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NEO-PAGANISM IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE AND ITS RELEVANCE TO JUDAISM

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While history never repeats itself, many of its major motifs recur over the centuries. This is underlined again by a variety of contemporary manifestations of idolatry, both in the public square and outside it. None of these are entirely identical to those mentioned in Bible. Nonetheless, like its predecessors, the phenomenon of neo-paganism merits Jewish concern.

As modern motifs are not dressed up the same way as ancient ones, one can no longer show visitors around pagan Jerusalem, passing Astarte's holy poles, incense burning to Baal, or horse sculptures dedicated to the sun god.¹ One cannot let tourists experience religious prostitution — at least not in the literal sense of the word — nor show, as the excursion's high point, parents burning children at Molech's in the Ben Hinnom valley.²

Astarte³ and Baal are no longer worshipped, though one still has to pay to see sculptures of them

at museums and archaeological sites. In today's atmosphere one wonders whether they will not be pulled out one day — with or without the permission of the museum management — to be revered again. An Israeli museum curator told me that she removed a statue of Buddha from an exhibition after finding somebody kneeling before it. There is indeed much to be said for the view that as it is holy for many, a statue of Buddha does not belong in a museum.

Secular Aspects

Some neo-pagan expressions are religious, others secular. The latter concern secular religion, i.e., ideology, as well as popular culture. Occasionally we also find indications of it in a business context. Semantics show this well. When *The Economist* recently wrote about Nobuhiko Kawamoto, the retiring chief executive of Honda, it mentioned that "he has worshipped fast machines

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all his life." When he became chief executive in 1960, "Honda was in thrall to its engineers — a priesthood housed in separate premises."⁴ Money-hungry people are considered to worship Mammon. Consumerism is called "a contemporary religion."

Singers like Elvis Presley or Madonna and sport stars like Michael Jordan or Ronaldo are "idols." And, above all, Princess Diana has become a universal icon and cult figure. Her burial place is becoming a secular shrine. Mythology is developing fast and there is already a walking tour around the main locations of her life, a secular version of the Via Dolorosa. A Jew must distance himself from this. What is there to admire in this suicidal and neurotic person, a self-confessed adulteress? Indeed, she spent time on charity. Many other wealthy people do without so much fuss being made about it.

Sex is another pagan motif dressed in new clothes. The ancient desire for sex under the auspices of the idol has been partly replaced by the modern desire for sex with him or her. In pre-Aids days, one could regularly read how popular singers found groupies in their bed when they returned to their hotel rooms. After he was found to have Aids, American basketball star Magic Johnson told the media that so many women had offered themselves to him that he could not resist. If he were to die early from unsafe sex, as Adonis did in the old days, this would again be a variation on an ancient motif. However, he will not necessarily be resurrected in the spring thereafter, as Tammuz was believed to be.

Spiritual Elements

The spiritual and ritual elements of today's idolatry are still evolving and are part of a widespread search for "unconventional" religion. Like so many expressions of Western society, paganism is fragmented. Partly because of this, its overall impact cannot easily be assessed. Remnants of indigenous religions have survived in the Americas and have been revived in Europe. Several Eastern religions which have come to the West are pagan or have pagan elements.

Neo-Nazism is another semi-religious ideology. One hears more about its racism than its pagan interests in nature, but the latter are there nonetheless.

Religious Neo-Paganism

Religious neo-pagans are yet another category. These are not necessarily provocative people. A Jewish Harvard University student told me that, when asked about their religion, several of his non-Jewish colleagues answered that they consider themselves pagans.

He added: "They are dour people, no different from other students."

In North America, Wicca or Witchcraft claims to be the fastest-growing religion. Whether that is true cannot be ascertained. Neither can the international spread of neo-paganism be assessed.

American rituals are not necessarily the same as those emerging in Eastern European countries, where the gods are Slav. The *Jerusalem Post* reported about a "grandly named June 20-25 World Pagan Congress" in Lithuania, a "sedate mix of ethnographers, hippies and New Age followers," with participants from Latvia, Russia, Britain, and the U.S.⁵

Most neo-pagan groups are very small. Some, though, strive for recognition as an official religion. The Internet is an easy communication and propaganda vehicle. As an Italian paper put it: on the worldwide web, David is equal to Goliath.

Much of neo-pagan ritual centers on nature. There are many modes of veneration. In this splintered world, the sun god is making his re-entry. On May Day, some pagan fertility rites celebrate the sexual union of the gods, who replenish the earth. One can communicate at appropriate moments with the spirits of one's ancestors or others. Animism is no longer exclusively confined to American Indians or African tribes. For those looking for a more selective nature religion, there is Druidism. Besides the serious movements there are also those who take matters less seriously. For playful Jews there is, or was, Hassidic Druidism which has among its scriptures one called Mishmash.⁶

With the possible exception of Satanists, neo-pagans do not sacrifice children, but cults sometimes lead to death in a different way: collective suicide. Others commit murders: remember Charles Manson.

The increase in nature worship may be explained by the attitude in contemporary Western society that anything is permitted. This easy answer is most probably a wrong one. We should try to understand better where neo-paganism comes from and how it may develop. We will then see that there are many possible causes, some of which point in the same direction.

Nature's Return

Central to the subject is revival of interest in nature, for a variety of both rational and irrational motivations. One rational reason is that the development of industrialization and consumerism has led to nature's increasingly being destroyed or damaged.

Re-evaluation of nature takes many forms. Some

aspects may cause humanity serious problems in decades to come, as they may lead to people's focusing on wrong priorities. The signals are there for whoever wishes to see them. Some people risk their lives to protect whales and dolphins, or to report on tropical forests being felled.⁷ It was much easier to mobilize millions of Western Europeans to boycott the Shell petroleum company, wanting to dump its Brent Spar oil platform in the Atlantic Ocean, than to put pressure on their governments to do something about the mass slaughter of humans in Bosnia or Rwanda. What, indeed, are the priorities of many modern nature lovers?

There are many other reasons for the resurgence of nature's role. One is an increased awareness that science can provide only limited explanations and solutions for the human condition. Nature is being rediscovered, now that technology and science have partly failed mankind's exaggerated expectations.

Virtual Society

Yet another reason for the desire to return to nature is that society is becoming increasingly virtual. Money is a good example. It took a long time to replace barter trade with metal coins, a first modest step of virtualization. It took many centuries again to replace metal coins with paper money. Now we are rapidly moving to the cashless society.

Tomorrow one's deposits, debentures, shares, and other financial instruments may be wiped out by the mistake of a bank clerk, the attack of a computer terrorist, or the millennium bug. Despite all the talk of post-modernity, technology is rapidly proceeding further, and the advance of this flag-bearer of modernity causes many unease. In this virtual society, people are increasingly seeking something real, tangible, and durable. Nature, which was around long before history started, fulfills this role ideally.

From the economists' perspective, nature's re-evaluation is simple to understand: the number of people in the world is increasing, while parts of nature are gradually disappearing. Thus the value of the abundant good "mankind" declines, and the value of the scarce good "nature" increases. In other words, killing people will preoccupy people relatively less, and animal and other ecosystem protection will become more central.

One extremist environmental current — deep ecology — posits that humans should not have more rights than nature's other components. They claim that we should adopt biocentric rather than anthropocentric approaches. If one were to take this to its logical

extreme, that would mean that, in the case of a major fire, people should prefer the fire brigade to focus on saving endangered animal species rather than children, of whom there are so many.

We find nature's re-evaluation in many places where few people recognize it. At an international medical congress in Jerusalem, doctors reported that increasing numbers of people want to die a "natural death." Somebody from the audience remarked correctly: if that is so, why do they go to see doctors? One may consider this to be a matter of semantics only: what people mean is that they do not wish to suffer from modernity, i.e., technology, by having a low-quality life prolonged by the application of a variety of machines. Still, there is a general longing for a beautified imaginary past, which is perceived as "natural."

The emergence of a variety of religious expressions of neo-paganism in modern Western society has to be seen against the background of this desire to return to nature. The idolaters are not necessarily implying that "anything is permitted." Their message may well be the opposite: all other ideas have failed. This includes monotheistic religions, totalitarian ideologies, atheism, secular humanism, and science.

In the past two centuries, we have seen the belief in an invisible God first weakening, then being abandoned by substantial parts of Western society. Thus a spiritual vacuum was created. Major ideological weeds — i.e., secular religions like Communism, Fascism, and Nazism (in historical order) — entered the increasingly barren public square. In this spiritual vacuum newly designed pagan ideas have also re-emerged.

The collapse of the last of the totalitarian ideologies — Communism's demise at the end of the 1980s — left an even greater spiritual void to be filled in many public squares in the West.

Meanwhile, the *Zeitgeist* has changed. In the confused *fin de siecle* atmosphere and the fast-increasing complexity of Western society, individualism is more fashionable than collective approaches. This is also true for beliefs. Despite individualism, however, many wish to belong to larger communities, albeit with little permanent commitment. It is against this background that the Diana-cult needs to be seen. More commitment is shown in the trend to belong to vague, ill-defined movements, the most important of which are those wishing to protect nature. For those who desire greater commitment there are small neo-pagan groups and cults.

Their philosophy can be interpreted as "let us return to the basics to which man has adhered from time immemorial, a religion intimately connected with sacred nature." They do not necessarily accept old rituals as such, but often reconstruct new ones from ancient elements. Neo-paganism is part of this search for roots and may be interpreted as a religious root therapy. Thus, not only is nature being re-evaluated in modern Western society; with the return of the prominence of the forests and the lakes, the spirits which lived in them have also been resurrected.

These sects rightly see the worlds of both Jewish and Christian thought as their enemies. There is no place in monotheism for the divinity of nature to which humanity must bow. In it nature may be valued but it is not sacred. The adherents of the single God, Creator of the world, have a long record of destroying pagan idols and desecrating their holy places.

Astrophysicists and the Weather

The undermining of basic monotheistic beliefs comes from many other directions. This helps provide the infrastructure which enables nature worshippers to increase their self-confidence. Some may come from academics who have no affinity whatsoever with neo-paganism. Among neo-paganism's de-facto and unintended allies are prominent astrophysicists who claim that the world has not had a beginning but has been around forever.

Stephen Hawking relates how he was once invited to a conference on cosmology at the Vatican that was organized by Jesuits: "At the end of the conference, the participants were granted an audience with the pope. He told us that it was all right to study the evolution of the universe after the big bang, but we should not inquire into the big bang itself because that was the moment of Creation and therefore the work of God. I was glad then that he did not know the subject of the talk I had just given at the conference — the possibility that space-time was finite but had no boundary, which means that it had no beginning, no moment of Creation."⁸

Hawking, himself a modern icon, is not the only one unintentionally helping paganism. The weather does too, with its quirks. Is El Niño a secret agent of the heathens? A few more years of multiple natural disasters will greatly assist nature's reinstatement in the mainstream of society's consciousness.

The Upgrading of Paganism

Although organized neo-paganism seems to be growing, it remains marginal. Neo-pagan groups may have prominent adherents, but they usually do not come out of the closet, a pre-condition for being in the public square.⁹ This is likely to change when the opportunity presents itself.

There are signals of the possible upgrading of paganism in more prominent places. While these signals are weak, they are not insignificant. Recently, in the framework of a series of conferences on religion and ecology at Harvard University, the relationship between Judaism and the natural world was discussed. Several other conferences covered the relation to ecology of religions such as Shinto, Hinduism, and "indigenous traditions."

The organizers plan a concluding conference which aims to find a common position of the world's religions on the environment. Their aims can be translated into plain English: all religions are basically different brands of the same make and we had better unite their views under Harvard sponsorship. From a Jewish angle this can be summarized as: Judaism should better work out an ideological compromise to reach a common position with the pagans on its environmental world-views and ethics. It is a meager consolation that this "community of believers" does not — yet? — include neo-pagans.

Astrology

Other beliefs which reflect ancient ideas related to paganism have permeated mainstream society even more deeply. The horoscope is an integral part of many respectable Western newspapers, including Israeli ones. It is so common that many superficial readers of the latter would be shocked to be told that they adhere to marginal pagan rituals. The field of reading one's future is equally fragmented. The stars are not alone. Numerology, reading Tarot cards, and crystal ball gazing are also flourishing.

In major Western cities, magic shops seem well established and are not always in back alleys. If there were no demand for their books, cult objects, and other wares, they would have vanished long ago. When Nancy Reagan was First Lady of the United States, she regularly consulted her astrologer. So did Princess Diana. Probably many more politicians do this than we are aware of.

Extreme Environmental Currents: A Major Pagan Carrier?

There are many more murky ideas which have penetrated the Western world. Various ill-defined spiritual interests have developed. In the Netherlands not long ago, a book by Irene von Lippe-Biesterfeld, the sister of the Dutch queen, became a bestseller. She relates how she talks with dolphins and trees, and how nature gives her answers before she takes important decisions.

In the next century, some of the more extreme currents of modern environmentalism may well become a significant vehicle for the spreading of neo-pagan ideas and pseudo-religious concepts linked to nature. Here, I can only refer to this briefly, although these ideas and their influence in the public square merit a fully-fledged discussion.

In the fragmented, even splintered, world of modern environmentalism, neo-pagan ideas have emerged separate from many perfectly pragmatic approaches. Many environmentalists pursue rational goals. They rightly claim that decades of Western focusing on economic expansion has brought with it an irresponsible neglect of the environment. On the other hand, neo-pagan and other pseudo-religious concepts are hidden features of the powerful, partly amorphous construct which some more extreme Green activists develop.

It is difficult to gain a coherent understanding of modern environmentalism, lacking as it does a single main force. It is still in great flux. The issue is indeed complicated, because the movement embraces so many individuals with only very pragmatic goals. Frequently its adherents have only a single purpose: for instance, people whose sole environmental desire is that no noisy highway or electric transformer station be built next to their house. These people usually do not care at all about the spiritual aspects of environmentalism. One should certainly not accuse mainstream environmentalism of being related to neo-paganism, though some extreme currents definitely are.

Judaism, Environmental Matters, and the Long Struggle of Monotheism

Many aspects of pragmatic environmentalism are also immanent in classical Judaism. *Halakhah* (Jewish law) refers to a multitude of measures which would now be described as "protecting the environment," even if Judaism defines them differently.

While pragmatic approaches may often be similar, the values of Jews and fundamental environmentalists are radically different. Norman Lamm, president of

Yeshiva University, stated that he refused to participate in a major ecology conference because it focused around the concept that "nature is sacred."¹⁰

The ancient revulsion with regard to paganism felt by adherents of Judaism links up with the need to take stock of contemporary phenomena. The long struggle of monotheism against paganism began with Abraham's recognition of God. The Torah issues strong warnings against idolatry, and tells the Israelites to destroy the pagan gods and their infrastructure upon entering the Land of Israel. *Halakhah* indicates how central this struggle against paganism is. In times of danger to life, the Jew is allowed to abandon all the Torah's commandments with three exceptions: murder, incest, and idolatry.

In most of the last two thousand years, the Jews have had little time, possibility, or desire to propagate monotheism to humanity. As far as paganism was concerned: why fight it if it had faded away from most societies where Jews lived? The developments in this soon-ending century indicate that this was too hasty a conclusion.

We cannot know the future. In today's chaotic and rapidly evolving world, we ignore the directions that contemporary paganism may take and how influential it may become. Yet we cannot exclude the possibility that it will get a syncretistic grip on many secularists as well as disillusioned monotheists.

Judaism's Attitude

What should Judaism's attitude be with respect to both neo-pagan religions and extreme environmentalists? In order to answer questions, we must first ask: why is the fight against idolatry so central in Judaism? We are helped to comprehend this by rephrasing it in the language of our time: "Why is the Jewish God so jealous? Why is He so intolerant of pagan deities and idolaters? Aren't Jews intolerant and weren't pagans tolerant? Polytheists did not care whether there is one deity more or less. All gods are welcome."

The language is misleading. What is presented as "tolerant paganism" included the permissiveness of religious prostitution and the cruelty of human sacrifices.

For several prominent writers in the environmental context, paganism scores higher than monotheism. The historian Lyn White wrote in a much-quoted article: "By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects."¹¹

White was certainly wrong with regard to Judaism.

Its environmental message is finely calibrated: it sees nature as having its place in the Divine universe, but not as its master. It should not be abused and destroyed, but it can be used for man in a reasonable way.

The Bible conveys two major messages regarding nature as God's creation. The first is that it is a manifestation of God's majesty, and man should recognize this; the second is that God may use it as He wishes and change it at will. For the modern nature-believer, such views are close to heresy.

Judaism and the Laws of Nature

Halakhah is the antithesis of the laws of nature. The latter are cruel: there is no charity in nature; there is no mercy. There is no safety-net in nature for marginal beings. The strong eat the weak. The old are abandoned. Neither is there any equality or anything resembling democracy. Nature should be feared. Volcanic eruptions sometimes cause as much damage as atom bombs. Earthquakes wipe out communities. The expression "forces of nature" has a clear undertone of violence.

When we discuss nature's image, truth, half-truth, and fallacy are intertwined.¹² Nature is presented in a benign way. "Nature knows best" is a foolish expression. It is fashionable to think about natural products in a positive way and about synthetics in a negative one. However, some natural poisons are thousands of times more toxic than the most lethal synthetic chemicals. Some water streams are rich in arsenic, and contain more natural poison than the sewage of heavily polluting industries.

Another slogan of our time is that man should learn to "live in harmony with nature." Those who propagate it hardly understand what they are promoting. Firstly, if man had done so, his average life-span would have remained at thirty years or so. Furthermore, I postulate that no nation in the twentieth century has lived as much "in harmony with nature" as Hitler's Germany. Blood and soil became central values. In the pseudo-religious world of national socialism, nature and its rule — i.e., the survival of the fittest — played an important role.¹³ Not surprisingly, the Jews — the people who introduced moral laws into society — were to be wiped off the earth. Germany was also the first country to introduce significant laws for the protection of nature.

Anybody who places nature as the central value in society must be suspect in the eyes of Jews. One should not lump together neo-nazis, neo-pagans, and extreme environmentalists. Yet all should be watched carefully by Jews, even if the degree of worry greatly differs.

The Noahide Laws

In the Torah, God tells not only the Jews but also humanity in general that they should not live according to the laws of nature. Among the 613 commandments given to the Jews, there are seven which Judaism considers binding for all humanity. Non-Jews are expected to practice these Noahide laws at the very least: they prohibit idolatry, the vain use of God's name, murder, sexual transgressions, theft, and eating the flesh of live animals, and require all people to establish courts of law to govern themselves. Two of these commandments are relevant to man's relation with nature: not eating the flesh of live animals, and the recognition of God and the prohibition of idolatry. The latter forbids revering nature — or any part of it — as sacred.

These Noahide laws are Judaism's central message to the world. A world which would study these laws and adhere to them would be a much more moral place than the one we live in today. Judaism is not a universal religion in the sense that it has to take a position on everything which happens in the world. Anybody familiar with the strategic aspects of propagating ideas knows that it is counterproductive to focus on secondary issues. There is only a limited number of messages that the human mind can retain.

A Jewish Return to the Sources?

The re-emergence of paganism has particular significance for Judaism. There are some indications that Jews are disproportionately active in neo-pagan groups, particularly in the U.S.A.¹⁴ Even more importantly, however, it admonishes us that Jews should focus again on the basic attitude of the Jewish legal and value system toward nature and those who venerate it. In recent decades some diaspora Jews, most of whom are remote from the observance of most Jewish laws, have been telling the world that some of Judaism's central values are to fight against the American involvement in Vietnam, to eliminate nuclear weapons, to foster civil rights in the United States and human rights in the world, and to protect the environment.

The extent to which classical Judaism deals with these issues varies. One thing is clear: these are derivatives and not Judaism's central messages to the world. Important as they may be, emphasizing them in isolation distorts what Judaism is about.

The main Jewish message to the world is very different and focuses on other matters. The Noahide laws are the essence of Jewish universalism. They stress human duties. Human rights are only derived from these duties, and are not the basis from which

Judaism starts. If the commandments are not respected, human rights automatically de facto disappear.

Establishing a Watch

Searching for the central values of Judaism, we cannot invent or re-invent them: they have been defined by classical Judaism. Trying continually to twist them to fit the passing fashions of the surrounding world not only means distorting them, it is also politically and strategically unwise.

So what does the return of paganism mean for Judaism? It forces us to focus on the importance of Jewish law and tradition, which proclaims that nature is not the dominant force in the world, nor is it sacred. There is a unique divine force above nature. Nature's laws represent barbarity; the Noahide laws represent civil society. Civilization must be intolerant toward barbarity. No compromise is possible between the monotheist God and the polytheist deities.

The Jewish agenda is a very long one. Many things assimilated Jews consider important should be pushed down the Jewish agenda. The new outside reality should help us understand that propagating the Noahide commandments to humanity should have had a higher place on this agenda a long time ago.

It is not very clear where we are going. We live in a rapidly changing world where we must continuously catch weak signals and watch whether they get stronger. Nothing good for the Jews can come out of a worldwide strengthening of paganism. The same goes for a distorted emphasis on the importance of nature.

One popular mode of civic action today is the establishment of "watches." If a certain phenomenon is worrying, one develops ongoing documentation on what is happening so that, if threats arise, one is mentally prepared and can react. If, indeed, protecting nature is a key issue of the next century, there seem to be enough reasons for Jewish observers to watch which direction this powerful, renewed interest in nature will take, and what consequences this may have for world Jewry. This refers to both the religious focus on nature of neo-paganism and the ideological one of extreme environmentalist currents.

* * *

Notes

1. "He did away with the horses that the kings of Judah had dedicated to the sun, at the entrance of the House of the Lord" (II Kings 23:11).

2. "He also defiled Topheth, which is in the Valley of Ben-Hinnom, so that no one might consign his son or daughter to the fire of Molech" (II Kings 23:10).

3. "The king also defiled the shrines facing Jerusalem, to the south of the Mount of the Destroyer, which King Solomon of Israel had built for Ashtoreth, the abomination of the Sidonians, for Chemosh, the abomination of Moab, and for Milcom, the detestable thing of the Ammonites. He shattered their pillars and cut down their sacred posts and covered their sites with human bones" (II Kings 23:13-14).

4. *The Economist*, July 4, 1998.

5. *Jerusalem Post*, June 23, 1998.

6. Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today*, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin, 1986), p. 325.

7. So, for instance, the *Time* special issue, "Our Precious Planet" (November 1997), mentions three Western environmentalist activists wresting incriminating information from illegal loggers in the Cambodian forests.

8. Stephen W. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), p. 116.

9. Adler, *op. cit.*

10. Norman Lamm, "A Jewish View of the Environment and Ecology," lecture given at the Technion, Haifa, Israel, October 7, 1996.

11. Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," quoted in *The Environmental Handbook* (New York: Ballantine, 1970), pp. 20-21.

12. Manfred Gerstenfeld, *Environment and Confusion: An Introduction to a Messy Subject* (Jerusalem: Academion, 1994), p. 123ff.

13. Robert Pois, *National Socialism and the Religion of Nature* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), p. 35.

14. Adler, *op. cit.*

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