

**HOW GREEN IS JUDAISM?  
EXPLORING JEWISH ENVIRONMENTAL  
ETHICS**

David Vogel  
Haas School of Business  
University of California, Berkeley  
Berkeley, California, 94720  
E-mail: [vogel@haas.berkeley.edu](mailto:vogel@haas.berkeley.edu)  
Phone: 510-642-5294

November 1999

A different version of this article appeared in [Business Ethics Quarterly](#)

## Introduction

This article explores the Jewish approach to environmental ethics.<sup>1</sup> It draws on the extensive contemporary literature on Judaism and the environment, including three articles which have been published in Judaism. This literature includes more than a score of scholarly and popular essays and articles as well as two volumes of essays.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the Jewish environmental organization *Shomrei Adamah: Keepers of the Earth* has published A Garden of Choice Fruit, a collection of 200 classic Jewish quotes on human beings and the environment, and Let The Earth Teach You Torah, a guidebook for teaching Jewish perspectives on the environment.<sup>3</sup> The Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life represents a large number of Jewish organizations and engages in environmental advocacy and education in both the United States and Israel. The Jewish-oriented left-of-center monthly Tikkun has also periodically published articles which present Jewish perspectives on bio-diversity as well as on other current environmental issues.<sup>4</sup>

Clearly, environmental ethics represents an important Jewish issue: it links the Jewish tradition of ethical analysis to a significant contemporary problem. The Jewish tradition makes a distinctive and important contribution to our understanding of contemporary environmental ethics and the complex relationship of man to nature. Both

the biblical corpus itself, which extends over seven or eight centuries, as well as post-biblical exegesis contains not one normative view of nature but a variety of views.

Many ancient and medieval Jewish texts both express and are consistent with a strong environmental ethic. Far from providing a blanket endorsement to man's domination of nature for his own benefit, Judaism imposes numerous restrictions on how, when and to what extent people can use the natural environment. Rather than simply expressing anthropocentric values, many of its ideas and principles either explicitly or implicitly evoke themes that are consistent with eco - or biocentric understandings of the relationship between people and nature.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the latter ethos, rather than representing a major new departure in or challenge to western religious thought, is actually prefigured in both ancient and medieval Jewish religious texts.

But while Judaism may be consistent with many contemporary environmental values and doctrines, its teachings are not identical to them. Specifically, Judaism does not regard the preservation or protection of nature as the most important societal value; it holds that humans are not just a part of nature but have privileged and distinctive moral claims; it believes that nature can threaten humans as well as the obverse; it argues that nature should be used and enjoyed as well as protected. In short, the Jewish tradition is complex: it contains both "green" and "non-green" elements. It is both inappropriate to over-emphasize the former, as have some Jewish environmentalists, or the latter, as have some environmental critics of western religion.<sup>6</sup>

In the Jewish tradition, humans have both moral claims on nature and nature has moral claims on humans. But neither claim is absolute: nature both exists for the sake of humans and for its own stake. While the natural world must be respected and admired, its

challenge to human interests and values must also be recognized. The key contribution of ancient and medieval Jewish texts to contemporary environmental discourse lies in the concept of balance – balance between the values and needs of humans and the claims of nature, and between viewing nature as a source of life and moral values and as a threat to human life and social values. The teachings of Judaism challenge both those who would place too low a value on nature as well as those who would place too high a value on it.

### Anthropocentrism and Eco-centricism

“When you besiege a town for many days, waging-war against it, to seize it: you are not to bring-ruin upon its trees, by swinging-away (with) an ax against them, for from them you eat, them you are not to cut-down – for are the trees of the field human beings, (able) to come against you in a siege? Only those trees of which you know that they are not trees for eating, them you may bring-to-ruin and cut-down, that you may build siege-works against the town that is making war against you, until its downfall.” (Deuteronomy 20:19-20)<sup>7</sup>

This is perhaps the most frequently cited passage in contemporary writings on Jewish environmental ethics and is often evoked as a textual basis for Jewish environmental ethics. Yet it contains an important ambiguity. Put simply: why should one not destroy the fruit trees?

One interpretation of this passage, expressed by the medieval Jewish commentator Ibn Ezra (1089-1164 ), is that we should not destroy the fruit trees because our lives are dependent on them and the food they produce. Thus destroying the fruit-trees is forbidden because it is not in the long-term interest of humans. However, the

medieval Jewish scholar Rashi (1040-1105), offers a rather different interpretation. He asks rhetorically: “Are trees like people that they can run away from an advancing army and take refuge in the town? Of course not – they are innocent bystanders. Therefore don’t involve them in your conflicts, and don’t cut them down.”<sup>8</sup> In short, the trees have a life of their own: they don’t just exist to serve human needs.

The former interpretation is anthropocentric. It evokes the concept of sustainable development: we are permitted to pick the fruit, but not destroy the fruit tree because the fruit is a renewable resource while the tree presumably is not. The later interpretation is eco-centric or biocentric: it makes no reference to human needs. It posits that trees have an intrinsic value which is independent of human welfare or concerns.

Not only can one locate both perspectives within the Jewish tradition but the very ambiguity of Deuteronomy 20: 19-20 contains an important key to understanding the Jewish approach to environmental ethics. The diverse interpretations of this passage suggests that Jewish environmental ethics incorporates both anthropocentrism and biocentrism. To argue that nature exists only for the benefit of man is to refuse to acknowledge all nature as God’s creation. But it would be equally misguided to claim that humans ought not use nature for their own benefit.

Thus even if one were to agree with the eco-centric interpretation of the prohibition against destroying fruit-trees, i.e. that they are to be valued for their own sake, the fact remains is that *is* permissible to cut down the non fruit-bearing for the purposes of waging war. But these trees are no less a part of nature than fruit-bearing trees. Neither are able to run away. Why are we then permitted to destroy them? Are they not equally innocent? Why are they not also valued for their own sake?

Clearly God does not want us to live in a world in which we are forbidden to chop down all trees, since such a prohibition would make the preservation and sustaining of human life impossible. At the same time, neither does God want us to assume that the entire natural world exists to satisfy our material needs, for as Psalm 24 reminds us: “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it.” The Torah’s distinction between fruit-bearing and non-fruit-bearing trees seems to suggest both ideas: nature exists both for the benefit of humans and has a value which is independent of human needs.

Both interpretations also inform the exegesis of Deuteronomy 22: 6–7, another Biblical text frequently cited in contemporary discussions of Jewish views on ecology: “When you encounter the nest of a bird before you in the way, in any tree or on the ground, (whether) fledglings or eggs, with the mother crouching upon the fledgling or upon the eggs, you are not to take away the mother along with the children. Send-free, send-free the mother, but the children you may take for yourself, in order it may go-well with you and you may prolong (your ) life.” Once again: why should one take the young but let the mother go?

According to Don Isaac Abravanel, (1437 – 1508) “God has commanded us not to destroy that which generates progeny” adding that “this commandment is given not for the sake of the animal world but rather so that it shall be good for humankind when Creation is perpetuated so that one will be able to partake of it again in the future.”<sup>9</sup> To translate this interpretation into a modern idiom, Abravanel has invoked the concept of sustainable development.

Yet Nahmanides, (1194-1270) another Medieval commentator, views this commandment in terms of an eco-centric understanding of the value of species

preservation. According to his interpretation of this passage, “Scripture will not permit a destructive act that will bring about the extinction of a species, even though it has permitted the ritual slaughtering of that species for food. He who kills the mother and offspring on one day is considered as if he destroyed the species.”<sup>10</sup> Thus according to Nahmanides, species extinction is intrinsically wrong – regardless of how or whether it affects humans.

### The Relationship of Humans to Nature

A similar ambiguity informs various interpretations of the creation story. Specifically: what is the significance of the fact that man was created on the sixth day – after the creation of the entire natural world? According to the talmudic tractate Sanhedrin, “Our masters taught: Man was created on the eve of the Sabbath – and for what reason? So that in case his heart grew proud, one might say to him: Even the gnat was in creation before you were there.”<sup>11</sup> Yet a Midrash (a tale created for interpretative or pedagogical purposes) compiled in the early Middle Ages offers an anthropocentric perspective. It has God showing the Garden of Eden to Adam and saying to him: “All I have created, I created for you.” Why did God create man at the end of the work of creation? “So that he may directly come to the banquet. One can compare it to a king who constructed palaces and embellished them and prepared a banquet and only then did he invite his guests.”<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, both relationships of man to nature are expressed at the very beginning of the Pentateuch: “Let them (humankind) have dominion over the fish of the sea, the fowl

of the heavens, animals, all the earth, and all crawling things that crawl upon the earth! (Genesis 1:26) This passage has been frequently cited as the basis for the claim that the Bible legitimates, even commands, the exploitation of nature by humans. However a classic rabbinical midrash on this passage suggests a more nuanced interpretation: “When God created Adam he led him past all the trees in the Garden of Eden and told him, ‘See how beautiful and excellent are all My works. Beware lest you spoil and ruin My world. For if you spoil it there is nobody to repair it after you’”<sup>13</sup> Moreover, it is followed in verse 30 by a clear restriction on man’s domination of nature: people are only permitted to eat plants. And in the second creation story in Genesis 2:15, God places man in the Garden of Eden and instructs him “to work it and watch it” – which explicitly invokes the principle of stewardship.

The same complex relationship of people to nature also informs the environmental ethic implicit in the laws of the kashrut which distinguish between foods that are permissible and prohibited to eat and sacrifice. Just as Deuteronomy 20: 19 – 20 distinguishes which trees which one can and cannot cut down while waging war, so Jewish dietary laws distinguish between which animals Jews can and cannot consume. The restrictions on fish and animal consumption specified in the laws of the kashrut are not anthropocentric in the sense that only a few of the forbidden animals pose a threat to human health and obviously there would be no health hazard in sacrificing them. It is noteworthy that a significant number of the animals currently protected by either American or international environmental law and whose endangerment has become a focus on considerable public concern are also forbidden to be eaten or sacrificed by Jews.



These include lions, tigers and the other animals of the cat family, elephants, bears, rhinoceros, dolphins (mammals), whales, eagles, alligators and turtles.

This is obviously coincidental since the origin of the kashrut laws has nothing to do with animal protection; rather they stem from the divine compromise with Noah, which permitted humans to eat meat, but only under certain conditions. But what is not coincidental is that both the ancient Jews and contemporary environmentalists believed that many of God's creatures do not exist for the sake of humans. The fact that much of the animal world was not created for man's use is further made clear in Job, when God points with pride to the various magnificent creatures He has created, virtually all of whom are useless to people. This list includes the lion, the mountain goat, the wild ass, the buffalo, the ostrich, the wild horse, the eagle, the hippopotamus and the crocodile.

Critical to the observance of the Shabbath is the prohibition against productive activity. Jews are enjoined from tinkering with or transforming the world, which of course also includes tinkering with or transforming nature. Indeed the commandment to observe the Sabbath is the only commandment which applies to nature as well as people, or, more precisely, to the relationship of people to animals and the land. According to Exodus 20: 10, "you are not to make any kinds of work, (not) you, nor your son, nor your daughter, (not) your servant, nor your maid, *nor your beast*, nor your sojourner that is within your gates," (italics added) – a stipulation which is repeated in Exodus 23:12 and Deuteronomy 5: 12.

According to one contemporary scholar, "The essence of the prohibition against *melacha* (productive work) on Shabbat is to teach that the productive manipulation of the environment is not an absolute right."<sup>14</sup> Thus on the Shabbath, one cannot slaughter

animals (though one can eat them if they are prepared earlier), work them in the field, hunt them, harvest crops, chop down trees, pick fruit etc. In short, on the Shabbath nature also has a day of rest from human manipulation. This is also true of the observance of most holidays. As Schorsh notes, “an unmistakable strain of self-denial runs through the Jewish calendar. From the sacrificial cult of the temple to the synagogue of rabbinic Judaism, it is the absolute cession of work that distinguishes the celebration of Jewish holy days . . . spiritual renewal is effected through physical contraction . . . To spend one-seventh of one’s life in ‘unproductive rest’ is scarcely a mark of absolute power.”<sup>15</sup>

But it is equally important to note that the Shabbath only takes place one day of the week. The other 86 percent of the time (not counting various holidays) humans can not only tinker with and transform nature, but they are required to do so. Indeed, as the 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher A.J. Heschel observes, “the duty to work for six days is just as much a part of God’s covenant with man as the duty to abstain from work on the seventh day.”<sup>16</sup> During the former, nature can and should be used productively. Moreover the Sabbath and the six working days are interdependent: neither can exist without the other.

The same sense of temporal balance underlies the Sabbatical year, which is akin in some respects to a year long celebration of the Sabbath. During this year, which occurs every seven years, sowing, harvesting and the gathering of grapes and other crops is forbidden. (Leviticus 25) Thus every seven years the land has a year of rest. This law may have an ecological dimension. “In the days before crop rotation or the availability of chemical nutrients for the soil, the practice of letting the land lie fallow enabled it to regain its fertility.”<sup>17</sup> But the Rabbinical commentary on the Sabbatical year does not refer to this instrumental explanation. Rather the exegesis on this commandment

emphasizes that its central purpose is the reaffirmation of God's ownership of the land.<sup>18</sup> Thus while Genesis 1, Deuteronomy 20: 19-20, Deuteronomy 22: 6-7, and the rules of the kashrut limit *which* parts of nature one can consume, the commandment to observe the Sabbath and observe the Sabbath year places limits on *when* this consumption can take place.

A similar principle underlies the various rules regulating the treatment of animals that appear sporadically in the Pentateuch and are echoed in the rabbinic tradition. On one hand, compassion for all of God's living creatures is required: animals have feelings which man is obligated to respect. The principle in rabbinic literature relating to the treatment of animals is *zaar baalei hayim*, "the pain of living creatures."<sup>19</sup>

In addition to the fourth commandment's explicit requirement that all creatures, human as well as animal, have a day of rest, Deuteronomy forbids the farmer to plough with an ox and a donkey yoked together because, according to one interpretation, this would impose greater hardship on the weaker animal. (Deuteronomy 22:10) . Likewise a farmer is not permitted to muzzle an ox during the threshing period to prevent his eating grain. (Deuteronomy 25:4) Nor can an ox or a sheep be slaughtered on the same day as its offspring. ( Leviticus 22: 28) (See also Deuteronomy 22: 6-7 discussed above). The Torah also explicitly instructs Jews not to extend their animosity to the animals of their enemy: "(And) when you see the donkey of one who hates you crouching under its burden, restrain from abandoning to him – unbind, yet unbind it together with him." (Exodus 23: 5)

Not only do the laws of kosher slaughtering (*shehitah*) seek to minimize the pain of the animal being killed, but the biblical basis for the talmudic separation of the

consumption of meat and milk is based on a passage which speaks to compassion for animals, namely that a kid cannot be boiled in the milk of its mother. This passage is considered so important that it is repeated on three separate occasions.

But on the other hand, it is permitted to kill animals for food and other purposes, subject to the restrictions noted above. Rabbinic law also permits hunting for food, commerce or the removal of animal pests. And of course it also permits the use of animals for farm labor and transportation. And even unclean animals can be killed for their skins or if they present a danger to humans, etc.

That human life can take precedence over animal life is explicitly illustrated in one of the most dramatic and important biblical stories, namely the binding of Isaac. God instructs Abraham to substitute a wild ram for his son Isaac on the makeshift alter Abraham has been commanded to build. This passage makes explicit the Jewish prohibition against human sacrifice, but its environmental context is equally significant: the life of an animal is sacrificed so that a human being – one whose survival is central to the future of the Jewish people - may live.

This principle is repeated in the story of the Exodus when the Israelites are instructed to slaughter lambs and place their blood on their door-posts so that the angel of death may pass over their homes and not kill their first-born as well as those of the Egyptians. Moreover, animal sacrifices are commanded throughout the Pentateuch and are a major component of temple worship. Yet once again, limits apply: only domesticated animals can be sacrificed, thus assuring species preservation.

In this context, it is useful to note the historical context of Deuteronomy 20:19-20. Ancient practices of warfare knew no limits; nothing was allowed to interfere with the

achievement of military objectives, specifically in this case the conquest of a city.

Presumably the besieging force stood to benefit in some way from the destruction of the fruit trees in the vicinity of the city being attacked, otherwise there would be no reason for invoking the concept of *bal tashchit* (do not destroy) in this context in the first place. The *halachah* (Jewish law) subsequently extended the principle of *bal tashchit* to prohibit the diverting of the flow of a river to cause distress to a besieged city. Thus even in the extreme case of warfare, Jewish law imposes limits on man's use of nature.

### Perceptions of Nature

A major difference between anthropocentric and eco-centric environmental ethics lies in their respective views of nature. The former ethic assumes the existence of a tension between the interests of humans and nature, while both radical ecology and eco-feminism tend to regard nature as benign or at least innocent.<sup>20</sup> Once again, the Jewish tradition incorporates both perspectives. It also views nature in both positive and negative terms.

One finds a post-Biblical harbinger of the deep ecology or biocentric perspective that man does not enjoy a privileged place in the universe in the voice which (rhetorically) questions Job from the whirlwind: "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Who set its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the divine beings shouted for joy? (Job 38: 4, 6-7). More than five centuries before the advent of radical ecology, the Jewish medieval philosopher Maimonides (1131-1205) wrote in Guide for the Perplexed, "It should not be believed that all the beings exist for the sake of the existence of humanity. On the contrary, all the other beings too have been intended for their own sakes, and not for the sake of something else."<sup>21</sup>

The Jewish tradition is also both respectful and appreciative of nature. Thus “Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai . . . used to say: if you have a sapling in your hand, and someone should say to you that the Messiah has come, stay and complete the planting, and then go to greet the Messiah.”<sup>22</sup> The philosopher Bakhya ibn Pekuda wrote that Jews should engage in “meditation upon creation” in order to sense God’s majesty” while a large number of Kabbalistic works considered “nature itself as a garment of the *Shekkhina*.”<sup>23</sup> “Perek Shira”, a mystical poem from 900, has verses from all kinds of creatures singing God’s praises while one tradition of Jewish mysticism included outdoor mediation.<sup>24</sup>

At the same time, the Jewish tradition is by no means uncritical of nature. This criticism has a number of dimensions. First, for all its paeans and testimonies to nature’s beauty and majesty, the Torah also depicts nature as a malevolent force, one capable of wracking havoc, death and destruction. Indeed nature’s destructiveness plays a central role in a number of important biblical narratives. The first of these is the flood. God’s injunction to Noah to take two of every species into the ark has been frequently cited as demonstrating a Biblical commitment to species protection. This is certainly a plausible interpretation: having creating each of these species earlier in Genesis, God presumably did not want his efforts to be in vain.

But what is equally critical is that the flood also destroyed countless millions of animals and plants. (The latter, incidentally, were not brought into the ark.), The most apocryphal contemporary visions of ecological catastrophe do not even begin to approach the magnitude of the destruction of nature described in Genesis 7: 21-23: “Then expired all flesh that crawls about upon the earth – fowl, herd-animals, wildlife, and all swarming

things that swarm upon the earth, and all humans: all that had the breadth of the rush of life in their nostrils, all that were on firm-ground, died, He blotted out all existing –things that were on the face of the soil, from man to beast, to crawling things and to fowl of the heavens, they were blotted out from the earth.” Indeed, so great was the terror caused by this extraordinary destructiveness that God create the rainbow in order to assure people that such a natural catastrophe would not reoccur.

Another example of nature’s destructiveness occurs in the story of Joseph. For seven years, the entire region is made barren, causing untold misery not only for the Egyptians but for the Hebrews who are forced to leave their ancestral land in search of food. A third example of nature’s destructiveness, which also forms a critical part of the Exodus narrative, are the plagues which are visited upon the Egyptians. Half of the plagues, namely frogs, vermin, wild beasts, hail and locusts, directly use natural forces to make the lives of the Egyptians miserable, though for the most serious plague, the killing of the first born, God intervenes more directly through the angel of death. The Egyptian army seeking to recapture the fleeing Israelites also succumbs to nature’s destructiveness: it is drowned.

Other Biblical narratives also show nature as a life-threatening force. The Biblical woods are wild places filled with dangerous animals while the thirst and starvation routinely confront wanderers in the desert. Indeed God explicitly acknowledges the former danger when he tells Moses, “I will not drive them (the Canaanites) out before you in one year, lest the land become desolate and *the wildlife of the field become-many against you.* (italics added) (Exodus 23:29) In the Yom Kippur liturgy, God decides which Jews will be eaten by wild animals during the coming year.

And in one of the most dramatic passages in the Tenach, God tells Moses in Deuteronomy that if the Jewish people do not follow his commandments, natural catastrophe will follow. (Deuteronomy 27: 15 – 68)

Obviously in the context of the Jewish tradition, these natural disasters are not “natural.” They are created by God in order to achieve various divine purposes. But it is surely significant that God chooses to reveal himself through nature’s malevolence as well as through its beneficence. Both sides of nature appear throughout the Torah.

Second, nature is not only a source of physical danger to human beings; it is also a source of moral danger. Recall that it is an animal, the serpent, that leads to the first sin. A more significant, and subtle example is illustrated by the setting of the revelation at Sinai, the defining event in the history of the Jewish people. Why does God choose to make his covenant with the Jewish people in a place only utterly devoid of the capacity for sustaining life? Sinai is among the most desolate and barren places on the face of the earth. Why did God not choose a more hospitable setting, one that would enable Him to display the myriad wonders of the physical world that He so painstakingly created at the beginning of Genesis? In other words, why not choose a setting of natural abundance to make his covenant with the Jewish people?

My explanation is that God did not do so because seeing natural abundance around them would have distracted the people gathered at the foot of Mt. Sinai. It would have undermined God’s central message, namely that what is critical to the survival of the Jewish people is their relationship to God, not the abundance of the natural world. Indeed, it is the physical setting of the revelation at Sinai that marks Judaism’s decisive break with the pantheistic traditions of nature worship of other ancient religions. Because



there is no natural abundance to worship or even admire at Sinai, there is no possibility of intermingling God with nature or of viewing nature as sacred. There is only God and the Jewish people; everything else, including nature, is secondary.

The plausibility of this interpretation is suggested by the mummurings of the Israelites as they wander in the desert for forty years. What do they complain about? What makes them long for life as slaves in Egypt? What, in short, threatens to distract them from their obligations under the covenant? It is their memory of the abundance of nature's bounty in Egypt – a land which at one point they ironically recall as one of milk and honey. The contrast is clear. In Egypt, a land in which nature's abundance is manifold – and not incidentally where nature is also worshiped - Jews are slaves, while in the desert, where nature produces nothing of value to humans, Jews are free. Not until the Israelites reach and conquer the Promised Land will they be able to enjoy both at the same time.

The notion of nature as a source of distraction is also echoed in this passage from the Mishna composed in the third century AD: "Whoever is walking along the road reciting [holy texts], and he stops his recitation and says, 'How beautiful is this tree! How beautiful is this field!' it is reckoned as if he had committed a mortal sin."<sup>25</sup> <sup>26</sup> Thus while the Jewish tradition encourages the appreciation of nature, it also recognizes that there must be limits on this appreciation: nature is not to be worshipped. Indeed, for many commentators, the substitution of God for nature or the natural world as an object of worship is precisely what distinguishes Judaism from the pagan or pantheistic religions of the ancient world out of which it emerged.

## Practical Applications

The Rabbis wrestled with the practical implications of Jewish environmental ethics in part through their exegesis on the principle of *bal tashit*, a variant of the Biblical phrase in 20:19 translated as “you shall not destroy,” or “don’t destroy wantonly” which many Rabbis consider one of the 613 commandments which Jews are commanded to observe. But what precisely does it mean to “destroy” or “waste?”

While originally interpreted to place limits on the waging of war, *bal tashit* came to have more far reaching applications. The Talmud applies it to both products of nature and products of man: “Whoever breaks vessels, or tears garments, or destroys a building, or clogs up a fountain, or does away with foods in a destructive manner, violates the prohibition of *bal tashhit*”<sup>27</sup> According to Maimonides, “all needless destruction is included in this prohibition; for instance, whoever burns a garment, or breaks a vessel needlessly, contravenes the command: ‘you must not destroy.’” The Gemara (a codified commentary on Jewish law compiled in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century AD) instructs: “One who tears cloths in anger, breaks objects in anger, or squanders money in anger, should be in your eyes like an idolater.”<sup>28</sup> According to the Babylonian Talmud, “anyone who does not properly adjust the air flow of a lamp, thereby causing unnecessary fuel consumption, has violated the *bal taschit* prohibition.”<sup>29</sup> The general principle is expressed in the Shulkhan Arukh, (a major codex of Jewish law compiled in the 16<sup>th</sup> century): of Jewish law: “It is forbidden to destroy or injure anything capable of being useful to men.”<sup>30</sup>

Since the concept of ownership is irrelevant to its application, this principle clearly limits private property rights; after all everything belongs to God. Thus one is equally enjoined from wantonly destroying one’s own property as well as that of others.

Not incidentally, one is also forbidden from destroying resources which belong to the commons, e.g. the fruit tree, the river in front of a besieged city.

However in another sense the Talmudic texts interpreted *bal taschit* more narrowly. Thus the Gemara in Bava Kamma suggests that even the protection of fruit trees may be overridden by economic need, while the Gemara in Shabbat, not only claims that destruction for the protection of health is permissible, but goes so far as to suggest that both a personal aesthetic preference as well as the gratification of a psychological need constitute sufficient grounds to override the prohibition of *bal tashchit*.<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, the Jewish tradition does not regard the economically productive use of natural resources as wasteful. Thus, according to a contemporary interpretation of a Talmudic passage, “if the transformative use of any raw materials, including fruit-bearing trees, will produce more profit than using it in its present form, its transformative use is permitted.”<sup>32</sup> For Judaism, it is the wanton destructiveness of nature which is wrong. But by using nature productively, humans appropriately mix their efforts with God’s creation. The blessing recited before eating most meals – one of the most frequently recited Jewish prayers – thanks God for bringing forth bread – which requires the productive collaboration of humans with nature.

#### The Non-Green Dimensions of Judaism

While there are important differences between many contemporary environmental challenges and those which faced the world in which ancient and medieval Jewish writers lived, the latter do prefigure and incorporate many “green” elements. But it is equally important not to ignore the important ways in which Jewish texts dissent from a number of contemporary green values, especially those associated with radical ecology.<sup>33</sup>

First, while Judaism clearly regards the preservation and protection of nature as an important value, it is certainly not the most important value. What is more important is performing *mitzvot* (commandments) all but a small portion of which deal with the relationship of people to God and to each other. Of the Ten Commandments, only one – the commandment to keep the Sabbath – has even a remote relevance to the relationship of people to nature. A similar ratio likely holds for the hundreds of other commandments Jews are required to observe. For Judaism, how people relate to their God and how they relate to each other are more important than how they treat nature. Treating nature with respect and reverence is not incompatible with the former, but neither can it be considered a substitute for revering God and respecting other human beings. In this important sense, Judaism may contain “green” elements, but it is not a “green” religion.

Second, the notion that humans are not just a part of nature, but have distinctive – and privileged - moral claims is an integral part of Jewish thought. Thus preserving and maintaining human life is more important than protecting or preserving nature. It is significant that none of the numerous restrictions on man’s use of nature in Judaism endanger human life or society, though some – such as the restrictions on which animals can be eaten - may at times make its maintenance more difficult. But Jewish concern for nature stops where the preservation of human life begins. While numerous commandments speak to the compassion for animal life, God did not hesitate to command the sacrifice of a wild ram to save Isaac or numerous lambs to save the lives of the Israelites in Egypt.

Thus the Jewish tradition holds that while humans do have responsibilities for animals, these responsibilities should not come at the expense of human welfare. As

Berman notes, “It is not acceptable in Jewish law to make an assertion of the independent rights of nature. The rights of nature need to be carefully balanced, calibrated against human interests; and in that balancing, it will be the human interests which will have the priority.”<sup>34</sup> In short, in Judaism, nature does not have rights; rather humans have responsibilities for the natural world.

Third, while it is certainly true that a strain of self-denial runs through the observances of many Jewish holidays – including the Shabbath - it is equally true that Judaism regards nature as something to be used. Recall that the Promised Land is described as one of “milk and honey,” and thus a place where nature is to be used to benefit humans. Indeed, in Deuteronomy 8: 7-9, God waxes eloquent in describing its abundance: “When YHWH your God brings you into a good land, a land of streams of water, springs and Ocean-flows, issuing from valleys and hills: a land of wheat and barley, (fruit of the) vine, fig, and pomegranate, a land of olives, oil and honey . . . a land whose stones are iron, and from whose hills you may hew copper.” While man’s use or taming of nature must not be “wasteful,” the Jewish concept of waste does not preclude the economically productive use of nature’s assets or even the use of them to derive psychological benefits. As one commentator observes, “the biblical imperative requires finding a balance between transformation and preservation.”<sup>35</sup>

In this context it is worth re-examining the criticisms made by Jews of the activities of Pacific Lumber Company. This firm is owned by Maxxam Corporation whose major shareholder is a Jewish businessman, Charles Hurwitz. After Pacific Lumber began to increase the rate at which the ancient redwoods on its property were being logged following its takeover by Maxxam, a number of Jews, including several

Rabbis, publicly appealed to its CEO to make a *teshuvah sheleymah* (a genuine change of direction) and perform a great *mitzvah* by dedicating himself to the preservation of the Headwaters Forest. The company's critics attempted to bring "Jewish wisdom and ethics" to bear on this issue as a way of pressuring the firm's owner.<sup>36</sup>

Preserving the redwoods in the Headwaters Forest may be a good or wise idea. But it is unclear that it is either mandated or logically flows from the teachings of Judaism. According to talmudic interpretations of *bal tashchit*, natural objects should not be wasted or needlessly destroyed. But using the lumber harvested from the Headwaters Forest for commercial purposes is not necessarily wasteful. Rather it constitutes an alternative use – one which may be more or less important than letting the trees remain standing. While it is clear that the community does have a stake in what happens to the redwoods - after all Hurwitz is a trustee for God's creation – this does not mean that none of these trees can be cut down, for productive uses. What the Jewish tradition *does* require is that these trees be harvested in a sustainable, non-exploitative way – one that strikes an appropriate balance between the need to protect what God has created and the needs of humans to sustain life.

Finally, Judaism does not view nature as inherently benevolent. While recognizing the beauty and majesty of the natural world, it also perceives that nature can also be terrifying and threatening. According to Jewish thought, human efforts to discipline or subdue nature do not, as many radical ecologists claim, stem from the urge to dominate nature but rather represent a response to the real challenges to human survival posed by the natural world.<sup>37</sup> Notwithstanding the achievements of modern science and technology, these challenges have by no means disappeared.

These four ideas – that protecting the natural world is not the highest imperative, that human life is more important than non-human life, that nature is to be used and enjoyed as well as preserved, and that nature can threaten humans just as humans can threaten nature – should not be viewed as the outdated legacies of a pre-industrial religion. They represent an important contribution to contemporary efforts to define and redefine the appropriate ethical relationship between people and the physical world in which they live and which God created.

---

1 . The author would like to thank the following individuals for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article: Robert Alter, Eugene Bardach, Zev Brinner, Kenneth Cohen, Edwin Epstein, Claude Fisher, Rabbi Stuart Kelman, Christine Rosen, Eric Schulzke, Adam Weisberg.

- 2 Saul Berman, “Jewish Environmental Values: The Dynamic Tension Between Nature and Human Needs, in To Till and To Tend, New York: The Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life; Jeremy Benstein, “Leave Nature Out of the War,” The Jerusalem Report September 7, 1995, p. 32; Jeremy Benstein, “One, Walking and Studying . . . : Nature vs. Torah,” Judaism Spring 1995, pp. 146 – 168; Mark Bleiweiss, “Jewish Waste Ethics,” Jewish Spectator Fall, 1995, pp. 17 – 19; Eliezer Diamond, “Jewish Perspectives on Limiting Consumption,” in Ellen Bernstein, ed. “Ecology and the Jewish Spirit: Where Nature and the Sacred Meet, Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1998, pp. 80 – 89; David Ehrenfeld and Philip Bentley, “Judaism and the Practice of Stewardship,” Judaism pp. 301 - 311; Eliezer Finkelman, “*Kee Tetze*: Do Animals Have full Moral Standing?” Jewish Bulletin of Northern California August 23, 1996; Eric Freudenstein, “Ecology and the Jewish Tradition,” Judaism: fall, 1970, pp.1 – 11; Everett Gendler, “The Earth’s Covenant,” Reconstructionist November-December, 1989, pp. 28 –31; Robert Gordis, “Ecology in the Jewish Tradition,” Midstream October, 1995, pp. 19 – 23; Robert Gordis, “the earth is the Lord’s – Judaism and the spoliation of nature,” Keeping Posted December, 1970, pp. 5 – 9; Ismar Schorsch, “Leaning To Live With Less – A Jewish Perspective,” unpublished talk, September 14, 1990; Eilon Schwartz, “Judaism and Nature: Theological and Moral Issues to Consider While Renegotiating a Jewish Relationship to the Nature World,” Judaism, Fall, 1995, pp. 437-447; Abraham Stahl, “Educating for Change in Attitudes Toward Nature and Environment Among Oriental Jews in Israel, “ Environment and Behavior, January, 1993, pp. 3 –21; Daniel Swartz, “Jews, Jewish Texts, and Nature A Brief History,” in To Till and to Tend p. 1 – 14; Samuel Weintraub, “The Spiritual Ecology of Kashrut,” in To Till and To Tend, pp. 21- 24.

Ecology and the Jewish Spirit, Bernstein, ed op. cit; Judaism and Ecology, Aubrey Rose, ed, London: Cassell, 1992.

- 3 Ellen Bernstein and Dan Fink, Let the Earth Teach You Torah Philadelphia: Shomrei Adamah, 1992, David Stein, ed. A Garden of Choice Fruit Wyncote, Penn. 1991.
- 7 See, for example, Badley Shavit Artson, “A Jewish Celebration of Biodiversity,” Tikkun vol. 12, no. 5, pp. 43 – 45.
- 5 For a discussion of these two perspectives, see Avner De-Shalit and Moti Talias, “Green or Blue and White? Environmental Controversies in Israel,” Environmental Politics Summer, 1995, pp. 273 – 294. For a discussion of deep ecology, see Deep Ecology for the 21st Century, edited by George Sessions, Boston: Shambhala, 1995.



- 
- <sup>6</sup> See for example, Lynn White Jr. “The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis,” Science, March 10, 1976, p. 1207
- <sup>7</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Biblical quotations are from The Five Books of Moses A New Translation with Introductions, Commentary, and notes by Everett Fox, New York: Schocken Books, 1995
- <sup>8</sup> Quoted in Bernstein, p. 32.
- <sup>9</sup> Quoted in Diamond, p. 85.
- <sup>10</sup> Quoted in Gordis, p. 20.
- <sup>11</sup> Quoted in Ehrenfeld and Bentley, p. 302.
- <sup>12</sup> Quoted in Stahl, p. 6.
- <sup>13</sup> Quoted in Meir Tamari, With All Your Possessions Jerusalem: Jason Aronson, 1998 p. 280
- <sup>14</sup> Berman, p. 15.
- <sup>15</sup> Schorsch, p. 6.
- <sup>16</sup> Quoted in Marc Swetlitz, “Living As If God Mattered: Heschel’s View of Nature and Humanity,” in Ecology and the Jewish Spirit, p. 247.
- <sup>17</sup> Gladis, p. 22.
- <sup>18</sup> Gordis, p. 8.
- <sup>19</sup> See, Gordis, p. 20.
- <sup>20</sup> See, for example, the various essays in Ecology: Key Concepts in Critical Theory edited by Carolyn Merchant, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1994
- <sup>21</sup> Quoted in Swartz, p 6.
- <sup>22</sup> Quoted in Swartz, p. 4.
- <sup>23</sup> Swartz, p. 5.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> Quoted in Stahl, p. 7.
- <sup>26</sup> For a detailed exegesis of this text, which appears to admit of a variety of interpretations, see Berstein, “One, Walking, ...”
- <sup>27</sup> Quoted in Gordis, p. 22.

---

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Bleiwiss. p. 18.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Diamond, “Jewish Perspectives,” p. 87.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Gordis, p. 22.

<sup>31</sup> Berman, p. 16, 17.

<sup>32</sup> Bernstein, p. 87.

<sup>33</sup> A number of writers have pointed to the danger of “study(ing) the Sources with an eye for those particular teachings that are inspirational for – or at least compatible with – one’s own predetermined ‘green’ positions and thus avoiding challenging oneself with texts that don’t fit current environmental wisdom.” Benstein “One Walking. . .” p. 147

<sup>34</sup> Berman, p. 17.

<sup>35</sup> Diamond, “Jewish Perspectives,” p. 82.

<sup>36</sup> Arthur Waskow, “Redwoods, Tobacco, and Torah,” Tikkun, Vol. 12, no. 5, p. 35.

<sup>37</sup> For a very different interpretation, see, for example, the claim made by a number of the contributors to Reweaving The World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism edited by Irene Diamond and Gloria Orenstein, San Francisco: Sierra Books, 1990.