

ZIONISM AND THE ENVIRONMENT¹

by
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In one of her best-known poems, Rahel (1890-1931) writes: “*I have never sung to you, my land, or glorified your name, with heroic deeds or battles’ booty. Only a tree have my hands planted on the silent banks of the Jordan river.*”² Several later Israeli writers also refer to the ‘Zionist relation to nature’. From a variety of perspectives, they often consider tree-planting one of its most important expressions.

From its beginning, the attitude of the Zionist movement toward the world of nature was much more ambivalent and complex than is commonly understood. When one asks how the early Zionists related to their environment, the stereotypical answer is that Zionism glorified living on the land, draining the swamps, tilling the soil, planting forests and making the desert bloom. This simplified picture distorts the multifaceted reality.

Zionism was born out of rejection of the Diaspora and was fueled by the many threats to the Jews. Its thinkers and leaders believed that there was no future for the Jewish masses in Eastern Europe, and viewed very negatively the Jews’ way of life there. Chayim Nachman Bialik refers in several poems to the pollution seen in villages in Russia.³ The bitter reality, though, is that the life that many pioneers lived in Palestine contained elements of the dirt that Bialik had described.⁴

Differing Voices

Zionism proposed that the Jews needed a place of their own, in Palestine, in order to live a ‘normal’ life. Opinions differed greatly, however, as to what such a life would consist of. For several of its currents, the relationship with ‘the land’ filled a key ideological role in the desired

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² *El Artzi* in: Rahel, *Shirat Rahel*. Tel Aviv: Davar, 1935. Also in: *1000 Zemer Ve’od Zemer*. Tel Aviv: Kinneret, 1981, Part 1, p. 40. [both Hebrew]

³ *Mi Yode’a Ir Lashtin?* in: Chayim Nachman Bialik, *Kol Ktavav*. 8th ed. Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1945, pp. 52 and 355-7. [Hebrew]

⁴ Anita Shapira, Berl Katznelson: *Biographia*. Vol. 1. Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1980, p. 66. [Hebrew]

change of the Jewish people's social structure. Their adherents considered getting closer to nature and working the land an instrument for self-improvement and mental healing. In this way, they thought that a 'new Jew' would be born. Although contested by other Zionist factions, this attitude was wide-spread and persistent.

From the beginning of the Zionist movement, however, there were many influential voices with widely varying opinions. Theodor Herzl claimed that those who wanted to turn Jews into farmers were mistaken; he considered the farmer an anachronism.⁵ Later Zionist pioneers were to prove him wrong on this point.

Read with modern eyes, one specific text from Herzl's *The Jewish State* sounds like a strong anti-environmentalist statement: "*If we were in the situation where we wanted to liberate a country from wild animals, we would not do it the way the Europeans did it in the 5th century. We would not go out with a spear and lance against bears, but rather organize a great pleasurable hunt, drive the animals together and throw a bomb under them.*"⁶

Awareness of the Environment in General Society

The modern environmental movement has been a mainstream force in Western society only since the 1960s. Before that, a broad interest in matters that are now labeled 'environmental' was confined to marginal currents.⁷ Nonetheless, many of this new discipline's motifs have ancient roots: no civilization has arisen that has been totally devoid of environmental concerns and norms.

The main elements of the modern environmental movement's focus are protection of nature and animal life, limitation of use of non-renewable natural resources, prevention of pollution and nuisance, and allocation of space. Analyzing the Zionist perspective on nature, for instance, shows that it differs greatly from that of contemporary environmentalists for all that their views coincide on some aspects.

A broad range of measures for protecting the environment has existed in the Jewish tradition for thousands of years. Judaism's sensitivity to many

⁵ Theodor Herzl, *Der Judenstaat*. Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag, 1936, p. 25. [German]

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁷ For an analysis of this development, see Anna Bramwell, *Ecology in the 20th Century: a history*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.

issues is demonstrated both in the normative and narrative parts of the Bible and in other classical Jewish texts. The environmentally most significant of these laws include the sabbatical year (*shemittah*), and prohibitions against wanton destruction (*bal tashkhit*) and causing pain to animals (*tza'ar ba'alei hayim*).⁸

Limited Jewish Interest

Environmentalism began to gather strength as a mainstream Western concern in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Although Jews numbered among its active propagators, few were interested in the environment as Jews. Even today, interest in the specifically Jewish aspects of environmental concern is limited.⁹ Several Jewish writers in this field have felt a need to explain this, by stressing the urban character of Jewish life over many centuries.^{10 11}

That many Eastern European Jews lacked all interest in the environment is borne out, for example, by Isaac Bashevis Singer in his memoirs. He recalls his youthful alienation from the world of nature, and misconceptions prevailing among poor Jewish children in Warsaw: “*On Mirowski Place, behind the market halls, was the wholesale fruit market. The abundance of all the orchards around Warsaw was brought hither: apples, pears, cherries, sour cherries, gooseberries, currants. There too were traded strange fruits and vegetables that most Jewish children had never tasted and thought forbidden [from the viewpoint of kashrut]: tomatoes, cauliflowers and green peppers.*”¹²

Other authors consider these positions far too one-sided. Norman Lamm maintains that Hasidism, in particular, relates to nature: “*For Hasidism, which is immensely immanentistic, man has a kinship with other created beings, a symbiotic relationship with nature, and hence should maintain a sense of respect, if not reverence, for the natural world which is infused with the presence of God.*”¹³

⁸ See Manfred Gerstenfeld, *Judaism, Environmentalism and the Environment*. Jerusalem: The Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies & Rubin Mass, 1998, Chapter 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Chapter 2.

¹⁰ Eric G. Freudenstein, *Ecology and the Jewish Tradition*. *Judaism*, Vol. 19, No. 4, Fall, 1970, p. 413.

¹¹ David Ehrenfeld & Philip J. Bentley, *Judaism and the Practice of Stewardship*. *Judaism*, Vol. 34, No. 3, Summer 1985, p. 309.

¹² Isaac Bashevis Singer, *In My Father's Court*. New York: Noonday Press, 1967, p. 177.

¹³ Norman Lamm, *A Jewish View of the Environment and Ecology*. Lecture given at the Technion, Haifa, Israel, October 7, 1996.

A Chapter in Jewish History

The attitude toward the environment of both Zionism and the State of Israel is a discrete chapter in the history of the Jewish people. Avner de-Shalit argues that the first stage of the relationship between Zionism and the environment, during the early waves of immigration “*was characterized by a romantic attitude to nature and a glorification of rural life.*”¹⁴ This description characterizes only one – and not the dominant – immigrant faction. Walter Laqueur describes a different reality: “*...the settlers of the first aliya had become plantation owners, and... among the permanent residents of these colonies there were actually more Arabs than Jews. ...Few Jewish peasants engaged any longer in manual labour.*”¹⁵

Amos Oz points to the diversity of the dreams of those who immigrated: some came to build anew the Israelite kingdom, others a Marxist paradise, and yet others to pave the way for the Messiah. He added: “*It was possible, for instance, to love Eretz Israel the way my late grandfather loved it, who was a veteran revisionist and enthusiastic Herut member. Veteran revisionists were city people. They didn’t travel to villages; the odor of dung, the perfume of hay were not to their nose’s liking. My grandfather lived in Eretz Israel for forty-five years and did not visit the Galil or the Negev: he was in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Ramat Gan. Once he even risked his life and went to the deep south and spent a few hours in Gedera. But he loved Eretz Israel with his whole soul, and even composed love poems in its honor (in Russian.)*”¹⁶

From the beginnings of Zionism, there were at least two important forces at work: one was to bring Jews from the city to the land; the other was modern and technology-oriented. Although not representative of society in general, the attitudes of the land-oriented currents in Zionism are the most interesting from an environmental perspective.

The kibbutz movement was central in imbuing members – in some cases, including children as young as two years old – with new values about

¹⁴ Avner de-Shalit, From the Political to the Objective: The Dialectics of Zionism and the Environment. *Environmental Politics*, Vol. 4 No. 1, Spring, 1995, p. 81.

¹⁵ Walter Laqueur, *A History of Zionism*. New York: Schocken, 1976, p. 221.

¹⁶ Amos Oz, *Al Ahavat ha’Aretz*, in: Beni Gwerzman, ed., *HaMeimad HaZioni shel Shmirat HaTeva*. HaHevra leHaganat HaTeva, 1981, p. 14. [Hebrew]

nature.¹⁷ Some of these contain a strong element of nature protection. The historical and present relationship of the kibbutz to the environment merit an essay in itself.¹⁸

Religion of Labor

Many people with a romantic approach combined it with an almost religious attitude toward physical labor. The struggle for Jewish labor has partly to be understood against this background. From the modern environmental viewpoint, there is a contradiction between romanticism of nature and its development. The early Zionists were not aware of this.

The most extreme Zionist ‘environmentalist’ precursor was A. D. Gordon (1856-1922) who preached a ‘religion of labor’ (*dat ha’avoda*). For him, nature and (manual) labor were inseparable values.¹⁹ Hertzal Fishman observes that “*Gordon’s Zionist philosophy focused on the exalted value of agricultural labor. Industrialization has alienated human beings from one another and from a close relationship with the cosmos; it is impersonal, machine oriented, and outside the purview of nature. It relates to man as a number, not as a person... By working the soil, man realized his inherent creative potential within the context of an intimate at-oneness with the universe; once again he will become God’s partner in creation.*”²⁰

Gordon’s view of nature was one-sided. His idea of living in harmony with nature was extremely selective. In reality, nature is not romantic: it is non-democratic, cruel, and lacking in charity; only the fittest survive. These characteristics of nature were admired by the Nazis, who introduced the first major environmental laws in Europe.²¹

The Political Concept of Nature

The Zionist attitude toward nature was frequently contrasted with that of the Arab world. In a story about Trumpeldor, the plow, symbol of the

¹⁷ Melford E. Spiro, *Children of the Kibbutz: A Study in Child Training and Personality*, rev. ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975, p. 43.

¹⁸ See also: Manfred Gerstenfeld, *HaYahas HaMishtaneh leReah HaZevul. Nihul*, December 2000, pp. 36-7. [Hebrew]

¹⁹ A. D. Gordon, *Auswahl aus seinen Schriften*. Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag, 1937, p. 142. [German]

²⁰ Hertzal Fishman, *The Challenge to Jewish Survival*. West Orange, New Jersey: Behrman House, 1993, p. 220.

²¹ See Manfred Gerstenfeld, Neo-Paganism in the Public Square. *Jewish Political Studies Review*, Vol. 11, Nos. 3 & 4, Fall 1999, p. 30.

Jews and the Zionists' new relationship with nature, is contrasted with the gun, symbol of the Arabs.²²

This is one of the several nature-related contrasts between Jews and Arabs that are often stressed by Israelis. They frequently tell how, as children in the years before the Six-Day War, they were taken to hills overlooking the West Bank where their teachers pointed out how green the Israeli side was and how barren the Arab side was. Others relate how the goats of the Bedouins used to eat the greenery where Jewish National Fund (JNF) forests now stand.

Zionist attitudes toward nature and development play an interesting role in the writings of Meir Shalev, one of Israel's important novelists. As an elementary school pupil in the 1950s, he was confronted with *"the political concept of nature. I think that Israel was the only country which taught its children 'mosquito studies' in history rather than in zoology classes. From the point of view of the Israeli educational system, the Anopheles mosquito, which transferred the malaria bacteria and infected the pioneers through them, was not an insect but a terrorist. Together with the field mice, the hamsin, the Mufti of Jerusalem, the couch-grass, the communist party and some larvae, he wanted to destroy the Zionist enterprise but failed, to our good fortune."*²³

Shalev also mentions the reclamation of the Huleh swamp in the 1950s: *"...a Dutch engineer was also brought in...He warned that the peat grounds, of which those who reclaimed it had so many hopes, could behave in unexpected and even damaging ways. Then the JNF hydrologist stood up, hit the table with his fist and declared: our peat is Zionist peat, our peat will not do damage. As is known, the Dutch have much experience in the reclamation of land, but even they had not yet met land with a political conscience... The Huleh was reclaimed and then it became clear that the Zionist peat disappointed all hopes. It was even, to a certain extent, anti-Zionist."*²⁴ Indeed, in recent years, the area has been partly re-flooded.

The political and cultural ethos of the country's development, which characterized Israeli society in particular after the establishment of the State of Israel, is well expressed in a popular song of the time, *Morning*

²² Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 154.

²³ Meir Shalev, *Be'Ikar al ha'Ahava*. Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1995, p. 31. [Hebrew]

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

Song by one of Israel's best-known poets, Nathan Alterman. He wrote about the land: "*In the mountains the sun is already hot and in the valley still shines the dew. We love you fatherland, with joy, song and hard work. From the slopes of the Lebanon till the Dead Sea, we will worship you with plows. We will plant you and build you. We will make you very beautiful... we will cover you with a coat of concrete and cement.*"²⁵ This text is often quoted as an example of one aspect of national development that may have taken a wrong turn.

Reforestation

The reforestation program has been a key element in the relationship between Zionism and the land. In 1949, Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, "*asked Yosef Weitz, the head of the Jewish National Fund, 'to plant a billion trees in the coming decade' arguing that the value of afforestation was incalculable, as it was the 'essence of everything', that 'the tree would lead us to our goals', and that planting was the only way in which Jews could develop such strong ties to their land that they would never again be thrown out of it.*"²⁶

The forest planted by the Jewish National Fund became a Zionist icon. Later, in the State of Israel, trees would fulfill another symbolic function. At the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial Institute, trees are planted in memory of the Righteous of the Nations, those Gentiles who saved Jews during the Second World War at the risk of their own lives.

This Zionist world of ideas has very little in common, however, with the thoughts of the prominent 19th century precursor of modern American environmentalism, Henry Thoreau, who aimed for the 'preservation of wildness'. Herzl's view was among the more remote, which is expressed in his appreciation of technology: "*Where we modern ones appear with our auxiliaries we turn the desert into a garden.*"²⁷

Tree-planting has been part of the practical-political Zionist approach to making the land more livable. At the same time, it has become an important ritual marking the return of the Jewish people to Palestine. The Jewish National Fund, the World Zionist Organization's key instrument for Jewish land purchases in Palestine, has been the main promoter of this

²⁵ *1000 Zemer Ve'od Zemer*. Tel Aviv: Kinneret, 1983, Part 2, p. 145. [Hebrew]

²⁶ De-Shalit, *op. cit.*

²⁷ Herzl, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

activity. Collecting funds throughout the Diaspora for the reforestation campaign continues until the present day.

The goal of tree-planting was also instilled in the minds of Jewish children around the world. In order to encourage them to relate to the land, they often participated in this effort. The historian Simon Schama called JNF trees “*our proxy immigrants.*”²⁸

The Impact of Immigrants

In addition to the wars in which Israel was involved, the various waves of immigration did not allow leeway for much interest in the environment in the Zionist state’s first decades. Uri Marinov, the first director-general of the Israel Ministry of the Environment, believes that the 1980s saw an overall improvement in the environment, but adds that the mass immigration of the early 1990s has brought with it some backtracking: “*Building a great number of housing units rapidly was approved without a proper investigation as to where they should be located.*”²⁹

Some of these units were built on former landfills, while others were located too close to airports; yet others were constructed without proper sewage facilities. From the environmental point of view, the mass aliya of the early 1990s saw the government fall back to an approach that was evident during the 1950s.

Western environmental policies are rife with irrational elements, and a similar irrationality is strongly present in Israeli environmental policies and their implementation³⁰. Due to Israel’s political reality, environmental concerns compete with many others, some of which – such as defense – are objectively more urgent. This also explains why even key issues such as water shortages – which are immediate – are not adequately dealt with.

Conclusion

This preliminary analysis of a number of key elements of the interaction between Zionism and the State of Israel, on the one hand, and the environment, on the other, indicates considerable potential for further

²⁸ Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*. New York: Vintage Books, 1996, pp. 5.

²⁹ Uri Marinov in: Manfred Gerstenfeld, *Israel’s New Future: Interviews*. Jerusalem: Rubin Mass & The Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 1994, p. 175.

³⁰ See Manfred Gerstenfeld, *Sviva v’ BilBul*. Jerusalem: The Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies & Hotsa’at HaKibbutz HaMeuhad, 1998. [Hebrew]

research in this field. A more general assessment of the environmental attitudes expressed by Jews in the Mandate and the State of Israel would require a much more detailed cultural and socio-historical examination of the society's Zionist roots.

Any appraisal of Israel's attitudes toward the environment should also analyze the cultures that the immigrants brought with them from their respective countries of origin. This heterogeneity is expressed in almost all aspects of Israeli culture: not only does it lead to the emergence of original ideas resulting from the interaction of varying experiences and influences, but it also accounts in part for the varied attitudes to the environment amongst the population.

Modern-day Israel is not in the forefront of environmental activity. Nonetheless, the country has played a pioneering role in fields such as reforestation, drip irrigation, and the protection of wild flowers; it has also made significant contributions in the fields of combatting desertification, and research on alternative energy sources, particularly in the field of solar energy. Other Israeli achievements of worldwide significance are water desalination and desert agriculture. There is thus a contradiction between advanced approaches on the one hand, and backward policies on the other. In many environmental fields Israel still has much to learn from Western countries. Catching up may take several decades.

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