Judaism, environmentalism and the environment: Mapping and analysis
Gerstenfeld, M.

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Chapter One

The Touching Points Between Judaism and Modern Environmentalism

Where does Judaism meet with environmentalism? What are the major categories of this interaction? These are the main issues which this chapter intends to answer.

Several aspects of modern environmentalism inspire interest and/or caution in contemporary Jewish writers. In order to understand these better, some attention has to be given to the historic development and major characteristics of modern environmentalism.

I. Modern Environmentalism

As stated in the previous chapter, '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 for society. It began on the fringes of society, but in the past decades several of its key elements have become part of Western mainstream thinking, with environmental matters increasingly drawing worldwide attention.

The precursors of modern environmentalism or 'the ecology movement' emerged in the 19th century. Anna Bramwell locates the origins of normative ecology in the latter half of that century, but also refers to earlier proponents, such as Thoreau. She claims that "today's Greens, in Britain, Europe and North America, have emerged from a politically radicalized ecologism, based on the shift from mechanistic to vitalist thought in the late 19th century."

Movements stressing the importance of nature conservation existed in many countries in the last century. Ideas embodied in modern environmentalism can be traced back much further, particularly interest in health protection, resource conservation, animal protection and some types of pollution control. As will emerge from this study, the Bible contains many references to issues that we currently call environmental.

From the margins to the mainstream

The emergence of environmentalism as a mainstream field of concern is linked to the development of the industrial/mass consumption
society. The publication in 1962 of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* is often considered the point from which environmentalism, until then still on the margins of society’s consciousness, started to take on mass appeal, and consolidate into a sizable sphere of interest.

In her book, Carson drew attention to the dangers inherent in the spread of synthetic pesticides, which “have been so thoroughly distributed throughout the animate and inanimate world that they occur virtually everywhere.”

The move that environmentalism has taken toward the mainstream has manifested itself in many ways, as illustrated by a number of events of global importance. In 1972, the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) was established after an international conference in Stockholm. Early in the 1970s also, the U.S. government established the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). This agency has not only played the central role in the development of the United States government’s environmental policies, but has also assisted many foreign governments in the initial phases of their environmental policy formulation. In addition, the 1970s saw the adoption of an international convention on the protection of endangered wildlife.

In 1983 the UN established the World Commission on Environment and Development. This independent body, headed by the then Norwegian prime minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, was asked to evaluate the problematic interaction of environment and development. Its report, *Our Common Future*, was presented in 1987.

Several international conventions were signed through the ’80s. One of these, the Montreal Protocol of 1987 on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer, limited the production of the chemicals mainly held responsible for the growing hole in the stratospheric ozone layer. In 1989, the Basle convention committed exporting OECD countries to apply severe rules for waste exports to the Third World.

This trend has continued in the 1990s. The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, signed in 1992, came into force in 1994. Another agreement adopted in 1992 was the Convention on Biological Diversity.

In 1989 an opinion poll in what were then the 12 countries of the European Economic Community, showed how much headway environmental concern had made. Those interviewed were asked to list what they considered the five major national and international problems facing the EEC. Of those polled, 94% said the environmental issue was “very important”. Only unemployment scored slightly higher. The environment was well ahead of the other issues cited, which included stable prices, personal security, arms control, terrorism and reform of health care systems.
Another indication of the strong international interest in environmental matters was the celebration of the 20th anniversary of Earth Day, on April 22, 1990. An estimated 200 million supporters took to the streets around the world. According to one source “Earth Day 1990 united more people concerned about a single issue cause than any other global event in history.”

What is popularly known as the Earth Summit, the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro, drew more attention worldwide than any other environmental meeting before or since. This conference became the largest gathering of heads of states ever to take place.

This interest in environmental issues does not necessarily express the willingness of either governments or individuals to practice what they preach. Despite their undeniable objective relevance, environmental problems also have a significant ‘fashionable’ character, and showing concern about them belongs to the world of ‘political correctness’. On the government level, moreover, the participants’ inability to reach major concrete decisions at the UN “Rio Plus Five” meeting in New York in June 1997 demonstrated the lack of political consensus on the subject.

One major new element which has emerged in environmentalism in recent decades is the dramatic fear that humanity is doing irreversible harm both to the immediate environment and to life on earth in general. This damage is not the result of a major activity such as nuclear war, but of a great number of largely unrelated actions carried out all over the globe.

The times have also shown a shift in public attention regarding environmental issues. This has differed from country to country. Alvin Alm, a former deputy administrator of the EPA, defines three distinct periods of environmental attitudes in the U.S., “the most recent of which regards the global environment.”

Continued development of environmentalism

Environmentalism continues to develop in a large variety of directions – philosophical and ethical, political and practical. The relationship between these is often unclear. This makes it difficult to predict where modern environmentalism is heading.

Among those who are boycotting an oil company for wanting to dump a platform in the North Sea, almost no one is concerned with the arguments between biocentrists and sociocentrists. The discussion as to whether the German philosopher Martin Heidegger should be considered a precursor of the radical environmentalist current of deep ecology, is of no interest to the vast majority of those who
advocate the recycling of paper. They most probably ignore what that term means, and who Heidegger was.¹⁵

The perception varies as to what environmentalism is or should be. Few people consider that it should be developed as a fully-fledged ideological alternative to the market economy. Among those who do is the American political scientist Robert C. Paehlke, who claims that environmentalism must develop clear and consistent platforms on the full range of political and social issues. Its key characteristic should be that it “is an ideology distinctive first in its unwillingness to maximize economic advantages for its own adherents, or for any contemporary group.”¹⁶ No major political current in any part of the Western world subscribes to such a thesis.

Where to locate environmentalism politically

The situation in the political arena is equally confused. Most Western political parties have an environmental platform today, although their actual commitment varies greatly.

It is also unclear where to locate environmental politics in the political spectrum. ‘Green’ political parties have different interests and approaches in different European countries. The Greens’ participation in coalitions with social democrats in Germany, with the left of center parties in Italy and with socialists and communists in France seemingly identifies environmental politics with those European parties that like to call themselves ‘progressive’.

Several writers view the ‘natural’ place of environmental activists in the political spectrum from their own perspective. However, even if they address the issue at different periods it seems that the arguments for their diverging and incomplete conclusions still stand today.

Historian Walter Laqueur states with respect to Germany that, “most members of the Green Party consider themselves to the left of the Social Democrats without being Marxist.” However, he adds, “Much of the Green program can be accepted with equal ease by people from the right and the left of the political spectrum. It has not come as a surprise therefore that the extreme right has been active among them.”¹⁷ Laqueur does not consider the German Greens “a political party in the traditional sense”.¹⁸

The latter view is echoed by the French philosopher Luc Ferry: “One asks often whether environmentalism is a full-fledged political force, whether it is legitimate that it constitutes itself as a party and in that case has the vocation to exercise power in all the traditional sectors of government activity. This is what the Greens want. I believe that they are wrong.”¹⁹
In the 1970s, Marxist philosopher and environmentalist André Gorz considered that environmentalist demands “are specifically an indispensable dimension of the anti-capitalist struggle. Only the socialist and self-governing left can politically take care of these demands. It is not yet there, neither in its practice, nor in its program. That is why the ecology movement has to continue to affirm its specificity and its autonomy.”

The views of a significant number of environmentalists show elements of wishing to return to an idealized past, which might label them as reactionary. Bramwell considers that “today’s ecological movement is in favor of a return to primitivism.”

**Defining environmentalism**

For some people environmentalism is a universalist ideology concerning the relationship between man and nature, with far-reaching consequences not only for their own lifestyle, but also for how they want others to live.

Environmentalism can also be described as a value system. This definition is not generally accepted, however, due to the lack of cohesion among the environmentalist currents. Arguments in favor of this definition include that it aggregates around certain values which may be either beliefs or opinions. These hold in common the view that the protection of the environment (including natural resources and ecosystems) should be a or the central goal of society.

Avner de-Shalit, of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, calls environmentalism a “scientifically-based philosophy.” One can also consider it the promoter of the environmental discipline. For example, in its confrontations on specific issues with the discipline of economics, it has a distinct method of analysis, with its own values, tools and indicators. It also has several partly-consolidated methodologies such as the environmental audit, environmental impact assessment, life cycle analysis and various types of risk evaluation.

A more limited description of environmentalism is as a family of rather divergent beliefs and/or opinions emphasizing environmental matters.

For many others, environmentalism is a pragmatic approach to protecting one’s health, to removing waste and preventing pollution as well as eliminating other threats to humankind, wildlife and the inanimate.

**Who represents environmentalism?**

There is no single body representative for modern environmentalism which is still in great flux; nor does it have a single,
recognized spokesman.24 There are several worldwide movements, such as Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and the World Wildlife Fund, as well as Green parties in a number of countries. However, none of these can claim to be 'the' authorized representative of environmentalism. Furthermore, no collection of principles or authoritative book explains its concepts. There is no 'green' equivalent of *Das Kapital* (or *Mein Kampf*); it has no Vatican or Kremlin to refer to for teaching or instructions.

The organized nucleus of modern environmentalism is embodied in various non-governmental organizations and a number of national parties, several of which also participate in the European Parliament. Some of the non-governmental organizations are represented at the highest international levels, such as United Nations conferences and bodies.

In the supranational bodies and meetings they hold positions which have clear limits, if compared with the positions of others such as the business world or other political parties.25

*Environmentalism's boundaries*

Some environmentalists would like to dictate how the world should function. These include social engineers wishing to redesign national and international policies with a totalitarian slant.26 Others are worried that concern for the environment does "not imply the rejection of authoritarian, techno-fascist solutions," as Gorz explains, basing himself on the analysis of another radical philosopher, Ivan Illich.27

Gorz adds that "environmentalism *uses* ecology as the lever of a radical critique of this civilization and this society. But ecology can also be used in order to exalt applied engineering of living systems."

Wanting us to radically change the way we behave, move and consume, the environmentalists attempt to influence both government and corporate policies. On some issues they have been extremely successful. However, none makes a systematic organizational effort to try to rule the world.

Still other activists are interested only in one single cause; for instance, stopping the construction of a municipal incinerator or a highway near their home. The practical concerns of environmentalists thus range from the worldwide level, such as preventing global warming or the deterioration of the stratospheric ozone layer to the personal level, right down to the neighbor's Rottweiler dog or the cigarette in his mouth.

The boundaries of environmentalism are also not very clear. Some consider animal rightists and animal protectionists to be outside the community of environmentalists. They are organized in movements
which only partly overlap with the general environmentalist groups. I consider their motives and aims sufficiently similar to warrant inclusion, as animals are part of the ecosystem. In the analysis of general Jewish attitudes to environmental matters, and particularly within the context of this study, excluding this subject would affect the conclusions reached, as many modern Jewish writings refer to both issues in a way which makes separation difficult.

One general conclusion can be drawn from the above: due to its diversity and fragmentation, or even atomization, environmentalism is difficult to characterize.

If one cannot define or even understand environmentalism well it is hard to form a balanced opinion on its multiple aspects. Nor does it facilitate effective discussion. Still one can define the areas that are of concern to environmentalism: relations with nature, protection of natural resources, pollution/nuisance, allocation of space, relations with animals. These will provide a framework for the analysis later in this study.

II. Judaism's Interactions with Environmentalism

Since the 1960s, a few books and an unspecified number of articles by Jewish writers have referred to various aspects of the interaction between Judaism and environmentalism.

The books include bibliographies or surveys of classical Jewish sources referring to the environment, with little overall analytical content, and a number of publications which refer to the Jewish attitude toward animal welfare. The articles touch not only on the main subjects treated in this study but also on issues as diverse as environmental ethics, theology, animal rights, Zionism, the greening of Jewish communities, Jewish eco-feminism and many other aspects of the complex and fragmented environmental discourse.

These Jewish writers have taken very varied positions. For all that it has grown over four millennia around a common tradition, contemporary Judaism is heterogeneous, reflecting a spectrum of religious concepts, identities and organizational structures. It speaks with many mouths, but not all writers are equally authoritative. Some are prominent scholars; others are laymen. Many speak only for themselves.

What is a Jewish attitude?

This study focuses first of all on contemporary Jewish writings discussing environmental issues. What can be considered a 'Jewish reaction' to environmentalism (if such a clear-cut classification can
be made)? In the framework of this study, ‘Jewish reactions’ to the interaction of Judaism and the environment are often simply those published by Jewish writers in Jewish journals.

Such an article at least provides a minimalist Jewish filter: it has gone through the hands of a Jewish editor who has assessed its interest to a Jewish audience. Sometime references are included where writers relate to a subject of analysis in a specific Jewish context (for instance, when the writer occupies a prominent position in the Jewish community, or refers to a personal Jewish experience).

At this stage of scholarly research, determining an overall Jewish attitude in contemporary Jewish writings toward such a multifaceted issue seems an almost impossible mission. The interactions and meeting-points of Judaism and modern environmentalism, often still in a nascent state, are dispersed over a vast, incoherent, largely uncharted area. However, important references are also found in sources which do not directly relate to the subject of the environment.

Availability of books specifically referring to the Jewish outlook on modern environmentalism would have facilitated analysis at a much higher level, but such resources hardly exist. As said, the modest number of publications available deal with a large number of issues, but often an individual article focuses on one or a few points only. These publications help only in a limited way to map out an overview of the Jewish approach to environmentalism.

This study then assesses the Jewish attitude toward environmental issues as it emerges in the large corpus of Jewish literature that has developed over more than three millennia. As a complete analysis goes way beyond its scope, I have focused on parts rather than on the whole in an attempt to obtain a strategic view. This will offer insight into a large number of key issues in the Judaism-environment field, and help develop an initial overall framework for it.

Earlier Jewish debates

Not only has modern environmentalism grouped many existing environment-related concerns within a specific area of interest, it has also added other emerging issues. It has created additional perspectives, as well as given fresh impetus to discussions. Several issues which have been around for many decades or centuries, including man’s relationship to animals and nature and pollution problems, are hardly seen today outside the broader context of the environmental debate.

As a result, some of the ongoing discussions within Judaism, and between Judaism and the outside world, that took place before modern environmentalism emerged have been drawn into the new, broader framework. Vegetarianism is one such example.
Another example is the debate on Jewish ritual slaughter. Even here, however, the nature of the debate has changed in recent decades. On the one hand, the large influx of Moslems into Western Europe has created a second target for the opponents of ritual slaughter. On the other, the emergence of the animal rights movement has augmented and radicalized the debate on the status of animals in society.

The meeting of Judaism and modern environmentalism on so many subjects may ultimately lead to another development. Looking at the latter from the diverse angle of a relatively consolidated system like classical Judaism may provide new impetus to some environmental fields.

Different approaches

In assessing Jewish and environmentalist positions, we are dealing with two radically different approaches: Judaism – particularly its Orthodox component – expresses the approach of an ancient and relatively cohesive and consolidated system, however heterogeneous, while – as stated earlier – modern environmentalism’s approach is in flux and often confused. Although both operate, to different degrees, on theoretical and pragmatic planes, the nature and priorities of these planes also differ.

In Judaism, the theoretical component has a major legal and theological – as well as ethical – orientation. In modern environmentalism, that same component has a strong ideological, philosophical and ethical content. However, it could be argued that a pseudo-theology may also be present in modern environmentalism, as opposed to a revealed religion.

Some elements of the two approaches are incompatible on the theological/philosophical plane. For example, according to several Jewish writers, deep ecology and Judaism are antithetical with regard to the desired man/nature relationship.

On the other hand, in terms of practice, the two often overlap. One could claim that Jewish Orthodox practice is far more compatible with environmentalism than other currents in modern society, because Halakha has many elements which restrain the abuse of nature, even if the reasoning behind the law differs from environmentalist reasoning. It is due to halakhic restrictions that Jewish civil society and its individual members are not free to do with nature as they wish.

No continuing debate

Recent contemporary Jewish writings on environmental issues reveal many aspects which illuminate the range of contemporary Jewish
attitudes toward modern environmentalism. Few writers state their motives for interest in the environmental cause, but we may still clearly see how heterogeneous Jewish thinking is today. Attitudes range from ‘catastrophist’, with proponents telling us that Jews must be involved in ‘healing the planet’, to those of ‘contrarians’, who tell us that the state of the environment has actually improved over the last few years, and that environmentalism is of no specific Jewish concern.

Another pertinent observation in this field is how little reference Israeli scholars make to publications in the U.S., and vice versa. At a 1998 conference on “Judaism and the Natural World”, held at Harvard University, it also became clear how far the American Jewish reality is from the Israeli one.

Third, the debate further illuminates the nature of contemporary society, one aspect of which is its increasing specialization and fragmentation. Fifty years ago, an environmental argument would most probably have been presented in a mainstream journal. A Jewish thinker would have responded to any criticism with regard to Judaism in the same publication.

Nowadays, theses are often outlined in specialized environmental publications, and countered – sometimes much later – in a specialized Jewish journal. There is no continuing debate, only a statement of positions and counter-positions presented in different arena. However, to the limited extent that there is a discussion between Jews on the subject, it takes place in Jewish publications.

**Judaism as an organized religion**

Broadly speaking, Jewish positions on environmentalism can be categorized as: a) those based on the organic development of traditional Jewish sources (not all writers in this category are necessarily Orthodox), and b) all others, embodying very diverse attitudes.

Orthodox Judaism is centered around ancient religious law, with time-honored institutions qualified to exercise its interpretation. Over the centuries, however, the decisive authority of rabbis has become fragmented.

In our time, the State of Israel has increasingly become the center of Jewish thought and action. Orthodox Jewry’s position as the country’s dominant religious current makes it – *de facto* – the main religious force in Judaism, irrespective of its numbers.

In addition to Orthodoxy in its various shades, various other forms of Judaism – such as Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist – have developed over the last two centuries. This has remained largely a Diaspora phenomenon while in Israel these groups remain of
limited importance. Another modern development is that some Jews claim that their personal vision of Judaism is as valid as the institutionalized forms.

"Judeo-Christian": an unacceptable term

It is often assumed that Judaism and Christianity hold a common position with regard to the environment. The term ‘Judeo-Christian’ that appears many times in environmental literature is controversial. While this expression may be acceptable to Christians, who see Christianity as having grown out of (yet away from) Judaism, it is not acceptable to many Jews, who see their religion as distinct. The latter would argue that the differences between the two religions far outweigh the similarities, even if Jewish concepts such as monotheism, charity and martyrdom have permeated Western society. Furthermore, the specific attacks on Christianity and its attitude toward the environment concern many arguments which have no relevance in Judaism. Thus Jewish writers often have very different attitudes from Christian ones.

This distinction is perhaps best illustrated in the ‘spoliation of nature’ debate, which has focused on the interpretation of Genesis 1:28, where God says to man: “Be fertile and multiply, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth.”

Critics of the ‘Judeo-Christian’ attitude referred to a literal interpretation of the text and of actual Christian behavior in later centuries. In Jewish tradition, however, interpretation of the text as expressed in the Oral Law and the later rabbinical decisions is integral to an understanding of the Bible verse. Attempting to deduce the complex and elaborate Jewish attitudes toward environmental issues from any single Bible text testifies only to its practitioners’ ignorance of Judaism. This issue will be dealt with in more detail in Chapter Two.

Judaism and environmentalism: A detached view

Overall, modern Judaism and certainly Orthodox Judaism have taken a rather detached view of environmentalism. For a people always out of sync with the contemporary mainstream, the ideological challenge of modern environmentalism may be considered exceptionally mild and hardly relevant. In today’s Jewish world modern sects are seen as more of a threat. For example, the integration of Judaism and Christianity which the Jews for Jesus attempt has put them outside Jewish society. The same is true for the integration of Judaism and Islam by the Donmeh, the surviving adherents of the false 17th century messiah, Shabbetai Tzvi.
In order to understand how small the tension is between Judaism and environmentalism, it should be noted that those who attempt to integrate the two systems meet little resistance. What is more, this tension – as far as it is felt at all – refers only to the ideological approaches of Judaism and environmentalism. There is usually no contradiction with regard to practical environmentalism. Like anyone else, Jewish communities in both the Diaspora and Israel would benefit economically by assessing, for example, how to reduce energy consumption in their communal buildings. Some detailed suggestions for this are to be found in Jewish environmental advocacy publications.  

The Jewish agenda

There are several other reasons why organized Jewry has a rather offhand approach to environmentalism. One is the large number of primary worries which the Jewish people has. For thousands of years the Jewish people – small in number – has been confronted with powerful and hostile forces and such diverse challenges as paganism, Hellenism, Christianity, Islam, Enlightenment, Communism and Nazism. Moreover, murder, expulsion, enforced or incentive-prompted conversion, and assimilation have long threatened the survival of Judaism.

Political agendas are established according to priorities – whether formal or informal. The Israeli political scientist Peter Medding defined the Jewish agenda in the last decades as follows: “Jewry’s first political interest is for the survival of the Jewish group, not only of those Jews in the same society, but of Jews everywhere. Among other ways this manifests itself in the sheer ‘instinct for survival’ of Jews as an independent people, and in intense concern with all aspects of physical security, the certainty of which is never, as with other interest groups, taken for granted... Jewish concern with sheer physical survival and security as a basic and primordial interest has, in recent years, been strikingly manifested in actions in support of Israel, particularly those seeking to ensure its continued physical existence.”

Medding’s observations illuminate our subject. The literature available indicates that environmental issues are generally not high on the political agenda of the Jewish people. Possible threats which global environmental problems may cause humanity at large in a relatively far-off future seem for the Jewish people no more than background noise against much more immediate and direct menaces.

The physical threats of the Arab nations against Israel are continuous. One of the most recent ones, at the beginning of 1998, led
to new gas masks hurriedly being distributed to the entire Israeli population, in view of the possibility of Iraqi rocket attacks with bacteriological warheads.

Arab terrorists and their associates have also managed to impact on the way Jewish communities live abroad, including the specific security measures they have to take – Buenos Aires being an extreme case in point. To this should be added the cultural-religious threat to the Jewish people of assimilation.42

Another reason for the modest Jewish interest in our subject may be that the small number of Jews prevents them, as a group, from having a significant impact on global warming, biodiversity, the damaging of the stratospheric ozone layer, acid rain, etc.

Thus, with few exceptions, Jews see no reason to get involved as an organized group.43 Their involvement mainly occurs on the individual level.44

Multiple interaction

The interaction between Judaism and environmentalism falls into many categories. Some of these are discussed in more detail in the following chapters. These and several others are briefly reviewed hereunder.

Of the many matters which come under the heading of Judaism’s attitudes toward environmentalism, this study deals mainly with the religious aspects rather than sociological, cultural or political ones. Neither does it analyze extensively the environmental attitudes of the State of Israel, now the dominant political expression of the Jewish people.45 Some reference will be made in this chapter to issues such as post-Biblical history, Zionism, the kibbutz movement, Israeli and Diaspora attitudes, and organized Jewish environmentalists. However, these will mainly be left for further study.

Classical Jewish sources

Any attempt to deduce a more consolidated ‘Jewish’ position toward the natural world, the environment at large, or modern environmentalism, requires a review of the classical sources. It is in this area that this study’s main effort lies.

The behavior of observant Jews toward the environment is largely regulated by the body of Jewish law called Halakha. Chapter Three details those Halakhot which prescribe the attitude of both individuals and communities toward the environment.

Additional classical Jewish attitudes toward the environment are analyzed in Chapter Four. This deals mainly with the non-legal parts of the Bible and particularly, its narrative.
An important classical source for expanding the comprehension of Jewish attitudes toward the environment is the *Aggadah*, which uses a specific method of Biblical interpretation called *Midrash*. These texts show that, many centuries ago, Jews asked themselves basic questions which have re-emerged in a secular form in modern environmentalism. This is demonstrated by a series of environmental *Midrashim*, reviewed in Chapter Five.

**Liturgy**

Classical Jewish attitudes toward the environment are expressed in the liturgy. Neil Gillman points out the importance of liturgical texts for the current subject, and states his belief that they played a greater role than Talmudic *Aggadah* in “shaping the belief system of post-Biblical Jews.”

Among these texts is a series of blessings frequently said by Jews before or after eating, praising God for bringing food forth from nature. For instance, before eating bread, God is thanked for “bringing forth bread from the earth”. Before eating an apple or a pear, thanks are offered to the “Creator of the fruit of the trees”.

Less frequently used blessings pertain to the aroma of fragrant woods or barks, plants, fruits, spices and oils. Other benedictions refer to the witnessing of natural phenomena – perceived as tokens of God’s benevolent presence – such as lightning, falling stars, lofty mountains, a rainbow, great deserts, the sea, beautiful trees or animals, as well as trees blossoming for the first time in the year. One message which the liturgy conveys is that nature is not in itself Divine, but an instrument of God.

Hertz observed: “These benedictions are especially remarkable. Those who were for ages excluded from the life of Nature, thanked God for everything inspiring, beneficent and beautiful in Nature… in connection with these Benedictions, the word *bless* connotes not thanks giving only, but also wonder and admiration.”

Blessings of relevance to our subject also appear in the daily liturgy. In the morning prayer the observant Jews praise God for various elements of His creation. One of these refers to God’s spreading the earth above waters, another to His giving the cock [who crows unfailingly every morning] the understanding to distinguish between day and night.

Another blessing is said in the morning service, where God is praised as Former of light and Creator of darkness, Maker of peace and Creator of all things. In the evening service, in the first blessing preceding the *Shema* prayer, God is praised as Creator of day and night. The *Amidah*, the other central part of the morning and evening services, refers
to God as the cause of the wind’s blowing and the rain’s falling in winter, and in summer, as the cause of the dew.

In the contemporary liturgy there is a prayer for the planting of trees in Israel. This prayer, composed by a former Sephardi Chief Rabbi, Benzion Meir Uziel, is said on the occasion of Jewish National Fund tree-planting ceremonies.\

A more systematic analysis of Jewish liturgy will provide insights on several aspects of the Jewish attitude toward environmental issues. This is discussed in Chapter Four with respect to relevant Biblical texts in prayers.

Mystical literature

The subject of references to environmental matters in Jewish mystical literature is of considerable importance. Detailed discussion on this subject will probably require the efforts of many scholars. In order to give some indication of its many angles, I shall refer here to a few dispersed issues which touch upon environmental matters.

In the Midrash literature it is told that the cutting down of a fruit-bearing tree creates a worldwide silence, as does the divorce of a couple. This is a way of attaching a universal meaning to these acts, the first of which has an environmental character.

Alexandre Safran, the Chief Rabbi of Geneva, writes that, according to the teachers of Kabbalah, “when a man in his own mind treats any object as if it were a dead thing, he damages that object. In fact, the things we wrongly call ‘animate beings’ and ‘inanimate things’ are part of the same cosmic reality, the whole of which is ‘animated’ by the divine breath that flows through it. True, this breath is manifest more clearly in man than in animals, more in the animal than in the vegetable kingdom, and more in the vegetable than in the realm of minerals, but all these realms constitute a coherent unity, where the various elements are closely linked.”

Safran adds that the Kabbalists consider damage caused to nature similar to that done to man and his property: “The way man behaves toward nature is judged with the same severity as his behaviour towards his fellowman… In polluting nature, man defaces ‘the work of God’; in striking his fellowman, he ‘disparages’ the image of God.” According to Safran, the Kabbalist is emotionally affected by the cutting of a tree, as if it were a man.

Haifa Chief Rabbi Shear Yashuv Cohen tells the story which he heard from Rabbi Aryeh Levin, who went for a contemplative walk with Chief Rabbi Kook in the fields of Yaffa. Rabbi Levin picked a flower. This shocked Rabbi Kook, who said to him: “My whole life I have been careful not to pick grass or a flower, which could have
grown up as there is no grass which does not have a star above which tells him: grow up. Each grass says something, each stone whispers a secret, each being sings a song."

One finds a similar attitude in the Habad (Lubavich) trend of Hasidism. The late leader of Habad Hasidism, Rabbi Menahem Mendel Schneersohn, said: "The world is not governed by chance or caprice. Every motion within it, from the turning of a leaf in the wind to the transition of power from nation to nation, is controlled by a unique Divine Will." On another occasion, he recalls "how his father, the Rebbe Rashab, having once observed that he had unthinkingly plucked a leaf, commented: 'How can a person be so lightminded in relation to a creature of the Almighty? This leaf is something created by the Almighty for a particular reason... One should always remember the mission and the Divine intention of every created thing.'"

Transmigration

The 16th century Kabbalists in Zefat were against the killing or torture of any living creature, including insects, as they believed that human souls could transmigrate into animals.

However, J. David Bleich considers that opposition to meat-eating was the view of a small minority even within the kabbalistic tradition: "A number of kabbalistic sources indicate that, quite to the contrary, the doctrine of transmigration yields a positive view regarding the eating of meat.

According to these sources, transmigrated souls present in the flesh of animals may secure their release only when the meat of the animal has been consumed by man. The mitzvot performed in preparation and partaking of the meat and the blessings pronounced upon its consumption serve to 'perfect' the transmigrated soul so that it may be released to enjoy eternal reward."

The halakhic scholar and mystic Ben Ish Chai states that it is forbidden to dump carcasses in the city. The person who sees one should pay from his own pocket to dispose of it outside the city. He bases his statement on Rabbi Yitschak Luria, the great 16th century Kabbalist who lived in Zefat and warned that people should not smell the odor of a carcass, partly because it is damaging to the soul. Other environmentally relevant references can be found in the Zohar (see Chapters 4 & 5).

Minhagim

Another area to explore concerns environmental aspects of the minhagim (religious customs). This is an extremely fragmented field
in view of the differences between local communities. The few examples given here will indicate some directions which these minhagim take.

One example of these is the tashlikh prayer said on the afternoon of the first day of Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, next to a river or well where, as it were, one’s sins are thrown in.\(^\text{65}\)

It was common in many Ashkenazi communities in Eastern Europe to feed the birds on the Shabbat when the beshallakh section from the Torah was read in the synagogue.\(^\text{66}\)

Many minhagim relate to Tu bi-Shevat, the New Year of the trees. Originally, it was a minor religious holiday on which special prayers were said. It changed in character in the 16th century with the immigration of Spanish and Portuguese Kabbalists to the Land of Israel. The group around Rabbi Yitshak Luria in Zefat turned it into a day of eating fruit. In Saloniki, the Jews gave special performances in Ladino. The youngsters who participated in them were disguised as trees, and each tree sang its song, accompanied by a choir. In modern Israel, largely secular tree-planting ceremonies have been added to this.\(^\text{67}\)

Minhagim are not necessarily animal-friendly. On the day before Yom Kippur, in order to be absolved of the sins of the past year, it is common in many Jewish communities to slaughter a rooster for every male, and a chicken for every female. Before this, one rotates the animal three times above one’s head, reciting prayers. This custom is called kapparot. One of the major medieval scholars who opposes this custom is Rashba,\(^\text{68}\) who claims that this seems to him an “Amorite custom”, i.e. a pagan one. He succeeded in banishing this custom from the town where he was rabbi.\(^\text{69}\)

Another custom was practiced only by the Jews in Yemen, from the month of Elul to Yom Kippur: at night the Jewish children would organize in groups to hit stray dogs. After chasing the dogs, the children returned to the synagogue. Even though the children were warned by their parents that this made the animals suffer, which the Torah forbids, the custom continued.\(^\text{70}\)

Philosophy

Medieval and modern Jewish philosophers have given attention on various occasions to the relationship between Judaism and the natural world. Here too, only a few examples can be given which could be indicative of directions for further study. However, they cannot be taken as representative of the body of Jewish literature in this field.

Some medieval Jewish philosophers thought about the role of the world in God’s creation and the way to reach God through nature.
Maimonides\textsuperscript{71} begins by saying that there is a commandment to love and to fear God, and asks the way to achieve this. He answers: "When man reviews His deeds and His marvelous major creations he sees His infinite wisdom he immediately loves, praises and glorifies and expresses a great desire to know God... and when he ponders these things... he will be afraid and recognizes that he is a small dark and lowly creature." \textsuperscript{72}

Another medieval philosopher, Bahya ben Joseph ibn Paquda refers to man's reflection on nature.\textsuperscript{73} In his \textit{Hovot ha-Levavot}, written around 1080, he claims that this reflection brings man to recognize God's existence and His being the world's creator. Bahya states that we see the world "as a built house, where everything needed is available. Heaven above is a ceiling. The land is stretched as a platform and the stars are ordered like lights. All bodies are gathered like treasures... and man as the owner of the house uses all what is in it." \textsuperscript{74}

\textit{God and nature the same?}

An important philosophical matter referring to the relationship of Judaism to nature is treated in a responsum. Rabbi David Nieto, of the Sha'arei Shamayim congregation in London,\textsuperscript{75} posited in a sermon that God and nature were the same. He called those who do not believe this heretics. However, some of his congregants considered this position an heretical deviation. Nieto had to explain his position by saying that he referred to those people who considered wind or rain as nature; these are works of God, and that is valid as well for the whole of nature.\textsuperscript{76}

This matter was referred to a leading scholar of the day, Haham Zevi.\textsuperscript{77} He discusses the question with two colleagues from Altona and his responsum also reflects their position. He says that the same idea is mentioned in Yehuda Halevi's \textit{Kuzari} (where God is called 'Teva' - nature - because He places His stamp on all creatures). Haham Zevi also quotes another great scholar, Rabbi Yeshayahu Horowitz, in his work \textit{Shelah}.\textsuperscript{78}

He adds that Nieto referred to God's responsibility for the overall functioning of nature, and that those who criticize Nieto are in fact criticizing the true scholars of Judaism. He strengthens Nieto's stand by saying that one should be grateful for his having given the sermon, because he has enlightened them that everything is guided by God. In doing so, he has told them not to follow the opinions of the philosophers.\textsuperscript{79} Haham Zevi does not specify which philosophers he is referring to.

Among modern Jewish thinkers, Rabbi Kook's views on nature are often quoted in Jewish writings on the environment.\textsuperscript{80} According
to Rakover, Kook’s views on man’s attitude toward nature may be examined from various angles. For instance, the adaptation of mankind’s life to nature’s ways is a worthwhile challenge for both the individual and humanity in general; however, this should not be at the expense of higher-placed ideals, such as learning the Torah. Man’s moral level and his relation toward nature should correspond.

Rakover quotes Kook’s letter to his son, who had decided to no longer eat meat: “My main intention is that you check very well whether this will not cause any weakness in the development of your physical and mental courage and that you will not become a captive of the animal protectionists, most of whom, as it seems to me, have in the depth of their soul a hatred against man.” Man’s relationship toward the environment should be one of belonging, from the recognition that God has created both man and nature.

Benjamin Ish-Shalom summarily interprets Kook’s concepts: “When speaking of nature, one must not to attribute to it a set and defined essence in and of itself. Rather one must relate to a broader essence – that of holiness... According to this view, nature, in all its dimensions, including the spiritual and the material, the cosmic and the cultural-historical, is a process of the revelation of God in the world, and man is perceived to be its pinnacle, the highest expression of this positive and optimistic divine-cosmic natural process.”

Contemporary environmental theology and ethics

Some thought has been given in contemporary Jewish writings – particularly in the United States – to the possibility of developing a Jewish environmental theology and ethics. A substantial part of the 1998 conference on “Judaism and the Natural World”, mentioned earlier, was devoted to this issue.

Moshe Sokol has pointed out that “overall, applied Jewish normative ethics is characterized by a strong legal rather than virtue orientation. Discussions of concrete problems in business, biomedical or legal ethics are typically (although of course not always) found in Judaism’s vast legal corpus, which is centrally concerned with moral issues.” He concluded from this: “Theologians would do well to examine what the applied Jewish normative tradition – its body of case law – has to say about environmental issues, and using that as data, attempt to construct a theology which explains or grounds these normative materials.”

A coherent review of classical sources and other components of the Jewish environmental field is necessary for starting to develop an environmental theology and ethics more relevant to the Jewish
people. The expansion of Jewish environmental Halakha is central in providing a basis for this. Without it, efforts to develop a Jewish environmental theology and ethics will remain personal exercises.

**Post-Biblical development**

Another issue which falls within the broad subject of Jewish attitudes toward the environment will not be treated here in any detail, but deserves some discussion: the behavior of Jews toward the environment in post-Biblical times. So, for instance, the first-century historian Flavius Josephus relates that Herod collected many wild beasts and lions together which were trained to fight with each other, or with men who had been condemned to death. Foreigners who saw this were delighted, but Jews saw as it as a major breach of their tradition.⁸⁶

As one modern writer put it: "Instances of Jews engaging in hunting, like Herod in the Roman era, and Provencal Jews in medieval Europe, are few and are, undoubtedly, instances of acculturation to the non-Jewish environment."⁸⁷ Even Jews remote from religion occasionally observe this. The nuclear physicist, Abraham Pais, writes: "Hunting was something that never interested me in the least. As Einstein told me on a later occasion, Walther Rathenau, at one time Germany's foreign minister and a Jew, had once told him that when a Jew says he likes to hunt he is a confessed liar."⁸⁸ A rather different view of this is taken by Theodor Herzl, founder of the Zionist Movement, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

Israel's former chief rabbi, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef - considered by many the main contemporary Sephardi halakhic authority - forbids Jews to attend bullfights.⁸⁹

Animals were seen favorably if they fulfilled a function. For instance, while the image of dogs in the literature of the Second Temple Mishnah and Talmud periods was largely negative, as Joshua Schwartz has analyzed, they could fulfill positive functions, such as being guard dogs, if trained and treated properly.⁹⁰

Contrary to many other Near-Eastern nations, the Jews usually buried their dead in a simple manner, and didn't put utensils in the graves, which could be considered a waste of resources. Even princes could not be buried in silk clothes. Maimonides writes that this was considered a sign of arrogance, following non-Jewish customs, as well as an act of destructive waste.⁹¹ He also mentions that it is important to stress equality in death.⁹²

The various references in the Talmud to pollution control laws indicate that they conditioned Jewish behavior. Beyond that, historical cases mentioned there give us further insights. So the Talmud
records: “The market places of Jerusalem were swept clean on a daily basis.” Even if the main motivation was related to avoiding spreading cultic impurity, its effect was environmental.

A reference in the Mishnah to recycling tells us that wicks were made from the worn out trousers and belts of the priests.

**Personal hygiene**

Personal hygiene is a partial indication of attitudes towards pollution. The traditional emphasis on personal hygiene, as prescribed by Jewish law, cost Jews dearly in the time of the Black Death. In many areas, there was a long tradition among Christians of accusing the Jews of various types of poisoning. As proportionately fewer of them died from the Bubonic plague, they were accused of having caused its spread, and were massacred.

The reality contrasted heavily with the perception which associated Jews with extreme pollution. The standard of hygiene was not always maintainable, however. In later years in Germany, the hygienic conditions of Jews deteriorated so much that some illnesses appeared particularly frequently. In 1777, Elkan Isaak Wolf wrote a publication on the illnesses of the Jews, dedicated to his brothers in Germany. He refers to these illnesses, which he attributed to life in the ghetto, and to the political and social repression of the Jews.

Externally imposed conditions on Jewish life are also reflected in the attitudes toward the environment. Space was a scarcer resource in Italy’s ghettos than it was in many small villages in Eastern Europe. So Rabbi Shimshon Morpurgo, a 17th century Italian rabbinical authority, wrote in a responsum that Jews are not allowed to establish damaging industries, and those which already exist in the city must be removed. However, he added, in a reality where the Jews are confined to special Jewish quarters, the community cannot survive economically if it carries out such a removal.

In a 19th century responsum, the Netsiv from Wolozhyn answers a question from the rabbi of the city of Zvinikradka. The latter writes that the Jews in the city, where he recently became a rabbi, do not drink water from the local river because they found a few small organisms in it, which may make the water unfit according to the dietary laws. However, the owner of the only two good wells, which are far away, charges exorbitant prices for the water; they cannot afford this and so go thirsty. The rabbi adds that he himself has tested the river water and did not find any polluting organisms.

The Netsiv’s careful reply reflects both religious considerations with respect to the dietary law and awareness of pollution problems. He says that the water should be tested during various seasons.
because the organisms develop only at certain temperatures. He adds that the river water should be tested at a place where it leaves the town, because perhaps the pollutants flow into it from the city itself. If none of these tests show any organisms, then the river water may be drunk.\textsuperscript{102}

While in literature one often finds that Jews, as city-dwellers, were cut off from nature, one often hears in personal stories how close people were to nature in the Hasidic areas of Eastern Europe. There are also tales of Hasidic rabbis showing concern for animals.\textsuperscript{103, 104}

This analysis of attitudes toward the environment can be extended to our own times. Whoever visits Har Nof, one of Jerusalem's new ultra-Orthodox quarters, is struck by its stone desert character, particularly as this is a middle class neighborhood whose inhabitants include many Western immigrants. The contrast with the verdant kibbutzim is striking.

It is difficult to assess how much truth there is in the speculations one sometimes hears that this distancing from nature is a reaction to the Zionists' interest in it. If, as we will see below, trees and agriculture have become Zionist icons, should ultra-Orthodox non-Zionists consider them alien?

\textit{Israel/Zionism environmental interactions}

An assessment of the environmental attitudes expressed by the State of Israel and its citizens requires a detailed socio-historical examination of the country's Zionist roots. A thorough analysis of this area, however, is beyond the scope of the present study.\textsuperscript{105}

In this connection, it is imperative to assess the relationship between the immigrant pioneers and the land. Their negation of the Diaspora and the disproportionate number of Jews living in cities led to the glorification of living on the land, tilling the soil and draining the swamps.\textsuperscript{106} This must be seen within the larger and more complex framework of Jewish perception of types of dwelling-places. Chapter Two will refer to this from other perspectives.

However, for Theodor Herzl the transition from city to rural setting was not obvious at all. He claimed – and was proven wrong by later Zionist pioneers – that those who wanted to turn Jews into farmers were mistaken. He considered the farmer an anachronism: "If one conserves the farmer artificially, that is because of the political interests he has to serve. To make new farmers according to ancient prescriptions is an impossible and stupid undertaking."\textsuperscript{107}

His attitude toward nature was remote from that of modern environmentalists. He wrote: "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.”

For all that, tree-planting is a major symbol in Zionism. It is part of Zionism’s practical-political approach to making the land more livable, and became 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, was the main promoter of this activity. Funds for the reforestation campaign were collected throughout the Diaspora, and this continues until today.

When Aubrey Rose reviewed U.K. Jewish involvement in environmental issues for the British Board of Deputies, he concluded: “The longest-running Jewish effort for the environment is tree planting, coordinated by the Jewish National Fund, which has helped with the 170 million trees planted in Israel over the last 40 years. In this way British Jews have been deeply involved in environmental issues… particularly the fight against soil erosion, turning back the desert and developing water resources.”

The goal of tree-planting was also instilled in the minds of children, who participated in the effort. Historian Simon Schama describes it almost poetically: “When not paddling in the currents of time, I was gumming small green leaves to a paper tree pinned to the wall of my heder, the Hebrew school. Every sixpence collected for the blue and white box of the Jewish National Fund merited another leaf. When the tree was throttled with foliage the whole box was sent off, and a sapling, we were promised, would be dug in the Galilean soil, the name of our class stapled to one of its green twigs. All over north London, paper trees burst into leaf to the sound of jingling sixpences, and the forest of Zion thickened in happy response.”

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.”

The forest planted by the Jewish National Fund thus 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 at risk to their own lives during the Second World War.

Zionism and the environment

Avner de-Shalit argues that the relationship between Zionism and the environment has passed through three stages. The first, during the early waves of immigration “was characterized by a romantic attitude to nature and a glorification of rural life.” This was combined with an almost religious attitude toward physical labor. Hertzel Fishman writes: “The individual who epitomized this ‘religion of labor’ (dat ba’avoda) doctrine was Aaron David Gordon (1856–1922), who came to Eretz Israel from Russia when he was 48 years old.”

Among the early Zionists, Gordon can indeed be considered closest to early environmentalists. For him, nature and (manual) labor were inseparable values. He exalted nature, writing: “Nature, spread wide open for everybody, is for man exactly what water is for the fish and air for any living being.” Gordon also praised primitive man above civilized man, as the former is close to the fountain of life.

The kibbutz epitomized the place which tried to imbue these new values, even in very young children. These included “sharing... i.e. to have no feeling of ‘mine’ and ‘thine’; ... the love of nature; love of the nation, and the importance of work.” In some kibbutzim kindergarten teachers attempted to transmit these values from age two.

Yael Zerubavel mentions a popular children’s story, glorifying rural life, which tells how Yosef Trumpeldor brought a small group of settlers to check the damage done by an Arab attack on Hamra, a Jewish settlement near Tel Hai. In the story, the plow, symbol of the Jews and the Zionists’ new relationship with nature, is contrasted with the gun, symbol of the Arabs.

Those in agricultural settlements who did not share the pioneers’ romantic attitude were considered outsiders. We may see this from Shabtai Teveth’s biography of Moshe Dayan who, as soon as he “satisfied his curiosity in a new area of work... lost interest and grew impatient with its endless repetition.”

De-Shalit traces the beginning of the second stage of the relationship between Zionism and the environment back to 1930, even though “it only became prevalent after 1948, following the foundation of the State of Israel and the subsequent massive immigration... As immigration and settlement came to bear a social and national character a new ethos emerged: the ethos of development.”

The Israeli author Meir Shalev relates that, when he was an elementary school pupil in the 1950s, he was confronted there with “the
Judaism, Environmentalism and the Environment

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.”

Shalev also refers to the reclamation of the Huleh swamp: “There a Dutch engineer was also brought in, an expert in land reclamation and drainage. He warned that the peat ground, for 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 ethos of development is well expressed in a popular song of the time, Morning Song, whose lyrics were written by one of Israel’s best-known poets, Nathan Alterman: “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.”

In another song, Southern Lullaby, lyricist Yehiel Mohar tells of a father who plows the land at night as “our land has no free time”. In yet another song, written by Zalman Hen, the text reads: “see how great this day is, a fire burns in the breast, and the plow again opens forest in the field. Hand, pick-ax, hoe and hay-fork came together in a storm and will again light up the land in a green flame.”

De-Shalit argues that until the late 1980s this development ethos “outweighed any attempt to put forward environmental values and considerations.” Thereafter it ceded its place gradually to “the modern, rational environmental attitude of the 1990s.” Nonetheless, pollution of Israel’s coastal aquifer has continued, causing damage that may prove irreversible.

Well before the ’90s, however, the value of nature had changed. It is far from being a working tool in a popular song by one of Israel’s best-known songwriters Naomi Shemer: “The law says: you are not allowed to pick flowers here... frightened hinds look at the sign, where it is written explicit: hunting is forbidden... man be careful,
do not touch the irises... the mountain tulip is out of bounds... each hill which rises on the outskirts of the town is fenced-off wild land.” In the song Shemer aspires to be protected like nature: “I sometimes think that it might perhaps be worthwhile if I were a narcissus or cyclamen, or even a common squill... if I were an animal or a flower, my situation would be different.”  

There are many more – often fascinating – environmental aspects of Zionism, but they are beyond the scope of this study.

Besides its Zionist roots, any assessment of Israel’s attitudes toward the environment should also analyze the cultures the immigrants brought with them from their many countries of origin; these account in part for the heterogeneous attitude found in Israel on the subject. Furthermore, the extent to which the political realities of Israel’s situation as a beleaguered nation have made its people focus on priorities other than the environment needs to be considered.

The religious kibbutz movement

The attitude of the religious kibbutz movement toward nature is an interesting case, in view of its attempted synthesis of religion and Zionism. In this movement, the relationship of man and nature started to emerge as a major ideological and practical issue a few decades before modern environmentalism became a mainstream interest in the West. Out of Orthodox and socialist conviction, the religious pioneering movement established the first religious kibbutzim in Israel in the 1930s, and devoted great attention and many discussions to this subject.

From Aryei Fishman’s description of the mood of these religious pioneers, one realizes how far their spirit was from modern environmentalist thinking. Fishman mentions the “charismatic religious experiences of the Orthodox pioneers” which were created by an immediate relationship with God.

“Manual labor, especially in the cultivation of the land, also symbolized participation in divine reality. For working the land not only allowed the individual to see himself ‘as a partner of God in Creation’ but also aroused a religious feeling of ‘soul cleansing and body purification’, and thereby moral rejuvenation of the individual personality. And cultivating the soil of Eretz Israel was of particular significance in creating the feeling of oneness with the religious ordering force.”

Thus the charismatic religious experience of the first plowing at Kibbutz Tirat Tzvi was described as follows: “With a quiver of holiness, the tractor opened the new land.” In short, by using the symbols embedded in the metaphysical past of Genesis, religious pioneers felt that they were participating in the perfection of the cosmic order.
As the above excerpts illustrate, even when Orthodox Jewry in
modern times is concerned with the environment, it is for very differ­
ent reasons and with other objectives than those of environmentalists.
When reviewing the literature on Judaism and environmentalism,
even where their concepts are parallel, it becomes clear that they
draw from different viewpoints and cultures.

Fishman remembers the dualistic attitude of the members of the
religious kibbutz where he lived, shortly before the establish­
ment of the State of Israel. During the week, kibbutz members tried to
reap the maximum from the land. On Shabbat, however, the land
became part of nature and they felt an inner need to walk through
natural surroundings, admiring it.137

Israeli achievements

While Israel undoubtedly has much to learn from various Western
countries in the field of environmental policies, nonetheless it has
made major contributions in the field of combating desertification.
The Jewish National Fund tree-planting program is another source
of pride for Diaspora Jewry.138

The fore-mentioned British Board of Deputies report, compiled by
Rose, investigated whether there was a specific Jewish contribution to
make in the cause of the environment. In his report, he reviewed
both the British and the Israeli situations.

Besides tree-planting, he pointed to Israel’s research on alternative
energy sources, particularly in the solar energy field. Other Israeli
achievements of worldwide significance that he mentioned are water
desalination and desert agriculture.139

An interviewer asked the Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, Jonathan
Sacks, how modern-day Judaism relates to the global environmental
problem. He stressed the importance of the State of Israel: “At the
very time when we’re talking about the destruction of rain forests,
we are part of a people who reforest a completely desolate area.
That’s been the tremendous work of the JNF throughout the last
hundred years and Israel is one of the world’s leaders in refor­
estation... And I think that’s no accident. I think Jews cared so
much... every year they [celebrate the festival of] Tu bi-Shevat – they
have new trees planted and so on. Really this global contribution is
the contribution that Israel has been making.” 140

Diaspora attitudes

Another subject with sociological and political aspects concerns
Jewish Diaspora attitudes toward the environment. Among the major
Diaspora communities, mainly in the United States but also in Britain,
attitudes toward the environment are becoming an increasingly important issue.

Some American Jewish leaders hold that Jewish communities as such should actively pursue environmentalist policies. “In our synagogues, we must take a hard look at the way we conduct business, and insure that our activities are in keeping with sound environmental policies,” writes Mordechai Liebling, the Executive Director of the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot.

Arthur Waskow claims, “There are two major reasons for the American Jewish community to take as one of its major concerns – in prayer and celebration, in daily practice and in policy advocacy – the protection of the earth-environment. One is for the sake of the earth. The other is for the sake of Jewish continuity, renewal and vitality. Both are for the sake of God and Torah.”

Waskow goes so far as to claim that, by the end of this century, the organized U.S. Jewish community may no longer have any great reasons for continued existence in the present framework. Therefore, in order to revitalize Jewish life and strengthen the interest of the young in the Jewish community, he suggests that Jewish energy today should be focused on solving major global environmental problems that especially threaten the future of the young.

An early attempt at giving prayer services an environmental character is described by Reconstructionist Rabbi Everett Gendler. He emphasizes outdoor services, which underline the elements of nature in the liturgy.

A conference on “The Environment and Jewish Life” took place in Washington D.C. in March 1992, before the Earth Summit. It was meant to give a Jewish communal response to the world environmental crisis. Those who initiated it included many leading personalities from major U.S. organizations as well as three Jewish senators.

It became clear that environmental problems may receive lip service but they do not generate much active support in the American Jewish community. Waskow claims: “Even that conference did not put specific programs or visions before the Jewish community.”

Of the various Jewish denominations in the United States, it is the smallest one, the Reconstructionists, which seems most interested in environmental issues. Jewish organizations with a specific environmental goal are islands in a large, not very concerned community.

Among the Jewish activist groups in the United States is the Philadelphia-based Shomrei Adamah (Hebrew for Keepers of the Earth), which has been active for more than ten years now. The American Jewish community has since understood that it must address environmental issues on its agenda more systematically. This led to the
foundation in 1993 of COEJL, the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life. It has about 30 participating organizations, representing a wide spread of the organized American Jewish community. However, COEJL’s budget is very modest compared to that of major Jewish organizations.

COEJL has published a reader, *To Till and To Tend*, which contains *inter alia* material about Jewish attitudes toward environmental issues, suggestions for environmental action, and information on American Jewish organizations – and some Israeli ones – active in promoting environmental awareness.¹⁵¹ This has been mailed with other material to a large number of American Jewish congregations of all denominations.

COEJL collaborates with several Christian groups: the United States Catholic Conference, the Evangelical Environmental Network, and the National Council of Churches of Christ, in the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, which started its activities in 1993. The latter aims for the integration of commitment to global sustainability and environmental justice in all aspects of religious life. Its goals include defining and instructing an ethic of stewardship, encouraging sustainable habits of consumption, and encouraging laws linking environmental protection and social justice.

In Britain, too, environmental problems have raised official Jewish community interest. Representatives of British Jewry were one of the seven religious groups which addressed the All-Party Committee of Lords and Commons on Conservation in 1988.

The 1988 annual conference of the United Kingdom Reform Synagogues,¹⁵² which represent about 15% of British Jewry, “passed a resolution based on the *bal tashhit* (you must not destroy) principle of Judaism, urging reverence for the earth and all its creatures. It also made practical recommendations. This was followed by two publications of its Social Issues Group, setting out specific ideas for education and practical action.” ¹⁵³

**Individual contributions to modern environmentalism**

Many Jewish individuals are active in the environmental debate. As long as they do not specifically refer to their Jewishness and do not write about Jewish aspects of environmentalism, for the purposes of this study they are not considered exponents of Jewish positions. Rather they are seen as being involved in the general environmental debate. Consequently, this leaves out the noteworthy contributions of several Jews to the environmental discourse.

Norman Solomon, editor of *Christian-Jewish Relations*, suggests that “the contribution made by individual Jews, for instance scientists
and economists, to the modern ecological movement... would make an interesting study in itself.” However, as science historian Yakov Rabkin points out, since World War II, looking for specifically Jewish contributions to certain disciplines is often taboo, and research on Jewish contribution to the sciences encounters hostility.

In his 1989 report to the Executive of the Board of Deputies of British Jews reviewing whether there was a Jewish contribution to the cause of the environment, Aubrey Rose mentions prominent Jewish lecturers and journalists committed to the general environmental cause. He adds: “Jewish individuals and groups are much involved with national bodies like Friends of the Earth, one of whose main backers is a prominent Jewish businessman.”

It is well known that in progressive politics, avant-garde ideologies and innovative areas of scholarship one often finds a disproportionate number of individuals of Jewish origin. But does that mean that their involvement reflects a specifically Jewish point of view or vision? Perhaps it is a reflection of the socioeconomic situation or the state of mind of Jews? It may also be heavily influenced by their minority position and frequent persecution. The correlation is not necessarily clear, and this question requires another forum for debate.

Perception of the environment in works of literature

Another area, not further included in this study, which may yield interesting insights is the analysis of how modern Israeli and Jewish writers perceive environmental issues in fiction, poems and other writings.

Once one knows from their diary or memoirs that the subject is of interest to an author, as in the case of the Yiddish novelist Israel J. Singer, one can search in their literary works for references. Such ‘environmental motives’ also appear in the novels of his brother, Nobel prize winner Isaac Bashevis Singer. This was pointed out by Edward Alexander for the novel *The Estate*. He refers to one of its characters, Zadok, ‘the wayward son of the hasid Jochanan’. Alexander stresses that “Singer’s vegetarianism, which he called his only dogma, however embarrassing it may be to some of his admirers, is crucial to his understanding of the Holocaust.”

The leading modern Hebrew poet Chayim Nachman Bialik refers in several poems to the filth in the Jewish village in Russia. In his reflections, Albert Cohen considers that it is one of the great merits of his Jewish forefathers to have stood up against nature: “One very beautiful day, which was the glory of the universe, one of my ancestors, a being of Nature and a member of the animal species, decided crazily, decided ridiculously, on his two hairy and still twisted
legs, on a schism: that he didn't want to belong any more to nature and obey its laws."  

Franz Kafka's attitude toward the natural world would require a more specialized study. This becomes clear upon reading the opening sentence of one of his best-known short stories, *Metamorphosis*: "When Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from his unquiet dreams, he found himself metamorphized in his bed into a monstrous vermin."  

Bernard Malamud's *God's Grace* is a fable based on a second Flood, the result of a nuclear war between America and Russia. Only one human survives, with the ambiguous name of Calvin Cohn. God tells him: "And that you, Mr Cohn, happen to exist when no one else does, though embarrassing to Me, has nothing to do with your once having studied for the rabbinate, or for that matter, having given it up."  

Cohn's initial survival is due to the fact that he was carrying out research at the bottom of the sea when the rockets fell. He then negotiates with God not to correct the error, and wonders whether he is the new Adam, and if the latter's job is at all open. *God's Grace* may, to some extent, be considered a Jewish environmental novel.  

Several modern Israeli writers refer to the 'Zionist aspects of nature' from a variety of perspectives. In one poem, Rahel 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."  

In modern Israeli fiction there are also many references of relevance to our subject, of which only a few examples can be given. The contemporary writer A.B. Yehoshua tells the story of the watchman of a JNF forest planted on the ruins of an Arab village destroyed in Israel's war of Independence. Both the watchman and an old Arab worker dream about burning the forest, an act finally carried out by the Arab.  

In his *Russian Novel*, Meir Shalev introduces a teacher who conveys the Zionist message in various ways: "Every radish which became red in the green garden, every baby and calf which was born was a promise and expressed hope." And elsewhere: "we do not believe in the underground rolling of the dead and the forgiving of sins. Our forgiving of sins is working the land and not the digging of graves. Our rolling of dead is ploughing." In his later days, however the teacher suffers a stroke and becomes a Zionist heretic.  

**Toward an integrated understanding**  

It is only by systematic and integrated study in the above fields that a full picture of Jewish attitudes toward the environment can be
developed. This requires seeing Jewish environmental studies as a single scholarly field. In that way a more profound understanding of the various areas of interaction between Judaism and environmentalism can be obtained. Thus the present study can only make a preliminary contribution to this discourse.

Notes for Chapter One

2 Ibid., p. 3.
3 Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), an important American thinker and social critic.
4 Bramwell, op. cit., p. xi.
5 Eugene C. Hargrove claims that American environmental attitudes have developed out of an intricate interplay between Western science and art over the last three centuries. He argues that “modern American environmentalist attitudes are the product of several centuries of changing attitudes towards nature and are most closely associated with nineteenth century developments in the natural history sciences of botany, biology and geology, and in the arts, particularly poetry and American landscape painting... modern ecologists and environmentalists have a perception of the world which is little different from and is directly traceable to the aesthetic perception of early botanist, biologists, and geologists and are, therefore, in this sense, compatible with at least one important component of science and with Western civilization and man.” Eugene C. Hargrove, The Historical Foundations of American Environmental Attitudes. Environmental Ethics, Vol. 1 No. 3, Fall, 1979, pp. 209–240.
7 There were earlier environmental conventions as well. The precursors of the 1983 international convention to prevent pollution in the seas (MARPOL) go back to 1926. The international agreement to regulate whaling was agreed upon in 1946. For a review of the more important international environmental conventions, and the effectiveness of global environmental management, see Lucas Reijnders, De effectiviteit van mondiaal milieubeheer. In: Milieu als mensenwerk. Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1996, pp 242–256. Dutch.
12 There is considerable disagreement as to who is to blame for today's environmental problems. Reijnders points out that both ideological and material factors are cited. "Ideological factors which are often mentioned are the Jewish-Christian tradition, focused on subduing nature, the belief in progress, the arrogance of man, the disappearance of animism, the alienation of one's own products, unlimited egoism, etc. Overpopulation, capitalism, industrialization, 'bad technology', and economic growth are considered material factors. All these explanations have in common that they are characteristic of
Judaism, Environmentalism and the Environment


13 Alm says: “The first wave I would characterize as concern over air and water pollution. This wave is characterized by concern over pollutants that one can see, smell and which make eyes tear. In 1980, a second major wave occurred, focusing on hazardous wastes. The concerns shifted from visible obvious pollutants to toxic wastes such as dioxin, harmful in parts per trillion. The American public was deadly afraid of these invisible forms of pollution, most of which were chemical substances. The third wave of environmental concern in the United States regards the global environment. Global climate change and ozone depletion being the two most obvious issues.” Alvin Alm, Environmental Quality and Soil Remediation: the American Experience. Lecture at Conference on Waste Treatment, Recovery and Soil Remediation: the American Experience, April 1990, Marina di Ravenna.

14 This lack of relationship between philosophical, theological and ethical discussions on the one hand, and the practical world of society’s environmental policies on the other, is also seen with regard to Judaism. At the Conference on Judaism and the Natural World, which took place February 22–24, 1998, as part of a series of conferences on religions of the world and ecology at the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard University, the discussions between philosophers and theologians on Jewish environmental ethics did not provide any additional relevant insight into practical work in the field of environmental corporate strategy which I have now been carrying out for well over ten years.


18 Laqueur defines the Greens as “a catch-all movement for various single issue groups, a coalition of sectarians and, generally speaking, those in firm opposition to the existing political and social order without necessarily having clear ideas on how to bring about change.” Ibid., p. 205.

19 Ferry concludes: “At the intellectual, or even philosophical plane only deep ecology can pretend to have a global political vision – but for that it has to dress in the tawdry finery of the neoconservative or new leftist romanticism. If environmentalism wishes to escape these ridiculous and dangerous archaisms, if it accepts to define itself reformist, it has to recognize that it is a pressure group that expresses a sensitivity, which in order to be able to be shared by the great majority, has not itself a vocation for power. If it will be political, environmentalism will not be democratic; if it will be democratic, it has to renounce the mirages of the ‘grande politique’.” Luc Ferry, Le nouvel ordre écologique. Paris: Grasset, 1992, p. 215. French.


21 In the concluding paragraph of her book, Bramwell writes: “What after all today’s ecological movement is advocating is a return to primitivism, and the abandonment of treasure and knowledge to tribes, and nations in foreign lands who pose no threat to us. Consciously or otherwise, this is a death-wish. We are not talking here about eschewing food additives and colouring matter, whole food in a whole land, as were
the earlier ecologists, but something different – and deathly. For today’s ecologists, their hope of regeneration presupposes a return to primitivism, and thus, whether they wish to enunciate it or not, concomitant anarchy, the burning before the replanting, the cutting down of the dead tree. The father of the movement is an utter rejection of all that is, and for at least three millennia all that was.” Bramwell, op. cit., p. 248.

22 Paehlke is one of those who refers to environmentalism as a set of values. He lists a number of central values asserted by proponents of environmentalism, which “have consistently been emphasized in the writing of environmentalists and are implicit in their actions.” Among those are: the appreciation of all forms of life, humility of the human species with respect to the global eco-system, a pre-occupation with the quality of human life and health, a global perspective, a lengthy time horizon, and disapproval of waste. Paehlke, op. cit., pp. 143–145.

23 “Environmentalism… is a scientifically-based philosophy, not in the sense that it is unrelated to metaphysical principles, but rather in the sense that a philosophy of the environment derives from new data which is being put forward by scientific research (ecology, environmental studies). Moreover, philosophically, this theory is based on anti-speciesism and respect for all organisms, for life, or for ecosystems, and so forth, and is thus rooted in the tradition of the Enlightenment.” 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.

24 This reflects its recent advent and the general fragmentation which increasingly characterizes contemporary society.

25 I argue that interaction with a range of organizations with different viewpoints may gradually create greater coherence in the environmental field, further enhancing its system. Others claim that more divergence among environmental currents is probable in the future.

26 In conversations over the past decade with more extreme environmentalists, I have occasionally heard observations such as ‘capitalism should be abandoned’, ‘the economy should shrink’, ‘world government should be established to save the environment’, or ‘consumption patterns should change radically to obtain a sustainable society’. While these ideological positions are not usually accompanied by a detailed program on how this could be achieved, it is clear that the implementation of these ideas could only be realized by significant curtailment of individual freedom.


28 Whereas environmental issues have been given considerable publicity, and the number of publications on them is large by any standard, the number of references to modern environmental issues from a Jewish viewpoint is extremely limited. To put this in perspective, one single article in the general environmentalist context – Lynn White’s The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis, published in 1967 – has generated more than two hundred reactions. This is probably more than the number of serious articles on environmentalism written by Jewish writers in a Jewish context in the same period. See also Chapter Two.

29 James M. Jasper & Dorothy Nelkin write, “Anthropomorphic projects break down the boundaries that humans perceive between themselves and other animals. Animals rightists believe that animals share traits such as the ability to plan a life, to have intentions and to carry them out, or to be loyal and loving. They say that, ‘A life is a life is a life…. It’s alive and that’s all that matters,’ and that, ‘A rat is a pig is a dog is a boy.’ Taking this belief to its extreme, one activist could even claim that ‘it is obvious that the life of a healthy chimpanzee must be granted a greater value than the life of a human who is a hopelessly retarded infant orphan.’ How are such beliefs possible?” James M. Jasper


32 David Ehrenfeld & Philip J. Bentley write: “Christian thought and Christian interpretation of Jewish and Christian Scripture is so pervasive in Western Society that even most of the Jews who think about these matters do not realize that the problem of the chasm between humanity and the rest of nature exists more for Christians than for Jews. Christianity has a stronger emphasis on the other world than on this world, and classical thought has a much stronger hold on Christianity than on Judaism.” Judaism and Stewardship, *Judaism*, Vol. 34 No. 3, Summer, 1995, p. 303. The authors refer to Trude Weiss Rosmarin, Judaism and Christianity: The Differences. New York: Jonathan David, 1943.

33 A quotation from the radical German ecologist, Jutta Ditfurth, illustrates how remote the Christian reality is from Judaism: “Before Christian morality and missionaries flooded the world and preached that contraception and birth control were a punishable act in the framework of God’s laws, the problem of too high birthrates in Africa, Asia and Latin America didn’t exist.” Jutta Ditfurth, *Lebe Wild und Gefährlich: Radikaloekologische Perspektiven*. Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1991, p. 142. German. While Orthodox Judaism opposes contraception, it does not carry out any missionary activities among non-Jews.

34 For an example of how environmentalist attitudes have led to changes in the approach of some Christian theologians, see Chapter Two.

35 Many Jewish environmentalists do not perceive any significant tension between Jewish values and those of the ideological currents in modern environmentalism. Eilon Schwartz points out that ‘Judaism’s relationship with the natural world is far more ambivalent than that with which many Jewishly-committed environmentalists would feel comfortable. Too few have delved into the complex and intricate relationship between Judaism and the natural world, a relationship which, while containing the ‘green’ traditions often quoted, also contains the admonition in *Pirkei Avot* that ‘One, who while walking along the way, reviewing his studies, breaks off from his study and says, “How beautiful is that tree! How beautiful is that plowed field!” Scripture regards him as if he has forfeited his soul.’ (Ethics of the Fathers, 3:7).’ Eilon Schwartz, Judaism and Nature: Theological and Moral Issues to Consider While Renegotiating a Jewish Relationship to the Natural World. *Judaism*, Fall, 1995: 44(4).

36 “Jews-For-Jesus’ is clearly a post-Holocaust phenomenon in that an old impetus of Jewish flight-into-Christianity is combined with a new reluctance to abandon the post-Holocaust Jewish remnant. However, the ‘movement’ combines the uncombincable: unless its members propose in perpetuity to marry only other Jews-for-Jesus, their distant offspring may conceivably be for Jesus, but they will not be Jews.” Emil L. Fackenheim, To Mend the World: Foundations of Future Jewish Thought. New York: Schocken Books, 1982, p. 283.

37 In each generation, tensions between different systems are felt in different ways. Jewish communists under communist regimes could not ignore the tension between the two systems, even when they tried to minimize their Jewish ethnicity. Few Orthodox Jews anywhere adhered to communism. Tension may also be noticed by an outside observer. The philosopher Feyerabend maintains that even modern democratic society is so dogmatic that it does not allow other cultures to flourish within it. He writes, “Democratic principles, as they are practiced today, are incompatible with the undisturbed existence,
development, and the undisturbed growth of specific cultures. A rational-liberal (-Marxist) society cannot contain a black culture in the full sense of the word. It cannot contain a Jewish culture in the full sense of the word... It can tolerate such cultures only as secondary outgrowths of a basic structure, which itself is an unholy alliance of science, rationalism (and capitalism)." Paul Feyerabend, Erkenntnis fuer freie Menschen. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980, p. 129. German.

38 See, for example: COEJL, To Till and To Tend: A Guide to Jewish Environmental Study and Action. New York: COEJL, no year of publication.

39 Julian Simon states this explicitly: "Instead of environmental 'causes', it is better that our money go (just one example) for loans to Soviet emigrants in Israel and the U.S. – emigre dentists so they can buy the equipment they need, to talented kids for violin lessons and to Russian computer programmers who want to open shops." Simon, op. cit., p. 51.


41 One indication of this is a survey conducted in the United States in 1997 by the Center for Jewish Community Studies of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. Jewish state legislators and Jewish community state government affairs professionals were asked which issues they had dealt with in the last biennium they considered of major legislative relevance. Environmental issues hardly figured in their responses. Daniel J. Elazar, Strengthening the Ties Between the American Jewish Community and the States. Jerusalem Letter (Special Report), No. 364, August 15, 1997.

42 Perhaps Medding’s argument is applicable in reverse to the interest shown today in the general environmental situation. As Europeans and Americans in the 1970s and 1980s no longer felt threatened by war and had few other major concerns, they had the time and mind available to fear environmental risks. There are some indications that, with unemployment rising, the environment is now receiving less attention.

43 Miriam Wyman, a member of the board of directors of Shomrei Adamah, writes: "It is easy to say that, as Jews and as individuals, we are not responsible for environmental problems or for solving them. In the public perception, government, business and industry are the chief culprits. That, however, is only partly true. North Americans are the world’s largest users of energy and new material resources... Middle-income citizens – which most North American Jews are – use twice as much energy in daily life as low-income citizens. We also use ten times the resources used by those in the developing world. How can we think that we are not responsible?" Miriam Wyman, Derekh Eretz: A Personal Exploration. Conservative Judaism, Fall, 1991, pp. 5–13.

44 For some background on Jewish environmental activism, see Aubrey Rose, Judaism and Ecology. London: Cassell, 1992, chapters 14-16.


47 See also Mishnah Berakhot 9:1 and the discussion in Bavli Berakhot 59 a/b.

Shema is the central prayer of both the morning and evening services.

Rabbi Benzion Meir Uziel, 1880–1953.

'You, who have constructed Zion and Jerusalem, bless this country, given by You to our ancestors. Lord, accept the sacrifice of this earth which is Yours; give it Divine grace, and Your benevolence. Give it salutary rains in their season, to quench the thirst of the mountains and of Israel's valleys, to water each plant and tree, and the shrubs which we here plant for You today...'


Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer Section 33.


Ibid., p. 72.

Safran adds that the Kabbalah sees significant similarity between trees and man: "This is more than a mere resemblance, for there is an actual affinity between the crown of the vegetable world, the tree, and the crown of the animal world, man. This affinity between the friendly representatives of these two worlds is expressed in their appearance and their vocation. Both are 'upright', both are 'bearers of fruit', and both offer protection to those who need it." Ibid., p. 74.

Rabbi Aryeh Levin, 1885–1969, particularly known for his work as a prison chaplain.

1865–1935, Palestine's first Chief Rabbi.


Ben Ish Chai, Year One, Section *Ki Tetse*, 14. (Its author, Rabbi Yosef Chaim al Chakkam, was born in Baghdad in 1834, and died in 1909. His halakhic authority is recognized by Jews from most of the Islamic countries.)

*Zohar* – the Book of Splendor; the central work of Jewish mysticism, usually attributed to Shimon bar Yochai, but supposed to have been written by Moses de Leon in Spain at the end of the 13th century.

There was another 'environmental' aspect to this custom in its early days. Sperber points out that the Maharil (born in Mainz in 1365, died in Worms in 1427) recommended that Jews not feed the fish in the rivers. He assumes that the reason for this was to prevent accusations by Christians, common at that time, that the Jews were poisoning rivers and wells. Daniel Sperber, Israel's Customs: Sources and History. Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1994, Part III, Footnote 23, p. 121. Hebrew.


Rabbi Shlomo Ben Aderet, born in Barcelona in 1235, died in 1310.

Rashba Responsa 1:395.


Moses Maimonides (1135–1204), the most important Jewish codifier and philosopher in the Middle Ages, was born in Cordova and died in Fostat (ancient Cairo).

73 Born around 1040; lived in Spain, and died in 1100.
75 David Nieto was born 1654 in Venice and died in 1728.
77 Haham Zevi (Rabbi Zevi Ashkenazi) was born in Moravia in 1660 and died in Lemberg in 1718.
78 *Teshuvot* Haham Zevi 18.
79 Ibid.
80 Hermann Cohen and Abraham Joshua Heschel are two more 20th century Jewish thinkers from the period before modern environmentalism became a mainstream interest, who have referred to Judaism and the natural world.
82 Avraham Yitzhak Hacohen Kook: *Igrot haRa'ay*y* 3:802, as quoted in Rakover, *ibid.*, p. 36.
85 Sokol added: “What picture of God, humanity or the world best accounts for the normative data? How might this picture lead to fresh new thinking, and help chart new directions to the challenges posed by evolving threats to the well-being of the planet? The strength of this approach is that its theological reflections are grounded in concrete Jewish normative data, and thereby connect theology to how the Jewish tradition – at least in its legal manifestation – practically responds to the natural world.” *Ibid.*, pp. 24–25.
89 Responsa *Yechave Da’at*, Part 3, section 66. For more details on his responsum see Chapter Three.
92 Ibid 4:1.
93 Bavli *Pesachim* 7a.
94 *Sukka* 5:3.
95 An example of such attention to hygiene is given in the testament of Eliezer of Mayence, who died in 1357: “Wash me clean, comb my hair, trim my nails, as I was wont to do in my life-time, so that I may go clean to my eternal rest, as I went clean to Synagogue every Sabbath day.” In: Israel Abrahams, ed., *Hebrew Ethical Wills*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1948, Part II, p. 217.


98 The difference in mortality and morbidity between Jews and non-Jews continues to puzzle researchers until today. So, for example, Allen Glicksman writes about the Jewish elderly in the United States: “Jews appear to live longer than non-Jews. Even in the urban slums of the early part of the century, the mortality rates of Jewish immigrants were significantly lower than those of Irish and Italian immigrants as well as those of the native white population. Even in more recent periods, the death rates of Jews have been found to be lower than those of non-Jews in the same socioeconomic class. Jewish longevity may be due to occupations of lower risk and higher social status, more stable family lives, more frequent use of formal health-care services, lower rates of alcohol use, and an ability to mobilize resources in later life... The concerns Jews have about health are legendary. Concern about children is often expressed as concern about their health, and every little symptom seems to assume enormous importance. Even controlling for socioeconomic status, Jews visit doctors much more often than non-Jews and report more symptoms. Rather than directly expressing his feelings about some matter, the individual may display the ‘pain and suffering’ it causes.” Allen Glicksman, The New Jewish Elderly: A Literature Review. New York: The American Jewish Committee/The William Petschek National Jewish Family Center, 1991, p. 11.

99 Rabbi Shimshon Ben Yehoshua Moshe Morpurgo, born in 1681 in Austria, died in Ancona in 1740.


101 Rabbi Naftali Tsvi Yehudah Berlin, born in Mir, Poland in 1817; died in Warsaw in 1893.


103 “It is told of the Hasidic master, R. Zusya of Anapole, that, saddened by the sight of caged birds, he would purchase them from their owner in order to set them free. He informed his disciples that he regarded this to be a form of ‘ransoming prisoners’ which constitutes a moral imperative.” Quoted in Bleich, op. cit., p. 195.

104 Buber relates an anecdote of how the Hasidic Rabbi David of Lelow accuses a coachman before a Zaddik – a righteous man; in the Hasidic movement, a spiritual and moral leader – of hitting his horses. Seeing that the load was heavy, the rabbi had suggested to the other traveling Hasidim that they walk; but the coachman was dissatisfied with this and had started to hit the horses. The coachman said that he had the whip from the rabbi himself; who had told him that it was only for making the sound of whipping, but not for actually hitting. The coachman said the rabbi had delayed his travel so much that he became angry; and added: “Whom should I hit then, if not the horses?” Martin Buber, Gog und Magog. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1957, pp. 14–19. German.

105 Amnon Hadary, former editor of The Forum, a quarterly journal of the World Zionist Organization, writes: “In contemporary Israel, one can hardly address environmental issues without assessing the input of Zionist ideology, and Zionism is very much the child of both its fin-de-siècle derivation and its biblical ancestry. In this, modern Israel resembles the Bible-imbued frontier period in America, which helps to explain the strong affinity in the pioneer tradition of the two cultures.
Tree planting had begun in the prairie states as early as the 1860s. Indeed, the protection of trees and forests was an early environmental issue in America. While championing the conservation of Yosemite in 1890, John Muir, a pioneer American preservationist, spoke in religious terms remarking that while God's glory was written all over his works, in the wilderness the letters were capitalized. In Israel both the Jewish National Fund and the Nature Reserves Authority continue to say Amen to his notion.” Amnon Hadary, Paradise Greened. *Midstream*, April 1994, p. 21.

One serious ecological mistake resulting from this ideology, after the establishment of the State of Israel, was the draining of the Huleh Valley in the 1950s: “This undertaking was called a project, and it represented the climax of the Zionist effort to overcome the alien environment. It was justified by three main arguments: that it defeated malaria; that it 'liberated the soil', thus enabling more people to settle in the area; and that it enabled the soil beneath the swamp to be exploited for agricultural purposes. The irony is that none of these aims was fulfilled, except for that of populating the area; the soil turned out to be agriculturally worthless, and malaria was eradicated before the draining started... On the other hand, an ecological disaster took place when dozens of species of fish, animals, and birds that used to live in the Hula were forced to migrate or perish.” De-Shalit, *op. cit.*, p. 79. An attempt to reverse this process began a few years ago by reflooding part of the area.


"On the eve of the creation of the State of Israel, the JNF owned over 235,000 acres, almost half of all land owned by Jews in Palestine, including large tracts in the Galilee, Samaria, Huleh, the Negev, and the Valley of Jezreel. The Fund has also been the chief instrument in the reforestation of the land, and the purchase of tree stamps is a familiar charitable device among Jews all over the world.” Melvin I. Urofsky, *American Zionism From Herzl to the Holocaust*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995, p. 312.

Palestinian terrorists have occasionally understood this symbolism and have set fire to Israeli forests. A totally different example of this symbolism was the strong psychological impact on the nation when, in 1996, fire destroyed a sizable forest area near the village of Shoresh, outside of Jerusalem. This impact was also felt further afield: the event even made the news on major radio and television stations in Europe, which usually only report fires in other countries if they cover much larger areas.

The Board of Deputies is the representative organization of British Jewry.


In Schama's romantic reminiscence: “The trees were our proxy immigrants, the forests our implantation.” He continues: “And while we assumed that a pine wood was more beautiful than a hill denuded by grazing flocks of goats and sheep, we were never exactly sure what all the trees were for. What we did know was that a rooted forest was the opposite landscape to a place of drifting sand, of exposed rock and red dirt blown by the winds. The diaspora was sand. So what should Israel be, if not a forest, fixed and tall? No one bothered to tell us which trees we had sponsored. But we thought cedar, Solomonic cedar: the fragrance of the timbered temple. “Every year the tempo of leaf-gumming accelerated furiously toward *Tu bi-Shevat*, the New Year for Trees. The festival had originated in an arbitrarily established date that separated one year’s tithed fruit from the next — an oddly pleasing way to celebrate the end of a tax year. In Israel, though, it had been wholly reinvented as a Zionist Arbor Day, complete with the trowel-wielding children planting the botanical equivalent of
themselves in cheerful, obedient rows. It was an innocent ritual. But behind it lay a
long, rich, and pagan tradition that imagined forests as the primal birthplace of nations;
the beginning of habitation. Paradoxically... this was a tradition that had prospered
in the very cultures that had stigmatized the Jews as an alien growth and had periodically
undertaken campaigns of murderous uprooting. But we knew even less about K.G.
Frazer's *Golden Bough*, with its mythic connections between sacrifice and renewal,
than we did of Conradian fatalism. Nor did it occur to us that the biblical Hebrews,
like all the pastoral tribes of the ancient Near East, were certain to have contributed
to the denuding of the Levantine hillsides. And even had we known, it wouldn't have
mattered. All we knew was that to create a Jewish forest was to go back to the beginning
of our place in the world, the nursery of the nation.” Simon Schama, Landscape and

Reference to these childhood experiences can be found in many other reminiscences
by Diaspora Jews. Several years ago, philosopher Jerome Segal published a controver­sial book defining a strategy for the creation of a Palestinian state. He mentioned that
he grew up in a totally Jewish neighborhood in the Bronx. Referring to his attitude to
Israel in that time, he begins: “There was a time every year when we went door-to-
door in the neighborhood selling stamps and collecting money that would be used to
plant trees in Israel. It never occurred to anyone to ask why we were doing this, or
what our relationship to Israel was. Israel wasn’t a central preoccupation; it was part
of the landscape. Raising money for Israel was just an accepted part of childhood.”
Jerome M. Segal, Creating the Palestinian State. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1989
p. 2.

114 De-Shalit, op. cit.
115 Ibid.
116 “A.D. 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
pursuit of nature. It relates to man as a number, not as a person. Hands, not humans,
work the machines, and in due time even hands will be replaced by mechanical
gadgets. Man must restore his relationship with nature and soil in order to see the
fruits of his labor and to reunite with the supreme source of creativity – God – in
whose image he was created. 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.” Hertzel Fishman, The Challenge to Jewish
118 “Aren’t the senses getting worse all the time and less perfect, as the borders of know­ledge and feelings enlarge and their treasures become richer? Do we find among those
who have been illuminated by the light of science... many people with good eyes
who can see well and far? Do you find among these, people who look out from their
offices and from their research over nature? The same goes for the other senses. In
particular, the wild man – the man of nature – has healthy, sharp senses and reaches
in the meantime with his simple senses what the man of science, with all his tools
and equipment, cannot achieve. The reason for this is not only in the negative, i.e.
that natural man is not in the unfavorable circumstances of life in which civilized man
is, who has removed himself from nature. The reason is also positive: natural man is
always close to the fountain of life and draws from it, without interruption, as much
as he needs.” Ibid., p. 145.
“The love of nature that the nurses attempt to transmit at these ages includes not only a feeling for nature in general, but a love for the physical and geographic environment in which the children have their existence – [the kibbutz], and its surrounding flora and fauna. A positive attitude towards this environment is not induced through formal instruction or admonition, but through experience in walking through the kibbutz, hiking into the fields and orchards, and observing the various barnyard animals. By teaching the children the names of the flora and fauna, telling them something of their habits, stimulating their interest in their behavior, and making them feel their beauty, the nurses hope to stimulate their love of nature in those manifestations that can be observed and appreciated by young children... The inculcation of a love of nature at times involves the use of negative sanctions, although such sanctions are mild. One day, for example, some three-year-olds picked grass from an area in which the gardener was trying to grow new grass. The nurse, upon seeing this, came out immediately and told the children to stop this, explaining seriously to them that they should not do this because it was nice to have grass, and that if they picked the young grass now, it would not grow.” Ibid., pp. 143–144.

The settlers found the place burned down and the fields deserted. As they approached the field, they saw a plow that had been left behind... All of us surrounded the plow and stared at it. The plow was our symbol: they [the Arabs] have weapons and we have a plow. They left our plow here. They did not take it. ‘We will take the plow to Tel Hai!’ exclaimed Trumpeldor after a prolonged silence. ‘We will go on plowing and sowing the land.’ As they were about to leave for Tel Hai, the Arabs resumed the attack. Under the enemy’s bullets, Trumpeldor carried the plow all the way back to Tel Hai. When they arrived there safely, one of his comrades asked him, ‘Did you risk your life for one plow, Yosef?’... ‘This is not merely a plow,’ Yosef solemnly replied, ‘this is our flag, the flag of the awakening people of Israel. And one cannot abandon a flag at the hands of the enemy.’” Ya’el Zerubavel, Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 154.

This is one of the many nature-related contrasts between Jews and Arabs which is stressed by Zionism. Several people have told me that, 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 one.

“For the majority of Nahalalites, young and old, it was a profound and memorable experience to watch their animals eat their own barley for the first time. They even held a special celebration to mark the event. First they harvested the barley, then brought it in ceremoniously and placed it in neat stacks on the threshing floor. The idea was that the mules would be tied to stakes and the entire village would then watch with pride as the animals munched on the first sheaves of barley grown in Nahalal. Each child was given the honor of leading the mules to his ‘family stake’, and all the children did so, except Moshe. His parents were deeply ashamed: ‘Every other child knew where his stack was, but Moshe could not find our stack of barley and tie the mule to the stake.’” Shabtai Teveth, Moshe Dayan: The Soldier, the Man, the Legend. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972, pp. 55–56.

De-Shalit claims that a pragmatic attitude to nature was part of this ethos. This entailed the view that “nature could be exploited to rebuild a normal social structure for the Jewish people and thus sustain a personal psychological change in the young immigrant. Strangely enough, the two attitudes could coexist simultaneously in the same...
persons. They thought as romantic ruralists when they were on the kibbutz, and at one and the same time as developers when they met in the trade unions or national institutions." De-Shalit, op. cit.

125 It is striking that when the theoretical physicist Pais writes about Israel’s first president, Chaim Weizmann, himself a well-known scientist, trying to convince him to join the Weizmann Institute in Israel, he doesn’t refer to the scientific content of their discussion. One of the few things Pais mentions is that Weizmann “pointed out the green fields and plants one could see from his window, adding with evident pride that, when he first came to Rehovoth, all you saw was barren sand.” Pais, op. cit., p. 275.


127 Ibid., p. 34. Shalev continues: “The Dutch engineer returned home. 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.”


129 1000 Zemer Ve’od Zemer. Tel Aviv: Kinneret, 1981, Part 1, p. 44. Hebrew.


131 De-Shalit, op. cit.

132 1000 Zemer Ve’od Zemer, Part 2, op. cit., p. 29.

133 Although no statistics exist on this point, immigrants from the United States, Canada and some other Anglo-Saxon countries play a role in this field disproportionate to their numbers.

134 When the original peace agreements with the Palestinians were signed, Uri Marinov, the first Director-General of the Israeli Ministry of the Environment, stated that the impact of peace would improve the ecological situation in the Middle East even beyond Israel’s collaboration with neighboring countries. He added: “From a macro-economic point of view, the reduction in defense costs may facilitate greater investment in environmental issues, if the population presses for it.” Interview with Uri Marinov. In: Manfred Gerstenfeld, Israel’s New Future: Interviews. Jerusalem: Rubin Mass & the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 1994, p. 184.


136 Ibid., p. 83.

137 Personal communication.

138 Hadary underlines the positive influence of the tree-planting program on Israel’s microclimates. “While it would be extravagant to claim that the weather profile of Israel’s arid zones has already been changed, the hundreds of thousands of trees that have been planted in thousands of trenches to ward off erosion have had a salutary effect. First of course is the observable impact on the landscape. In the past, as one drove along kilometers of road from Be’er Sheva southward, the eye became fatigued, attention stultified by the unrelieved dun colored earth. Now one sees stands of trees clumped together inside earth enclosures. There is no doubt that these microcatchment basins have had far-reaching consequences for the microclimate of the South.” Hadary, op. cit., p. 23.

139 Rose, Grass Roots, pp. 66–70.

140 Neil Amswych, An Interview with the Chief Rabbi. From http://www.st-and.ac.uk...jewish/sacksindex.html, February 20, 1996.


143 “For most of the last generation, the organized Jewish community in North America has had two great raisons d’être: achieving security for Israel through peace with its
neighbors and liberating Soviet Jews. Both goals may be accomplished by this century's end. If so, what will it mean to be and especially to do Jewish?" Ibid.

144 It has been a recurrent theme since the beginning of Jewish emancipation in the 19th century that assimilated Jews who find no interest in Judaism's multifaceted and rich religious and cultural content, may find it more interesting if one attempts to cloak an outside argument with a Jewish mantle. So Waskow's opponent, Julian Simon, makes another suggestion: "I suggest that Jews can truly 'build the Land' by (say) pioneering in the construction of living habitats on Mars. The pioneers can lay the foundation for the next expansion of human population to 20 or 100 billion by creating a demonstration area on that planet – technological, political, social – that will serve as home for ten thousand or ten million Jews, where the Jewish settlement can serve as a true light to the nations. Or we can colonize the bottom of the ocean. Such activities would be a true challenge and a distinctively Jewish contribution to the Jewish and human communities." Simon, op. cit., p. 61.

The Israeli novelist, Abraham B. Yehoshua, reveals the same attitude in another field. His more recent claim is that Israel and the Jews in the Diaspora have to look beyond the establishment of peace with the Arabs for new positive contents of collaboration. "I suggested that we try to develop some kind of a common mission toward the Third World... A specific suggestion: a joint Teaching Corps.

"There are many unemployed Jewish intellectuals in the world... Why not send them to Third World countries for a year or two to teach music, history, science, technology or computers? Jews and Israelis can participate in such a project, which will make these people available, free of charge, to the Third World. If 1,000 or 1,500 of these teachers take up posts, they will make an impact. It is also another way of bringing Jews and Israelis together for a common purpose." Interview with A.B. Yehoshua. In: Gerstenfeld, Israel's New Future, op. cit., pp. 196-7.

145 Reconstructionism: a Jewish religious movement founded by Mordecai M. Kaplan in 1922, and mainly active in the United States. Its central value is the survival of the Jewish people rather than the survival of specific religious beliefs or rituals: each individual must consider which rituals he wishes to practice. Reconstructionism does not believe that the Torah is Divine revelation to Moses.

146 "For some four summers, we held Friday evening services out of doors at the Jewish center of Princeton, weather permitting. The setting itself was the attractive lawn behind the sanctuary, flat but ringed by shrubs and bushes, with a number of older, substantial trees in view. The hour of the service was advanced somewhat (from eight fifteen to seven forty-five P.M.) to take full advantage of sunset, twilight, and in late summer, the dusk. Nature elements in the traditional service were emphasized; special readings appropriate to a nature setting were included in the service; periods of silence and meditations on trees and shrubs were part of the worship; and the varying qualities of the 'twilights' (aravitri) were also a focus of attention.

"I can report that the reaction to this, among adults as well as young people, was almost universally favorable, and often enthusiastic. In fact, except for a few occasions when the bugs were especially bothersome (no, we did not spray!), the out-of-door services were deeply appreciated by nearly all involved.

"Another practice which received a generally favorable response was connected with the morning service of Sabbaths and festivals. When there was no bar mitzvah and our numbers were not increased by people unfamiliar with the building, on bright days, temperature permitting, we would leave the sanctuary immediately after the Barchu and head out of doors. There, under the skies and in the face of the sun, we would chant together that part of the service which celebrates the gift of Light and
the radiance of the luminaries. And on days when it was not possible to go out of doors, this part of the service was prefaced by a focusing of attention on the light streaming in through the many windows in the sanctuary. In both cases, the added power of this part of the service was quite perceptible." Everett Gendler, On the Judaism of Nature. In: James A. Sleeper & Alan L. Mintz (eds.), The New Jews. New York: Vintage Books, 1971, pp. 233–243.

147 The Eternal Light of Gendler’s synagogue, Temple Emanuel in Lowell, Massachusetts, has been powered by solar energy since 1978, via panels on the building’s roof. For part of the year, these provide enough energy to illuminate the Holy Ark as well. This is just one of a variety of environmental projects of the community. (Personal communication by Everett Gendler.)

148 “The mainstream Jewish community took its first steps to raise a Jewish banner on the environmental question at a conference in Washington D.C., in March 1992. The heads of every major national Jewish organization, led by Shoshana Cardin, joined with several senators and world-famous scientists like Carl Sagan and Stephen Jay Gould to call on the Jewish community to address the looming dangers of global warming and ozone depletion. The heads of rabbinical seminaries, synagogue movements and communal organizations agreed that these issues belong on the Jewish agenda.” Waszkow, The Greening of Judaism, op. cit., p. 46.


150 The first specific mention of the environment as an issue of concern for the Jewish community in a joint program plan of the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council was in 1991–2 (p. 45). Energy had already been included in the Council’s program plans since the end of the 1970s. This organization has since changed its name to the “Jewish Council for Public Affairs”, and in its agenda for public affairs for 1998–9, environmental concerns cover nine pages out of fifty-nine.

151 COEJL, op. cit.

152 Reform Judaism is the oldest of the non-Orthodox movements, and has its origins in Germany in the early 19th century. Today, its largest community is in the United States. Its attitudes on issues changes with time, adapting to what its adherents consider appropriate for that period.

153 “Many Reform institutions have since implemented the recommendations, recycling paper and waste and encouraging the use of environment-friendly commodities. The Biblical Garden recently set up at the Sternberg Centre in London helps focus the minds of children attending the Centre’s school, as well as numerous visitors, on biblical attitudes to nature.” Rose, Grass Roots, op. cit., pp. 66–67.


155 Rabkin writes: “The issue of cultural variables in science has long been controversial. The mainstream ideology of science stipulates that science is essentially transnational. To look for ethnic, national, gender-related or ideological variables in the scientific enterprise used to be deemed generally irrelevant, occasionally subversive, and in a few historical cases simply dangerous. Attempts by the Bolsheviks to distinguish between proletarian and bourgeois science resulted in the Lysenko affair. Similarly, National-Socialist policies of promoting Aryan, as opposed to Jewish, science left an indelible trauma.

Against this background, research on Jews in the scientific profession which started in the past decade encountered vigorous opposition and resentment, particularly from

156 Rose, Grass Roots, op. cit., i.

157 One may ask, in this context, whether it is coincidental that the executive director of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment is Jewish (Paul Gorman).

158 At a later stage the quest for Jewish environmental attitudes may be extended to searching for such expression in other forms of modern art: for example, painting and sculpture.

159 In his memoirs, Singer tells of his youthful preferences: “I would have gladly given up all the Talmud of the world for the neighing of this horse.” and “I managed to study the Talmud, but it was like swallowing a bitter medicine. I longed to go out in the sun, longed for the grass, the trees, man and the animals, life.” Israel J. Singer, Von einer Welt, die nicht mehr ist. Frankfurt-am-Main: Fischer, 1993, pp. 75 & 175. German.

Singer also tells the story of a cat which sat next to his grandfather, a rabbi, while he studied Judaism, and did not want to leave the room. His grandmother claimed that his grandfather loved the cat more than her, because it constantly sat next to him, whereas the grandmother did so only on very rare occasions. However, while the grandfather did not allow anybody to chase the cat out, he never touched it because “he thought it inappropriate for a Jew to caress an animal.” Ibid., p. 128.

Judaism’s ambivalent attitude toward animals is a recurrent theme in memoirs of Eastern European Jews. The former chairman of the World Zionist Organization, Nahum Goldmann, was born in a little town in Russia. He relates that his grandfather, the town doctor, was often paid by farmers in kind rather than in money. As a child, Goldmann loved animals, and on various occasions farmers gave him dogs as a present. One Shabbat morning, he rode a St. Bernard into the synagogue, causing a panic among the congregation, as several of those saw in the “innocuous animal a wild beast which would tear them to pieces. Women high up in the gallery fainted; dozens of men ran shouting out of the synagogue.” Nahum Goldmann, Mein Leben als deutscher Jude. Frankfurt am Main: Ullstein, 1980, p. 17. German.

160 In his memoirs, Bashevis Singer makes many references to his remoteness, in his youth, from the world of nature. He comments, for example, on the misconceptions of poor Jewish city children: “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: tomatoes, cauliflowers, and green peppers.” Isaac Bashevis Singer, In My Father’s Court. New York: Noonday Press, 1967, p. 177.

161 “Zadok believes the moral laws of the Jews are confuted by the laws of biology which sanction, and indeed require, the Malthusian struggle for existence and catastrophic wars. ’It’s the same to nature who kills whom. For thousands of years bulls have been slaughtered and nature has kept quiet... Why should a human life be so dear to nature?’... Singer believes that acceptance in any form whatever of the theory that might makes right must eventually victimize the Jews. Hence, in the dreams of Yoineh Meir, the slaughterer who, in the story of that name, forsakes his calling because he comes to believe that injustice to dumb beasts retards messianic redemption, ‘Cows assumed human shape, with beards and side locks, and skullcaps over their horns.’ Singer’s saints, like Jochanan, whose son will welcome the killing of bulls and of men, are not only troubled by the slaughter of animals but express tenderness over flies
and bugs, as if they could feel that it was to be but a short step from the metaphorical
depiction of Jews as parasites to their literal extermination as bugs.” Edward Alexander,
The Destruction and Resurrection of the Jews in the Fiction of I.B. Singer. Judaism,

162 1873–1934. One such poem, The Street of the Jews, he undertitles: “A picture of the
life of the Jews in Morocco”. Obviously, the poem refers to Russia, but it probably
would not have passed Tsarist censorship otherwise. Another such poem he calls, with
an intentional typing error, Who knows a town to urinate? Chayim Nachman Bialik,

163 Cohen continues: “He decided that he would obey the new commandments which
he invented in the name of God whom he also invented. Sublime commandments
which, by his own volition, would transform him into Man, toward which marvelous
and desperate venture this anthropoid launched himself... This truth, I can never
repeat it enough: my beloved, royal and beautiful truth. I swear it, to whoever sees it

164 “While the beef simmers, she talks to me about the Bible. ‘Know, my son, that the
Eternal, may His name be blessed, has spoken Himself to our master, Moses, who was
his intimate friend, may he be blessed, and He told him that if the ass of your enemy
is in difficulty, you have to help the ass, you have to lift it up gently if it has fallen,
and you have to bring it back to your enemy. These are the Eternal’s own words in
the book which, in His great goodness, He has given to our people. Do you realize,
the Eternal, King of the Universe, who is even concerned about a little ass!, isn’t that
a holy thing, my son?’ ” Ibid., p. 24.

165 Franz Kafka, Die Verwandlung. In: Das Urteil und andere Erzählungen. Frankfurt
am Main: Fischer, 1960, p. 23. German.


Bluwstein was born in Russia in 1890 and died in Tel Aviv in 1931.

168 The forest has a metaphorical meaning for the storyteller: “This is not yet a forest but
a ‘hope and assurance for the future.’ ” Elsewhere the watchman asks the supervisor
how relevant his assignment is; he is told: “to tell the truth, I don’t remember a real
fire in this forest. Even nature has joined the [Zionist] enterprise.” A.B. Yehoshua, Mul


170 I.e., from their graves on their way to Israel for the Resurrection.


172 “Eventually we drained the morasses, but below them we found much worse mud.
The relation to the earth, the merger with nature, what are they if not decline and
animalization. We created a new generation, no longer miserable and unconnected
Jews, but a generation of farmers connected to their land, coarse, quarrellers, narrow-
minded and thick-skinned.” Ibid., p. 258.

173 I have not been able to identify any institution of higher learning anywhere which
teaches Jewish environmental studies as an ongoing course. Incidental courses on sub-
jects or individual lectures are also rare. A one-time course on Jewish law and
environment was taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York in recent
years. (Personal communication from Eliezer Diamond, who gave that course.)