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Integration of Torah and Ecotheology: Strengthening the Social Forestry System in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Indonesia is grappling with the complex challenge of managing its forests in a truly sustainable way. Problems such as land degradation, widening socio-economic gaps, and ongoing environmental damage not only threaten the well-being of local communities but also put at risk the country's rich biodiversity that is vital to the world. Although social forestry programs in Indonesia hold tremendous promise, their implementation often overlooks the integration of traditional ecological wisdom and theological perspectives—elements that could enrich and strengthen current forest management practices. This study proposes the integration of principles from the Torah, emphasizing stewardship, biodiversity preservation, and justice, along with insights from ecotheology, to inform sustainable social forestry management in Indonesia. Drawing on religious texts, theological insights, and contemporary environmental scholarship, this research explores how the teachings of the Torah and ecotheological perspectives can be applied to enhance social forestry practices. Case studies from Israel, along with initiatives led by Catholic and Protestant churches in Indonesia, demonstrate how religious values can be woven into environmental conservation. By integrating Torah principles and ecotheological perspectives into social forestry, forest management can evolve into a more holistic practice—one that not only protects the environment but also nurtures social cohesion and spiritual well-being. Applying these principles paves the way for sustainable forestry in Indonesia, while at the same time uplifting local communities and safeguarding nature for future generations.

Keywords: ecotheology, environment, social forestry, torah

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INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, social forestry, also known as community-based forest management, is described as a sustainable approach to managing forests on both state and non-state lands. Local or indigenous communities implement this system with the objectives of enhancing their welfare, improving environmental outcomes, and fostering socio-cultural development (Rakatama & Pandit, 2020, p. 1). According to the Ministry of Environment and Forestry (KLHK), Indonesia has set a target of 12.7 million hectares for social forestry land. As of 9 September 2025, the government has achieved 8,018,575 hectares, distributed across several schemes: community plantation forests make up 29.39%, village forests 22.08%, customary forests 1.48%, forestry partnerships 11.33%, and community forests 35.71% (GoKUPS, 2025).

Land degradation in Indonesia has become a serious challenge, directly undermining the agricultural sector and threatening food security. Its impacts are evident in prolonged dry seasons, recurring droughts, reduced water absorption into the soil, and increasing shortages of water resources. Currently, more than 14 million hectares of land are classified as critical, a result of declining physical, chemical, and biological conditions—an alarming reality that demands urgent attention (Afia, 2022, p. x). Indonesia holds the world's third-largest tropical forest area and ranks second globally for biodiversity, including the richness of native medicinal plants. These forests account for 10% of the world's total tropical forest cover and shelter nearly half of the planet's biodiversity. Surrounding this vast ecosystem are more than 25,000 villages, home to about 9.2 million households. Yet, within this abundance, around 1.7 million of these households still live in poverty—highlighting the urgent need to balance forest conservation with community welfare (Veriasa et al., 2021) . Indonesia's tropical forests play a vital role in mitigating climate change, preserving biodiversity, and sustaining the livelihoods of millions of people. Protecting these forests is not only essential for national interests but also for global environmental sustainability. Around 48.8 million people live in and around state forests, with 10.2 million of them classified as poor. Strikingly, more than 71% of these communities rely directly on forest resources for their daily survival, underscoring how deeply human well-being is tied to the future of Indonesia's forests (Gunawan et al., 2022, p. 7).

Deforestation in Indonesia is not just about the disappearance of trees—it is a complex and deeply rooted environmental crisis with consequences that ripple across ecosystems, communities, and even the global climate (Atkinson, 2014). Illegal logging, large-scale land conversion, and the unchecked spread of plantations continue to be the main forces behind the decline of Indonesia's forests—once celebrated as some of the most biodiversity-rich ecosystems on Earth (Lubis, 2023). Indonesia's tropical forests are home to thousands of unique plant and animal species, making them some of the world's most irreplaceable ecosystems. Yet as these forests shrink, the loss of habitat not only

threatens biodiversity but also disrupts the lives of millions who depend on them. For forest communities, the forest is the heart of survival—providing food through farming and fishing, as well as income from non-timber products. At the same time, deforestation accelerates soil erosion, depletes fertility, and releases greenhouse gases, deepening both ecological and economic hardships in regions that are already vulnerable (Naik et al., 2025). These realities underscore a sobering truth: without resilient and forward-looking forest governance, the cycle of environmental collapse and persistent poverty will only intensify. For many impoverished communities, survival often depends on extracting resources, a strategy that may provide short-term food security but ultimately erodes the very ecological foundations of their future livelihoods. Forest policy, therefore, must embrace a dual mandate—protecting ecosystems while also improving the economic well-being of local populations. In this context, sustainability is not optional but essential. Ancient teachings, such as the Torah's principles of stewardship and restraint, offer timeless guidance, serving as a moral compass to harmonize human activity with the integrity of the natural world (Monia, 2023). Central to the Torah's ethical framework is the affirmation that the cosmos is the handiwork of the Divine, entrusted to human stewardship not solely for utilitarian gain, but as an expression of covenantal duty to the Creator (Emina, 2023). This call urges us to live in ecological balance, where every action respects the intricate web of life that sustains us. In this light, the ongoing loss of forest ecosystems is not only an environmental catastrophe but also a moral failure—a rejection of the guardianship entrusted by the Torah. For this reason, it is essential that this inquiry grounds itself in scriptural wisdom. Sacred texts, with their repeated call to protect the tree as a symbol of creation's vitality, provide both a moral anchor and a practical guide—one that resonates strongly with the principles of contemporary ecotheology. This perspective recognizes that ecological destruction is more than an environmental issue—it is a liturgical rupture, revealing a broken relationship between humanity and the Divine. In this way, ancient ordinances and contemporary theological reflections converge on the same mandate: to act, to restore, and to bear witness that the vanishing forest represents not only an ecological loss but also a profound moral and spiritual crisis.

Deforestation is more than an environmental concern—it is also a question of human faithfulness to God's Word, which affirms the profound significance of trees in sustaining life. In Proverbs 3:18, the tree is portrayed as the "tree of life," a symbol of wisdom and sustainability. Beyond their ecological functions, trees stand as enduring emblems of vitality, continually giving of themselves—providing shade, nourishment, and renewal—without seeking profit in return (Gore, 2021). Rabbinic teachings on protecting forests and the wider biosphere find strong resonance in Indonesia's social forestry efforts. In Deuteronomy 20:19–20, the command is clear: even in times of war, fruit-bearing trees must not be cut down. This ancient injunction underscores a covenantal mandate for ecological integrity and proportionality—principles that remain profoundly relevant for

guiding sustainable forest stewardship today. This injunction calls for a model of forest stewardship that looks beyond short-term market gains and carefully considers the long-term impacts on ecosystem integrity and community well-being. Guided by such an ethical framework, Indonesia's participatory and ecologically grounded forest governance can more effectively address the drivers of deforestation while safeguarding the natural balance essential for future generations. In Proverbs 3:18, wisdom is described as a "tree of life," reflecting how deeply trees embody core Jewish values. They stand not only as symbols of vitality but also as living reminders of the need for a healthy and sustainable environment (Wolff, A., & Neril, 2023). The Bible (Deuteronomy 20:19-20) teaches us not to cut down fruit trees in times of war. Christian ecology is a theological discipline that examines the relationship between Christian faith and ecological issues. According to Conradie (2020, pp. 2–3), the essence of Christian ecology has two assumptions: Christian criticism of environmental damage and ecological criticism of the role of Christianity in this damage. Applying theology to environmental challenges means bringing spiritual teachings into dialogue with today's ecological crises. This integration is especially urgent as many ecosystems are being severely damaged, with some pushed to the brink of extinction by human activity (Borrong, 2019, pp. 183–212; Opatrný, 2023; Rabie-Boshoff, 2022). Combining theology with the context of environmental decline gives rise to a new approach in the study of environmental theology (ecotheology) to respond to real environmental damage (Kriswibowo & Amtiran, 2024). This article seeks to examine how the teachings of the Torah can serve as a guide for sustainable social forestry management, to analyze the role of ecotheology in enhancing community welfare through responsible forestry practices, and to propose practical ways these principles can be applied within Indonesia's social forestry policies. The novelty of this research lies in the application of Torah principles such as *Shmita* and *Bal Tashchit* to support environmental conservation in a modern context.

This study seeks to connect ancient wisdom with modern approaches to sustainable agriculture and forestry. At the same time, it introduces an ecotheological perspective as a meaningful response to today's global ecological challenges. By integrating ecotheology with exegetical analysis, the research explores environmental principles within the Torah, with the aim of applying these insights to social forestry management in Indonesia. By analyzing Torah texts, this study seeks to uncover principles that can be applied to sustainable social forestry practices. The findings are expected to support the development of forest management policies in Indonesia that are both environmentally friendly and socially sustainable.

METHOD

This study uses qualitative methods that bring together ecotheology and exegetical analysis to explore the Torah's principles on the environment. Through an ecotheological

lens, it examines the relationship between faith and ecology, with particular attention to the Torah's teachings on stewardship, justice, and sustainability. The exegesis analysis interprets key biblical texts-Leviticus 25:4 (*Shmita*), Deuteronomy 20:19-20 (*Bal Tashchit*), Deuteronomy 22:6-7 (biodiversity conservation), and Leviticus 19:9-10 (*Pe'ah and Leket*), to draw ethical and practical implications for ecological preservation and fair resource management. This approach underscores how the principles of the Torah can serve as a foundation for responding to today's environmental challenges. The method involves gathering and reviewing relevant literature—ranging from Torah texts to contemporary studies in ecotheology—then analyzing selected passages within their historical, cultural, and theological settings. The insights are finally synthesized into an ecotheological framework that points to practical applications for advancing sustainable social forestry in the modern world.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sustainable Social Forestry Utilization in the Torah

Viewing the Torah through an ecotheological lens—especially in relation to the preservation of social forestry—has become an important endeavor for Christian scholars who advocate for environmental conservation. Christian ecotheology explores the intersection of theology and social responsibility, grounded in the conviction that God is the Creator of the universe and that humanity is entrusted with the care of His creation. It seeks to show how faith speaks to environmental concerns and how biblical and Christian traditions can inspire conservation efforts and meaningful responses to today's pressing ecological crises.

Torah offers an argument that is highly applicable and appropriate to the subject of sustainable forestry (Goodman, 2015, pp. 41–70). Whereas modern forestry often emphasizes efficiency and productivity, the biblical tradition highlights long-term ecological stability and reverence for nature. By engaging with specific concepts found in the Torah, we can begin to reconcile ancient wisdom with today's environmental challenges. This study focuses on four central principles: *Shmita*, *Bal Tashchit*, the conservation of biodiversity, and resource justice. Together, these teachings offer a foundation that can enrich and strengthen contemporary approaches to sustainable social forestry.

Shmita and the Ecological Rest of the Land

The Torah commands a sabbatical year, called *Shmita*, every seventh year. In this sacred cycle, farmland is left fallow, allowing the earth to rest. As Leviticus 25:4 (NKJV) declares: "But in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a sabbath to the Lord. You shall neither sow your field nor prune your vineyard." This verse

affirms that the land itself shares in God's covenantal rhythm, entitled to rest and renewal as part of creation's divine design (Krantz, 2021). The principle of *Shmita*—the sabbatical year—was not meant only for farmlands but can also be understood in terms of forests. Just as fields and vineyards were commanded to rest, so too must forests be granted cycles of renewal rather than subjected to constant exploitation. The phrase *"a sabbath to the Lord"* is more than an ecological guideline—it is an act of obedience to God's sovereignty. In the same way that humanity pauses on the seventh day, creation itself is called to rest. For forestry, this means that practices like unchecked logging, slash-and-burn clearing, or relentless extraction disrupt the divine rhythm of rest. Allowing forests to recover is a way of recognizing that they are not mere resources to be consumed, but sacred trusts belonging to God. In a wider sense, *Shmita* aligns with the Jubilee (*yovel*), when land was returned to original holders as a corrective to inequality. When applied to forestry, this principle calls for forest resources to be shared fairly—not monopolized by the powerful, but entrusted to local communities and preserved for future generations. Practices such as sustainable forestry, community stewardship, and reforestation embody the heart of this command. In an age marked by deforestation and ecological crisis, Leviticus 25:4 speaks with prophetic clarity: the earth, including its forests, must be allowed its seasons of rest. Only by honoring this divine rhythm can humanity sustain fertile soil, thriving ecosystems, and a just relationship with both creation and the Creator. The Shmita practice ensures the land's longevity by preventing overuse and allowing it to regain its strength. By weaving rest into the cycle of agriculture, Shmita fosters ecological balance and harmony. According to the Torah, every seventh year is set aside as a sabbatical year, when fields are left fallow—unplanted and undisturbed—so the earth itself may enjoy the rest it deserves (Leviticus 25:4). It safeguards the land from over-exploitation, promoting sustainability by giving the soil time to renew itself. In this way, the concept of *Shmita* strengthens ecological balance by ensuring that each farming cycle includes intentional periods of rest (Goldberg et al., 2024). The *Shmita* extends the nourishment of the soil and prevents soil congestion. The Shmita cycle allows the land to rest every seventh year, giving the soil time to restore itself and preventing the nutrient loss that comes with continuous, intensive farming. This practice speaks not only to environmental concerns but also to the ethical and spiritual posture of humanity toward nature. It reflects a commitment to honoring the boundaries set within creation and to living in harmony with the natural rhythms that sustain life.

The Torah gives certain dos and don'ts, which help maintain some species. One such instruction deals with sending away the mother bird before the eggs are taken (Deuteronomy 22:6-7). This instruction aims at ensuring that certain species are not driven to extinction, and the ecological balance is not disturbed (Jähnichen, 2021, p. 4). This action shows that there are limits that need to be met, even in satisfying human wants, so that the lives of other creatures are not unduly harmed. This principle reinforces

the Torah's broader mandate of ecological guardianship, warning against actions that could lead to species loss or disrupt the intricate web of life. The ethical vision it offers aligns closely with modern sustainable social forestry, which seeks a balance between preserving ecosystems and meeting the economic needs of nearby communities. Such practices not only encourage forest renewal but also ensure that resources and benefits are shared fairly among those who depend on them. Much like the Torah's limits on the exploitation of animals, sustainable social forestry sets boundaries through careful logging, replanting, and inclusive stewardship of forest lands. Beyond technical regulations, the Torah's call for respectful stewardship of resources continues to inspire modern policies that blend traditional ecological wisdom with contemporary governance. Much like the communal life of ancient Israel, today's forest-dwelling peoples play an active role in protecting biodiversity, carefully aligning their use of resources with the natural cycles of renewal. When these values converge, sustainable social forestry emerges as a living framework that meets both human needs and the demands of ecological integrity. The Torah's ideals also find resonance in governance models that pair justice with environmental responsibility. By engaging local communities in forest protection, ministries and conservation bodies help ensure that these vital ecosystems remain abundant—not only for the present, but for generations still to come. The ecological ethics of the Torah carry a dual mandate: care for the environment and the pursuit of social justice. This vision resonates strongly with modern sustainable forestry initiatives that emphasize community-based governance and the integration of ancestral ecological wisdom. A vital aspect of socially sustainable forestry is the recognition and validation of indigenous and local knowledge systems. Rooted in centuries of stewardship, and in harmony with Mosaic principles, these communities have preserved forest ecosystems by protecting biodiversity and managing resource use within ethical and ecological boundaries.

The Torah's vision of ecological stewardship resonates with indigenous traditions, reminding us that true sustainability rests on ethical and mindful use of resources. Its laws uphold the dignity of every living being and affirm the unity of all life—a core principle of sustainable ecology. These commands are not mere technical guidelines; they embody an ethical posture toward nature and all its creatures. They call for a way of living where human relationships with the environment make space for the survival of diverse forms of life and safeguard the well-being of entire ecosystems.

Bal Tashchit and the Ethics of Non-Destruction

Among the Torah's many ecological teachings, the principle of *Bal Tashchit* remains one of the most enduring and profound. Meaning "do not destroy," it goes beyond a simple ban on wastefulness—it is a call to nurture reverence for the natural order entrusted to humanity by God. Creation, in this view, is not something to be consumed

without thought, but a sacred gift to be protected and preserved so that all life may continue to flourish. In this light, the ancient prohibition of *Bal Tashchit* foreshadows what contemporary discourse identifies as sustainability: the prudent stewardship of finite resources in order to secure their availability for the generations yet to come. The currency of this directive becomes manifest especially within landscapes—forests, watersheds, and broader biomes—now contending with the accelerated pressures of deforestation, excessive extraction, and the leaching of toxic remnants. Applying the principle of *Bal Tashchit* to the practice of social forestry challenges communities to look beyond the lure of short-term economic gain and embrace methods that secure the long-term health of the environment. When conservation is grounded in a sense of divine calling rather than shifting human preference, the responsibility to protect nature gains far greater weight. In this way, *Bal Tashchit* is not simply a set of technical rules, but a living ethical framework—where reverence for the Sacred, ecological understanding, and communal responsibility come together in a unified vision of sustainable living.

The importance of the principle of *Bal Tashchit*, derived from Torah, is that it initially forbids the destruction of trees in the course of warfare, especially species that bear fruits. Deuteronomy 20:19–20 (NKJV) teaches: "When you lay siege to a city for many days, fighting against it to capture it, you must not destroy its trees by swinging an ax against them. You may eat their fruit, but do not cut them down, for the tree of the field is man's food. Only trees that you know are not fruit-bearing may you destroy and cut down, to build siegeworks against the city that makes war with you, until it falls." From this foundation grew the Jewish principle of *Bal Tashchit*—a call to refrain from needless destruction. Over time, its scope widened into a broader ecological ethic: urging people not to waste food, not to squander resources, and not to cut down trees without just cause. Over time, as rabbinic teachings evolved, this principle matured into a more developed form of environmental ethics—one that stands firmly against the needless destruction of natural resources. This interpretation affirms the responsibility of both individuals and society to act as caretakers of the environment, ensuring that resources are used wisely and efficiently while avoiding waste and overexploitation (Goldman et al., 2020, pp. 183–212). This principle encourages sustainable practices by shaping how natural resources are consumed. What began as a prohibition in times of war is extended into daily life, reminding people to respect the environment and live in harmony with ecological principles. The injunction against waste found in the principle of *Bal Tashchit* serves not only as a liturgical command but also as a prophetic voice that complements modern environmental ethics. It calls for behaviors that preserve balance within ecosystems and affirms the continuing relevance of rabbinic wisdom in today's ecological governance. By linking ancient guidance to present concerns—such as carbon accounting—it highlights the enduring heuristic power of Torah law in shaping sustainable practices. Modern definitions of sustainability follow this same logic:

managing resources carefully so that material flows are used wisely without jeopardizing the rights and livelihoods of future generations, especially those of smallholders and communities that depend directly on the land. Secular conceptions of social forestry, once articulated in covenant maps of the Talmudic period, still advance *Bal Tashchit* by balancing sylvan protection with equitable harvest; the act of forbidding waste entails, after all, the maximal realisation of biomass per minute of labour spent, seeding both Torah ethics and rational carbon justice. The ethic of balancing cost and consumption extends into practical expressions such as delaying forest clearance, practicing low-impact labor that sustains polyculture systems like vineyards, and creating fair debt-for-nature exchanges—acts that some mahogany growers now regard as a form of restitution. A thoughtful reading of the Torah's waste laws, whether interpreted through ancient Hebrew frameworks or modern international forums that brand themselves as ecological, continues to carry deep theological weight. It speaks to how land is managed and allotted, how technology reshapes agriculture, and even how the smallest details of creation—like the fragrance of anise—remind us of the sacred bond between humanity and the earth.

Modern discussions on forestry strongly echo this principle. Sustainable forestry strives to balance human needs for timber, food, and land with the vital ecological roles of forests—as carbon sinks, habitats for biodiversity, and regulators of the water cycle. When large-scale deforestation is carried out in the name of economic growth, the consequences are severe: soil erosion, flooding, water shortages, and the collapse of food security. Viewed through the lens of Deuteronomy 20:19–20, such practices are more than ecological missteps—they are violations of the divine command to safeguard the trees that nourish and sustain life. The principle of *Bal tashchit* also challenges the practice of short-term profit forestry that disregards forest regeneration. Instead, it encourages community-based forestry, where local people serve as stewards—replanting fruit and timber trees and managing them responsibly so they can endure for generations. In this way, biblical teaching and Jewish tradition offer a spiritual foundation for viewing forests not simply as economic assets, but as life partners to be cherished and safeguarded for the future of humanity.

Biodiversity Conservation and Torah Stewardship

Today, biodiversity is often described in ecological and scientific terms, but within the Torah it is grounded in theological and ethical commitments that affirm the sacredness of all life. The Torah does not view nature as a stockpile of resources to be consumed at will, but as part of God's ordered creation, where every species has a role in maintaining balance and harmony. Forests, rivers, animals, and plants together form a living web that reflects divine wisdom. The loss of biodiversity is therefore more than an ecological crisis—it is also a moral and spiritual failure, revealing humanity's neglect of its God-given responsibility to safeguard creation. In the context of modern social

forestry, biodiversity conservation is not only central to ecosystem resilience but also vital for the well-being of local communities. This makes the principles of the Torah deeply relevant today, as they remind us that honoring the boundaries of nature is itself an act of obedience to God. By presenting conservation not merely as a technical duty but as a sacred responsibility, the Torah offers a moral framework that can shape contemporary forestry policies. These teachings call humanity to embrace stewardship as an expression of faith—one that safeguards creation and ensures that life, in all its diversity, can continue to flourish.

In Jewish tradition, protecting biodiversity is considered part of humanity's responsibility to care for God's creation, a principle known as *Tikkun Olam* (repairing the world). From the very beginning, the Book of Genesis portrays humans as stewards of the earth (*shomer adamah*), entrusted with the duty to cultivate and preserve God's creation: "The Lord God took the man and placed him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it" (Genesis 2:15). Biodiversity, as an integral part of the beauty and order of creation, reflects God's wisdom and glory. Jewish tradition also prohibits actions that disrupt the balance of creation, including crossbreeding or mixing two different species. This prohibition is found in the law of *kilayim*, which forbids the unnatural mixing of various elements of nature: "Do not mate different kinds of animals. Do not plant your field with two kinds of seed" (Leviticus 19:19). This command seeks to protect the integrity of every species as part of God's creation and to safeguard the continuity and purity of biodiversity. The Torah also reflects this concern through laws that emphasize sustainability and the preservation of ecosystems—for example, the command not to take a mother bird together with her young: "Do not take the mother with the young" (Deuteronomy 22:6-7). These regulations are designed to guard against excessive exploitation and careless harm to creation. By following them, humanity learns to uphold ecological balance, to honor every creature as part of God's divine design, and to care for the natural world as an expression of worship to the Creator.

Pe'ah and *Leket* as Principles of Resource Justice and Forest Equity

The Torah presents sustainability as more than just environmental protection—it is also about justice and the fair sharing of resources. From this perspective, caring for creation is inseparable from the ethical duty to uphold equity within society. Forests, like farmland, are not merely assets to be exploited but sources of life that sustain entire communities. When these resources are monopolized by a privileged few, both social well-being and ecological balance are endangered. This understanding highlights the continuing relevance of Torah principles in today's discussions on social forestry, where fairness, participation, and equal access remain central concerns. Unlike systems that overlook vulnerable populations, the Torah insists that protection of the poor is woven into environmental law, teaching that ecological balance cannot be divorced from distributive

justice. The commands of *Pe'ah* and *Leket* illustrate this approach, serving as enduring models for responsible resource management. They embody the conviction that land and its harvest are ultimately gifts from God, and as such, must be shared. This belief provides not only an ethical foundation but also a theological bridge, linking ancient agrarian wisdom with the pressing challenges of modern forestry governance.

Sustainable forest use, when guided by Torah principles, calls for fair and just management that prioritizes the well-being of the whole community. It ensures that everyone—not just the powerful—has access to the resources needed for life and livelihood (Case, 2023, pp. 177–207). The Torah emphasizes social justice for communities, including fair access to natural resources. This principle is evident in the laws of *Pe'ah* and *Leket* (Leviticus 19:9-10), which require landowners to set aside a portion of their harvest for the poor. *Pe'ah* means "corner" in Hebrew and requires landowners to leave the edges of their fields unharvested. The poor could then gather crops from these areas, ensuring they had access to food without relying solely on charity. *Leket*, meaning "gleanings," instructs farmers not to pick up grain that falls during harvesting (Rosenberg, 2024, pp. 179–209). Rather than being gathered for personal gain, these fallen grains were to be left for those in need. Such regulations were designed not only to provide for the most vulnerable but also to build an inclusive system of distribution—one in which all members of society, especially the marginalized, could share in the blessings of natural resources. Forest resources are meant to be shared by all. In practice, this means forest governance must guarantee fair access—not only for powerful stakeholders but also for local communities whose survival depends on the ecosystem. Yet, in reality, stark inequalities persist. Access to timber, non-timber products, and vital ecosystem services is too often monopolized by large corporations or actors with significant economic and political influence, leaving local communities at a disadvantage. Too often, local communities who depend most directly on forests are marginalized and denied their collective rights to use and manage these resources. This injustice not only deepens economic hardship but also undermines ecological sustainability, since these communities carry traditional knowledge vital for forest preservation. A more just and inclusive system of forest management must therefore be built on principles of social justice—principles deeply rooted in the Torah. At the heart of such a system lies active community involvement: forestry policies must move beyond serving only economic and political interests and instead give real space to the voices, needs, and wisdom of local communities. Additionally, the laws of *Pe'ah* and *Leket* emphasize that resources must be distributed equitably (Case, 2023, pp. 107–207). In forest governance, fair profit-sharing is a vital principle: the benefits from timber and non-timber resources must not remain in the hands of a privileged few but should be distributed in tangible ways to the wider community. Scriptural traditions, especially the Torah, affirm this responsibility by linking wealth creation with an equally binding duty to protect and uplift the vulnerable Translating this kind of moral guidance into forest practice means, for

example, legally recognizing the customary land rights of Indigenous communities, granting sustainability certifications to small-scale producers, and designing revenue-sharing mechanisms that channel forestry income directly into the hands of marginalized rural households. When implemented well, such measures can transform short-term speculative profits into sustainable yields, preventing the destructive cycles of overexploitation. Yet, turning this doctrinal vision into reality is often obstructed by entrenched structural barriers: volatile commodity prices that reward short-term gains, licensing systems vulnerable to corruption, and bureaucratic indifference toward participatory governance—all of which tend to benefit the powerful at the expense of the forest and its most vulnerable dependents.

Application of the Law in the Life of the Modern Israelic People

Wisdom is described in Proverbs 3:18 as a tree of life, offering sustainability, joy, and peace to those who embrace it. This tree of life is rooted in obedience to the Torah—divine teaching that leads humanity to live in harmony with God's will. The Torah is far more than a collection of laws; it is a wellspring of wisdom that restores the soul, illuminates life's journey, and nurtures the fruits of righteousness in daily living. As Psalm 19:8–11 proclaims, the Torah revives the soul, gladdens the heart, and imparts wisdom even to the simple. True wisdom, then, cannot be separated from understanding and applying the Torah. Through faithful obedience to God's Word, a person walks the right path and becomes like a tree of life—bearing fruit that blesses both themselves and those around them. Like the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden—symbolizing a direct relationship with God—wisdom grounded in the Torah guides humanity back into harmony with the Creator, enabling people to become a light to the world and a blessing to others. In modern Israel, this reverence for trees is reflected in law: anyone wishing to cut down a tree must first obtain a permit, even if the tree stands on their own property (Kornfeld, 2021). In Israel, it was once customary to plant a tree for every child born in the previous year—a cedar for a boy, symbolizing the hope that he would grow tall and strong, and a cypress for a girl, reflecting grace and fragrance (Mah, 2019, p. 144). In tradition, branches of cypress and cedar planted at a child's birth were later used to build the chuppah (wedding canopy) when that child married. Planting thus became a sacred act tied to life's most meaningful milestones—birth and marriage—moments when hopes for the future take center stage. Today, the significance of trees is also reflected in law: cutting down a mature tree without a license is prohibited, with violators facing up to six months in prison or a fine (Ross, 2000).

Israel has emphasized the planting of olive (*Olea europaea*) and carob trees (*Ceratonia siliqua*) for several key reasons related to their historical, agricultural, and ecological significance. Olive trees hold a profound place in Israel's history and culture, often celebrated in the Bible as symbols of peace, resilience, and prosperity. For centuries, olive trees have been central to Israel's agricultural heritage, serving as a living link to

ancient farming practices and cultural identity. Carob trees, too, have long been a staple of regional agriculture, deeply woven into the historical and cultural fabric of the land. From an agricultural perspective, both olive and carob trees provide remarkable advantages: their natural drought resistance and minimal maintenance needs make them ideally suited to Israel's Mediterranean climate, with its long, dry summers and brief, rainy winters (Tous et al., 2013, p. 404). Olive and carob trees are uniquely suited to Israel's landscape, able to thrive even in arid conditions and poor soils. Economically, olive oil production is a cornerstone of the Israeli economy, meeting local demand while also driving exports that sustain rural livelihoods. Carob trees, meanwhile, yield pods that can be processed into a variety of food products, including carob powder—a natural cocoa alternative—creating additional income opportunities for farmers. Beyond their economic benefits, both olive and carob trees play vital environmental roles: conserving soil, preventing erosion, and fostering local biodiversity. With their deep root systems, these trees help stabilize soil in hilly areas and support ecological balance by providing habitats for diverse species. They also play a vital role in carbon sequestration, helping to mitigate climate change and strengthen Israel's environmental sustainability efforts. The practice of mandating the planting of olive and carob trees reflects a multifaceted strategy that weaves together historical tradition, agricultural needs, economic priorities, and environmental policy. By encouraging their cultivation, Israel not only preserves its cultural heritage but also advances sustainable farming and ecological conservation in response to today's pressing challenges.

Since its founding, Israel has made afforestation a cornerstone of its national development strategy, turning barren and arid lands into vibrant ecosystems. The Jewish National Fund (JNF) has led a remarkable effort by planting more than 240 million trees across Israel. These forests provide vital ecological benefits—reducing soil erosion, improving air quality, and creating habitats for wildlife—while also standing as symbols of renewal and resilience, reflecting the deep bond between the people of Israel and their land. Beyond their environmental impact, Israel's afforestation projects embody a broader commitment to sustainability and stewardship. By transforming semi-arid regions into thriving green landscapes, they have slowed desertification, improved water retention, and pioneered innovative approaches to land restoration in difficult climates. At the same time, these initiatives carry cultural and spiritual meaning, echoing biblical principles of caring for creation and nurturing a shared sense of pride and responsibility to safeguard the environment for generations to come.

CONCLUSION

The Jewish theological corpus articulated in the Torah offers an ecotheological framework crucial for developing a praxis of sustainable forestry, evidenced in precepts such as *Shmita*, which asserts the exigency of land observance, *Bal Tashchit,* which

circumscribes the sphere of permissible consumption to that which does not precipitate gratuitous loss, the safeguarding of biotic plurality, and the distributive justice guarded by the mechanisms of *Pe'ah* and *Leket.* These normativities exemplify that ecological stewardship is inscribed within the very fabric of covenant obligation, such that forestry is reconstituted not as a secularist calculus of material gain, but as an obligatory service to the Creator. This study offers a fresh perspective by bringing together divinely grounded ecological teachings and modern sustainable forestry scholarship. It shows that ancient covenantal principles still carry practical insight and guiding authority in addressing today's environmental crises. In this light, forestry is reframed as a theocentric endeavor—an act of stewardship that, as L.E. Goodman describes, becomes a participatory rehearsal of the divine blueprint for creation's order. This analysis argues that ecotheological principles must be meaningfully integrated into both the curriculum and policy frameworks of forestry sciences. In this view, communal forestry, replantation programs, and the protection of shared biological resources should be carried out as acts of faithfulness to a divine mandate. At the same time, regulations must resist the lure of short-term gains in order to safeguard ecological resilience for generations to come. That said, this study remains primarily doctrinal and discursive, without presenting detailed forestry data or technical management models. For its moral and epistemic insights to be translated into measurable and actionable strategies, ongoing collaboration is needed among ecologists, forest policy makers, and indigenous silvicultural practitioners.

Competing interests

Gandi Wibowo focuses on Christian Theology, while Robert W. Wiley specializes in Natural Theology and Geophysics. This difference in disciplines indicates no academic competing interests.

Author contributions

G.W. is the lead author, compiled the literature, and developed the discourse.
R.W.W. contributed perspectives on Israelite culture and reviewed the language as a native speaker.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human, animal, or environmental subjects. Ethical approval to conduct the study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Baptis Kalvari.

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Data availability

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Environment and Forestry of Indonesia. The data are continuously updated in real time, and the dataset used in this article was accessed at the time of submission.

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