

10. A Message from Judaism

Rabbi Leonid Feldman

I believe that the idea of joining science and theology in the struggle to end plastic pollution is very appropriate. In chapter two of the Book of Genesis, at the very beginning of the Bible, we read “The Lord God took the man and placed him in the Garden of Eden, to till it and tend it.” This verse is one of many in the Bible which clearly express God’s concern for preserving nature. It is obvious that all the great crises confronting humanity today are the results of human choices and the consequences of human actions.

A fundamental concept in Judaism, which has become very well-known is Tikkun Olam, which means the “Repairing of the World.” It is a concept that has been mentioned by almost every American president in the last fifty years. Tikkun Olam means that we, humans, have the responsibility to work towards healing the environment and to serve as much as we can as good stewards of God’s creation.

Now how does Tikkun Olam relate to plastics? The connection lies in plastics’ increasingly visible harms to God’s creation, in plastics’ pollution of the lands and the ocean, in the harm plastics cause to whales and seabirds, and the disease, disability, and death that plastics cause in people of all ages. We cannot allow these evils to continue. We have a responsibility to intervene, to help repair this damaged world.

Each one of us must first take personal action to reduce these harms, for example, by using less plastic in our daily lives, like the plastic water bottles that we all use and just throw out, and so on. But beyond the personal, we also have a responsibility to address the dangers of plastics at a systemic, societal level, in the cities, states, provinces where we live, in our countries, and even internationally. We must work with legislators to create laws and policies that will reduce plastics’ harms to human health

and the environment—for example, by banning most single-use plastics and requiring manufacturers to take back and reuse plastic products.

Most importantly, we must work through the United Nations to craft a Global Plastic Treaty that protects human health and safeguards human rights by limiting global plastic production, especially the production of single-use plastics, and also addressing the thousands of toxic and unregulated chemicals in plastics.

Hence, I urge the delegates from nations around the world who will gather this year to finalize the Global Plastic Treaty to write a treaty that protects the health of all living beings, safeguards human rights, and heals our wounded world.



Rabbi Leonid Feldman is a Soviet-born American Conservative Jewish rabbi. From 2005 to 2022 he was the spiritual leader of Temple Beth El in West Palm Beach, Florida. He is the host of the podcast "Ask the Rabbi."