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Judaism, environmentalism and the environment: Mapping and analysis

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Summary

The central question addressed here is: "How does Judaism view modern environmentalism and environmental matters?"

For the purposes of this analysis, 'Judaism' has been defined as the world of Jewish thought – particularly its religious aspects – and the precepts for action which flow from it. Attention is also given, albeit more briefly, to Judaism's cultural and national thought.

The phrase 'environmental matters', as defined here, covers several fields. The main ones are man's relationship with living nature, his attitude and behavior toward animals, his use of natural resources, the effects of pollution and nuisance on third parties, and issues pertinent to the allocation of space.

'Modern environmentalism' refers to those currents and individuals who consider protection of the ecosystem one of society's central goals.

Serious public concern about the environment only began to develop in the second half of the twentieth century. However, the historical origins of this modern phenomenon in Western society can be traced back to the last century.

Several issues which have developed in modern times and are now considered environmental, were already of serious concern in Jewish thought many centuries ago. One finds a broad variety of references to such matters in the Bible, the Talmud, the responsa literature and other classical Jewish sources.

Halakha (Jewish law) determines the observant Jew's behavior in many aspects of life. This includes ancient laws which would now be defined as 'environmental'. They deal with issues such as nature protection, animal welfare, pollution control and environmental hygiene.

Any attempt to arrive at a consolidated Jewish position with regard to the natural world or modern environmentalism must start with a review of the classical Jewish sources. It is in this area that this study's main effort lies.

Chapter One deals with the touching points between Judaism and modern environmentalism.

Several aspects of modern environmentalism inspire interest and/or caution in contemporary Jewish writers. In order to understand this better, some attention is given to the historical development of the movement and its major characteristics.

Due to its diversity and fragmentation, modern environmentalism is difficult to define. For some people it is a universal ideology which concerns the relationship between man and nature. Others describe it as a value system, or a scientifically-based philosophy. A less far-reaching description is that it is a collection of rather divergent beliefs and/or opinions in which environmental matters are central. For many others, environmentalism is a pragmatic approach to protecting one's health, controlling waste, preventing pollution, and eliminating other environmental threats to both mankind and living nature.

As one cannot easily define or understand environmentalism, it is hard to form a balanced opinion on its many aspects. Thus it is a complex mission to determine an overall Jewish attitude toward this multi-faceted field, and discussion between the two worlds is complicated.

Judaism – particularly its Orthodox component – tends to take a rather detached view of environmentalism. One possible explanation is that it does not provide a challenge to the Jewish people, who have many more urgent problems to deal with, including concerns for the physical safety of Israel and the cultural-religious threat of assimilation.

The instances of interaction between Judaism and modern environmentalism, often still in a nascent state, are dispersed over a vast, incoherent, largely uncharted area. The current study deals mainly with issues which relate to the religious rather than the sociological, cultural or political aspects of the Jewish position on the environment. Neither does it deal extensively with the analysis of the environmental attitudes of the State of Israel, the dominant political expression of the Jewish people. Some reference is made in this chapter to issues such as post-Biblical history, Zionism, the kibbutz movement, Israeli and Diaspora attitudes, and organized Jewish environmentalists.

Another meeting-point between Judaism and environmentalism can be illustrated by the ways in which modern Israeli and Jewish writers perceive environmental issues in novels, poetry and other writings. However, this is mainly left for further study.

Chapter Two analyzes the Jewish reaction to environmentalism. Judaism was initially drawn into the environmental discussion because of the 'spoliation of nature' debate. In the late 1960s and early '70s, some publications – mainly in the United States – claimed that Judeo-Christianity had laid the ideological basis for the current environmental crisis. These accusations included claims that a passage in Genesis legitimizes man's exploitation of nature for his own ends. A major source of these accusations was an often quoted 1967 article by the American historian Lynn White Jr.

In the – mostly unstructured – debate on the attitude of Judaism toward the environment, Jewish writers write from a variety of motives. They seem to share almost no common view on the subject, other than the motivation to write about it and the belief that it is a genuinely problematic issue.

The number of Jewish writers who explain their motives on this issue may be small, but the range of positions they represent is wide: from the attitudes of catastrophists to those of ‘contrarians’, who are of the opinion that environmental issues hardly exist or are not problematic. Some publications refer to many aspects of environmental consciousness in Judaism, stressing harmony between Judaism and environmentalism; others see significant tensions between them.

Some of these tensions arise from various neo-pagan elements in environmentalism, and the similarities in the approach of some environmentalists to that of the Nazis in their love of animals and nature (as the latter also combined with the hatred of certain humans). Other tensions concern the relatively strong position of the Green political party in Germany and the anti-Israel attitude of some European Green politicians.

The main interests of most Jewish writers on environmental issues lie in other fields, and their forays into environmentalism may be considered incidental. Most of them reveal a limited understanding of the subject.

Despite their limited numbers, Jewish publications available on the subject of Judaism and environmentalism raise many motifs and themes. Those reviewed here express a diverse religious Jewish background, from Orthodox to Reconstructionist. The writers reveal a wide spectrum of views on nature and its destruction. Nonetheless, there are specific boundaries which are never crossed. Biocentricity seems so indefensible that few Jewish writers even approach it. Declaring nature holy, and caring so little about nature as to destroy it without reason are both considered totally unacceptable.

Chapter Three deals with environmentally relevant themes in Halakha.

Halakha prescribes rules to be followed by Jews in many areas of life. Reviewing this vast body of law indicates classical Jewish attitudes in several areas of environmental relevance. These may be broken down into various categories and issues:

- a) Principles referring to the prohibition of wanton destruction.
- b) Halakhot in the broad area of health protection and nuisance limitation. Both Bible and Talmud give many examples of pollution prevention and abatement to prevent hindrance to others.

- c) Laws concerning land policies and soil protection, including commandments concerning sabbatical and jubilee years.
- d) Halakhot referring to animal protection.
- e) Laws prescribing constancy of species.
- f) Laws defining elements of the layout of Levite cities and refuge towns that are, to some extent, precursors of the modern concept of sustainable cities.
- g) The Shabbat laws, containing several elements of environmental relevance.
- h) Other halakhic rules of environmental relevance, such as the dietary laws (*kasbrut*) and fasting.
- i) Halakha pertinent to the conflict between environmental and economic interests.

Many of these rulings apply to Jews everywhere; others pertain only to the land of Israel. From the above list, it is clear that a body of what we would now call 'Jewish environmental law' has existed for many centuries, although it is not concentrated in a separate codex. Together, these rulings cover many environmental aspects of industrial/mass consumption society.

In general, contemporary Halakha has barely referred to environmental matters: when it has done so, it has been in a scattered manner. Among the issues dealt with in responsa in recent years, a prominent one is passive smoking – a phenomenon which can cause nuisance and health damage to others. There has also been some recent halakhic discussion on the Jewish attitude toward vegetarianism. Authorities who have based their views on the same sources have reached diverse conclusions on this subject. Animal experimentation is another contemporary issue to which some halakhic attention has been given.

The idea that the corpus of Halakha could be substantially extended and developed to deal with a variety of contemporary environmental issues is rarely posited, but the Jewish tradition has great potential in this field. Applying Halakha to problematic areas where both value and pragmatic judgments need to be made, may become Judaism's most important contribution in the environmental field.

The mechanisms for setting this process in motion need not be complex. In the future, halakhic scholars may find environmental Halakha of interest, acquire a specialized knowledge in this field and start developing it. Another possibility is that concerned citizens may start to pose environment-related halakhic questions, and may find rabbinical authorities willing to study and answer them.

In cases of conflict of interest, Halakha determines which interest takes precedence. Such hierarchies are also clearly shown in the

value judgments which emerge from the narrative, prophetic and wisdom texts of the Bible, and from later literature such as the *Aggadab*. By systematically analyzing hierarchies in the various types of classical Jewish sources, a larger map of Jewish views on the environment could be developed, setting out how several elements of the eco-system fit into the Jewish value system. A contribution to this is made in this chapter.

Chapter Four discusses Jewish attitudes to environmental issues in the Bible's narrative.

Additional insights into Jewish attitudes to environmental issues can be gleaned from the Bible's non-halakhic writings. A sizable number of references to the subject is found in its narrative, prophetic and wisdom texts. Modern Jewish writings have given little attention to this. Thus, while most of the Torah's Halakhot with environmental aspects have probably been identified by now, this is not necessarily the case with other Bible texts.

Four different approaches are proposed which, together, provide environmentally relevant views as expressed in the Bible's narrative:

One can review those stories in the Bible which have obvious environmental aspects, as currently defined, and analyze them from an environmental viewpoint – occasionally even with the methods, instruments and categorization of modern environmentalism and environmental studies. For instance, Paradise and life in it can be analyzed with the tools of the environmental audit and environmental impact assessment. In some cases, this approach can help to identify where religious and modern environmentalist views overlap or diverge.

Following these methods, some Biblical stories (the Garden of Eden, the Flood) can be considered almost as environmental paradigms. Others, such as the story of the Ten Plagues, have several environmental aspects.

A further clarification of classical Judaism's views on the environment can be gained by reviewing the Bible texts included in the Orthodox prayer book. Those most relevant to our subject generally refer to nature. This selection reflects those Biblical concepts which the rabbis composing the prayers in post-Biblical times wished to emphasize.

Modern Jewish publications can be reviewed, in order to see how they interpret various non-halakhic Bible passages. Further insight can be obtained from the way various Jewish commentators have interpreted Bible texts with environmental elements. This is particularly relevant with regard to stories like the Flood and the Ten Plagues.

The attitude toward the environment that is revealed in the Bible's narrative is reviewed through analysis of a number of subjects:

- a) the Paradise story;
- b) nature and the stories dealing with man's attitude toward natural resources;
- c) the position of animals in the Biblical narrative, and
- d) pollution.

From the viewpoint of both modern environmentalism and Judaism, Paradise was an ideal location. In its messianic thought, Judaism strives for similar harmony at the end of days. Environmentalism aims for sustainability. Thus the ideals of these two radically diverse spheres have much in common, although their approaches, values and motives are entirely different. Environmental and religious views can be compared in other cases, thereby clarifying the differences in approach of these two worlds of thought.

Another major Biblical theme is the role of nature. The Bible conveys two main messages: that it is a manifestation of God's majesty and that man should recognize this; and that, as it is God's creation, He may use and even change it as He wishes. The latter means, for instance, that God can transform non-living into living nature, or destroy living nature. Its normal functioning is subject to obeying Divine commandments.

The Bible contains many such examples of nature's modification – in more traditional language, miracles – as a tool of punishment for communities and individuals. The most extreme case is the Flood in which – with the exception of Noah's family – all humanity and large parts of the ecosystem are destroyed. Others include the destruction of the city of Sodom, because ten righteous men cannot be found there. Lot's wife is turned into a pillar of salt because, while being saved from the disaster, she does not obey the one Divine instruction given on this occasion: not to look back.

The story of the Ten Plagues is the main example of a series of modifications of nature as a tool of Divine punishment. Few other Biblical stories relate in such detail the relations between God, man and nature in Judaism. Humanity must obey God; if it does not, nature can be used in extraordinary ways to punish it.

The Bible also tells us a number of basic things about natural resources:

- a) they are in God's hand;
- b) if people are dissatisfied with God-given natural resources, they may incur God's wrath;
- c) sometimes they are scarce and become a bone of contention;
- d) they should be used wisely.

Similarly, the Bible provides many perspectives on animals and their position in society. The themes addressed can be summarized as follows:

- a) animal sacrifice as a substitute for human sacrifices;
- b) animals as a tool of divine punishment;
- c) animals cannot be wantonly destroyed;
- d) animals should be treated well;
- e) animals are held responsible for their deeds;
- f) animals can also be used in metaphors.

Many more themes emerge from a modern environmental reading of the Bible. This includes issues of pollution, recycling and the way in which environmental problems affect the economy.

Chapter Five refers to additional environmental motifs in the *Aggadab* literature.

A broad variety of environmental themes are addressed in classical Jewish religious literature. This field requires more substantial exploration than it has received to date. The examples given in this chapter are indicative of the potential wealth of environmental material in the *Aggadab*.

The *Aggadab* texts lend themselves to multiple, sometimes contradictory, interpretations. This is illustrated in modern Jewish writings, which give many different interpretations of the often quoted *Midrash*: "God said to Adam: See my works, see how pleasant and good they are. Everything I have created I have created for you. Be careful not to spoil and destroy my world. If you do so no one will repair it."

A broad spectrum of environmentally relevant themes are developed. One group concerns links between abstract concepts such as sacredness and righteousness, on the one hand, and concrete issues such as decay, putrefaction, destruction, disease, death and natural disaster on the other.

Many other motifs from the *Aggadab* demonstrate an ancient Jewish interest in issues which are now considered environmentally relevant. This includes matters such as silence versus noise, avoiding conspicuous consumption, protecting biodiversity, compassion for animals, the importance of tree-planting and intergenerational equity.

Conclusions

Read together, the various classical Jewish sources referring to environmental matters show prescribed behavior and thought to be coherent.

An integrated review of the environmental halakhic rules clarifies that the discussion as to whether Judaism is anthropocentric or biocentric is misplaced. In fact, it is theocentric.

There are many limitations in Jews' behavior that have environmental relevance. The observant Jew is not free to eat all that is available, whenever it is available; even within marriage, he or she is not allowed to have sexual intercourse whenever they please.

On one day of the week, the Shabbat, activities and movements are limited. The same is true for the Holy Days. There is no full freedom to do with one's property as one wishes. There are halakhic prohibitions against causing pain to animals or random wanton destruction of both nature and inanimate matter. Halakha is opposed to many elements of conspicuous consumption, and its multiple rules set behavioral limits on such an attitude. Together with other constraints with an environmental impact that are detailed in other commandments, these mean that the Jew is not free to do with his environment whatever he wants.

Does Judaism have anything to say to environmentalists? Put this way, the question is difficult to answer, and requires additional questions such as 'which Judaism?' and 'explicitly or implicitly?' Contemporary Judaism is so heterogeneous that the answer can only be that certain Jews feel that they have something to say to environmentalists in the name of Judaism, but these views are not necessarily shared by many other Jews.

Phrasing the question differently – does classical Judaism or its continued contemporary expression, Orthodoxy, have anything to say to environmentalists? The answer is 'not directly', because Judaism does not address adherents of any particular 'ism'.

Firstly, Orthodoxy speaks mainly to Jews. However, it does have a message for humanity in general which includes environmental matters. Its view is that all mankind should respect the Noachide commandments. These include two environmentally relevant components: the first is that there is only one God, Who should be revered; thus there is no place for the sanctification of nature or elements of it. God can make things sacred; He did not make nature so. The second is that animals should not be cruelly treated.

There may also be many implicit matters for Orthodox Judaism to convey to environmentalists, through both the halakhic system and its world of thought. As environmentalism is such a fragmented movement, each person or group will have to determine whether this is a matter of interest to them. Should Orthodox Judaism see it as an important task to carry the implicit message to the nations of

its own initiative? The answer seems to be 'not yet': the priorities on its agenda are different.

Judaism and modern environmentalism sometimes coincide in their approaches to various practical issues. However, they have radically different origins, and their main concerns are often on quite diverse tracks. Neither do they aim at similar goals. Even where their positions do overlap, they draw from different points of view within different value systems.

The more environmentalist currents acquire the character of a value system (which sees the protection of the ecosystem as the central task of society), the more alien their views are to Judaism (which sees obedience to God as the central value). There is no place within Judaism for two central values.

Those environmentalists who see nature as sacrosanct are expressing the beliefs of neo-paganism, which is diametrically opposed to the world of Jewish values. Judaism's origins lie in the affirmation of a single God and in the struggle against paganism and its idols.

This ideological incompatibility has few practical consequences as the threats that deep ecology poses to Judaism are minimal. There are no countries with deep ecologist rulers, and its influence as a value system is limited. Judaism looks favorably on a variety of the environmental movement's aims, such as energy saving, waste prevention and nature conservation.

There is conflict between Judaism and some environmentalist positions (particularly as represented by the animal protection movements) with regard to ritual slaughter. These tensions existed well before modern environmentalism became a mainstream movement. As the latter deals with so many issues and its values are so different from Judaism, future tensions may well develop on other issues.

Because the practical tensions between environmentalism and Judaism are so weak, there is currently little need for the worldwide Jewish community to change its de facto view that interaction with environmentalist currents can remain low on the Jewish agenda.

Now that a more responsible attitude toward the environment is being taken, in the near future Jewish concern for environmental matters will have to find its main expression in participation in the actions of society in general. The political and behavioral aspects of this will thus require some attention from organized Judaism. To the extent that environmental issues have specific Jewish aspects, these should mainly be dealt with in the scholarly domain.

It is here that the current major environmental challenge to Judaism lies. A much better understanding of the environmental discourse, its underlying motifs and perplexities will remain a precondition for

the identification and competent reading of classical Jewish sources relevant to environmental matters. As a result, the sensibilities of individual Jews and communities toward environmental requirements may be sharpened.

This may lay the basis for a more general Jewish vision on environmental issues, starting from the current interest in a few individual aspects of this problem complex. The latter often leads to an apologetic approach. Environmentalism's achievements and flaws can then be looked at from a more consolidated appreciation of the ancient Jewish value system.

There are so many areas – with such diverse elements – of interaction between Judaism and the environment that there is room for a separate field of Jewish environmental studies. By seeing the various Jewish environmental issues as part of a whole, significant scholarly progress can be made to deepen understanding of Jewish attitudes toward the environment.