Judaism, environmentalism and the environment: Mapping and analysis
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Citation for published version (APA):
Chapter Five

Additional Environmental Motifs in Classical Jewish Literature

This chapter analyzes some additional environmental motifs from classical Jewish religious literature. This is a field which requires major further exploration, and the examples given here are indicative of the potential wealth of environmental material in classical Jewish texts.

Many such motifs appear in the Midrash Aggadah, the non-halakhic elements of rabbinical interpretation of scripture. (The word Midrash is used in two ways: firstly, for a method of religious explanation of the Bible; secondly, for halakhic and aggadic writings which use this complex method of exegesis.)

No systematic attempt has yet been made to review the Aggadah for its potential relevance to the current subject. Neither will I attempt to categorize contemporary Jewish writers’ views on how ethical expressions in classical Jewish sources relate to environmental issues. Only a brief reference to both issues will be made below.

The Midrash and environmental elements

It has been demonstrated in the previous chapters that Halakha and Bible stories can be related to environmental matters: so can the Midrash motifs which will be discussed in this chapter.

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Contradictory explanations

One Midrash stresses the importance of man's position in Creation in two explanations as to why man was only created on the sixth day: "The rabbis said: 'man was created on the day before Shabbat'. Thus the heretics could not say that the Lord had a partner in creation. Another explanation: The purpose was that when he became arrogant, one could say to him that even the mosquito had been created before him."¹

The Aggadah lends itself to multiple, varied, and sometimes contradictory, interpretations which have expanded over the centuries. This becomes clear from modern Jewish writings, where individual writers may emphasize diverse aspects of a text as it is interpreted today. One environmental Midrash that is often quoted is: "God said to Adam: 'See my works, see how pleasant and good they are. Everything I have created I have created for you. Be careful not to spoil and destroy my world. If you do so no one will repair it.'"²

Yehudah Levi argues that this Midrash means that the Torah "views Man as being entrusted with the orderly and proper management of the world. Therefore we may not stand aside and watch the world being destroyed."³

Steven Schwarzschild, who openly expresses a dislike for nature, reflects laconically that this text proves there is nothing 'wrong' with trees, and that it provides the normative purpose why God pointed them out to Adam in the Garden of Eden.⁴

Bradley Shavit Artson writes: "Our distinction as a people, our very claim to preeminence in the world, rests on our ability to distinguish good from evil, to restrain our desires, to consider the whole and the holy."⁵

Mordechai Liebling claims "This Midrash contains an inherent contradiction, stressing on one hand a vision of creation that exists for the sake of humanity, and on the other hand a view of creation as a Divine unfolding, with its own value."⁶

The philosopher Lenn Goodman interprets the text differently: "Here, working at the heart of the teleological and anthropocentric conception of nature, for which the monotheistic tradition is so
often blamed, we find God commending His creation to humanity, not for its utility or commodiousness but for its beauty. And the rhetorical suasion brought to bear, by way of imparting a sense of responsibility for nature to humankind, in the person of Adam, is not the prudential concern that one must not foul one’s own nest or pollute the well one drinks from but the appeal of the preciousness and irreplaceability of each of God’s creations – whose paradigms are the trees in Eden.”

For Everett Gendler, the question is what guidance it gives for our contemporary decisions. To him, the Midrash is “a beautifully articulated appreciation of the loveliness of our natural inheritance; here, also, is clearly stated the demand that we care for and treat our planet with consideration. Reading it, can one help but ask what this might mean when we read about the destruction of the world’s rain forests? Or what should be our responses to issues concerning the treatment of our own national parks and forests?”

In my view, this Midrash also shows that ancient Jewish thought already considered the possibility of man’s one day having the potential to destroy much of the Earth which God had created. This argument returned in a modern, secular form in the discussion about a possible nuclear holocaust.

The modification of nature

In the previous chapter, a number of cases are mentioned where God modifies nature – or at least intervenes in it at a very significant moment – to reward or punish. Such miracles are also mentioned occasionally in the Mishnah and Talmud, in connection to post-Biblical figures. The following cases mention the modification of nature to reward meritorious people.

In the Mishnah it is told that when there was no rain, the people went to a sage, Honi the Circle-Drawer, and asked him to pray for rain. He then said: “Put your ovens for the Pesach holiday into the house, so that they won’t melt.” He prayed, but no rain came down. Then he drew a circle and stood in it, and said: “Lord of the world, Your children have put their hopes on me because I am like Your house-guest. I swear by Your name that I will not move from here until you show mercy upon Your children.” Then drops of rain started to fall. Honi said that this wasn’t what he had asked for, but rather for rain which would fill the wells. Then the rain came down violently. Honi said that he had not asked for this, but for benevolent rain. Then the rain fell in an orderly way.

Once, when the Israelites came to Jerusalem on pilgrimage, they had no water to drink. One of the town’s rich men, Nikodemon
Ben-Gorion went to one of the rulers and borrowed water from him. He promised that, if he did not return the water before a given time, he would pay him twelve talents of silver. When no water fell in time and the ruler asked for his money, Ben-Gorion prayed; the sun went back up into the sky, and rain fell so that he could redeem his loan.  

Another such miracle is told of R. Pinhas Ben-Yair who went to redeem some captives. On his way, he came to the River Ginai, which he could not ford. He told the river to divide so that he could cross. The river refused, saying that while the rabbi was on his way to carry out the will of his Creator, this was also what the river was doing. However, while it was doubtful whether the rabbi would be able to carry out his mission, there was no doubt that the river was carrying out his own. The rabbi then said: ‘If you do not divide yourself, I will make it your destiny that no water will ever flow through you again.’ Upon which, the river divided itself.

Learning and nature

Jeremy Benstein has reviewed how Jewish commentators over the centuries have given interpretations of a moral teaching from the Mishnah: “R. Jacob said, ‘He who is walking by the way and rehearses what he has learnt, and breaks off from his rehearsing and says, “how fine is that tree, how fine is that field”, him the Scripture regards as if he were guilty against himself.” He points to the many classical commentators – including Aba-banel – who interpret this Mishnah to mean that studying Torah takes priority over admiring nature, without meaning that nature should be denigrated. He compares this approach with that of the 19th century rabbi, Yosef Hayyim Caro, who interprets the same Mishnah as meaning that, while nature is always visible as a sign of God’s creation, the Torah’s revelation is not, and thus special attention must be given to it.

Benstein then quotes Schwarzschild, who views in a positive light Jews’ alienation from nature over the centuries, and adds: “it is no surprise... to find that our Mishnah is Schwarzschild’s ‘favorite text’.”

Sacredness and decay

Many motifs which have emerged in today’s environmental discussions are already found in the Aggadah. Some of these were mentioned earlier in this study, in the discussion on Bible texts. The motif that man is dust is developed in the Mishnah Avot: “Akavya son of Mahalel says: ‘reflect about three things which will keep you away from sin... you come from a stinking drop, you are going to a place
of dust." The third point he mentions is that man will have to account for his deeds before God. Thus the sage stresses that an affinity with dust is not man's only important characteristic.\textsuperscript{15}

One group of motifs illustrates various links between abstract concepts such as sacredness and righteousness, and concrete issues such as decay, pollution, putrefaction, destruction, disease, death and natural disaster.\textsuperscript{16} Several examples from the Bible were given in the previous chapter.

Spirituality is linked to the absence of noise. The \textit{Midrash} says that there was no noise at all when the Torah was given on Sinai: "Said R. Abahu in the name of R. Yohanan: 'When God gave the Torah birds didn't chirp or fly, no oxen mooed, angels did not fly or say "holy, holy", the sea didn't shake, humans didn't speak, the world was quiet and silent.' Then the voice came: 'I the Lord am your God.' "\textsuperscript{17}

Pollution and filth are linked to a lack of spirituality. For example, in the Mishnah \textit{Avot}, R. Simeon states: "If three have eaten at a table and have spoken there no words of Torah, it is as if they had eaten of sacrifices to dead idols, of whom it is said, 'For all their tables are full of vomit and filthiness' \textsuperscript{18}; the All-present is not (in their thoughts). But if three have eaten at a table and have spoken there words of Torah, it is as if they had eaten at the table of the All-present, to which the Scripture may be applied, And he said unto me, 'This is the table that is before the Lord.' \textsuperscript{19,20}

In the same tractate, it is pointed out that pestilence hits especially hard at four specific moments of each seven-year period. This occurrence is related to transgressions of various social/religious laws, such as selling the produce of the sabbatical year, when what has grown should only be consumed by the owner's household and by the poor.\textsuperscript{21}

In the Talmud it is written that various shortcomings of the legal system – such as the postponement of sentences, corruption of justice, the tribunal's carelessness, and neglect of the Torah – lead to the "multiplication of sword and robbery, the outbreak of pestilence and drought, while people eat without appeasing their hunger." \textsuperscript{22}

The sage R. Papa interprets a verse in the Song of Songs to mean that whoever derides the sages will be punished with boiling excrement.\textsuperscript{23} Also, before the Israelites are given laws related to food they are compared to hens picking in the dirt.\textsuperscript{24}

The following \textit{Midrash} relates how immoral behavior on environmental issues leads to cosmic disaster: "The Rabbis taught... because of four transgressions will the heavenly bodies suffer eclipse: because of forged documents, because of false testimony, because of flocks
of goats and sheep in the land of Israel, and because of the felling of good trees." 25

Various related motifs appear in classical Jewish literature. Joseph Soloveitchik, one of the most important Jewish thinkers of this century, writes that the idea that sin and sickness are the same is already found in the Bible. He interprets the following text from Psalms 103: 1-4 along the same lines: "Bless the Lord, O my soul and do not forget all His bounties. He forgives all your sins, heals all your diseases, He redeems your life from the Pit, surrounds you with steadfast love and mercy." He points out that the Bible precedes Maimonides, who "brought out and expounded the idea that a parallel exists between sickness of the mind and sickness of the body." 26 Soloveitchik sees in this and other texts parallels "between healing and forgiving, between iniquities and diseases." 27

Connecting God with cleanliness

Another Mishnah underlines a mirror image of the previous motifs: how serving God leads to cleanliness. Here, then, cleanliness is both a religious and a physical concept; it only partly coincides with the concept of a clean environment as it is currently understood. In Mishnah Avot, ten miracles that God has wrought in the Temple are listed: among these, the holy flesh never becomes putrid, no fly is seen in the slaughterhouse, no serpent or scorpion ever harms anyone in Jerusalem, nor is the Temple ever overcrowded despite the multitude of worshippers. 28

Similarly, the land of Israel is presented in the Talmud as a mirror image of pollution. The sage Zera changed his position on an issue after he immigrated to Palestine, exclaiming: "the air of the Land of Israel makes wise." 29, 30 R. Yitschak appears to echo this with the statement: "The earth of Israel causes repentance." 31 However, he is referring to an opposite phenomenon, i.e. increased interest in the commandments after the exile of the Jews to Babylon.

The angel of death is perceived to be powerless before righteous people. The Talmud relates that the angel of death comes while R. Hisda is studying in the Beit HaMidrash (house of learning). As he does not interrupt his studies, the angel cannot take his life. The angel sits on a cedar tree outside, causing it to collapse. The noise causes R. Hisda to pause in his studies, giving the angel the opportunity to take his life. 32 The Zohar offers an observation which reflects a link to these ideas: "Those who throw stinking water in front of their yard are cursed by the angels." 33

Yet another image of pollution concerns the pig, symbol of filth in the Aggadah: "Ten measures of diseases descended on the world.
Nine of these took the pig.” This may be related to another Talmudic text where it is pointed out that the pig is considered the richest animal; Rashi explains this to mean that the animal eats everything. Such indiscriminate consumption renders the pig susceptible to many diseases.

**Modern motifs**

The motif of the relationship between sin, destruction and punishment reappears continuously in varying forms. In this century, one of its manifestations is in the search for theological explanations for the Holocaust.

The motif that pollution and immorality are linked appears in a secular form in the concepts of the modern profession of environmental risk communication. Peter M. Sandman, an expert in this field, states, “American society... has decided over the last two decades that pollution isn’t just harmful – it’s evil.” The moral relevance of pollution has many consequences in the relationship between polluters and the community.

**Conspicuous consumption**

The motif of conspicuous consumption is very relevant to modern environmentalism: this is viewed as one of the major reasons for the depletion of resources while simultaneously stimulating the production of waste.

There are several references in classical Jewish literature to this motif; however, these are made only in a general moral context, and not an environmentalist one. Mishnah *Avot* says: “Who is rich, the man who is happy with what he has.” In the same Mishnah tractate, gluttony is denounced by the sage Hillel: “The more flesh, the more worms.”

Similarly, the Talmudic sage R. Yehuda states that a divine voice speaks every day “from the mountain of Horev and says that the whole world is only being nourished because of my son [the righteous] Hanina; my son Hanina, however, limits himself to the eating of a *kav* [a measure equal to 24 eggs] of carob from one Friday to another.”

One Midrash which underlines the vanity of consumption tells the story of a fox. It found a vineyard which was fenced on all sides, with only a small hole in the barrier. He wanted to enter but could not, so he fasted three days until he lost enough weight and was thin enough to get through. He then entered, ate his fill and became fat. He now wanted to get out, but could not. So he fasted another three days until he became thin again and then squeezed his way out. Once outside,
he looked at the vineyard and said: “Vineyard how good are you and your fruits, but there is no enjoyment from you. One goes out the same way one comes in. Such is the world.”

There are also references in the Midrash to abuse of certain foods, alcohol being one of them. Opposition to conspicuous consumption also appears in later Jewish literature. In his testament, the Spanish medieval scholar Ibn Kaspi tells his son to “marry a wife of good family, beautiful in form and in character. Pay no regard to money, for true wealth consists only of a sufficiency of bread to eat and raiment to wear.”

In his final testament Judah Asher, the rabbi of Toledo tells his children that they were brought into the world not for conspicuous consumption, but rather for the service of God.

Those who squander useful things not only transgress the law, but are also morally reprehensible. The Talmud says: “When somebody, in his anger, tears up clothes, breaks vessels, or scatters money, consider it as if he commits idolatry. This is the mastery of the evil inclination; today it says do this, tomorrow it says do something else, until it tells him to go and commit idolatry, and he will then go and do it.”

**Biodiversity**

The claim that biodiversity must be maintained and living nature respected, is an important goal of modern environmentalism. While we cannot blindly transpose environmentalist terminology to the world of the Midrash, this can be considered a secular version of the view which often appears in the Midrash: within God’s creation everything has a meaning.

The ‘biodiversity’ motif appears again in the Talmudic Midrash, in the teachings of the sage Resh Laqish. The raven tells Noah that God hates him because, as an unclean bird, only two of his kind are put in the Ark; while the clean birds came in sevens. He adds that Noah hates him too because he sends him out of the Ark as a spy, when he could just as well have sent a bird of a species of which there were seven. The raven says that if he should die of heat or cold, his species will disappear from the earth (adding to Noah, “Perhaps you desire my wife?”).

**Relationship with animals**

Animals are another subject which is given substantial attention in classical rabbinical literature. One Midrash cites Moses’ compassion toward animals as the reason he is chosen to lead the Israelites out of Egypt: “While our teacher Moses was tending the sheep of Jethro...”
in the wilderness a lamb ran away from him. He ran after it until it reached Hasuah. Upon reaching Hasuah it came upon a pool of water [whereupon] the lamb stopped to drink. When Moses reached it he said, 'I did not know that you were running because [you were] thirsty. You must be tired.' He placed it on his shoulder and began to walk. The Holy One, blessed be He, said, 'You are compassionate in leading flocks belonging to mortals; I swear you will similarly shepherd my flock, Israel.'

The survival of the different species is indeed protected in the Ark; however, when Noah leaves the Ark, he sacrifices some of the animals. "He contemplated – ‘Why did God command me to bring more pure than impure animals into the ark? – if not to offer sacrifices from them?’” 50 “He searched his heart, and said, ‘God has saved me from the waters of the Flood and brought me out of that enclosure – am I not obliged to offer Him sacrifices and burnt offerings?’” 51

Another frequently quoted Midrash is from the Talmud. A calf headed for slaughter hides its head in the folds of the robe of the sage R. Yehuda the Prince. He tells the calf: “Go, because that is what you have been created for.” It is then said in Heaven that, as he has no mercy, he merits punishment. On another occasion, the maidservant in the same rabbi’s employ gets rid of some young weasels while cleaning the house. The rabbi says, “Leave them alone, as ‘His mercy is upon all His works’” 52 upon which it is said in Heaven that, as he has shown mercy, he will be shown mercy too. 53

Another Midrash seems to indicate that the existence of animals is only meaningful because of the existence of man. In the Talmud the question is raised as to why almost all the animal world had to be destroyed in the Flood when it was man that had sinned. A parable from the sage R. Yehoshua ben Korcha is quoted, which tells of a man who makes a canopy for his son and buys food for the wedding feast. When his son dies a few days later, the man takes the canopy apart, saying, “I only did this for my son: what good is the canopy for me now my son has died?” The parable tells that God had said that the animals had been created for man: now that man has sinned, they have become superfluous. 54

An ambivalent story about sacrifices is given in the Talmud: “When R. Sheshet had fasted, he used to say after his prayers: ‘Lord of the world, it is known that at the time when the Temple still existed, a man who had sinned brought a sacrifice, of which only fat and blood were sacrificed, and he was forgiven. Now I have fasted, and my fat and blood have diminished; so maybe Your will that my fat and blood which has diminished will be considered as having been brought before You on the altar, and that I shall acquire Your good will.’” 55 This
can be construed as saying that, as sacrifices cannot be offered in our days, one has to find metaphoric connections to the sacrifice in one's religious actions. An opposite explanation may be possible however; vegetarian activist, R. Schwartz, comments on this text: "Perhaps a different type of sacrifice is required of us today." 56

The Bible tells us that, after the prophet Elisha has cured the water of Jericho, he goes to Bethel: "As he was going up the road, some little boys came out of the town and jeered at him, saying, 'Go away, baldhead! Go away, baldhead!' he turned around and looked at them and cursed them in the name of the Lord. Thereupon, two she-bears came out of the woods and mangled forty-two of the children." 57

The rabbis in the Talmud view the prophet's reaction very negatively. They mention that he later suffered from three illnesses, the last one of which he died from. The first illness was because "he set the bears onto the children". One may read in this the misuse of the prophet's powers through animals. 58

Another motif is that man can learn from different animals: "R. Yochanan says: 'If the Torah had not been given, we would have learned modesty from the cat [and the prohibition] of robbery from the ant [and the prohibition] of incest from the dove and decency from the rooster who, first caresses the [hen] and only afterwards mates [with her].'" 59

Midrashic sources for tree-planting

The origins of the tree-planting organized in our time by the Jewish National Fund can also be found in classical sources. Two Midrashim show that the planting of trees has an almost religious meaning:

R. Yehuda ben R. Simon teaches: "It is said, 'follow the Lord, your God.' This means follow His example. When he created the world His first action was to plant a tree, as is written, 'and God planted a tree in Eden.' So you, too, when you will enter the land of Israel, make planting of trees your first business." 60

Whoever cuts down trees will be punished accordingly. The Tosefta teaches: "Street vendors, breeders of small cattle and those who cut down good trees will never see a sign of blessing." 62

One Midrash refers to the Divine commandment to build the Tabernacle from acacia wood. "Said R. Takhlifa from Caesarea: 'God taught good manners. If man wants to build a house from a fruit tree, then tell him: 'as God, to whom everything belongs, spared fruit trees when he commanded the tabernacle to be built, you even more so [should not use fruit trees].'" 64

One of the sustainable development motifs appearing in modern environmental literature is inter-generation equity. This means that
the present generation should not diminish the life-prospects of future ones. A precursor of this idea can be found in a Midrash: “King Solomon has said: ‘He brings everything to pass precisely at its time;’ Just as others planted for you, so you shall plant for your children. Therefore scripture admonishes: ‘When you will come into the land, you shall plant.’”

This Midrash also says that if God told people the date of their deaths, they would neither plant nor build, as they would not want to take so much trouble over something which would only benefit others. However, God tells them that, even if they already found the world full of good things, they should not abstain from planting.

This motif returns from a different angle. The Israelites in the desert have to use planks for building the Tabernacle. The Midrash asks where these boards come from, and answers that Jacob the forefather planted trees when he went down to Egypt, telling his sons: “My sons, in future you will be redeemed from here and then the Lord will tell you to build the Tabernacle. Thus from now on plant cedars so that when he will tell you to make Him the Tabernacle, the cedars will be ready.” They immediately started to plant.

Another Midrash tells of a rabbi who sees a man planting a carob tree: “The rabbi inquires after how many years will it bear fruit? The man says, ‘70 years.’ The rabbi then asks whether he is assured that he will live 70 years, upon which the man replies: ‘I found carobs in the world which my ancestors planted for me; similarly, I want to plant for my descendants.’”

The extreme importance of tree-planting is emphasized in another rabbinic source: “If you held a young tree to be planted in your hand and you were told that the Messiah had come, first plant the shoot and thereafter go and welcome [the Messiah].”, i.e. the tree will continue to grow at the End of Days.

In addition to trees, plants also receive attention. R. Simon says that each plant has a guardian angel, who tells it to grow.

Inanimate matter also merits consideration. In Chapter Two a Rashi text was referred to which mentions that even stones should be treated with certain respect. This text’s origin is in the Aggadah literature: based on the Biblical verse that stones with no insight should not be disgraced [by exposing one’s nakedness to them], the Aggadah teaches that the case is that much stronger for not disgracing one’s human colleague, who was created in the Divine image.

Another modern motif which was discussed at length in the chapter on Halakha has an even broader application in the Aggadah: how one person’s actions may cause not only risk or nuisance to others, but even their destruction. The story goes that people are together
on a boat. One person starts to drill a hole in the floor of the boat under his seat. When the others protest he answers: “What do you care? I am only drilling under my place.” They answer: “The water will rise and flood us all.”

The above examples represent only a small number of the wealth of references in the Midrash literature to environmental issues. The writers identified underlying problems in the text they were commenting on, and the Midrash came to include explanations of these issues.

The fact that only modest attention has been given by modern Jewish writers to the environmental potential of the Midrash should not be considered an indication of its lack of importance. On the contrary: even from this limited selection it is evident that many questions of environmental interest existed more than a thousand years ago in the Jewish consciousness. Many of these motifs have re-emerged in somewhat different forms, and even more can be marshaled to confront a variety of the (often only partly) new questions raised by contemporary environmentalism.

Notes for Chapter Five

1 Bavli Sanhedrin 38a.
2 Ecclesiastes Rabba 7:13 (Wilna edition).
10 Bavli Ta’anit 19b–20a.
11 Bavli Hulin 7a.
13 Basing his interpretation on ancient sources, the late chief rabbi of England, Hertz, explains this Mishnah in line with this thought: “His saying states the duty of study of the Torah in extreme form. The Rabbis were certainly not indifferent to the beauty of Nature, as they prescribed various benedictions on beholding beautiful persons and
things... What is deprecated here is a willful distraction of the mind from Torah-meditation by the surrounding scenery... Actually he does not sin, as the exclamation, 'How fine is this tree', is itself an adoration of God. It is only because learning is so much more important, that the breaking off therefrom deserves condemnation.” Rabbi Hertz, Machzor Vitry and Tifereth Yisroel, ibid.


17 Exodus Rabba 29:10 (Wilna ed.)

18 Isaiah 28:8.

19 Ezekiel 41:22.

20 Pirkei Avot 3:4. Hebrew. The translation used here is by Hertz, op. cit.


22 Bavli Shabbat 33a.

23 Bavli Eruvin 21b.

24 Bavli Yoma 75b.

25 Bavli Sukkah, 29a.

26 Ibid.


29 Bavli Bava Batra 158b.

30 Yehudah Halevi (about 1075–1141) takes a similar position, stating that the residents of the Land of Israel have an advantage over the inhabitants of the rest of the world, because only in Israel can Jews reach God. He also points out that all prophecy occurred in the Land of Israel or was concerned with it. Yehudah Halevi, the Kuzari 2:12–14. Dvir. 1972. Hebrew.


32 Bavli Makot 10a.


34 Bavli Kiddushin 49b.

35 Bavli Shabbat 155b and Rashi thereon.

36 From there on it has permeated the contemporary Israeli reality. As Mordechai Gafni points out, “All too often, in the public discourse of modern Israel, we hear of bus accidents in which children are killed being ascribed by religious figures to ‘divine punishment’: There are two common responses to the Holocaust, both of which assume the punishment thesis. The first response, given most powerful expression in the works of R. Yoel Tzettelbaum, the late hasidic rebbe of Satmar, suggests that the Holocaust is punishment for the sin of Zionism. On the other end of the spectrum of belief is a book written in 1994 by a former Satmar hasid, R. Yisachar Teichtel, who suggests the opposite thesis: the Holocaust is punishment for European Jewry’s failure to respond to the divine clarion call of Zionism. European Jewry ignored God’s outstretched arm beckoning them to return to the land of Israel. The two positions, the anti-Zionist Satmar position and the pro-Zionist position of Em Habanim Smeiha – which, incidentally, is a standard text in religious Zionist schools – advance an identical argument concerning divine judgment. Both assume knowledge of God’s ways in the world. Both suggest that the
Holocaust is punishment for sin. They disagree only as to the nature of the sin." Mordechai Gafni, On the Commandment to Question. Azure, No. 1, Summer, 1996, p. 62.


40 Hertz on Ibid., 2:8.

41 Bavli Berakhot 17b.


43 Alcoholism is generally not considered an environmental issue but is relevant here in that it causes human health problems as a result of conspicuous consumption. The Babylonian Talmud mentions R. Hisda, who says: "God said to Noah: 'Noah, you should have been warned by what happened to Adam, the first man. His downfall was only caused by wine.' This seems to indicate that the tree from which Adam had eaten was a grapevine, as has been taught: 'The tree from which Adam, the first man, ate was, as R. Meir says, a grapevine, because there is nothing which brings to man so much suffering as wine.'"

44 Joseph Ibn Kaspi was born in l'Argentiere (in the Languedoc) around 1280, and died around 1340. He adds: "Why weary thyself to gain great riches, when neither thou nor any other could equal the vast store accumulated by the great mountain in our native city l'Argentiere, even though that mountain is a soul-less heap!" Quoted in: Israel Abrahams, Hebrew Ethical Wills. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, Part 1, p. 145.

45 Died 1349.

46 Ibid., p. 171: "Why, forsooth, were ye brought into this world? Not to eat and drink and wear fine linen and embroideries, but for the service of the God who hangeth the earth over nothing. And since His wisdom has ordained that the body cannot be sustained without food and raiment, He permitted man to eat, drink and clothe himself for the sustenance of the body, that body and soul might be associated to perform God's behests so long as their association continues. Food to a man is like oil to a lamp; if it have much it shines, if little it is quenched. Yet sooner is the lamp extinguished by redundancy than deficiency of oil."

47 Bavli Shabbat 105b.

48 Bavli Sanhedrin 108b.

49 Exodus Rabba 2 (on verse 2:2). Hebrew.

50 Genesis Rabba 34:9 (on verse 8:20). Hebrew.

51 Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer 23 (on Bereshit 8:20). Hebrew.

52 Psalms 145:9.

53 Bavli Bava Mezia 85a.

54 Bavli Sanhedrin 108a.

55 Bavli Berakhot 17a.


58 Bavli Sanhedrin 107b.

59 Bavli Eruvin 100b.

60 Leviticus Rabba 25:3 (on verse 19:23).

61 A collection of tannaic texts somewhat similar to the Mishnah.
63 Exodus 36:20: 'They made the planks for the Tabernacle of acacia wood, upright.'
64 Midrash Tanbuma, Parashat Vayakhel Section 9. (Warschau edition).
65 "He brings everything to pass precisely at its time; He also puts eternity in their mind, but without man ever guessing, from first to last, all the things that God brings to pass." Ecclesiastes 3:11.
66 Yalkut Shimon on Parashat Kedoshim, Section 615.
67 A similar Midrash appears in Midrash Tanbuma Parashat Kedoshim Section 8. (Warschau edition).
69 Bavli Ta'anit 23a.
72 Exodus 20:23. "Do not ascend My altar by steps, that your nakedness may not be exposed upon it." and Rashi commentary on this text.
73 Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael Parashat Yitro, Section 11. (Horowitz-Rabin edition).
74 The Midrash refers to a Bible text: "O God, Source of the breath of all flesh! When one man sins, will You be wrathful with the whole community?" Numbers 16:22.
75 Leviticus Rabba 4:6.
Conclusions

This chapter summarizes the main characteristics of Jewish attitudes to modern environmentalism and environmental issues. The strategic approach followed permits viewing the current subject in an integrated way. Directions for future development in the field of Jewish environmental studies are also indicated.

The touching points between Judaism and the modern environmental sphere are multiple and relate to many areas. These include political and religious categories and, to a lesser extent, historical, sociological, cultural and literary ones. So far, Jewish writers have largely focused on a number of individual touching points.

This 'point-focused' rather than 'field-focused' approach of modern Jewish publications is one major reason for the limited understanding of Jewish-environmental interaction. There is also a lack of overall understanding of modern environmentalism by many Jewish writers, and the subject occupies a low priority on the Jewish agenda. Furthermore, modern Jewish publications often reflect an unbalanced view of classical Judaism's position on environmental issues.

The discipline of general environmental studies has grown rapidly during the past three decades, as a result of the major inroads modern environmentalism has made in Western society’s awareness. Comprehensive Jewish environmental studies, however, have hardly begun to develop.

Many issues and motives are raised in the relatively few modern Jewish publications on the current subject. Their interrelation has usually been poorly understood due to the lack of an overall view of Judaism. This study aims at providing important elements for such a perspective.

The issues addressed

Within this context, three main issues will be addressed:

I. the views of classical Judaism on the relationship between God, man and the environment;
II. the Jewish outlook on modern environmentalism;
III. the potential for the further development of Jewish environmental studies.
I. Classical Judaism's Views on God, Man and the Environment

Judaism has developed over several millennia. Its classical literature, starting from the Bible and followed by Mishnah, Talmud and later rabbinical literature, expresses continuity in general and in environmental matters. In reading these texts through the eyes of the environmental discipline, it becomes clear that there was substantial environmental awareness — as we would now define it — in ancient Judaism. However, the attitudes to which Jewish sources refer must also be seen in the context of the time and society in which they were written. Classical Jewish literature originates in a much older society than does modern environmentalism; its world of thought reflects a different view of the meaning of human life.

Reference is made in classical Judaism to many environmental matters. Problems and thoughts on these already existed in Biblical Jewish society, but were not grouped within a specific subject frame. Integration of the classical references is required in order to develop a macro-view of Jewish attitudes toward environmental matters.

The key function of Halakha

Classical Jewish literature, including the Bible, deals primarily with the Jewish people, rather than with general humanity. Furthermore, different Jewish sources are far from equal in weight when determining Jewish attitudes toward any matters including environmental ones. Halakha is the main means for understanding the current subject. It dictates the observant Jew's normative behavior on all major matters affecting his life, including attitudes to many environmental issues. It provides substantially detailed guidelines as to how Jews must conduct themselves with regard to the ecosystem or the environment.

Many aspects of the relationship between Jews and the environment in pre-modern society have been ruled on by halakhic experts. Halakha does not allow the observant Jew freedom to act toward nature as he might perhaps wish. The multitude of rules in this area clearly indicate the place in Jewish Law of issues of environmental relevance, even if these regulations are not grouped in a 'Jewish environmental codex'.

Classical sources outside Halakha

The non-legal parts of the Bible illuminate the normative rules of the Halakha, and also provide further perspectives on other aspects of the current subject. The Bible does this primarily with respect to Jewish views on nature. It underlines repeatedly that nature is not self-standing but a manifestation of God's majesty, subordinated to
God’s will and serving a variety of Divine purposes. One of these purposes is as a tool of man’s reward or punishment.

The many environmentally-relevant references in rabbinical literature have been reviewed only in part. In these sources one finds many indications of Jewish views, expressed many centuries ago, on problems which have only recently become explicit within the modern environmental debate.

One such issue is the protection of biodiversity. The world of classical Jewish thought considers each animal and plant to have its particular function in Divine creation.

Judaism’s theocentric character

Non-halakhic Bible and Talmud texts, as well as other rabbinical literature, also express Jewish positions and value judgments on what are now seen as environmental issues. Reading all these sources together provides an overall picture of Jewish thought and prescribed behavior. It shows that Judaism does not take the matter of the environment lightly.

An integrated review of a cross-section of Halakha referring to the environment, together with an analysis of other Jewish sources, emphasizes the strong theocentric character of classical Judaism.

The classical sources stress that the Jew’s role is to recognize and serve God – creator of the world – in any variety of ways commanded by Him. These commandments should be applied to new situations by rabbinical scholars, following Divine principles.

Diverse attitudes exist in the Jewish tradition with regard to environmental issues and there are differences on these between various classical Jewish thinkers which have yet to be seriously assessed. However, these are secondary within the theocentric value system of Judaism.

Jewish anthropocentrism is a misnomer

Pluralism in contemporary Judaism sometimes resembles a cacophony. However, no Jewish writer has been identified who considers nature sacrosanct. Attitudes on many issues in classical Jewish sources are not homogeneous either, but a major core of environmental Halakha exists, which is not contested by any observant Jew. These laws refer to all areas of current environmental concern: natural resources, the relationship to nature, pollution and the allocation of space. There is also a substantial number of Halakhot referring to the relations between man and animals. On several more detailed issues there are significant differences between rabbinical positions concerning, inter alia, vegetarianism and the treatment of several elements of nature.
An integrated review of environmental halakhic rules clarifies that the discussion as to whether Judaism is anthropocentric or biocentric is misplaced. Judaism is theocentric, not anthropocentric; and no classical tradition even remotely affirms biocentrism.

The observant Jew is not free to eat all that is available, whenever it is available; even within marriage, he or she is not allowed to have sexual intercourse whenever they please. On one day of the week, the Shabbat, permitted activities and movements are limited. The same is true for the Holy Days. There is no full freedom to do with one's property as one wishes. There are halakhic prohibitions against the causing of pain to animals or random wanton destruction, both of nature and inanimate matter. Halakha is opposed to many elements of conspicuous consumption: its multiple rules set behavioral limits to such an attitude.

There are many other constraints besides these major ones. Such a value system contradicts anthropocentricity when the latter term is interpreted to indicate that humanity is free to do with the environment whatever it wants. Even those classical Jewish writers - e.g. Nachmanides - who indicate that the main purpose of Creation was for man, deny that man can do whatever he wants with nature.1 Certainly the Jew cannot.

That man must serve God does not mean that animals or nature are his equals. However insignificant both Jew and nature are compared to God, the former is permitted to supersede almost all Divine laws, including those regarding nature, in order to save his life.

With regard to their relationship with Jews, the Jewish tradition can be described in contemporary terminology as giving both animals and nature a variety of 'rights'. From a Jewish viewpoint, this is better described by saying that the Jews are subject to restrictions in their relations to them, rather than using the expression 'rights'.2

There has been little contemporary development of environmental Halakha. Further development in many directions can be initiated, for example, by individuals interested in environmental matters submitting queries to rabbinical authorities. On the basis of some precedents it can reasonably be assumed that they will receive rulings.

II. Judaism's Attitudes Toward Modern Environmentalism

Does Judaism have anything to say to environmentalists? Put this way, the question is difficult to answer, and requires additional questions such as 'which Judaism?' and 'explicitly or implicitly?' Contemporary Judaism is so heterogeneous that the answer should be that certain Jews feel that they have something to say to environmentalists
in the name of Judaism, but these views are not shared by many other Jews. A summary of the views of Jews who have expressed themselves on this matter is found in Chapter Two.

Phrasing the question differently – for example, does classical Judaism or its continued contemporary expression, Orthodoxy, have anything to say to environmentalists? – the answer should not be directed specifically at environmentalists because it does not address any adherents of specific ‘isms’. Orthodox Judaism, however, does have something explicit to say to humanity on environmental matters, as it considers that mankind should respect the Noachide commandments, which include two relevant components with regard to nature. The first one is that there is only one God, Who should be revered; thus there is no place for the sanctification of nature or elements of it. God can make things sacred; He specifically did not make nature so. The second one is that animals should not be cruelly treated, enlarging on the ever min habai concept.

Orthodox Judaism may also have many implicit matters to say to environmentalists through the halakhic system, as well as through its world of thought. As environmentalism is such a fragmented movement, each person or group must determine whether this is a matter of interest. Should Orthodox Judaism see it as an important task to carry the implicit message to the nations of its own initiative? The answer seems to be ‘no’; it has different priorities on its agenda.

The analysis of Jewish attitudes toward modern environmentalism and environmental matters is important, however, for a variety of purposes. The first is that there is significant halakhic literature in what is nowadays a separate field; this Halakha should not be neglected. Furthermore, there are Jews interested in environmentalism, and any legitimate tool to keep individuals within the Jewish people should be explored. Also, as the Jewish people is part of society at large, for whom ‘the environment’ is a major concern, the Jewish community should participate in discussing and solving the problems, as long as this does not contradict Jewish values (for example, if one has to declare that nature is sacred).

It is in this light that the following should be read. After over 30 years in the modern mainstream, the environmental discourse, its underlying motives and perplexities are still not easily accessible. As society’s attitudes to environmental matters become more institutionalized, comprehension of the latter may become easier. Still, in the future an overall understanding of modern environmentalism will also remain a precondition for the identification and competent reading of classical Jewish sources relevant to environmental matters. (It
is to a large extent from these classical sources that Judaism’s attitude toward modern environmentalism must be derived.)

At the outset of this study, exploring Judaism’s view on modern environmentalism was based on reviewing modern publications. In the course of the study, a strategic view of Judaism on environmental matters has been developed from the reading of a cross-section of relevant classical Jewish sources.

As a result of this study, one can now also analyze modern environmentalism without the intermediation of reviewing modern Jewish publications. This includes issues such as attacks against Judaism, and the compatibility of Judaism and environmentalism. The overall view obtained also permits critical analysis of the ideas expressed by contemporary Jewish writers.

Some of these writers have viewpoints that diverge from classical Jewish positions. There is no Jewish basis for an ‘eco-kashrut’ approach, even if there is no objection to Jews’ applying life-cycle analysis in what they eat and consume.\(^3\)

**Different sets of values and origins**

Judaism and modern environmentalism have different sets of values and origins. Their approaches to a variety of practical issues may sometimes coincide: both could broadly agree on avoiding wanton destruction and many other matters; Jewish animal welfare concepts are certainly closer to those of environmentalists than to those of the Spaniards cheering in stadiums when the bull is continuously tortured, then finally killed.

Buffalo Bill\(^4\) could never have been a Jewish folk hero the way he became an American one. The massive hunting of buffalo for railroad camps is not something which could rank high in the esteem of the Jewish tradition.

The Jewish approach that everything in creation has a function – which provides a compelling reason for maintaining biodiversity – leads to a conclusion which secular environmentalists should gladly go along with. However, the value systems behind the opinions held in common are quite different. Environmentalism and Judaism are not parallel in their main concerns; nor do they aim at similar goals. Even where the concepts of the two seem to coincide, analysis often shows that, not only do they draw from different points of view, but also from different value cultures.

**No place for two central values**

The more environmentalist currents have the character of a value system, seeing the protection of the ecosystem as the central task of
society, the more alien their world of thought is to Judaism, which sees recognition of God and obedience to Him as central. There is no place within Judaism for two different central values.

Deep ecologists are among those environmentalists who have gone farthest in developing a value system. Biocentrism is incompatible with traditional Judaism, which does not consider man and animal to be at the same level, however distant both may be from God.⁵

Those environmentalists who see nature as sacrosanct are effectively expressing neo-paganism. This is diametrically opposed to the world of Jewish values, which has its origins in the affirmation of a single God and in the struggle against paganism and its idols.

This incompatibility has few practical consequences, however. The threats that deep ecology poses to Judaism are very limited. There are no countries with deep ecologist rulers, and its influence as a value system is limited.

Reassessing White’s accusations

Lynn White’s accusations with regard to the relation between environmental degradation and the Judeo-Christian tradition should be reassessed from an integrated Jewish perspective. He only referred in a very limited way to Judaism, as his article mainly dealt with Christianity’s responsibility for the environmental crisis.

His first observation concerning Judaism was: “Our daily habits of action, for example, are dominated by an implicit faith in perpetual progress which was unknown either to Greco-Roman antiquity or to the Orient. It is rooted in, and is indefensible apart from, Judeo-Christian teleology. The fact that Communists share it merely helps to show what can be demonstrated on many other grounds: that Marxism, like Islam, is a Judeo-Christian heresy.” ⁶

White’s remark with respect to Judaism was a superficial generalization. It is extremely doubtful that classical Judaism has an implicit faith in perpetual progress, even if it embraces the idea of a glorious end of the days when the Messiah will come. Few, if any, observant Jews would oppose the statement that their religion sees the patriarchs as better human beings than the greatest contemporary Jewish sages. Ancient Jewish sources state that the generations decline the further away they are from the giving of the Torah on Sinai. The Talmud says: “The fingernail of the early teachers is superior to the waist of the later ones.” ⁷ ⁸

The rabbis in the Talmud could not make a halakhic statement if it contradicted the opinion of a mishnaic authority, who lived hun-
hundreds of years earlier, unless they based their statement on another mishnaic authority. This reflects a state of mind which is the opposite of what ‘faith in perpetual progress’ means.

Furthermore, White did not develop his thesis on Jewish legitimization of the spoliation of nature by reviewing the multiple references to environmental issues in the Halakha, or even in the Bible and its commentators. He quoted a single Bible text – Genesis 1:28 – without reference to other texts or traditional Jewish sources. His implicit, broad accusation of Judaism, mentioned in passing while he dealt with Christianity, was thus based on an exceedingly limited view of Judaism.

White then continued: “Christianity inherited from Judaism not only a concept of time as nonrepetitive and linear but also a striking story of creation. By gradual stages a loving and all-powerful God had created light and darkness, the heavenly bodies, the earth and all its plants, animals, birds, and fishes. Finally, God had created Adam and, as an afterthought, Eve, to keep man from being lonely. Man named all the animals, thus establishing his dominance over them. God planned all of this explicitly for man’s benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man’s purposes”.

Here White was wrong again. In Judaism’s world of thought, Creation serves God’s plans first and foremost. Many things are there to teach man a lesson, rather than serve his purposes as he sees them. Unless otherwise proven, one has to assume that White was ignorant about essential elements of classical Judaism.

Concrete fields of conflict

Judaism has few problems with modern environmentalism with respect to many practical issues. Health protection, pollution control, sustainable cities and animal welfare all have their place in Judaism. There is often a difference between the two, however, as to which basic concept they represent and consequently where the emphasis should be laid.

Neither is the fact that classical Judaism and environmentalism seem to reach similar practical conclusions on several major environmental issues a random result. Both are concerned about the environment as a major problem area confronting civil society. In the case of Judaism, the search for solutions has been carried out in a theocentric civil society.

As mentioned before, Jewish civil society (however vague a concept that may seem today) has its underpinnings in Halakha. This is rather a different concept from that of modern environmentalist
civil society (however undefined) which is based on a variety of opinions and beliefs, many of which are secular in nature.

There are some practical conflicts between Judaism and some environmentalist currents — such as animal protection movements in particular — with regard to religious slaughter. These tensions existed well before modern environmentalism became a mainstream movement. As environmentalism deals with so many issues and its values are so different from Judaism, future tensions may develop on other issues.

III. Jewish Environmental Studies

The strategic perspective thus acquired also enables conclusions to be made in the field of scholarship. There are so many categories — with so many elements — of Jewish-environment interaction that there is a space for a new, distinct field of Jewish environmental studies. A comprehensive view within the framework of a single field is also necessary in order to deepen understanding of Jewish attitudes toward the environment. It is mainly by seeing the various Jewish environmental issues as part of a whole that significant scholarly progress can be made.

There is a considerable body of classical Jewish literature, comprising texts of very diverse natures. By reviewing this corpus systematically, a more detailed picture of Judaism’s attitude toward the environment can be obtained. This will require much additional study by scholars familiar with both Judaism and environmentalism.

Issues to be studied include detailed assessments of environmental Biblical and rabbinical halakhic texts, other Biblical texts and the Aggadah. Attitudes of various Bible commentators and rabbinical attitudes toward environmental issues over the centuries should also be compared. The same goes for Jewish mystical literature.

A further tool for gaining insight into Jewish attitudes toward the environment is the gradual development of hierarchical mapping of environmental Halakhot and other expressions of value judgments in classical Jewish sources. Responsa in the environmental field to be issued in the future by halakhic authorities are likely to provide further stimuli for research in this field.

The behavior toward the environment of Jewish communities in the Land of Israel and the Diaspora throughout history has hardly been touched upon. Israel’s and Zionism’s attitudes toward the environment and their motives merit much more study than has been carried out so far. This should be done within the framework of a
much broader assessment of the political and behavioral relation of the Jewish people to environmental issues and environmentalism. Another requirement is a deeper understanding of what causes the discrepancy between the many references in classical Judaism to environmental issues and the lack of interest of large parts of the Orthodox community in environmental aspects of life.

Thus it is in the field of scholarship that the major environmental challenge to Judaism lies. As mentioned, however, political and behavioral aspects should also be given attention.

Notes for Conclusions

1. Humanity's God-given role toward nature is defined in much less detail in classical Jewish sources than normative Jewish behavior toward it.

2. Bleich points out that "in Jewish law no less than in other systems of law, neither the animal nor its guardian is granted *persona standi in judicio*, i.e., the animal lacks capacity to institute judicial proceedings to prevent others from engaging in acts of cruelty of which it may be the victim. This is so despite the unique provision in Jewish law to the effect that an animal that has committed an act of manslaughter is subject to criminal penalty but is entitled to due process of law, including a right analogous to the Sixth Amendment right of confrontation, viz., the requirement that the proceedings take place only in the presence of the accused animal." J. David Bleich, *Contemporary Halakhic Problems*. New York: Ktav, 1989, Vol. 3, pp. 203–4. For Helfand, however, rights do exist; see *Ecology and the Jewish Tradition: A Postscript*. *Judaism*, Vol. 20 No. 3, Summer, 1971, pp. 330–335.

3. Neither is there a basis in classical Judaism for Truster's biocentric compromises nor for Wyschogrod's reflections that Jewish prophets should have listened more to what those of the Baal had to say. Classical Jewish sources say very clearly why they should not have listened.


5. Biocentrists certainly cannot recognize themselves to any extent in the words of Joseph B. Soloveitchik: "When man, the crowning glory of the cosmos, approaches the world, he finds his task at hand—the task of creation. He must stand on guard over the pure, clear existence, repair the defects in the cosmos, and replenish the 'privation' in being. Man, the creature, is commanded to become a partner with the Creator in the renewal of the cosmos; complete and ultimate creation—this is the deepest desire of the Jewish people." Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1983, p. 105.


7. Bavli *Yoma* 9b, where the matter of the relative importance of the earlier versus the later generations is also discussed in further detail.

8. This is expressed, *inter alia*, in several other Talmud texts. Rabba son of Bar Hana, says "... The early generations are not like the later generations. The early generations turned the Torah in to their main occupation and their work into an auxiliary one. Thus
they were successful in both. The later generations turned their work into their main occupation and the Torah into an auxiliary one. Thus they failed in both.” Bavli Brakhot 35b. The decline of the generations is also emphasized by the sage Zeira’s saying: “If the first were sons of angels, we are mortal people. And if the first were mortal people, we are like asses.” To make it perfectly clear, he adds that he does not refer to the asses of two important scholars, which showed understanding, but “to the rest of the asses”. Bavli Shabbat 112b.

9 The fact that binding Halakha is decided by contemporary rabbis does not change this, as they must base their decisions on their predecessors’ rulings.


11 Ibid., p. 20.