Judaism, environmentalism and the environment: Mapping and analysis

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Introduction

This study discusses and reviews a broad question: “How does Judaism view modern environmentalism and environmental matters?”

Environmentalism as we know it today has developed as a mainstream interest only in the latter half of this century. The significant hold which the subject of ‘environment’ has taken on global thinking in recent decades is the motive for this study.

Definitions

‘Judaism’ can be defined for the purposes of this study as the world of thought of Jews – especially its religious aspects – and the precepts for action which flow therefrom. To a lesser extent, attention is given here to Judaism’s cultural and national thought.

‘Environmental matters’ include several areas, the main ones being man’s relation with living nature, his attitude and behavior toward animals, the use of natural resources, the effects of pollution and nuisance on third parties, and issues pertinent to the allocation of space. This broad variety of issues gives rise to the complex and fragmented environmental discourse.

‘Modern environmentalism’ refers to the world of thought and action of those currents and individuals who consider protection of the ecosystem or the environment a central goal of society. Its time frame relates mainly to the last thirty-five years.

Aim of this study

In identifying Jewish attitudes to modern environmentalism, this study starts from and focuses on contemporary Jewish writings and the many references quoted in them from the Bible, Talmud etc. The relevant material is dispersed over many publications in several languages, and has been collected and reviewed for this purpose.

This study aims firstly to analyze the material on modern environmentalism and environmental issues written by Jewish authors in their capacity as Jews, spanning the past 25–30 years.

The study’s second, equally important, aim is to explore how classical Judaism views environmental issues. This goal originates in the fact that a number of matters which, today, are considered environmental have long had a place in Judaism.
As the corpus of classical material is vast, this study refers mainly – but not exclusively – to those sources quoted in modern Jewish writings. This is particularly the case with respect to Halakha (Jewish Law), as a wide range of environmentally relevant Halakhot is mentioned by contemporary writers. This view is complemented by reviewing other large areas of the world of classic Jewish thought, i.e. the Bible’s non-legal texts, their interpretation in later rabbinical sources and other non-legal rabbinical material.

**Disorganization**

The subject to be covered is huge and disorganized for a number of reasons. One is that modern environmentalism is not only fragmented, but sometimes even atomized as regards the issues it deals with.

Another reason is that contemporary Jewish writings on the subject of environmentalism have little common basis. Many are by writers from the United States. While Judaism everywhere is heterogeneous, in that country it has a strong multi-denominational character. Yet another reason for the disorganization is that, within classical Judaism, the references to issues now considered environmental are scattered over many places.

**Method**

The subject of this study’s inquiries is thus complex and dispersed. Before developing methods for investigating the ‘Jewish environmental garden’, it must first be established by gathering a number of reasonably representative plants together. There is little or no organized material giving an overview of the subjects which the various chapters of this study refer to.

This situation prescribes the steps in this study. First the subject has to be put on the map. Its key components will be described and, thereafter, elements of these will be chosen for further examination. This will be followed by the selection of methods and tools for the analysis. Thereafter, classical texts are selected that have environmental relevance.

To avoid misunderstanding: the application of the approach of any modern discipline to ancient situations does not imply that the people living at that time viewed issues as we do today. Thus I am not claiming that these texts were seen as environmentally relevant when they were written, or that their environmental relevance, when recognized at the time of writing, was the same as it is now.

This study attempts to reach its goals through a strategic – rather than a systematic – analysis of classical Jewish texts. This means obtaining an overall or macro-view of the subject based on a cross-
section of issues, without going into much detail by analyzing underlying components.

Moreover, like all overall pictures, the perspective drawn here is not critically dependent on individual elements of support. It may be expected to undergo only limited change by the study of additional material. Furthermore, the conclusions reached tend to rest on consensus rather than on highly disputed issues.

Within the areas selected for study, a number of categories of environmental issues will be defined and examples given thereof. From an integrated analysis of the subject, a macro-picture will emerge of where Judaism stands on issues which are now included in the environmental field. Suggestions for further research will be made.

Connecting two different worlds

Judaism refers predominantly to how Jews should behave. Classical Judaism not only represents a much older world of thought than that of modern environmentalism: it is also a radically different one. This raises the question of how one can transpose concepts from one world of ideas to another, very different, one.

Here the approach taken is to link classical texts to broad categories of currently relevant environmental problems. In doing so, it will emerge that ancient Jewish society had many laws which now would be defined as environmental. With regard to ideas, a variety of motifs and preoccupations which have become explicit in modern environmentalism were expressed in the religious sphere of classical Jewish thought.

The areas of interaction

After a description of the development and characteristics of modern environmentalism, Chapter One identifies the areas where Judaism and the environmental sphere touch or interact. The two main fields here are politics and religion. While opening a window on the first, the study concentrates on the latter. History and sociology are also areas of relevance and, occasionally, there are as well literary aspects. These other areas will only be dealt with very briefly.

Furthermore, it will be seen in Chapter One that modern Jewish writers relating to the religious views of Judaism broadly fall into two categories: those who base themselves on present-day continuity of classical Judaism, and those who do so only very partially. This study focuses on the first category of writings.

For a better understanding of contemporary Jewish attitudes toward environmentalism, Chapter Two reviews the various motives of mod-
modern Jewish writers in dealing with the subject. Thereafter, it particularly addresses how they view the compatibility of Judaism and modern environmentalism. This chapter also deals with those points in modern environmentalism which create unease in Jewish circles.

These include claims that the Torah (and thus, Judaism) legitimizes man's exploitation of nature for his own ends, certain neo-pagan elements in environmentalism, the similarities in some environmentalists' approach to the Nazis' love of animals and nature combined with their hatred of certain humans, the relatively strong position of a Green political party in Germany and the anti-Israeli attitude of some Green politicians. 10

Chapter Two also summarizes and critically reviews Jewish reactions to the spoliation of nature debate. It describes Jewish agendas in the environmental field, as proposed by some writers. It also provides a reflection on the Jewish Orthodox attitudes toward modern environmentalism as well as modernity in general. Furthermore, it investigates to what extent there is common ground in modern Jewish writings on environmental issues.

In the chapters thereafter, the study focuses on how classical Judaism views environmental issues.

The main field of investigation in Chapter Three will be that of Jewish law, as the halakhic system largely determines the observant Jew's behavior toward the environment. This chapter examines halakhic texts from the Bible, the Talmud and later rabbinical literature, highlighting items which are now included in the environmental field. Chapter Three deals in more detail with issues such as nature protection, sustainability, health protection, animal welfare, pollution prevention and environmental hygiene.

Most of the modern Jewish writers reviewed here who refer to Halakha have a strong base in Judaism, but often are not very familiar with modern environmentalist thought. Thus, they focus on obvious issues such as the commandment not to destroy fruit trees, to leave the land fallow in the seventh year, the structure of the Levite cities and the Jewish attitude toward animals.

It will be shown that a body of Jewish environmental law, which is environmental by current standards, has existed for many centuries, albeit not concentrated in a single codex. Furthermore, modern issues such as the conflict between environmental and economic interests, the concept of internalizing externalities, and that of the sustainable city have precursors in Halakha. Indications will also be given as to how contemporary Halakha deals with some environmental problems, and suggestions made with respect to further potential developments in Jewish law of relevance to the subject.
In Chapter Four approaches will be defined for analyzing the main non-halakhic elements in the Bible and what these may reveal with regard to environmental issues. Jewish attitudes to nature and several other environmental matters will be assessed as they emerge in the Bible’s narrative and – to some extent – in the classical Jewish commentators discussing this. Some reference is also made to the Bible’s prophetic and wisdom literature.

Modern Jewish writers provide us with very few environmentalist interpretations of Bible stories. However, from the environmentalist viewpoint, some Biblical stories (such as man in the Garden of Eden and the Flood) can be considered almost as environmental paradigms. Others, such as the story of the ten plagues, have numerous environmental aspects. In view of the scarcity of material in modern Jewish writings relevant to the environmental aspects of the Bible’s narrative, I have attempted to expand the views of current Jewish literature with some from my own perspective.

Chapter Five analyzes some additional environmental motifs from the classical Jewish religious literature. It deals mainly with *Aggadah* material, i.e. those elements of rabbinical scriptural interpretation which are essentially non-halakhic in character. A variety of motifs are identified which demonstrate ancient Jewish interest in issues which today are part of environmentalism. This includes issues such as the need to ‘keep the world intact’, avoiding conspicuous consumption, protecting biodiversity, compassion for animals, the importance of tree-planting and intergenerational equity.

The Conclusions chapter focuses on three broad issues: the Jewish view on God, man and the environment; the relationship between Judaism and modern environmentalism, and the potential of Jewish environmental studies.

Numerous issues are raised in the course of this strategic analysis which merit more detailed study than is possible in this survey. Thus from time to time, this study opens windows on issues, without being able to probe them deeply. Some reference to these is necessary, however, as they have to be taken into account within the framework of defining the overall attitudes of Judaism to the environment.
Notes for Introduction

1 One definition of 'ecosystem' is: “Ecosystems are the combination of populations of plants and animals, the interactions between them and their non-living surroundings.”

2 The environment includes the fields described above when referring to 'environmental matters'.

3 Chapter One will discuss in more detail the characteristics and development of modern environmentalism.

4 A definition of 'Jewish' writings as used in this study will be given in Chapter One.

5 Often I have preferred to insert quotations - rather than circumscribe the texts - because, in a field like this, the nuance of the original words contributes to clearer understanding.

6 The term 'classical Judaism' has been used in this study to describe Halakha-based Judaism as it existed before the emancipation of the Jews in the 19th century, and those sources which have continued the Halakha-based tradition since.

7 For the purpose of this study the term 'strategic approach' has been borrowed from the field of business, where it has been developed most over the last decades. My first undertaking in this study was to define the most important 'goals to be achieved': in this case, to characterize the essentials of the broad, vague field of environmentalism, concentrating mainly on salient elements. Within this study 'a few key concepts' have been developed to achieve these goals. The main categories of environmental Halakha have been reviewed and the resulting findings refined by integrating this analysis with that of non-halakhic parts of the Bible, classic Jewish commentators thereon and the Aggadah. In this way, this study aims to reach a 'cohesive whole'. For a description of business strategy, see: James Brian Quinn, Strategies for Change. In: James Brian Quinn, Henry Mintzberg & Robert M. James, The Strategy Process: Concepts, Contexts, and Cases. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1988, p. 3.

8 This means that the overall conclusions of this study would not have changed substantially by deleting or adding additional material such as halakhic rules, Bible texts or Midrashim.

9 While the experts in a particular field often focus on its inner contradictions, the strategist, who has a broader and more detached vantage point, attempts first to see the field's most salient features.

10 Anna Bramwell analyzes the possible reasons for attacks against the German Greens, which accuse them of being 'potential terrorists and anti-Semites'. She mentions that "one such attack was from Israel's ambassador to Bonn in 1984, after Greens planned to meet the PLO." Anna Bramwell, Ecology in the 20th Century: A History. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989, p. 224.