

## **Judaism and the Environment<sup>1</sup>**

by Manfred Gerstenfeld

Hans Bachrach Memorial Oration, 20 February, 2000

It is a great honor to have been invited to present this year's Hans Bachrach Memorial Oration in the presence of Mrs. Bachrach. Hans Bachrach's approach to Jewish community work was a very original one in whose framework he made important contributions both in Australia and Israel. From what I have heard from people at the Jerusalem College of Technology who were close to him, he was first and foremost a facilitator of projects. He wanted to move in directions which he felt were important but where others hesitated.

Peter Medding, one of our mutual Australian friends now living in Israel, described Hans Bachrach in the same way but in different words: a cutting-edge lateral thinker looking at the horizon who was always interested to move Jewish life one step further; a man who was determined, single-minded and creative about a dozen things at once.

Another mutual Australian friend, Isi Leibler, said that Hans Bachrach was highly respected as a man who lived a life of greater *chessed* than anybody he ever encountered. He undertook with great persistence many very difficult outreach activities, for which he made generous anonymous donations. Many were the noble causes he espoused.

May his memory be blessed.

### **A one-minute summary**

I asked myself: if the Jerusalem College of Technology and AIJAC, the Australia/Israel and Jewish Affairs Council had invited me from Jerusalem to Melbourne to speak for thirty seconds on Judaism and the environment, what would I have said in order to convey my main conclusions?

Most probably, it would have been: in Jewish law and tradition, there has been a coherent view on the environment for thousands of years. The number of sources referring to what are now called 'environmental' issues

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<sup>1</sup> Based on Manfred Gerstenfeld, *Judaism, Environmentalism and the Environment*. Jerusalem: The Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies & Rubin Mass, 1998.

is considerable. Two centuries ago, had one put together all Jewish laws referring to the environment, one would have obtained the world's most advanced environmental codex, dealing with a great variety of fields.

If the organisers had given me another minute, what would I have added? I would have said: Judaism and modern environmentalism often agree on many practical issues, but the value systems behind their common opinions are quite different. The respective main concerns of environmentalism and Judaism are not the same; neither do they aim for similar goals.

The more environmentalism moves away from pragmatic policies to ideological ones, the further apart these two worlds of thought become. Judaism is radically opposed to pseudo-religious environmentalism which focuses on the sacredness of nature. For the Jew, this is a modern version of paganism. Judaism sees recognition of God and obedience to Him as central. There is no place within it for different central values.

### **Starting at the very beginning**

I would like to start my presentation at the very beginning. In Paradise there was no production and no waste. A modern environmentalist would have to conclude that Paradise, as described in the Torah, represented an ideal society. Environmentalism seeks a sustainable society: Biblical Paradise was exactly that.

When we ask what pollution man and animals created in the Garden of Eden, what risks to the ecosystem they represented, the answer seems to be: almost none. Basic human needs like housing, transport and safety, as later became evident in early societies, did not yet exist in Paradise. Not even clothing was required: humanity used neither textiles nor other materials. There was no potential scarcity of resources. Man needed neither products nor tools: there were no production residues.

No artificial fertilizers or pesticides were required for plants to grow. Man and animals ate only vegetables. All that humanity used, which seems exclusively to have been food, was biodegradable and if there was post-consumer waste, it was probably metabolized into plants. There were no landfills. Animals did not require special protective measures, as they were not attacked by any other creatures. Biodiversity was thus maintained.

## **Eating from a forbidden tree ends sustainable society**

Most probably vegetarian, not-yet-violent man did not harm nature in any way or have any other impact on the ecosystem. Application of environmental analytical tools reveals that a situation of perfect sustainability reigned in Paradise.

There is one little snag: it is unclear from a modern, atheist environmentalist perspective why, through eating from a particular tree in Paradise that God has forbidden, sustainable human society becomes unstable and humanity is chased from the environmental Utopia.

A similar Utopian situation is forecast at the end of days, as described in the prophecies of Isaiah: “The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard lie down with the kid; the calf, the beast of prey, and the fatling together, with a little boy to herd them.” and “The wolf and the lamb shall graze together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox, and the serpent’s food shall be earth.” There is also a prophecy that there will no longer be conflicts between man and animal. Thus, according to Judaism, the beginning of the world and its end are environmentally perfect.

## **The Flood: then and now**

The Flood is the greatest natural disaster mentioned in the Tanach. In the Jewish view, God uses nature as an instrument of punishment: large parts of the ecosystem are destroyed by the rising waters. With the exception of Noah’s family, the whole of humanity is wiped out.

Through Noah’s survival, however, continuity with original man is maintained. Seven pairs of certain types of animals also remain, protected in the Ark; of other species, only one pair is saved. Biodiversity is thus assured, despite the catastrophe.

An environmentalist would view very positively Noah’s taking into the Ark all species of animals. From a modern environmental viewpoint, there is not much more that can be said about the text, other than that a huge natural disaster has taken place, the reason for which can only be guessed at. Some people and animals escape miraculously.

The reason which the Torah gives for this ecological disaster is incomprehensible to the modern environmentalist: man has sinned against God, so He decides to destroy large parts of the eco-system.

A modern secular version of this Biblical story is currently being circulated in the millennium that has just started. It says: man has sinned against nature. Heating and cooling buildings, industrial production, and driving cars all lead to the emission of greenhouse gases and, probably, to global warming. What the environmentalists are saying is that man is sinning against nature and now nature is taking its revenge. El Nino is only the first sign. It will be followed by the melting of the polar ice caps and increased flooding.

These two examples, referring to the very first chapters of Bereshit, already give us two significant indications of the Jewish attitude toward the environment. The first is, as already mentioned, that environmental considerations feature prominently in the Tanach. The second is that there are major differences between the value judgements of Judaism with regard to the environment and the ideology of the contemporary environmentalist movement.

### **The Ten Plagues**

There are many more stories in the Tanach with environmental aspects. One of the most important is that of the Ten Plagues, which offers many examples of modification of nature as a Divine tool of punishment.

A number of environmental disasters kill part of the Egyptian population, their slaves, animals and crops, but do not affect the Israelites living in the neighboring land of Goshen. Several of the plagues lead to considerable pollution of water and the air. This is already evident in the first plague, when the Nile's water turns into blood. The river is so polluted that all the fish die. There is also air pollution: "The Nile stank so that Egyptians could not drink water from it."

From this story we get an additional Jewish religious message with respect to the environment and nature. God created nature; as its Maker He is also its Owner, and as such, He can change it at will. This is precisely what He does in the story of the Ten Plagues: He uses nature to teach some hard-necked people a lesson, particularly the Pharaoh.

There are many other environmental messages in this story. Today, one of environmental science's main objectives is to prove that certain sicknesses are caused by pollution. The motif of pollution's epidemiological character is stated explicitly in the story of one of the plagues. Moses and

Aaron take some handfuls of furnace soot, which becomes fine dust “and it caused an inflammation breaking out in boils on man and beast.” The magicians are unable to confront Moses because of the inflammation, “for the inflammation afflicted the magicians as well as all the other Egyptians.” If we analyze this text from the viewpoint of modern environmentalism, it seems that industrial air pollution causes an epidemic.

### **God, man and nature**

This series of natural disasters gains another dimension within the religious context. The plagues are a paradigm of the relationship between God, man and nature. Few other Biblical stories present in such detail the position of these three elements in Judaism. Humanity must obey God; if it does not, nature can be used in extraordinary ways to punish it.

Protection of nature is important in the Jewish tradition. However, Judaism makes it clear that the preservation of nature is not humanity’s main goal. This is diametrically opposed to the views of some extreme environmentalists. According to Jewish thought, God can do with nature and animals whatever He sees fit within His own schemes. The river can be made unlivable for fish, in order to punish man. For the same purpose, frogs can multiply and die in the houses, courtyards and fields after they have fulfilled the role assigned to them by God.

Man and beast alike are punished during several of the plagues. The essence of the religious message is very clear and is repeated several times: God can punish disobedient man by using nature against him. God can change the rules of nature as He wishes and in many ways. For example, darkness hits the Egyptians in one place while it is absent elsewhere in Egypt where the Israelites live.

The animal world can also be pitched against man in a variety of ways. Frogs invade the house, vermin infest him, insects invade the palace and ruin the crops, locusts eat the grasses of the field. Large parts of the ecosystem are damaged. Most of the plagues are extremely difficult to explain from an environmentalist perspective.

From the viewpoints of both modern environmentalism and Judaism, it is clear that a major disaster befell the Egyptians, their animals and the inanimate world. From the religious point of view, the motives for this are clear; from the environmentalist point of view, they are not.

There are other religious ideas mentioned in the story of the plagues which are irrelevant to environmental analysis and policies. For instance, prayer by the right people may succeed in eliminating the plagues. Remorse is important in ending disasters. The Pharaoh could have prevented the natural catastrophes had he let the Israelites go.

### **The Manna**

A fourth significant environmental story in the Torah is that of the manna. It has several clear characteristics of waste prevention. It makes no sense for the Israelite to collect more than he can eat because the only result is that he is left with a foul-smelling waste product which is full of worms. It can reasonably be assumed that the Israelites rapidly learned their lesson and did not collect more than was necessary.

A second explicitly environmental characteristic is that the remaining manna does not foul the desert. Of what remains it is said that “when the sun grew hot, it would melt.” In contemporary environmental language, this process is called photo-degradation, i.e. the decomposition of the waste by the sun’s rays. At the beginning of my research on Judaism and the environment, my wife asked me whether the Israelites left the desert clean behind them. From this story, it seems, they did.

Another important environmental aspect of the manna story is that man can live a complete life with only a single food to sustain him. Manna is not the only reference in the Tanach to waste in the desert. Another emerges in the text: “The clothes upon you did not wear out, nor did your feet swell these forty years.”

### ***Bal tashkhit***

So far, I have referred to some of the Tanach’s main non-halakhic texts which refer to the environment. Hundreds of other examples can be given from Tanach stories with environmental aspects. However, many Jewish laws also refer to environmental issues.

*Bal tashkhit*, the prevention of wanton destruction, is the halakhic principle most frequently mentioned in contemporary Jewish publications to elaborate Judaism’s attitude toward the environment. Its origin is to be found in the Torah: “When in your war against a city you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy its trees, wielding the ax against them. You may eat of them, but you must not cut them

down. Are trees of the field human to withdraw before you into the besieged city? Only trees that you know do not yield food may be destroyed; you may cut them down for constructing siege works against the city that is waging war with you, until it has been reduced.”

Over the centuries, the concept of *bal tashkhit* has been discussed frequently in rabbinical literature and Jewish legislation has become more detailed. In one of the oldest collections of rabbinical traditions, the Sifrei – written around 300 CE – the halakha is extended to prohibit interference with water sources. The Talmud extends this to include an uneconomical use of fuel.

Maimonides mentions further extensions of the principle, pointing out that it does not refer only to periods of war, but to all times. Among the list of prohibitions that he mentions are: the breaking of utensils, the tearing of clothes, the destruction of buildings, the blocking of wells, and the destruction of food. This concept of *bal tashkhit* developed to the point that, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, R. Samson Raphael Hirsch reached the conclusion that nothing – including one’s own belongings – may be destroyed without purpose.

### ***Tzar ba’alei chaim***

A second salient halakhic law referring to environmental issues is *tzar ba’alei chaim*, the prevention of cruelty to animals. Many Jewish laws refer to this. The Torah tells us, for instance, that we must not eat the limb of a living animal. This is one of the seven Noahide laws, which means that it is valid for all humanity and not only for Jews.

Neither may we plough with an ox and a donkey yoked together. This would obviously be unfair to the weaker animal. On Shabbat, not only should we rest, but also our animals. The Talmud tells us that it is forbidden for man to eat before feeding his animals.

One of the greatest rabbinical scholars in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, R. Yehezkel Landau, better known as the Noda Biyehuda, says in a responsum: “The only hunters mentioned in the Torah are Nimrod and Esau. Hunting is not a sport for the children of Abraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov... How can a Jew go to kill a living creature only with the purpose of hunting for pleasure?”

For many centuries, then, the rabbinical world developed complex ideas of environmental relevance. It was only many hundreds of years later that most of these ideas entered the mainstream of modern thought and the consciousness of society in general. Many Jews now find such concepts interesting, ignoring the fact that Judaism dealt with them long ago and reached conclusions which are still valid today. This is a sad phenomenon and it is not limited to environmental issues alone.

### **The coherence of Jewish thought**

Looking more systematically through the legal and narrative parts of the Tanach and the literature of the commentators expressed in the Midrash, we may conclude that Jewish thought with regard to the environment is quite coherent. Let me demonstrate this to you with respect to five important environmental elements. Together, they cover most modern environmental concerns.

The first is the relationship of man and nature or, as an environmentalist would say, 'protection of nature.' Amongst Jewish environmental laws, I have already mentioned *bal tashkhit* and the prohibition against hunting. There is a third important element in Halakha which refers to nature: the laws of *kilayim*, protecting the constancy of species.

One example of this is the Torah text: "You shall not let your cattle mate with a different kind; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; you shall not put on cloth from a mixture of two kinds of material."

These three categories of Jewish law all point to the protection of nature. At the same time, many stories in the Tanach tell us that nature has other functions, such as being a testimony of God's majesty or, as we have already seen, His tool. Sometimes this tool is used to reward people. This is the case in the story of the Manna, or when – with God's help – Yehoshua stops the sun and moon so that the Israelites can defeat their enemies. At other times, as we have seen, it is a tool of punishment. Besides the stories of Paradise, the Flood and the Plagues already mentioned, we can cite the destruction of Sdom, the parting of the Red Sea and Korach's fall.

Nature also has other functions, such as teaching man a lesson. Some typical examples are the story of Moses and the burning bush; the story of Na'aman, the Syrian general who is cured by the waters of the Jordan; the story of the prophet Yonah and the tree which grows and wilts rapidly,

and the story of the men thrown in the oven by Nebuchadnezer, from which they are saved.

Not surprisingly, because Judaism sees nature as an instrument of God, revering nature is considered a transgression. Elijah's sacrifice on Mount Carmel proves that. The priests of the Baal are defeated.

In the Midrash literature there are also many references to various aspects of man's relationship with nature. For instance, the following midrash expresses this concept: "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.'"

### **Man's relationship to animals**

A second important element of modern environmental concern is the relationship between man and animals. I have already mentioned several Jewish laws in this field.

Other laws include aspects which seek to limit animal suffering. One of these refers to the young ox or sheep: "No animal from the herd or from the flock shall be slaughtered on the same day as its young." Another imposes the principle of *shillu'ach haken*. If one takes fledglings or eggs from a bird's nest, one is not allowed to take the mother together with her young. One of the leading contemporary rabbis, R. Eliezer Waldenberg, better known as the Tsits Eliezer, states in one of his responsa that, even if a man wants to fast, he must feed his animals.

We also find expressions of this concept in the narrative sections of the Torah. Abraham's servant chooses Rebecca as Isaac's wife because she is kind to animals. The motif that kindness to animals is a highly positive character trait returns in the Midrash literature. One midrash tells us that Moshe is chosen as leader of the Jewish people because he is kind to animals. Another tells us that R. Yehuda the Prince, author of the Mishna, is punished when he speaks cruelly to animals, but is rewarded when he is subsequently kind to them. In the first instance it is said in Heaven that, as he has no mercy, he merits punishment; in the second, because he has now shown mercy, he too will be shown mercy.

### **The preservation of natural resources**

A third environmental element is the preservation of natural resources. The halakha of *bal tashkhit* refers to this also. An important halakhic issue here concerns land policies and soil protection. The law of *shemitta*, the sabbatical year, commands us to let the land rest and lie fallow in the seventh year. After each 49 years, a jubilee year should be declared. During this jubilee, the same prohibitions are applied with regard to working the land as in the sabbatical year.

Another prohibition mentioned in the Mishna is also relevant to land protection. The raising of small cattle, goats and sheep in the land of Israel is forbidden.

To a certain extent, the animal protection and Shabbat laws also deal with the preservation of natural resources, as do also the laws of kashrut.

There are many references in the Torah stories to the preservation of resources. Abraham and Lot separate in order not to overwork the land. Joseph advises hoarding grain for the Pharaoh, so that people will not starve in the future. The gold used in the Temple instruments is recycled. There should be no scorched earth policies in Jewish wars. In the Midrash we are told many times about the necessity of planting trees, while conspicuous consumption is discouraged.

### **Nuisance and pollution**

A fourth environmental element concerns nuisance and pollution. In the Halakha, nuisance limitation and health protection play an important role. The first Jewish codex on environmental issues is the *hilchot shchenim* of Maimonides. Nuisance and pollution are viewed very negatively in the Tanach: they are tools of punishment.

This concept dominates the story of the Ten Plagues, but the fall of Jericho is also brought about by what we would nowadays call ‘excess noise pollution’.

Another example can be given in relation to Jerusalem, the Holy City. It is symbolic that there are specific laws forbidding polluting activities within the city. The Talmud says: “One should not erect a dung-heap there. One should not build a kiln there, one should not establish vegetable and fruit gardens, with the exception of the rose garden which has been there since the time of the first prophets. One should not raise chickens there. One should not leave a corpse there overnight.” The Talmud mentions that, as

one was not allowed to have a kiln in Jerusalem, all earthenware had to be brought to the city from elsewhere.

### **The allocation of space**

A fifth element of environmental concern is the allocation of space. The main example in Halakha is that of the Levite cities and the cities of refuge. Two thousand cubits outside the town – on each side – had to be open space which were to be used as pasture. It was forbidden to build houses, plant vineyards or till fields there. This approach is a precursor of modern town-planning attitudes, which try to apply strict ratios between built-up and open spaces.

### **Contemporary Halakha**

As the field is so vast, I can only deal very briefly with many subjects. Some contemporary Halakha deals with environmental issues. Thus R. Haim David Halevi, the former Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, says that it is forbidden to wear fur coats because the animals used for them are killed in a painful manner.

Other subjects dealt with in contemporary Halakha concern active and passive smoking, attitudes toward animals, vegetarianism, the throwing of unpackaged sweets or peeled nuts among congregants in a synagogue, and whether surplus food may be destroyed.

There are many other aspects of environmental concern or awareness in Judaism. For instance, there are many references to this in our liturgy. These include the special blessings thanking God for the beauty in nature.

Another field is mystical literature. The 16<sup>th</sup> century kabbalists in Safed were against the killing or torture of any living creature, including insects, as they believed that human souls could transmigrate into animals. One Chabad rabbi was shocked when he realised that he had unthinkingly plucked a leaf from a tree.

### **Non-religious aspects**

When speaking about Jewish interaction with the environment, we are dealing not only with religious aspects but also with many others. For instance, we may ask whether, through the ages, the Jews behaved differently toward the environment than other people? The answer is ‘yes’.

Another question is: how did Zionism behave toward the environment? This is a complex subject in itself: as we all now know, the Israeli coast is unfortunately in the process of becoming a metropolis.

There are other issues which can be included in this subject. The individual contributions of Jews toward modern environmentalism; the perception of the environment in works of literature; the interaction of Jewish organisations and environmentalist organisations; the pagan elements in ideological environmentalism and the possible connection between the German Green ideology and the Brown ideology of the pseudo-religious aspects of the Nazi movement.

## **Conclusions**

Let me now try to draw a few conclusions.

I hope to have proven here that Judaism has not only ‘something’ to say about the environment, but can make a significant contribution in a coherent approach to the subject.

One approach could be the development of Jewish environmental studies as an academic profession, just as Jewish women’s studies have evolved in recent years. Both are among the major issues currently being discussed in the fragmented modern discourse. The Jerusalem College of Technology has announced its intention to establish the first diversified center in the world on Judaism and the Environment.

A totally different approach could be if people concerned about the environment were to put environmental questions to rabbinical leaders. In this way, a new Halakhic category – Jewish environmental law – could be developed, similar to the way in which Jewish medical Halakha has flourished over the past decades.

It is by drawing from the wealth of our own sources that we can, not only confront the many challenges facing us, but also make a contribution to overcoming them.

Judaism and the environment  
Bachrach Memorial Lecture  
Thank you for your attention.

Dr Manfred Gerstenfeld is an internationally renowned environmental expert and business consultant and has a lengthy background in Jewish public affairs. He was born in Vienna, grew up in Amsterdam and came with his family to Israel in 1968 from Paris. He is a chemist and economist by training, holds a Ph.D. in environmental studies and has a teacher training degree in Judaism from the Dutch Jewish Seminary. In the past thirty-five years he has been an international consultant specialising in business strategy. He has worked in twenty countries and his clients have included the boards of several of the world's largest multinational companies as well as governments. Dr Gerstenfeld was a Board Member of the Israel Corporation, one of Israel's largest investment companies, and several other Israeli public companies, and is the chairman of the Steering Committee of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs.

Dr Gerstenfeld has published several books, his most recent being *Judaism, Environmentalism and the Environment*. His earlier books include *Environment and Confusion*, published in English, Hebrew, Italian and Greek, examining the future of environmental issues. In *Israel's New Future: Interviews*, Dr Gerstenfeld explored the views of sixteen leading Israelis on the political, economic, social and religious future of the nation.