

10

Left Out – the Ecological Paradox of the Israeli Left

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From the emergence of David Ben-Gurion as the key power broker within the pre-state Zionist movement in the 1930s until the election of Menahem Begin and the *Likud* party in 1977, leftist or Labor Zionism dominated the Israeli political system. It was also during this period that environmental degradation in Israel reached hazardous levels. By the mid-1970s, air pollution in Israel's cities exceeded international standards and Israel's own newly promulgated air-quality criteria. With a few exceptions like the Jordan River tributaries, all the country's streams and rivers were contaminated by sewage. Tar on the Mediterranean beaches was an unbearable annoyance that reflected a very sick Mediterranean sea. Drinking water was chronically unhealthy, especially among Israel's Palestinian Arab citizens, and dysentery a common malady. Noise, litter and other nuisances are an inseparable part of the contemporary Israeli experience.

There was a connection between these two phenomena – Labor rule and ecological neglect. The same political ideology that fueled the establishment of Israel and its remarkably successful initial development paid little attention to the attendant environmental devastation. Leftist Zionist politicians in the early days of the state were more aware of the environmental conditions than is commonly perceived. Simcha Blass was Israel's leading figure in water management during the 1950s. His autobiography explains that decision makers were cognizant of the salinization of the coastal aquifer from over-pumping. They simply perceived it as an unfortunate exigency required for creating a prosperous agrarian economy and gainful employment for the hundreds of thousands of immigrants pouring

into the country. Minutes from early *Knesset* debates show a host of politicians bemoaning the sully of their Promised Land.

Yigal Alon, the deputy Prime Minister from the Labor Party, reported to Israel's *Knesset* in a special 1973 session, that: "in the past decade chemical production increased 160 percent and production of detergents 100 percent. Israel showed the third highest use of coal and fuel per head in the world. During this decade, agricultural land use increased only 5 percent but the use of nitrate fertilizers 40 percent. Energy consumption is increasing 10–12 percent a year. If we add the fact that Israel already uses more than 90 percent of the water sources at its disposal, that special meteorological conditions will not allow good dispersal of pollutants in the atmosphere, that there is a trend toward large concentrations of residents in the coastal region and a rising standard of living – then we can see the severity of the environmental problems which are likely to arise in Israel if proper measures are not taken".

A feeble record

Most of these hazards have only grown worse. A government study released in 2003 estimates that 1400 Israelis die prematurely each year from air pollution exposures. Israel's two main aquifers are more polluted than ever. With the growing population came urban sprawl, staggering loss of open spaces and the disappearance of entire landscapes like the Sharon region. Biodiversity preservation, perhaps the most impressive achievement of Israel's first fifty years, is alarmingly in decline.

There are a few encouraging trends that deserve mention. Thirty years ago, Lake Kinneret (the Sea of Galilee) was on the verge of eutrophication, once the Huleh wetlands had been drained and could not provide a natural "sink" to filter out nutrients. It suffered from sewage discharges, runoff from dairies and massive loadings that reached the shore. Due to painstaking watershed management, the lake water quality has taken a turn for the better. Also, with international agreements protecting the Mediterranean, the tar concentrations on the beaches have also dropped. These items are proof that Israel's environmental history need not have been so negative.

One can make historical excuses for the ecologically obtuse Zionist leaders, who saw themselves as "Socialists" and oversaw the country for the first half of Israel's history. Yet one would have imagined that the Labor movement, and political parties which regarded themselves as belonging to the left, would have integrated the ecological impulse into their ideological commitments. Failing this, it can be reasonably argued

that the left must bear responsibility for Israel's most acute environmental problems. Politicians on the left with green susceptibilities often find themselves at odds with the prevailing views in their parties. Leftist party platforms in Israel typically espouse an ambitious ecological manifesto but the gap between promise and performance is conspicuous, in spite of the desire to imitate trendy progressive political slogans from around the world. Why has the Israeli left's environmental record been so feeble? How could it attempt to redefine itself in ecological affairs?

Seeking nature

The great irony about Labor Zionism's position on the environment is that it could have been different. Unlike many leftist political movements around the world, Zionist Socialism in the early part of the twentieth century harbored strong convictions about stewardship and intimacy with the land. This was a political movement that was informed as much by Tolstoy as it was by Marx. After two thousand years of Exile, it thought that a new Jewish state ruled by workers in the homeland had not only to create a harmonious egalitarian society, but equally, it had to facilitate reconciliation between the Jewish people and its land.

The most prominent advocate in this realm was the philosopher/farmer Aharon David Gordon. Far from being a politician, Gordon was a retired Russian estate manager, who moved to Palestine in 1904 at the age of forty-seven. His choice of *Aliya* was a conscious rejection of urban, Diaspora life and values, and in particular the traditional Jewish alienation from the soil. Because of his sincerity, seniority and indifference to politics, Gordon enjoyed a particularly revered status among the labor-oriented Jewish immigrants of his day, who later were to lead to the establishment of the State of Israel.

In Gordon's view, unlike the Jewish migration to America that was primarily motivated by materialism or economic advantage, a Jewish renaissance in Israel should constitute a true revolution that embraced a fuller, more meaningful life. Part of the equation was "the religion of labor", spiritual edification through manual work on the land. The parallel impulse was unmistakably environmental and today would be categorized as "deep ecology".

Gordon wrote in *The Human and Nature* that "it is clear that man-as-man always needs to be among nature. For nature is for a man who truly feels and knows, what water is for a fish. It is not just something to look at, for man's very soul is in need of it . . . Moreover, the more man develops and the more his internal emotions and awareness become deeper and

broader, and his knowledge becomes richer, so is he in greater need of direct attachment to nature.”

This “green” philosophical perspective was bolstered by a rich liturgy of poems and songs, and perpetuated through an educational curriculum that targeted children from preschool and made nature studies into the most prestigious classes. As such, this pro-environmental proclivity was quickly integrated into leftist Zionist ideology of the time, at least at the level of official dogma. Some fifty years later, even Prime Minister Ben-Gurion, often considered the quintessential advocate of aggressive economic development, would deliver an impassioned speech in Israel’s *Knesset* on nature and its preservation, extolling “the unencumbered connection between the natural landscape of this land and its history”.

And yet, as he and his associates saw it, creating an economic infrastructure that could accommodate the hundreds of thousands of immigrants and fielding a military force capable of withstanding growing Arab hostility, must have complete priority. The ruralist idealization of farming would survive on the left on paper, while the commitment to preservation and environmental health would be put aside. This undoubtedly had much to do with the huge leverage that kibbutzim and the agricultural sector wielded in Israel’s political arena at the time.

Ultimately, little of the Gordonian secular redemption package found an expression in Israeli public policy. In 1953 it was Labor politicians like Pinhas Lavon who rejected the pleas of zoologists and ecologists against draining the Huleh swamp. The Israeli left lost sight of the natural harmony that was a critical component of its original agrarian ideology. In the end, the drainage project, designed to create more farmland, turned out to be an ecological disaster, and recently a reflooding initiative began.

As time went on, in the “real world” rough and tumble of security, jobs, housing, planning commissions, industrial policies and water management, the old romantic environmental notions sounded nostalgic but impractical among most Labor politicians. An example was Prime Minister Golda Meir’s dismissive rejection in the early 1970s of *Likud* Knesset Member Yosef Tamir’s personal plea to create an environmental agency. Indeed, Yigal Alon, a kibbutz member and one of the “greener” Labor leaders, had to sneak a proposal to create such an agency through the Israeli cabinet when Meir was abroad meeting President Richard Nixon.

There were certainly those in the leftist camp who retained a fierce commitment to the natural world and to an environmentally friendly Jewish state. The Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel quickly became the largest organization of its kind in Israel during the 1950s through the initiative and political patronage of kibbutz members and

Mapai politicians. For its first thirty years, its organization and constitution reflected kibbutz culture, preferring to be managed by a “secretary” than a “director”.

The Society relied heavily on Labor politicians who were sympathetic to their message for funding and for political patronage. Thus, novelist (and *Mapai* Knesset Member) S. Yizhar was instrumental in shepherding the Society’s vision of a Nature Reserve Authority through the parliament in the early 1960s. He did so against the odds, defying party bosses, like the director-general of the Prime Minister’s Office, Teddy Kollek, who took a less environmental stance.

It is also important to note that even the advocates of nature held a somewhat narrow view of environmental interests. The mounting pollution problem of Israel’s cities was definitely not on their agendas. Rather, it would be rightist and centrist politicians, such as Shimon Kanovich, Yosef Tamir or Yedidyah Be’eri who made somewhat quixotic efforts to address these dynamics. Thus, it was *Likud* politician Ronni Milo who championed the establishment of a Ministry of the Environment and initially held the Cabinet post. The relatively high exposures to environmental hazards suffered by Israel’s Arab citizens were on the agenda neither of left nor of right.

It should not be inferred from this cursory review that the left has been less sensitive to environmental problems than Israel’s right-wing parties. The truth is that neither embraced these issues in a serious, systematic way. The emergence of environmentalism was more linked to the personal and even heroic inclinations of individuals than to the political or ideological habitat in which they dwelled. In any case, by the time Israel became an independent state, little was left of the early Labor-romantic vision of harmony between Jews and their land. Today, it is hard to find even remnants of the original Gordonian impulse among leftist politicians and parties.

The left and the environment

In considering Israel’s recent political divisions it is important to dispel the misconceptions harbored outside, and to a lesser extent inside, of Israel that perceives the environment as an issue primarily of concern to the left. The traditional Democratic/Republican dichotomy in the US regarding many environmental issues perpetuates such perceptions. Regardless of international trends, there is little empirical evidence to support such a perception in Israel.

To be sure, Hebrew University political scientist Avner de-Shalit

conducted a survey in the 1990s among workers at the Society for Protection of Nature in Israel in which he discovered a disproportionately large number of workers who identified politically with the *Meretz* party, the most leftist of Israel's Zionist parties. Moreover, in several consecutive elections, the *Meretz* platform was justifiably singled out as being the most ardently pro-environmental. De-Shalit concluded that in practice *Meretz* functioned as Israel's "de facto" green party.

But in the decade that has meanwhile elapsed, reality has not supported an equating of the "left" with environmental interests in Israel. Israel's Labor Party cannot honestly claim any particularly redeeming environmental inclinations. When the Ministry of Environment was first established, the battle for clean air policy pitted pro-environmental right-wing *Likud* politicians Milo and Justice Minister Dan Meridor, against Labor's Treasury and Energy Ministers Shimon Peres and Moshe Shahal, who opposed emission standards. The only occasion on which a Labor politician, Daliah Itsik, served as Minister of Environment in 1999, she sniveled to the press that Prime Minister Barak was punishing her with an insulting appointment. Her performance in the job was not much more enthusiastic and she hastened to take the post of Minister of Industry and Commerce at the first opportunity. Labor Prime Ministers continued their party's tradition of railroading through every available development project (except railroads), regardless of the ecological ramifications.

Meretz may have a more legitimate basis for boasting an environmental record. Yossi Sarid, the long-time chairman of the party is still considered to have been Israel's most conscientious Minister of Environment for the three years of impressive service that that he gave between 1993 and 1996. While at the helm he was a charismatic advocate for open space and tougher pollution enforcement policies in the Cabinet, increased the ministry's budget three-fold, expanding its authority and fashioning guidelines for the future. Yet, despite his pledges to the contrary, the moment that an opportunity to fill a more "prestigious" ministerial portfolio (Minister of Education) presented itself, Sarid, too, abandoned his post. At the same time, the *Meretz* party and its representatives frequently failed to internalize the ecological commitments reflected in its own platform.

For example, when Professor Amnon Rubenstein, a senior *Meretz* leader, served as chairman of the *Knesset's* Constitution Committee, he backed the private company that had won the contract to pave the trans-Israel highway. Despite an extensive attack on the highway on ecological grounds in the *Meretz* platform, and a firm party commitment to stop it at all costs, Rubenstein essentially saved the project, whose economic feasibility had become dubious. Similarly there is the critical issue of open

space preservation, where *Meretz's* platform is extremely vociferous in favor of conservation policies. However, the disproportionately large kibbutz lobby within the party made *Meretz* at best, a non-player in the currently raging societal debate over the legitimacy of re-zoning agricultural lands for commercial purposes. Yet this is probably the most important public debate of its kind ever held in Israel.

The Communist-led non-Zionist *Hadash* party has shown a general tendency to side with environmental interests. But based on its legislative initiatives and campaigns, the environment has never been a party priority. As Arab constituents dominate its electoral support and the current *Knesset* faction includes no Jews at all, its agenda is generally focused on issues of discrimination and occupation rather than environmental justice.

Indeed, in several instances it has been right-wing, or capitalist, parties that have taken the lead in championing Israel's environmental causes. Extreme "hawk" and *Likud* member, Uzi Landau, emerged as the leading campaigner for coastal preservation. He also opposed the trans-Israel highway. It was the free-market *Shinui* party Chairman, Yosef Lapid, who penned the only piece of innovative Israeli environmental legislation of the past ten years, a bill that created a Commissioner for Future Generations to review all proposed legislation and government positions from the perspective of inter-generational equity. Indeed, the same *Shinui* party was the only one that requested the Ministry of Environment portfolio in coalitional negotiations – something *Meretz* chose not to do two years earlier.

While individual politicians, such as *Meretz* MK Mossi Raz, emerged for a brief period as the darling of Israel's environmental movement, often they were a lone voice within their party (Raz was not elected to the 15th *Knesset* in 2003). When awards were given out by environmentalists for parliamentary performance that year, right-wing politicians such as Michael Nudelman (*Yisrael Beitenu*) or the *Likud's* Nehama Ronen outnumbered the champions of the environment from the left. Indeed in the contrasting "dirty dozen" list, where environmental groups named vilified anti-environmental politicians, the Labor Party was prominent.

The inability of Green parties in Israel to capture the hearts (and ballots) of the public in general elections suggests that the Israeli public does not place its environmental problems near the top of its national agenda. In two electoral attempts, the Green party has made a weak showing, hardly mustering more than 15,000 votes. This was only a fraction of the "Green Leaf" pro-cannabis party's support and was not nearly enough to cross the threshold into parliamentary representation. Nonetheless, at a local level there have been some surprising success stories. For instance, Haifa

architect Shmuel Gilbert's "Our Haifa-the Greens" list did well enough in the 1998 elections to make him head of the opposition. Gilbert joined forces with independent Yonah Yahav (formerly Labor) in 2003 to win control of the city council, affording him the position of deputy to Mayor Yahav, and head of the powerful planning and building commission. But, here again, the Greens' partner in the elections was not *Meretz* or a leftist oriented party but the free-market *Shinui* party. This suggests that political affiliation is a poor predictor of a politician's environmental orientation. Personal upbringing, and socialization, rather than party platform or tradition seem to be the dominant factor in shaping the environmental commitment of Israeli politicians.

The irrelevance of political ideology in environmental affairs is considered by many Israeli Green activists to be a blessing. If environmentalism were the sole domain of the leftist political spectrum, they say, surely it would be to the country's ecological detriment, especially during the present period when the left's geo-political positions are so unpopular among the Israeli public. Yet the Israeli left has a responsibility to take the environment seriously. Certainly, political expediency justifies it. The success of Green factions in local elections indicates that there will come a day when the Israeli public, like that of many European countries, rewards political parties with a real commitment to the environment. Any new perspective of social justice that the Israeli left will promote must include environmental objectives.

Toward a new vision of justice and the environment

It is time for the Israeli left to rediscover some of its early ecological zeal. Part of this vision involves the recognition that a Jewish state must maintain a nurturing and protective relationship with the land. This means that a healthy society is not only measured in narrow terms of economic prosperity or egalitarian distribution of resources and opportunity, important as they are. It is time to adopt an applied definition of "sustainability" that has become such a central precept of the world's present environmental jargon. In practice it means that several subtle and not-so-subtle shifts in conventional values and policies among leftist and Labor parties in Israel are overdue. Here are a few of the necessary items for such an agenda:

Rethinking ruralism

The citizens in the state of Israel live predominantly in cities and towns.

This phenomenon will continue to grow more pronounced. It dictates that open spaces are more important than ever for the mental and spiritual well-being of the nation. As agriculture becomes less relevant economically, its significance grows as a landscape resource for internal and external tourism, and as an inspirational connection to a more agrarian heritage, for both Jews and Arabs. It is also a critical hedge against sprawl and other encroachments on habitat.

Agricultural living should retain a special place in the leftist identity, but needs to evolve to meet a new economic and ecological reality. In a planet where there are chronic calorie shortages, food production remains among the most honorable of professions. Israel should subsidize an agriculture that is less reliant on chemical pesticides and Thai laborers, and that is irrigated almost exclusively with tertiary-treated effluents. It is important that the left, with its rich history of agricultural involvement, join forces with Israel's growing Green community to save open spaces through the preservation of a gentler agricultural sector. In this spirit, speculation and lucrative compensation for re-zoning agricultural lands should be rejected for what they are: greed and exploitation of historical status to the detriment of the quality of life of present and future generations.

Rethinking immigration

The initial commitment to Jewish immigration was common to all the Zionist political factions. This position was an expression of basic tribal solidarity. Israeli leaders, especially after the Holocaust, had lived in the Diaspora and understood the threat of anti-Semitism. Immigration to Israel offered an immediate solution. Later, the impulse was driven by demographic concerns and an unabashed desire for security. David Ben-Gurion was always forthright in his belief that Israel didn't have enough Jewish soldiers.

Such logic no longer holds today. Not many Jewish communities are threatened by anti-Semitism, and the Israeli army has sufficient troops. A far more serious threat to Jewish well-being is ecological. There is not a single category in Israel's present environmental crisis that cannot be linked to the astonishing increase in population of one million newcomers per decade. In a word, if Israel does not curb its demographic growth rate immediately, even the most conscientious environmental policy will fall short, and the country's environmental indicators will continue to reflect the massive exceeding of the land's carrying capacity.

There are three engines that drive population increase:

- high Arab birth-rates,
- high Orthodox Jewish birth-rate, and
- immigration.

The left cannot begin to address the first two phenomena without a real commitment to reforming the third. While according to the Law of Return any Jewish immigrant to the country will be welcome, financial incentives are no longer justifiable. Neither should Zionist emissaries be sent to the four corners of the earth to recruit potential Israelis. The insurgence of non-Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union during the past decade is certain to appear disingenuous to Arab citizens, and there should be stricter immigration criteria. In short, the Ingathering of the Exiles should no longer be an item on the agenda – and must be replaced by serious efforts to achieve zero population growth. The question of the size of families is a sensitive issue to be sure, but all who are serious about creating a minimal quality of life for the whole population in the future will have to take the stand that large families are environmentally irresponsible.

Rethinking cooperation with Israeli Arabs and Palestinians

The continuous drop in Arab Israeli support for leftist parties, and their preference for national Arab parties, reflects a failure which must be faced squarely. To regain Arab Israeli involvement and confidence, promises are no longer enough, for too many have been made and broken. Real contributions to the quality of life for Arab citizens must be assured on the ground. The gap between Israeli Arab and Jewish environmental exposures, and the glaring discrimination in access to key resources, is well documented. It is time that the left made environmental justice, founded on Jewish-Arab equality, a central part of its agenda, and this not only in word but above all in deed. This constitutes a concrete expression of the traditional Biblical commitment to respect the disenfranchised minority in Israeli society. The environment is also one of the areas where coexistence activities are not perceived primarily as symbolic, but have tangible benefits for Arabs and Jews.

While he was Minister of Environment, *Meretz* leader Yossi Sarid internalized this approach and implemented a program of affirmative action, establishing a disproportionately large number of environmental protection units among Arab municipalities. Yet inadequate funding has continuously undermined these units and many have closed. The complete absence of any protest by the political parties left the sincerity of Sarid's achievement in question. Environmental justice is a prolonged process and

its results are not seen overnight. This shows that on such issues, the left need more ideological stamina.

As a viable Palestinian state eventually takes hold, the environment offers enormous potential for reestablishing the trust that has been the ultimate victim of the past three years of violence. It is no coincidence that from the outset of the present peace process, the environment was considered to be among the most promising confidence-building measures. Whether in power or not, the left should bring its many environmental experts to the negotiating table with their Palestinian colleagues, and only limitations of space prevent us from entering in detail into the agenda of such discussions. While politicians quibble over borders, an ongoing dialogue should deal with promoting common sewage effluent and car exhaust standards, shared strategies for pesticide-use reduction, or biodiversity preservation plans. These and other ecological issues may ripen to become the true fruits of peace: mutual benefits in quality of life that come from a common recognition that this good land of Israel/Palestine has to support two nations and can only do so sustainably if they marshal all their resources to that end, together.

Rethinking definitions of justice

Socialistic political ideologies were born out of a sense of outrage that free market and Fascist governance were inherently unjust. A leftist political platform can only survive in the age of globalization if it evolves to embrace a richer and more universal meaning of equity. Internationally, the environmental consequences of free trade have galvanized and unified the left. In Israel, this has remained a non-issue.

Before deciding how to serve society, it would well to consider whom it includes. For starters, the response in Israel must include and integrate the natural world. Israel is home to 2600 plant species (130 endemic to Israel) and 700 vertebrates. But after four decades, this stability is being challenged. The left should insist that the interests of the natural world be considered, especially in a period when the country continues to make dramatic and often irreversible development decisions.

The community of concern needs to be even broader. Just because the *Knesset* created a framework for considering the interests of future generations, this does not mean that all political parties are actually doing so. The left's vision of justice must contain a strong inter-generational element. This tiny Land of Israel is all that our generation, or any generation of Israelis, will ever have in which to find spiritual inspiration and make peace with other creatures of the planet. When speaking of "a better life", following decades of development and economic rewards for almost

all sectors of Israeli society, it is time to bring this ethos of progress to non-economic spheres. We must now foster an enduring harmony with our natural resources and physical environment. Even if romantic Socialistic founders of Israel belong to the past, looking forward, we must insist that future generations are left a land that continues to hold the same beauty and holiness that once inspired the Biblical prophets.

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