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A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE ON MODERN ENVIRONMENTALISM

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Accusation: The Bible Legitimizes Spoilation of Nature / Scholarly Aspects / Interpreting the Bible from an Environmental Perspective / The Midrash Literature / Political Aspects / The Greens and Nazis / What is Behind the Lack of Interest? / A Trial Ground for *Halakhah's* Development Potential? / Applying *Halakhah* to Problems of Modern Society

In the Jewish tradition, man in his original environment was perfect. He had not yet sinned, and so lived in harmony with God. In its messianic philosophy, Judaism strives for similar good times at the end of days.

Paradise was also an ideal location from the viewpoint of modern environmentalism. Basic human needs like housing, transport and safety, as manifested in post-Paradise societies, did not exist in the Garden of Eden. Not even clothing was required. Man used no textiles or other materials. There was no potential scarcity of resources. There was no need for any production, as man needed neither products nor tools. Thus there were no production residues.

No artificial fertilizer was required for plants to grow. Man and animals ate only vegetables. All food was biodegradable and probably metabolized into plants. Animals did not require any special protective measures, as they were not

attacked by any other creatures. Biodiversity was thus maintained.

Most probably vegetarian, not-yet-violent man did not cause nature any harm; neither had he any other impact on the ecosystem. Application here of environmental analytical tools presents a situation of perfect sustainability.

Judaism and modern environmentalism, two radically diverse value systems, thus have a common golden age and utopia both as origin and ideal. Their motives and aims, however, are entirely different.

Already before the Paradise story, however, the ways of Judaism and deep ecology, an extreme current of environmentalism, had parted. In Genesis 1:28, God commands man: "Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth."

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Accusation: The Bible Legitimizes Spoilation of Nature

In 1967, the American historian Lynn White, Jr., stated that this text expressed God's will that man exploit nature for his own purposes.¹ In his often-quoted article, "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis," White apportioned major blame for the present crisis to medieval Christianity. He claimed that Christianity — especially in its Western form — was the world's most anthropocentric religion, and concluded: "Hence we shall continue to have a worsening ecologic crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man."

White said that Judeo-Christianity imbued Western culture with an "implicit faith in perpetual progress" which is "indefensible apart from Judeo-Christian teleology." In his view, the text from Genesis implied that the only purpose of the world's creation was to serve man, who was thus entitled to do with nature whatever he wanted to, including causing its gradual destruction.

White's article was mainly a critique of Christianity. His brief reference to Judaism was made in connection with his interpretation of the Torah verse. He did not search for interpretations among the classical Jewish commentators. Unless proof to the contrary is brought, one has to assume that White was ignorant of the fundamentals of Jewish biblical interpretation. His article is often quoted and has become a standard reference on the issue of religion and the environment.

Others expressed similar thoughts. Historian Arnold Toynbee, an intellectual Jew-baiter in many areas, wrote that while the verse from Genesis "in 1661 read like a blessing on the wealth of Abraham in children and livestock, in 1971 it reads like a license and an incentive for mechanization and pollution."²

Eilon Schwartz of the Hebrew University has analyzed White's and other attacks. He summarizes them as follows: "Both Judeo-Christian culture and Greek-Roman culture are said to have subscribed to dogmas which are either explicitly or implicitly antagonistic to nature. They assume a categorical distinction between the human being and the rest of the natural world, a distinction which devalues the rest of nature while it elevates human worth."³

Reactions to White's thesis have been reviewed or repeated in more than 200 articles over the last three decades. This number exceeds that of serious Jewish publications on environmental issues during that period.

The few Jewish authors who reacted to White's

accusations explained that, according to Jewish tradition, man was the divinely-appointed steward of the natural world, and not its destructive exploiter. To support this, they quoted texts from the Bible, its commentators, and the Talmud. Some added that, *halakhically*, to be fertile and increase did not mean maximalizing offspring.

Surprisingly enough, nobody seems to have focused on the simplest answer. The discussion as to whether Judaism is anthropocentric or biocentric is misplaced. The expression "centric" in this context is a misnomer. The observant Jew is not free to eat what is available, nor whenever it is available; he or she cannot have sexual intercourse whenever they please with whomever they please. On one day of the week, the Shabbat, actions and movements are limited. There is no full freedom to do with one's property as one wishes. One cannot even acquire land for eternity, as it returns to the original owner in the Jubilee year. Besides these major constraints, there are many others. Such a theocentric value system contradicts anthropocentricity.

Abraham J. Heschel addressed the issue of the Jewish attitude toward nature with precision, well before modern environmentalism became a mainstream interest: "One of the great achievements of the prophets was the repudiation of nature as an object of adoration. They tried to teach us that neither nature's beauty nor grandeur, neither power nor the state, neither money nor things of space are worthy of our supreme adoration, love, sacrifice, or self-dedication. Yet the desanctification of nature did not in any way bring about an alienation of nature. It brought man together with all things in a fellowship of praise. The biblical man could say that he was 'in league with the stones of the field' (Job 5:23)."⁴

It is only one step from the question of Jewish attitudes to nature to the next one: which neo-pagan elements contain modern environmentalism? Norman Lamm expressed a clear view: "To appeal to contemporary man to revert, in this twentieth century, to a pagan-like nature worship in order to restrain technology from further encroachment and devastation of the resources of nature, is a piece of atavistic nonsense."⁵

The two issues mentioned, Paradise and God's mandate to man with respect to the natural world, are only a few among many areas of interaction between Judaism and modern environmentalism. In modern Jewish writings, however, environmental issues are almost ignored in contrast to the major interest which they have raised in society in general.

Scholarly Aspects

The areas to be explored concern both scholarly and political aspects. A short overview will indicate the variety of subjects concerned.

Classical Jewish sources refer to many issues which we would nowadays consider environmental ones. One major category is *halakhic* references. One often-quoted commandment is *Bal tashkhit*, forbidding wanton destruction of fruit trees; another — *Tsa'ar baalei hayim* (the pain of living creatures) — refers to the Torah's attitude toward animals.

The law of *shmitta* — the sabbatical year — is frequently mentioned as fitting the environmentalist purpose of sustainable development, preserving the quality of harvests and preventing soil erosion. There are many more instances of such "environmental" commandments in the Torah.⁶ The environmental aspects of Shabbat, for example, merit much more research.

The analysis of *halakhah* should be extended to later periods as well. There are frequent references in the Mishna, Gemara, and the Responsa literature to environmental issues. The eighteenth century Rabbi Yechezkel Landau, known as the Noda biYehuda, answers the query as to whether a Jew is permitted to hunt game with a rifle: "I am very astonished that anyone should ask this question. The only hunters mentioned in the Torah are Nimrod and Esau. Hunting is not a sport for the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob....How can a Jew go out and kill a living creature for no purpose other than for the pleasure of hunting?"⁷

Contemporary discussions on the Jewish attitude toward vegetarianism often center on the writings of Rav Kook, who can be considered a near-vegetarian. The former Chief Rabbi of Ireland, David Rosen, a vegetarian, writes: "the current treatment of animals in the livestock trade definitely renders the consumption of meat *halakhically* unacceptable as the product of illegitimate means."⁸ The American *halakhic* scholar, J. David Bleich, who has reviewed the Responsa literature on animal experimentation, concludes that while Judaism does not command the eating of meat, it does not see in vegetarianism a moral ideal.⁹

Recently, senior rabbis such as Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef and the Bostoner Rebbe Levi Yitzhak Horowitz have urged Jews to stop smoking. *Halakhic* decisions on this go back as much as four centuries.

Interpreting the Bible from an Environmental Perspective

We can also interpret the Bible's narrative from an environmental viewpoint. Besides "man in Paradise," the other environmental story which immediately comes to mind is the Flood. God considers ten generations of human misbehavior intolerable. Spiritual pollution leads to environmental catastrophe. Humanity drowns.

Modern environmentalists forecast a similar story, excluding God. If humanity abuses technology and produces too many greenhouse gases, global warming will lead to melting of the polar ice caps and major floods. Many people may drown because humanity has sinned against nature.

Many other Bible stories have an environmental perspective. The ten plagues tell us that, having created nature, God is free to dispose of it at will. When the sixth plague in Egypt is described, the epidemiological link between pollution and sickness is laid. God orders Moses and Aaron to take some handfuls of furnace soot, which Moses throws heavenward. This becomes fine dust all over Egypt and causes severe boils upon man and beast.¹⁰ In environmental terms we would describe what happens to the *manna* in the desert as photodegradability. After everybody has taken his share, it melts away in the sun.¹¹

The Midrash Literature

Examples of Jewish views on the environment can also be found in the Midrash literature. They include ethical or philosophical attitudes with respect to nature and the environment. One frequently-quoted Midrash refers to man's obligation to maintain responsible stewardship of the world: "God said to Adam: 'See my work, see how good it is. Know that everything I have created, I have created for you. And now take care lest you spoil and destroy it; no one will rebuild it after you.'¹²

Many other modern environmental motifs already appear in the Midrash, including protecting biodiversity. Resh Laqish tells us that the raven said to Noah that both he and God hated him. God's hate expressed itself in making him unclean: thus only one pair of his kind was admitted into the Ark, while the clean birds came in sevens. Noah apparently hated him also, as he was the one sent out on a reconnaissance mission, rather than a bird of which there were seven pairs in

the Ark. The raven said that if he should die of heat or cold, his species would disappear from the earth. (He added as an afterthought to Noah: "perhaps you desire my wife?")¹³

There is also place for assessing the views of Jewish mysticism on specific environmental issues. The sixteenth century Kabbalists in Zefat were against the killing or torture of any living creature, including insects, as they believed that human souls could transmigrate into animals.¹⁴ It is claimed, though, that this was a minority position among Jewish mystics.

Another area which merits study is how Jews behaved toward the environment. The Talmud tells us that Jerusalem's marketplaces were swept clean daily.¹⁵ The emphasis on hygiene cost Jews dearly in the time of the Black Death: as proportionately fewer of them died, they were accused of having caused the Plague and were massacred. Whoever looks at the stone desert of the Jerusalem ultra-Orthodox Har Nof quarter nowadays, also finds there an expression of environmental perspective. One might speculate that, as Zionism reflected an interest in nature, many ultra-Orthodox shy away from it as a reaction.

Jewish writings on the above issues fall into two broad categories. The first includes those who base themselves on traditional Jewish sources (not necessarily only Orthodox scholars). The second category consists of all others. They display varied attitudes. Judaism today is pluralistic. Anybody can quote Jewish sources in his argumentation and call that a "Jewish position."

Political Aspects

The analysis of classical Jewish sources covers only part of the multiple interactions between Judaism and environmentalism. In the political-ideological arena, there are many touching points as well. Again, these are heterogeneous.

When discussing the dialectics of Zionism and the environment, Avner de-Shalit of Hebrew University states that, in Zionism, a new "ethos of development" emerged: "nature could be exploited to rebuild a normal social structure for the Jewish people and thus sustain a personal psychological change in the young immigrant."¹⁶ A.D. Gordon was probably the Zionist ideologist with the most affinity to modern environmentalism. In his view, manual labor and awareness of nature — hand-in-hand — would heal the Jewish people.¹⁷

In the context of Zionism and the environment, the JNF's tree-planting policy — perhaps better called a ritual — comes to mind. Here Zionism had an environ-

mental orientation before mainstream modern environmentalism emerged. The historian Simon Schama describes his London youth: "I was gumming small green leaves to a paper tree pinned to the wall of my *cheder*, the Hebrew school. Every sixpence collected for the blue and white box of the Jewish National Fund merited another leaf....The diaspora was sand. So what should Israel be, if not a forest, fixed and tall? No one bothered to tell us which trees we had sponsored. But we thought cedar, Solomonic cedar: the fragrance of the timbered temple."¹⁸

Zionist history only partially explains Israel's attitudes toward the environment. The great density of the Israeli population in the coastal areas creates environmental problems similar to those in the Western world. Why have environmental issues not reached an interest level in Israel anywhere near that which they command in North America and Western Europe? The answer seems obvious: Israel has other, more urgent, priorities such as security and Arab terrorism. When asked what the Israeli religious parties' attitudes toward environmentalism are, one draws a blank. Even the *shmitta* year is associated only with religion and not with environmentalism.

Another area where environmentalism and Judaism touch concerns diaspora policies. Some authors, mainly in the United States, claim that Jewish communities should — not only as citizens but in a Jewish capacity — actively pursue environmentalist policies. This position remains a marginal one. Groups of environmental activists — mainly in the United States — are islands in the larger Jewish community.

The Greens and Nazis

Another question to be addressed is: What is Israel's attitude to the Green parties in Europe? These are usually allies in the struggle against anti-Semitism. However, some Green extremists take anti-Israeli positions in international matters. This is a sensitive point, particularly where Germany is concerned.

The emergence of a strong Green party in Germany is not accidental. It is linked to the country's Nazi past. The French writer Elisabeth Badinter notes: "The slogan of the German Greens 'better red than dead,' which was so fashionable in the years 1970-1980, can only be explained by the antecedents of those...who exclaimed it. Children or grandchildren of hangmen, they were more than anything afraid of repeating the mistakes of their fathers."¹⁹ Historian of ecology Anna Bramwell quotes a Freudian psychiatrist, Jannine Chasseguet-Smirgel, who states "that Green interest in

air pollution was a subconscious reference to the gassing of the Jews, and that they claimed that Germans were in danger of suffocation through air pollution in order to hide their feelings of guilt...at having gassed the Jews."²⁰

In the eyes of Israeli policy-makers, however, the Greens do not pose a threat. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs does not have a specific policy for dealing with European Green parties, while it does for neo-Fascists. The Greens are considered democratic and in Austria, for example, some Israeli diplomats have viewed them positively and as allies in combating neo-Fascism.

This leads to another subject: the relationship between environmentalism and Nazism. French philosopher Luc Ferry contrasts the Nazis' love of animals and nature with their hatred of certain humans: "There is nothing accidental in the fact that we owe to the Nazi regime until today the two most elaborate types of legislation which humanity has known on the subject of protection of nature and animals."²¹ The differences and parallels in thinking between Nazism and modern environmentalism need further exploration.

Other issues merit analysis, apart from those mentioned so far. Norman Solomon, the former editor of *Christian-Jewish Relations*, suggests that "the contribution made by individual Jews, for instance scientists and economists, to the modern ecological movement... would make an interesting study in itself."²²

Many Jews are prominent environmental activists, ideologists, and scientists in the environmental field. However, in these activities they do not usually refer specifically to Judaism, nor do they write about Jewish aspects of environmentalism. It is unlikely, however, that we will soon see much study in this field: since World War II, looking for specifically Jewish contributions to certain disciplines is often considered taboo. Another area which may yield interesting insights is the study of how modern Israeli and Jewish authors perceive environmental issues in their novels.

What is Behind the Lack of Interest?

This large agenda of touching points between Judaism and environmentalism is not exhaustive. There seems to be substantial place for very diversified, systematic research; so much that one might consider that Jewish environmental studies has the potential to become a scholarly discipline in its own right, despite the low number of Jewish publications over a 35-year period.

One may well ask: why is there so little interest in Jewish attitudes to the environmental world? The most

obvious answer is that the Jewish people face more immediate threats. Organized Jewry inside and outside Israel has so many problems to deal with: Arab terrorism, anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism, and assimilation, to mention a few. They all take priority over confronting a topic such as environmentalism, which seldom focuses on issues which conflict radically with Judaism.

While there may be confrontation on an issue such as ritual slaughter, it is with animal protection movements rather than with mainstream environmentalists, and on a subject which was around long before modern environmentalism emerged.

A Trial Ground for *Halakhah's* Development Potential?

The main possibility for providing a coherent Jewish perspective on environmental challenges probably lies in the development of *halakhah*. This codified system, based on rules and precedents, goes back more than 3,000 years. Rabbis have defined priorities in conflicting situations using legal, pragmatic, and value considerations.

Using today's definitions of environmental issues, one could compile what *halakhah* had to say on them until perhaps the beginning of the nineteenth century. One would then find that *halakhah* already held positions relevant to many of the major environmental issues in pre-industrial/mass consumption society. Some of these applied to Jews everywhere; others, only in the Land of Israel. Though difficult to assess, it may well be that, at that time, Judaism had the most diverse and detailed legal infrastructures in the world with respect to the environment.

Applying the organically expanded rules of such a system to confused contemporary environmental issues, where both value and pragmatic judgments have to be made, may yield Judaism's most important contribution in this field. There is another benefit to be gained for Judaism. Orthodox Judaism has to start substantiating its claim that a modern state can function based on *halakhah*.

An area such as environmental legislation might provide a strategic trial ground for a variety of reasons. Israel is a fairly backward country in its environmental practice. Developing *halakhic* concepts could show that, domestically, *halakhah* can systematically confront complex modern problems. Due to the low environmental awareness in Israel, no major controversies are to be expected while *halakhic* experts rule on how to deal with problems.

So far, little has actually been done to explore

halakhah's potential attitudes on major environmental issues. One author who has made a foray into the field is American academic David Novak, who wishes to extend the law of *bal tashchit* with respect to the permissibility of nuclear war. He considers that *bal tashchit* teaches that we cannot destroy our enemies unconditionally and that, similarly, one cannot destroy one's environment unconditionally.

Novak states: "This is certainly the case in a situation like the nuclear threat today, where our destruction of somebody else's environment would inevitably entail the destruction of our own environment. Indeed, even without the actual use of nuclear weapons, we have painfully seen from the ecological devastation wrought by Saddam Hussein and his Iraqi troops in the Persian Gulf in 1991 that Iraq itself did not escape its horrible effects."²³

Applying *Halakhah* to Problems of Modern Society

The environmental field is rather confused. This provides a further opportunity for Judaism to contribute to clearer environmental thinking. Much Western legislation reflects unbalanced public policies and laws influenced by activist pressure. The conclusions of rabbinic experts may provide fresh perspectives for the legislators.

Many environmental issues need an approach where priorities are set according to clear principles. In one not too farfetched example: Can we hold a plastics manufacturer legally responsible for the recycling of a bottle he sold once to a soft drink manufacturer who in turn sold it to a consumer, who drank the contents and threw the bottle into the waste bin? In Germany that is the gist of a law. Would such a law be possible in a *halakhic* state? Probably not.

With what right could European states force manufacturers of consumer durables to recycle products at the end of their life? When a manufacturer sells a car to somebody, he does so with all its rights and obligations. The first owner usually sells the automobile after a few years to a second one. After ten to fifteen years, after 4 to 5 car owners, what justice is there in holding car manufacturers responsible for the recycling of obsolete cars? This concept of extended producer responsibility is occasionally proposed in Europe, however. How would *halakhah* deal with such a question? Could this goal be achieved through leaving a residual obligation for the seller in the original purchase agreement?

Under the U.S. Superfund law, the government can retroactively force any former owner to clean up a

hazardous waste site, irrespective of whether he caused the pollution or not. Is that equitable under Jewish law? Studying such problems and finding answers enriches *halakhah*. It can be a preparatory exercise toward more controversial *halakhic* decisions in other modern fields.

This proposal may be a long shot, but it provides answers to major problems which are lurking in the background. A Jewish problem: *halakhah* has to be developed organically to address modern issues. A world problem: a more coherent legislative approach has to be developed in the environmental field. It is not suggested that *halakhah* become the law for the world. God did not propose that. However, *halakhah* certainly could shed some additional light on how to approach problems of environmental legislation.

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Notes

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The essays collected here demonstrate the connections between the earliest days of the Jewish political tradition through the expression of that tradition in the Land of Israel and in exile to modern and contemporary times. *Kinship and Consent* will be of deep and lasting interest to political scientists, historians, social scientists, and historians of all persuasions.

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