

What's Jewish about Jewish Environmentalism?

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INTRODUCTION: ARE JUDAISM AND ENVIRONMENTALISM COMPATIBLE?

Beginning in the 1990s, an environmental wave began to rise within the Jewish world. Israel's green community, for decades dominated by the veteran conservation organization, the Society for the Protection of Nature, suddenly expanded at an unprecedented rate. Between 1998 and 2004, the number of environmental groups in the green umbrella organization Life and Environment grew from twenty-four to ninety. *Shomrei HaAdamah* [the preservers of the land], a spiritual and educational network, started. The Coalition on Judaism and the Environment (COEJL) became an American umbrella organization for such diverse organizations initiatives as Hazon and *Canfei Nesharim*, an Orthodox Jewish initiative. Every stream in the organized Jewish world had their "green rabbi," from Reconstructionist activist Rabbi Fred Dobb to University of Judaism rabbinical dean, Brad Artson, or Israel's former Chief Sephardic Rabbi, Bakshi Doron. A Green Zionist Alliance ran in the elections of the American Zionist Organization and stunned the establishment by fielding representation of a Jewish American Green Party in the 2002 and 2006 Zionist Congresses.

The phenomenon poses a threshold question: what's Jewish about Jewish Environmentalism? And naturally, a Jewish response requires that a question like that be answered by another, more basic question: is there such a thing as 'Jewish Environmentalism' at all? I pose the query because there are those who argue that culturally, at least, being Jewish has very little to do with bonding with the natural world, preserving ecosystem integrity, or preventing pollution. Such views are not the ravings of anti-Semitic villains but actually are held by some Jewish scholars.

In 1984, for example, Steven Schwartzchild, a learned rabbi, wrote a provocative essay titled "The Unnatural Jew" in the leading journal *Environmental Ethics*. Schwartzchild wrote:

My dislike of nature goes deep: nonhuman nature, mountain ranges, wildernesses, tundra, even beautiful, but unsettled

landscapes strike me as opponents which, as the Bible commands, I am to fill and conquer. . . . One explanation of my attitude is historical. My paternal family lived in Frankfurt on the Main prior to 1500. This was where I was born. We have been urban for well over a millennium. Might it be that Judaism and nature are at odds?

Rather than dismissively scoffing at it, Schwartzchild asks an interesting question: Is there an intrinsic alienation between Jews and the environment? Could all those years of persecution in the European and Arab Diaspora, during which Jews were prohibited from owning or connecting to land, have left such a scar on the collective national psyche that we are left incapable of appreciating or drawing inspiration and harmony from creation? Did the world of books and Torah study create a virtual reality so powerful that it ultimately came to supplant an organic connection between Jews and the earth?

The answer is not entirely self-evident. It would not be an overstatement to argue that, for many of today's suburban Jews around the world, the closest connection they have with the natural world is getting off the cart on the fairways of their country-club golf course, when they take their dogs for a walk before work, or when they stumble onto the National Geographic channel as they surf between CNN and HBO.

And if the criterion is based on doctrine, surely there are sufficient passages in our tradition to support a position that holds that the Jewish faith is anything but environmentally friendly. Many scholars of religion, beginning with Lynn White, have argued that biblical theology often implicitly advocates ecological domination. Who has not shaken their head when reading the famous line in *Pirkei Avot* 3:9, when Rabbi Yaakov states, "One who walks on the road while studying a Torah lesson but interrupts his review and exclaims, 'How beautiful is this tree! How beautiful is this plowed field!'-Scripture regards him as though he is no longer worthy of living"?

Alternatively, it might be argued that Jewish sources simply do not address these issues at all in a serious way. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin is one of the great popular sages of our time. With the exception of a couple of paragraphs about farm animals, Telushkin's voluminous 519-page *The Book of Jewish Values* is absolutely silent about the environment.

So it is well to state a definitive position on this key matter: when the preponderance of the evidence and tradition is laid out, Judaism and

environmentalism can be seen as largely synonymous. There need not be incompatibility between the Jewish faith and the natural world. If such a phenomenon is manifested in unfortunate individuals, it is anomalous. If it ever existed at all collectively, I would characterize it as one of those unfortunate consequences produced by an exile in a generally hostile European world that came to an end so tragically in the middle of the twentieth century. Surely it does not reflect traditional Judaism or Judaism in the twenty-first century.

The Bible—the book of books—is filled with an environmental perspective that only recently has been appreciated. From the moral imperative of biodiversity preservation by Noah (Gen 6-9) during the flood to the laws of *shmitah*, the earth's sabbatical year (Exod 23:10-11), or to the Bible's almost reverential attitude toward the cleansing power of water (Lev 15:1-27)—the Torah is anything but a how-to manual for plundering the planet. Open spaces serving as greenbelts that are to surround ancient cities are mandated as binding zoning obligations (Num 35:2-3). A variety of rules make compassion for the natural world compulsory, such as the prescription to send a mother from its nest before taking the eggs or the chicks (Deut 22:6).

The bottom line is that Jews are commanded to synchronize existence with that of Creation and live with limits. "The Earth is the Lord's," the Psalmist tells us. That is why land ownership was not absolute in Israelite culture; even today in Israel, technically real estate leases still largely expire every forty-nine years, as if to remind us that we are just visitors on this earth. And everyone knows that guests need to know how to behave themselves.

But what of those occasional, undeniable, uncomfortable passages from traditional texts that appear to depart from the predominantly environmental orientation of Judaism? Over the years, a series of elaborate and generally convincing interpretations have been offered to soften even the most ecologically unsympathetic texts. For instance, the Baal Shem Tov, who is generally associated with founding Chasidic Judaism, turned the passage that threatens death to someone distracted by trees during Torah study on its head. (The great Master explained that, if one is so alienated from the natural world that admiring a tree while studying constitutes an interruption, then indeed one is a great sinner. According to the Baal Shem Tov, the link between divinely inspired texts and God's natural world should be so self-evident that if someone has let books

become their sole reality and cannot see the connection, as, sadly, might be the case with Rabbi Schwartzchild, the Creator apparently would indeed be very unhappy.)

A PLURALISTIC JEWISH ENVIRONMENTAL VIEW

I think most scholars, and surely those attending this auspicious symposium, would agree that the principal message in traditional Jewish texts is an extremely green one. But at the same time, it would not be a Jewish ethic if it were a homogeneous one. Eilon Schwartz, the director of the Abraham Joshua Heschel Center for Environmental Leadership in Tel Aviv, has thought longer and more profoundly about these matters than anyone I know. Schwartz once analyzed a Jewish environmental ethic by dividing our traditional theology into four different schools.

One view sees humans as “stewards of the earth.” Creation is not to be used solely for the good of mankind, but rather humans are expected to take good care of this amazing planet with which we have been entrusted. This is best expressed in the mandate to “work and to preserve” the Garden of Eden (see Gen 2:15).

A second, which Schwartz calls “the holy sparks” view, is more of a mystical approach. God’s presence is not transcendental, being “out there somewhere,” but rather holiness can be found in every animate and inanimate object on earth. The divine sparks that penetrated them at the time of creation renew themselves constantly with a meaning and value that elicit a response of awe among all creatures and cry out for respect from humans.

A third view gets the name “out of the whirlwind,” most conspicuously manifested in the tempestuous book of Job. It sees humans as insignificant in a vast cosmos that we cannot understand but that, by its very dimensions, inspires a sense of reverence (see Job 38:1-36).

A fourth view, called “a little lower than the angels,” can in fact be challenged as less than environmental. Humans are placed by the Almighty at the top of the food chain and, in accordance with a divine hierarchy set forward in Genesis, are given the right to dominate the natural world. So there are many voices in Jewish tradition. But most commentators seem to agree that just as we ask for compassion every day of our Creator, surely our ability to rule the natural world must be tempered with the same empathy and kindness that we pray for. Indeed, internalizing the divine characteristic of compassion is the essence of the Jewish pursuit of *kedusha*

or holiness.

So, yes, Jewish theology is a mixed bag, but all of the different paradigms show different shades of green—none of which are mutually exclusive. Pluralism and diversity of perspective are of course about as inherently Jewish as monotheism. When I was chair of Life and Environment, the umbrella group of Israel's ninety environmental organizations, I used to quip that it was like trying to herd flies: "Two Jews—three synagogues—four environmental groups." But that of course is always what has made the Jewish intellectual menu so rich and tasty. So the fact that there are many Jewish environmental perspectives is perhaps the best validation of the position's authenticity.

Another way to approach that question is empirical: for social scientists, the way Jews act and what Jews largely believe offer a more tangible definition of what is the true Jewish outlook in today's world. If one is to look at Jewish inclinations in the modern world—or what Jews believe—it is hard to deny a green bias in any but the most ultraorthodox circles.

Take, for example, the global stage and the environmental discourse surrounding it. The disproportional involvement of Jews in the modern environmental movement is remarkable. I will get into reasons why later on in this essay. But just a cursory look at the American environmental scene uncovers a disproportionately Jewish involvement: from Fred Krupp, who personally upgraded Environmental Defense into the green powerhouse organization it is today, to Adam Werbach, the youngest person ever elected president of the Sierra Club, to Ellen Silvergeld, arguably the most effective public interest environmental scientist in the green nongovernmental organization (NGO) community.

While the chairman of Israel's Green Party has never made it to the Knesset, Ian Cohen, the leading green politician in Sydney, Australia, is a force to be reckoned with in the New South Wales Senate. The voting record of Jewish senators, be it Diane Feinstein or Joe Lieberman, passes the highest criteria set by the League of Conservation Voters. In academia, leading Jewish environmental experts are ubiquitous: from Princeton's global-warming authority, Rob Sokolow; to toxic air-pollution contaminants master, Jamie Schauer; to ecological guru, Jared Diamond; or to development-economics high priest, Jeffrey Sachs, once again the representation is extraordinary.

Now one can argue, with some logic, that the latter is merely a reflection

of Jewish success in academia in general. Jewish environmental expertise is really no different a phenomenon of intellectual excellence than that which even the less chauvinistic among us cannot help being proud of. It is best seen in the twenty-three percent of Nobel Prize winners that are identified as Jews. Yes, perhaps. But I would argue that a surprising proportion of the leading ecological academics who are champions of public-interest environmental protection are also Jewish. And this is worth pondering.

My own response to the opening query is that there is a Jewish environmental ethic. To be sure, it is an amalgam of our traditional land ethic, a search for new spiritual meaning in life, and the general tendency of Jews to identify with progressive causes involving social justice. But it is very real, and it recently has begun to sweep the Jewish world as never before.

FIVE THINGS THAT MAKE JEWISH ENVIRONMENTALISM JEWISH

This brings us at long last to the crux of this essay: what makes this Jewish environmentalism unique? Today, from the Pope to the Dalai Lama, spiritual leaders are standing up and speaking to the faithful about preserving creation. It is a wonderful and inspirational stage for the world's religions. It almost seems that after so many centuries of rivalry—indeed, frequently violent rivalry—theologies are converging around the notion of harmony between humans and this lovely, embattled planet. *So nu?* What is essentially Jewish about Jewish environmentalism? *Mah Nishtanah HaSvivanut ha zu me kol ha Svivot?* Why is this environmentalism different from all other environmentalisms?

I would like to propose five characteristics that make Jewish environmentalism fundamentally special and distinct from more typical environmental ethics that have come to inform the Western world. This list does not purport to be exhaustive. But it is one that resonates with me, given my own environmental axioms, personal paradigms, and twenty-five years of living in the Israeli and global environmental community.

So let me share the list with you, and then I will walk you through each component in greater depth:

- (1) Textual support for environmentally protective positions is old, very old. This gives the Jewish environmental perspective roots in an ancient and extremely rich tradition, imbuing it with a certain authenticity that more modern schools lack.

(2) Israel is at the heart of the Jewish ethic. Jews pray for rain every day and then shift to dew, not because they need more rain in Miami, or Auckland, or Buenos Aires, but because their heart is in the East. It was Rene Dubois who coined the environmental mantra “Think globally, act locally.” But I would argue that Jewish environmentalism implicitly thinks locally and acts globally. And when we think locally, it’s about Israel.

(3) The Jewish ecological perspective was born at a time when Jewish life was fundamentally agrarian. With exile, much of the associated tradition became dormant and hardly evolved during 2,000 years of Diaspora scholarship. Today, the vast majority of Jews, even Israelis, continue to live in cities and suburbs. And this dissonance between our agricultural roots and urban life has some interesting environmental implications.

(4) Jewish environmentalism embraces a technological optimism. While cognizant of the mischief that humans can create, Judaism also recognizes that humans were expected to work the Garden of Eden. Jewish environmentalists are rarely tree-huggers. They are more likely to be environmental economists or engineers.

(5) Today’s Jewish environmental perspective is born of the same *tikkun ‘olam* or “mending the world” impulse that fuels the broader, traditional Jewish commitment to social change. Hence, environmentalism is not just a narrow, technocratic attempt to meet emission standards or adopt protective zoning prescriptions; rather, it is a way of redefining social justice.

I would like to explore each of these themes and see what they mean for us as Jews and for the Jewish people’s potential to make a collective contribution to humanity’s greatest challenge for the future.

A CONTEXT OF ANTIQUITY AND AUTHENTICITY

To begin with, Jewish tradition has been dealing with the environment for millennia. It is a natural human impulse to seek wisdom from the past. And Jews are so very lucky that we can find insights in religious and natural writings that are about as ancient as any on the planet. That is a lot of what is happening at this symposium—for example, Ellen Bernstein sharing King Solomon’s reputed ecological wisdom in the Song

of Songs. If someone wanted to dig into more modern love poetry, say by Yehuda Halevi, written only 1,000 years ago, the role of nature is still extraordinary. There is something very powerful in having an ancient past. That is what makes normally intelligent people gape at stacks of dusty stones at archaeological sites or the scholars assembled here in Omaha fascinated by the images in Gary Rendsburg's PowerPoint presentation. They are inspired by the temples, the olive oil presses, just the mikvas of days gone by. And Jewish environmentalists live in such an inspirational world. That sense of "seniority" or that vast and primordial intellectual history makes it exciting to be a Jewish environmentalist.

Because, in essence, the Jewish heritage really is an endless well, a well that seems to contain a boundless flow of stirring and provocative nourishment from days of yore. Imagine my surprise, when in a discussion in my synagogue, during Rosh Hashanah services, a congregant pulls out a passage written by Philo, the great Jewish philosopher who wrote in Alexandria over 2,000 years ago. Ostensibly, Philo was writing about the shofar, of all things, but it seemed to me to be an uncanny prediction of what we are facing with climate change and consumption. As I have never seen the passage in the many anthologies of Jewish environmental wisdom, let me share it with you all now:

And there is another war not of human agency when nature is at strife in herself, when her parts make onslaught one on another, and her law-abiding sense of equality is vanquished by the greed for inequality. Both these wars work destruction on the face of the earth. The enemy cut down the fruit trees, ravaged the country, set fire to the foodstuffs and the ripening ears of corn in the open fields, while the forces of nature use drought, rainstorms, violent moisture-laden winds, scorching sun-rays and intense cold accompanied by snow, with the regular harmonious alternations of the yearly seasons turned into disharmony—a state of things in my opinion caused by the impiety which does not gain a gradual hold, but comes rushing with the force of a torrent among those whom these things befall.

So the question is: is this passage about Rosh Hashanah or about the environment? And of course the answer is "both." For Rosh Hashanah is the traditional birthday of the earth. And what better voice to bring to the personal and societal fight to reduce greenhouse gases for the coming year

than one that is 2,000 years old? The point is that because we belong to a people with a long history of living and thinking about the planet, Jewish environmentalism enjoys an extraordinary treasure chest of tradition from which to draw.

ISRAEL-THINKING LOCALLY

The second distinguishing characteristic is this: the Jewish environmental view is different from the generic, universal one because it is born of a particular place. Here is one story about the role of Israel in the subconscious of Jewish environmentalists. Adam Werbach is a friend of mine and something of a green icon, a remarkable guy. As a college student, fifteen years ago, Adam took advantage of the incipient Internet and student e-mail distribution to establish a campus network for the Sierra Club. Then he used the network to stun the environmental world and get elected president of America's leading conservation organization at the ripe old age of twenty-two. Adam grew up in Southern California and now runs a green media-consulting firm called Act Now. He has a better read on what makes the United States tick than just about anyone I know because he is so very American. But Adam is also very Jewish.

During his tenure as president, the Sierra Club decided it needed a national hotline to allow for easy access by its almost one million members to report environmental emergencies. Staffers were thrilled when they managed to obtain for the project the memorable toll-free number: 1-800-HOMELAND. "Homeland," said Adam. "What do you mean, 'Homeland'?" He remembers feeling a certain awkwardness because, as he explains, for him, the word "homeland" had always meant "Israel."

Now I am one of those die-hard Zionists—and so I will try hard not to get swept away into a polemic here. But the truth is that it is awfully hard to understand a lot of Jewish tradition—or Jewish environmentalism—in any other geographic context. The centrality of Israel is intuitive for our brethren who shiver in their Succot in Montreal or who wonder whether the new line of bathing suits really is the perfect Chanukkah gift in Melbourne. Jews are stuck living according to an Israeli calendar wherever they may be.

And it is not just Jewish environmental time. My friend Bill Slott, a tourist guide par excellence, always says that if you want to understand Torah, you have to let the land of Israel be your Rashi. If you want to understand Israel and the Philistines, not to mention Sampson and Delilah, you have to know the topography of the Judean hills and Israel's

coastal planes. If you want to understand how we built the tabernacle, get to know the acacia or “shitah” trees in Israel’s Arava Desert.

My favorite example of this phenomenon is the Tu Bishvat debate in the Mishnah. The Bible does not even mention this festival. So we find Hillel and Shammai at it again over the precise date to place the holiday. Shammai claims that the holiday falls on the first day of Shvat, and Hillel argues for the fifteenth; Hillel wins, and we all celebrate Tu Bishvat on the fifteenth of Shvat. It would seem to be just another of those arcane, inscrutable, rabbinic spats.

But, as Rabbi Michael Cohen explains, there is actually something profound going on here. The debate, it seems, is over meteorology. Israel, as you know, really only has two seasons: the wet one and the dry one. Beyond marking the time when fruits are formed for tithing purposes, Tu Bishvat is also when you plant trees. For this enterprise to be optimally successful, tree planting should take place smack in the middle of the rainy months. So the question really is: when do the rains begin and when do they end? And the thing is, that depends.

Every year in the fall, the heavy rains begin, first along Israel’s western coastal region. The Ayalon Highway in Tel Aviv is invariably flooded every fall, and only then do folks remember to get their windshield wipers changed. As we move toward spring, the rains tend to shift to the Judean Hills. By April, Tel Aviv will be getting less rainfall than Jerusalem. So the dates for the rainy season depend on where you sit on the Israeli precipitation gradient.

So you see, the question really is: where is the center of Jewish life, Jerusalem or Tel Aviv? (That’s a question that still rages in the country today. In the fall of 2007, the press took Israel’s cabinet ministers to task for conducting too much government business in their Tel Aviv chambers.) Back 2,000 years ago, it happens, Shammai’s school was situated nearer to the coast—so of course he favored the first of Shvat—while Hillel was in the hills to the east—and so he held out for the fifteenth. How can you understand that mishnaic debate without some understanding of Israel’s environment?

And it actually almost seems that it was the land of Israel itself that brought this wonderful holiday back to life from its moribund state after 1,500 years of exile, first by way of the mystics of Tsfat in the Middle Ages and then by the first Zionist pioneers who revived the dormant festival. To think of Jewish environmentalism without a geographic epicenter in

Canaan is simply unimaginable.

So the land of Israel is inextricably bound to Jewish environmentalist consciousness. What does this mean on a practical level for Israeli environmentalism and for Jewish environmentalists living outside of Israel?

Regarding the role of Judaism in Israeli environmentalism, here I think we have a long way to go. There have been some incipient efforts to bring a bit more *Yiddushkeit* into Israeli green consciousness. The chief rabbi was invited by environmentalists to speak at a major Knesset gathering on the topic. A few academic seminars have been held. But it has not been a focus, and in many ways the environmental agendas among Israeli environmental organizations differ little from those of their colleagues abroad.

And yet, even though secular Israelis are loathe to admit it, their environmental reality is constantly informed by Jewish tradition. I have already mentioned land ownership, where there are fundamentally different assumptions regarding “who owns the land of Israel”—and those assumptions can be traced to our tradition.

And if we are talking about land ownership, I cannot help but mention *Shmat Shnmitah*, the sabbatical year of rest that the Bible commands for the land of Israel, which in fact began in the fall of 2007. For the past six years, one of my more time-consuming hobbies has been involvement at the *Keren Kayemeth L'Yisrael*, the Jewish National Fund. I sit on its international board of directors in Jerusalem and, as of late, chair its land-development committee, which oversees river restoration, land-reclamation reservoirs, and of course forestry. For us, *shmitah* is a real issue. During the past four to five years, budget crunches and a certain loss of vision led to massive cuts in our afforestation budget. Essentially, very few trees have been planted on barren areas since 2003.

Inspired by the carbon-sequestration imperative of climate change, and of course by the impact of the massive forest fires and loss of a million trees that the Hezbollah Ketusha rockets caused in last summer's Lebanon War, we decided to get serious about planting. Our first major decision was that, over the next twenty years, the remaining 300,000 dunams of land that are zoned in the national master plan as forests in Israel should be planted. So here is my committee, chomping at the bit—waiting to get started with our first 15,000 dunams a year of planting—and then we get hit with *shmitah*.

It turns out that Halacha on the issue of tree planting is not absolute. There are a few loopholes. Israel has a serious problem of trespassing on public lands by Bedouins in the Negev, who now have 50,000 illegal buildings that threaten much of the Negev's open spaces. The only places where squatting seems to be absent in this area are in JNF forests. That is partly because of the sustainable-grazing program we have set up with the Bedouins in these forests and the fact that the chief forester in this region is a Bedouin. In any event, the rabbinate ruled that, in areas where national sovereignty might be in question, Jewish law not only allows but also commands us to plant. Some 6,000 dunams of land in the Negev was thus classified for planting for the coming year.

Wait a second, complained the foresters in our northern region. What about us? We just suffered a war and want to replant large swaths of scorched land that is calling out for restoration. (To make sure that I and the growing number of environmentalists on the board would be sympathetic, they added, "and we want to replant the lost monoculture pine trees with more sustainable, diverse, broad-leafed indigenous flora!")

"Hmm," said the rabbis. "Those lands are already forests. The ecologists are telling us that much of the land is naturally regenerating and that often leaving it alone is actually a better way to go. And even if it weren't, if we wait a year those lands will still be forests. Nobody is going to squat on them and raise doubts about Jewish ownership." So replanting prospects for the year 5768 were looking bad for the Galilee foresters.

"But," said the rabbinic court, "this replanting initiative may be important for national morale after it took such a hit during the 2006 Lebanon War. Surely the Almighty wouldn't want Jewish law to get in the way of Israeli spirit of resilience. Go ahead and plant 1,000 dunams." I was a bit surprised at the leniency, and of course the foresters were thrilled. My point is that this sort of dynamic, a real debate over forestry management and Halacha, is uniquely Jewish, and in fact there are occasions when Judaism does find its way into Israeli environmentalism.

So what does Israel's role in Jewish environmentalism mean for the Jewish world? Now that is probably a better question, but my present answer may be unsatisfying. On the level of philanthropy, surely there is much that can be done. In the same way that scores of Jews throughout the world support conservation work in the Amazon, support for Israeli environmental zealots is a fine, targeted form of *tzedakah*. Indeed, without it, my colleagues and I in Israel's environmental movement would have

achieved only a fraction of what we have—even as it is, it is woefully inadequate. There are also a few frameworks for direct political involvement in Israeli environmental policy, such as the Jewish National Fund or even the World Zionist Congress.

But on an educational level, I think Israel's environment remains an area where our pedagogical specialists have yet to put together a compelling curriculum. For the past ten years, Noam Dolgin has worked at the Teva Learning Center, probably America's preeminent Jewish environmental educational group. Recently, he left to take on the chairmanship of the Green Zionist Alliance, an exciting new effort to enlist Jews throughout the world to galvanize environmental improvement in Israel. Noam is a very creative guy and a passionate Zionist, but he tells me that educationally Israel tends to be a flop when trying to engage American Jewish youth on the environment. At best, Israel may come off as a beloved but still largely hypothetical "homeland." Remote-control activist projects will not capture children's imagination and get them fired up like cleaning up a local creek, starting a synagogue recycling campaign, or writing a letter about climate-change policy to the mayor. Hence my sense is that Jewish environmentalism in the Diaspora may ultimately adopt a "think locally"—about Israel—but "act globally" (that is, "wherever you may be") paradigm. And probably that is just fine.

ENVIRONMENTAL FARMERS

The world of the ancient Israelites was an agrarian one. And if you have ever lived and worked on a farm, you know that very quickly the rhythms of agricultural living begin to affect everything about your life. They determine when you wake up, how you smell, how you dress, and of course your calendar. Daniel Hillel may be one of the world's preeminent soil physicists, but he is also one of the founders of Kibbutz Sede Boqer and retains a small farm in Israel. In a few of his books, especially his most recent one, *The Natural History of the Bible*, Hillel takes the implications of this phenomenon one step further—into the theological realm. Hillel makes the compelling argument that the uncertainty in Israel's precipitation patterns may well have been the force that drove our ancestors to envision an omnipotent, monotheistic deity. How else could they explain the maddening inconsistencies in annual rainfall that left them suspended between feast and famine? Rather than seeing a separate deity for rain, these subsistence farmers at some point reached the conclusion that a single force in the universe links human behavior to the natural forces it

controls. In times of drought in Israel, when you see the rabbis gathering for a massive “Let it Rain” prayer revival session, you understand that this visceral intuition is not limited to our ancient past.

But here’s the thing: most Jews are not farmers, nor have we been for hundreds of years now. Indeed, in many countries during the long years of exile, we were strictly prohibited from owning or working the land. So over time, this complete occupational transition created a disconnection. How could it be otherwise? How do you reconcile this agricultural heritage with all its associated rules with life in urban Poland or Morocco or New York? Not only do many of the Halachic debates over the minutiae of Jewish farming sound awfully arcane, but the religious inspiration fades and in some cases may be lost entirely.

For instance, the second paragraph of the Shema, taken from Deuteronomy 11, warns us that God’s retribution for moral delinquency will be meted out in the form of poor agricultural yields. Surely, this threat of divine reckoning became less gripping and less immediate to the majority of Jews who no longer anxiously awaited to see whether this year’s crop would succeed or not.

The environment offers an interesting way to bridge this transition. I was stunned when I first discovered the old Reform sidurim, in which the prayer books eliminated this entire paragraph. Presumably, this was because this perception of an interventionist God was inconsistent with their more rarified and sophisticated perception of divinity. In one of those great Jewish environmental anecdotes, a few years ago young Reform rabbinical students began to call on the establishment to return the discarded biblical passages: they felt that global warming was a classic example of inappropriate human behavior producing the kind of cataclysmic results about which the biblical passage warns.

My point is that Jewish environmentalism offers modern Jews a connection to their agrarian roots. *Ba'al Taschit*, a biblical prohibition on squandering Creation that is the heart and soul of any Jewish environmental ethic, originally was about preserving fruit trees in times of war. (Non-fruit-bearing trees, apparently less important to agricultural sustainability, could be cut.) Jewish notions about *Tza'ar Ba'alei Chaim* [cruelty to animals] were based on the goats and sheep of Israeli herders or the oxen with which they ploughed, even as they resonate nicely with the golden retriever or Siamese cat who are just as much a part of today’s Jewish family and daily reality.

Because of our agricultural roots, Jewish environmentalism may actually have a special role to play. I would argue that most environmental groups in the West are fundamentally alienated from agriculture. And this is a pity. Farmers, who work outdoors and who are generally in touch with the rhythms of the land, should be natural allies for environmentalists. Frequently, though, farmers are caricaturized and demonized by green groups as an enemy whose need to maximize profits drives them to toxic levels of pesticide applications or whose profligate wasting of water endangers species or dries wetlands.

Jewish environmentalism, I believe, takes a far more conciliatory view on the subject. Modern Jews suffer many of the same twenty-first century dynamics that leave so many children thinking that food grows in supermarket stock rooms. But keeping kosher raises awareness about where food comes from and the moral responsibility associated with eating. During this conference, we have heard from Nigel Savage about his work in Hazon, where the link between the environment and food supply is made with particular intelligence and creativity. This is not a coincidence. Hazon is an organization that is focused on identifying the environmental wisdom in traditional Judaism and then applying it. Is it any wonder that calls for reconsidering the rituals of kosher slaughtering, so as to reduce the suffering of animals, come from environmental quarters? Because Judaism was born on the farm, perhaps Jewish environmentalists can facilitate a more holistic and conciliatory approach to agriculture within the world's green community.

“SUSTAINABILITY” RATHER THAN “PRESERVATIONIST” ORIENTATION

The fourth thing that makes Jewish environmentalism Jewish is that, on the broad spectrum of green shades in the environmental rainbow, Jewish environmentalism is of the “hands on” rather than “hands off” variety. While our prayers express just how awestruck we are about God's creation, Jews are not expected to take a preservationist approach to living on the planet. Indeed, the many proscriptions we have for Shabbat offer something of a permit to intervene in creation during the rest of the week. The Jewish paradigm for interpreting the text *May Klal Heyn—atah shomeyah Lav* [When something is specifically permitted in one example and then omitted in another, it is forbidden] leaves little room for doubt. Jews can and indeed must work this planet.

Such a view permeates rabbinic sources and can be seen in the famous story from Midrash about Rabbi Akiva and Tinneius Rufus. Akiva forever

had to outsmart this notorious Roman governor of Judea. (If the Talmud were our only historic source, one would think that the only thing this “bumbling rogue” did with his time was to unsuccessfully figure out ways to debunk Judaism, when in fact he was a fairly treacherous ruler.) In this particular episode, Rufus challenges the rite of circumcision, asking the great rabbi whether he really thinks that humans can improve on that “creation of God.” “Hmm,” muses Akiva. “I knew you would ask me that, so naturally I’ll respond with a question. Which is better, the raw wheat that comes from the land or the bread we make of it?” The Jewish perspective believes that the Almighty gave the Earth (and the Torah) as a gift to humans with the assumption that they would improve on it or “refine” it. That links up nicely to the Kabbalistic notion of *Shevirat ha-kelim* or the breaking of the vessel during creation that destroyed the ordered universe. Humanity’s attempt to patch together the glass shards with a blind confidence that we can actually heal the world is in fact “technological optimism.”

Of course, this Jewish green light to change the planet is a far cry from a *laissez faire* approach to human activities on earth. It is a “green” light after all. Rather, to stay in the realm of French phrases, it is accompanied by something more akin to *noblesse oblige* to use the awesome technologies that humans can wield gently. The Tower of Babel leaves Jewish school children with an intuitive sense of the potential for hubris and mischief when humans start using their tools recklessly. Hence, the myriad restrictions associated with *Ba’al Taschit*. Or the most-quoted Jewish environmental line in the Midrash, where God tells Adam that, if he destroys the splendid world of Eden, no one can repair it.

Some twenty-five years ago, Israeli novelist Amos Oz summarized this Jewish perspective in characterizing his own environmental ethic:

And now it is my turn for a terrible confession. I object to nature preservation. The very ideal of “preservation” is not acceptable in almost any area of life. We have not come into this world to protect or preserve any given thing, mitzvah, nature or cultural heritage. . . . We have not inherited a museum, to patiently wipe off the dust from its displays or to polish the glass. . . . Nature also is not a museum. One is allowed to touch, allowed to move, to draw closer, to change and to leave our stamp. . . . Touch the stone. Touch the animal. Touch your fellow man. On one condition. How to touch? . . . To answer on one leg and in a word I would say: “with love.”

I have always seen this very Jewish perspective as an ancient embracing of the sustainable-development paradigm that has been so popular, ever since Geo Brundtland, the former Norwegian Prime Minister, made it popular after chairing the United Nations report *Our Common Future*. Indeed, sometimes in Israel, we teach the essence of sustainable development by describing it according to the Lord's edict about the Garden of Eden, *L'Avdo u L'shamro* [To work and to preserve].

In what tangible ways does this approach manifest itself? In the Israeli context, with which I am most familiar, afforestation is an extreme example. As the Jews returned to their homeland, they found a desertified, denuded landscape. The 240 million trees planted by the Jewish National Fund are unique. While there once was a raging debate about the form that afforestation should take, a national master plan that demarks the borders of those lands that are ecologically and aesthetically appropriate for planting has more or less put this issue to rest. I believe we are redeeming these deforested lands. But the perspective also means that we will solve water-shortage problems through innovations in desalination and drip irrigation, and solar energy farms will become part of Israel's landscape. Individual Israelis will buy hybrid cars and composters. In the same way that they installed Shabbat clocks, synagogues should have long ago installed compact fluorescent light bulbs.

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

"Justice—Justice—shall you pursue." Thus rails the stern admonition of Deuteronomy 16, and this double call to action still resonates in the hearts of Jews around the world. Sometimes it seems to echo loudest among those Jews who for whatever reasons have ceased to find much meaning in traditional Judaism. It almost seems as if the energies that the daily demands of Jewish ritual living make are transferred to another, divinely sanctioned worthy cause. So many have made mention of the fact that Jews are disproportionately represented among issues associated with social justice that recalling the dynamic seems almost hackneyed or, even worse, gratuitously self-congratulatory. And yet, in the present context it is well to recall that, from the battle to halt South African apartheid to the U.S. Civil Rights movement, an almost hyperactive collective Jewish conscience is manifested not just in prodigious gifts to charitable causes but in the countless Jewish lives dedicated to these causes.

In recent years the environment has emerged as another cause célèbre that has captured the imaginations, donations, and passions of young and old Jews alike. I would argue that part of what attracts so many Jews and

more recently Jewish institutions, philanthropies, and scholars to ecology and environmental protection is the ancient call for justice and its almost genetic place in Jewish mindsets.

Personally, I do not believe that Jews sociologically are more prone to empathize with the world of animals or plants than other peoples. Nor do we suffer more the impacts of involuntary exposures to ambient pollutants or live in greater proximity to lovely and threatened landscapes. On the contrary. Intuitively, I think that the case may be just the opposite. While he may be a bit excessive, Rabbi Schwartzchild and his diagnosis of historic Jewish alienation from nature may be on to something. And yet, Jewish involvement at all levels of the world's environmental movement is remarkable. It seems counterintuitive. What's going on here?

So I would argue indeed that for many, there is a deeper psycho-spiritual need being fulfilled. Environmentally active Jews see degradation of the earth as something that is evil and, in a societal context, a dynamic that is fundamentally unfair. The fact that the poor invariably find themselves facing higher environmental risks than those with greater resources is part of the pathology. The fact that humans today so dominate the animals that no one finds book titles like *The End of Nature* even moderately controversial is another one. The trees have no voice, nor do the pandas in China, nor the bald eagles here in America, nor the leopards of the Judean desert. Nor, for that matter, can the inner-city child speak out, even as his or her intelligence or lungs will never reach full potential because of the lead paint peelings on the ground or the particulate matter in the air. The economic circumstances associated with a community's environmental health often are salient. Jewish environmentalism contains a commitment to speak on the victim's behalf. And if I might go one step further, recently I have come to identify a new stage in this particular aspect of Jewish environmentalism. This is a growing awareness among Jews around the world about the environmental conditions in developing countries and in Africa in particular. The fact that one-fifth of humanity has no access to potable water and that two-fifths still lack basic sanitation has far greater environmental health impacts than even the most acute radon exposures or pesticide-residue levels in the Western societies in which most Jews live. The public-health burden of pollution or the alarming loss of biodiversity and deforestation in the Third World is directly linked to economic disempowerment. Jews are beginning to sense that their responsibilities as a Jewish community extend to these problems as well. I recognize this

new stage because I find it is steadily capturing more and more of my own personal attention and angst.

Every time we stand and pray the *Aleinu*, Jews proclaim *Aleinu L'shabeyach* [it is incumbent upon us to praise]. But not just to praise. Rather, we are reminded of that proverbial partnership with the Creator. For the prayer continues: *L'taken Olam B'malchut Shadai* [to mend the world through the Almighty's sovereignty]. To do our part in that partnership with the Creator in healing that world—for me—that is the bottom line for Jewish ethics. And that world is increasingly polluted, and its ecosystems are collapsing. And so, as Jews, it is incumbent upon us to act. This may be the bottom line for Jewish environmentalism as well.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR JEWISH ENVIRONMENTALISM?

The environment is indeed an issue with a growing role on progressive agendas, so it is fair to assume that most Jews do care about it. The challenge now is to take this very powerful part of individual Jewish identity and to find institutional applications in the Jewish world. In fact, the process has already begun. It is reflected in the growing number of synagogues with environmental committees, ecological Tu B'shvat seders, or the growing number of Jewish environmental organizations. It can be found in the painfully slow but unmistakably growing commitment to sustainable policies among Israeli government ministries and industries.

So I do believe that Jewish environmentalism as a new force in the Jewish world has much to contribute to the world's ecological challenges, much as individual Jewish environmentalists are contributing every day. Judaism—the faith of mitzvoth, of commandments and action—should have institutions that embody environmental ethics through doing, through example, through discipline. But Jewish environmentalism's greatest gift, to my mind, might be internal and spiritual—to the Jewish people itself.

I am the last person to try to preach a given theology. And yet, with apologies to any of Mordecai Kaplan's Reconstructionists, I believe that the notion of "Judaism without the Supernatural" is something of an oxymoron. At the very least, Judaism without the notion of a divine architect is a poorer and lonelier identity than the traditional package. The breadth of Jewish conceptions about God's involvement with the planet and our relationship as Jews to the Almighty is very rich indeed. Rather than trying to facilitate its surgical removal, we need to do a better job

of offering rituals and venues that facilitate experiences when Jews can consider their role in Creation and their relationship to a Creator.

By bringing Jews closer to nature, Jewish environmentalism can be a key force to inspire such spiritual edification between today's and future generations. The inability of so many young (and old) Jews to connect to a holy presence on earth is probably no different than the phenomenon throughout the West and the general decline in the popularity of organized religion. As we live in a world that is climate controlled, where people can go months without leaving asphalt and tiles, where our sense of reality is shaped through TV screens and the Internet, rather than through the glorious, biological kingdom waiting just outside our window, the distractions of humanity tend to squelch the more gentle sounds of a Divine Creator.

But once we go out and truly feel the mystery and power that is so unmistakable in the world of nature, the possibility of engaging a personal God is greatly enhanced. This was an essential part of the magic of the Chasidic revolution years ago or the power of Rebbe Nahman's message: "Be aware that every weed and every stone has a song of its own."

My late grandfather, Yizhak Koller, taught me much of what I know about Judaism. Like many European Jews whose lives spanned the Holocaust, he struggled for most of his life between agnosticism and deism. From time to time, while walking above the coastal cliffs in Netanya, he would spontaneously quote to me a passage that was probably his personal theological mantra: *Ayeh amtzaeycha—ayeh lo amtzaeycha?* [Oh God. Where shall I find you? Where shall I not find you?].

So I believe that, if nothing else, Jewish environmentalism has a mission of bringing Jews to places, both physical and spiritual, where they might find God, where holiness is more accessible. It can reveal to Jews a glimpse of the incredible sensitivity and beauty in the mosaic of life and how small ecological epiphanies can connect with our ancient tradition, providing extraordinary insights and peace of mind for our complex and troubled existence. What greater contribution than this to today's chapter in the age-old Jewish search for meaning?

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