to Vayikra 19:19

Now the reason for [the prohibitions against] kilayim ["mixed kinds,"], is that G-d has created in the world various species among all living things, both plants and moving creatures, and He gave them a power of reproduction enabling them to exist forever as long, as He blessed be He, will desire the existence of the world, and He further endowed them with a power to bring forth [only] after their kind, and that they should never be changed, as it is Said with reference to all of them [at the time of Creation], after its kind. This driving force in the normal mating of animals is for the sake of preserving the species, even as human beings engage in sexual activity for the sake of having children. Thus one who combines two different species, thereby changes and defies the work of Creation, as if he is thinking that the Holy One, blessed be He, has not completely perfected the world and he desires to help along in the creation of the world by adding to it new kinds of creatures.

<sup>5</sup> The raven is unclean (Leviticus. 9:15)

## Discussion Questions:

1. According to these sources, why are we to avoid mixing species?
2. Do you think this value is present in our society today? Give examples.

## V. Sending Away the Mother Bird

### דברים פרק כב פסוקים ו--ז

פי יקרא קן צפור לפניך בדרך בכל עץ או על הארץ אפרחים או ביצים והאם רבצת על האפרחים או על הביצים לא תקח האם על הבנים: שלח תשלח את האם ואת הבנים תקח לך למען ייטב לך והארכת ימים:

### Deuteronomy 22:6-7, Judaica Press translation

6. If a bird's nest chances before you on the road, on any tree, or on the ground, and [it contains] fledglings or eggs, if the mother is sitting upon the fledglings or upon the eggs, you shall not take the mother upon the young.
7. You shall send away the mother, and [then] you may take the young for yourself, in order that it should be good for you, and you should lengthen your days.

### רמב"ן דברים פרק כב פסוק ו

כי יקרא קן צפור לפניך - גם זו מצוה מבוארת מן אותו ואת בנו לא תשחטו ביום אחד (ויקרא כב כח). כי הטעם בשניהם לבלתי היות לנו לב אכזרי ולא נרחם, או שלא יתיר הכתוב לעשות השחחה לעקור המין אע"פ שהתיר השחיטה במין ההוא, והנה ההורג האם והבנים ביום אחד או לוקח אותם בהיות להם דרור לעוף כאלו יכרית המין ההוא:

### Ramban (Nachmanides) to Deuteronomy 22:6, translation by Rabbi Dovid Sears

This precept is a moral instruction, as is the related prohibition not to kill a mother animal and its young on the same day (Leviticus 22:28). The reason for both commandments is that we should not be cruel-hearted and lacking compassion.

Alternately, it could be inferred that the Torah does not permit destruction--the extinction of an entire species--even if it permits the killing [of animals for food or other legitimate human needs] within a given species. One who kills the mother and her young on the same day, or takes them when they are free to fly, is considered as if he had eliminated an entire species.

### אברבנאל דברים פרק כב

הנה כוונה התורה בזה עוד להרחיק ההפסד האפשרי להיות קוד' זמנו ושתתמיד הווית הוויה כל מה שאפשר מאשר תקן הוויתם לעשות פרי שהם הבנים כמו העץ העושה פרי. וצוה הקב"ה שלא ישחית הדבר המוליד ועושה פרי אבל כמו שהותרה כריתת הפרי ונאסרה כריתת העץ כמ"ש (פ' שופטים) כי ממנו תאכל ואותו לא תכרות. ככה צוה שנקח הבני' שהוא הפרי שאם נותנת בהיות' רובצת עליה ולא נשחית עץ בלחמו אבל נשלח את האם כדי שאנחנו נזון מן הבני' או האפרוחים. והאם תעשה פרי אחר ותתמיד הוויה וההטבה... ולזה היה סוף המאמר למען ייטב לך והארכת ימים ר"ל שלא היתה המצוה הזאת לתועלת הב"ה, כ"א למען ייטב לאדם כשתתמיד בהם הוויה למען יאכל ממנה פעמי' אחרות וזהו והארכת ימים, ר"ל כיון שאתה עתיד להאריך ימים בארץ, הנה אתה צריך אל התמדת הוויה במזונות כדי שייסיקו אליך בהזנת ימים רבים, האמנם באו במדרשות...

### R. Isaac ben R. Judah Abarbanel to Deuteronomy 22:6, (Lisbon 1437- Venice 1508), translation by R' Neril

Behold, the Torah's further intention in this is to prevent the possibility of untimely destruction and rather to encourage creation to exist as fully as possible, since one enables existence to reproduce by having children, like a tree which produces fruit. And the Holy One, Blessed be He, commanded that one should not destroy that which reproduces and makes offspring. But, just as cutting fruit is permitted yet cutting the [fruit] tree is forbidden, as is stated (Deut. 20:19) "for from it you will eat, and you shall not cut it down," so too G-d commanded that we take the offspring, which are the fruit, if the mother bird is hovering over them, and that we not destroy the [fruit] tree in war. Rather, we should send away the mother bird in order that we will have food from the offspring or chicks, and the mother bird will produce other offspring and existence and goodness will persist...

...And for this was the end of the verses, 'in order that it will be good for you and you will live long,' which means, that this commandment was not for the benefit of animals, but rather in order that it will be good for

people when existence will persist in them [the animals] in order that people will eat from them at other times. And this is [the meaning of] 'and you will live long,' that since in the future you will live long in the land, you need existence to persist for food in order to provide you with food for the long term. Therefore come the Midrashot, Rabbi Tanchum said...[see next source for comment of Rabbi Tanhuma]

#### דברים רבה (וילנא) פרשה ו סימן ז

ד"א שלח תשלח רבנן אמרי למה שני פעמים... דבר אחר מהו שלח תשלח את האם אם קיימת מצוה זו את ממהר לבוא מלך המשיח שכתוב בו שילוח מנין שנא' (ישעיה לב) משלחי רגל השור והחמור, ד"א אמר ר' תנחומא אם קיימת המצוה הזאת אתה ממהר את אליהו הנביא ז"ל שיבוא שכתוב בו שילוח שנא' (מלאכי ג) הנה אנכי שולח לכם את אליה הנביא והוא יבא וינחם אתכם מנין שנא' (שם) מלאכי ג' (/ג) והשיב לב אבות על בנים.

#### Midrash Deuteronomy Raba, 6:7, translation from Judaic Classics Library

Another explanation: What is the meaning of, 'You shall send away (shiluah) the mother bird'? If you will fulfill this precept you will hasten thereby the coming of King Messiah, of whom Scripture uses the expression shiluah ('sending free'), as it is said, "That send forth freely the feet of the ox and the ass" (Isa. 32:20).

Another comment: R. Tanhuma said: If you fulfill this precept you will hasten the coming of Elijah the prophet, of blessed memory, of whom Scripture uses the expression, 'shiluah,' as it is said, "Behold, I will send (sholeah) you Elijah the prophet" (Malachi 3:23); and he will come and comfort you. Where is this [in Scripture]? For it is said, "And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children" (ib., verse 24).<sup>6</sup>

#### Discussion Questions:

1. What is the essence of the mitzvah of sending away the mother bird?
2. Why do you think it is linked to the coming of the Messiah?
3. How does this value apply to our actions today?

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<sup>6</sup> Chidushei Hardal explains that "in the merit of sending away the mother bird, the person sends away the mother bird and she is consoled by the offspring that will be to her." The human act of compassion causes the mother bird to be consoled at a future time. The Midrash cites the verse in Malachi as a Scriptural basis of a human parent emotionally returning to their children. The Midrash relates this to a mother bird being consoled by offspring that replace the ones a person took.