

## Is Environmentalism a Jewish Issue?

It's hard to escape the notion that the Earth is disintegrating, spiraling out of control in an environmental meltdown of our own making that will, at some point, be beyond repair. It's hard to escape this notion because the story is everywhere: on film, on the covers of leading national magazines, on street corners where canvassers corner passersby for "just a moment" of their time to talk about Mother Earth.

Putting aside for a moment whether global warming will prove to be a perennial or ephemeral phenomenon, in recent years there has been an effort on the part of many Jewish organizations to make "the environment" a Jewish issue. But is it? Is the idea that we should show respect for the Earth, disown Styrofoam plates, drive hybrid automobiles, recycle our trash - to cite just a few examples - a Jewish notion? Is there anything in our tradition that points to environmental consciousness as a Jewish value?

To debate the point, we asked two essayists, **Jay Michaelson** and **Edward Bernard Glick**, to examine the idea. We hope their perspectives will only be an opening point for discussion of an issue that, whether it has a place in our religious tradition or not, may have a lasting effect on our future.

- *Gerald Burstyn*

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## Yes: Our ethical behavior matters to God

by **Jay Michaelson**

How are we to read sacred text? Sometimes traditional Jews read expansively, sometimes narrowly and sometimes entirely metaphorically. An example of the expansive mode is how three verses admonishing Israelites not to cook a kid in its mother's milk have been interpreted to require two sets of dishes and a wait of six hours between eating chicken (which do not nurse their young) and dairy. On the other hand, the Sages read clear admonitions to stone Sabbath-breakers, kill rebellious sons and excuse debts so narrowly that they have no application at all. And of course, mandated sacrifice was constrained entirely to the Temple, replaced by the Talmudic rabbis with prayer.

So when we turn to the rabbinic requirements not to waste (*bal tashchit*), derived from the Torah's injunction against cutting down fruit trees when laying siege to a city, how do we apply them today? Do we build a fence around the Torah (as traditional Jews have done with electricity, bio-ethics and a host of other subjects) and extend the prohibition to require recycling or prohibit the use of disposable plates? Or do we say that the Torah has nothing to say about such matters?

Literalism will not help us here because our biblical and rabbinic ancestors had no concept of environmentalism. An ideal of "preserving the natural environment" depends on the ability to destroy it, and so looking in second century text for environmentalism is like looking in today's legal codes for laws regarding the destruction of planets and asteroids.

Not only is biblical text silent on environmentalism specifically, it is ambiguous on matters related to it. For example, God's famous injunction to "rule the earth and subdue [it]" has been read by

some, including many critics of Judaism, as permitting or even mandating the despoiling of nature by humankind. But lately the same verse has become a watchword of Jewish environmentalists, who read the Hebrew "*u'rdu et ha'olam*" as requiring wise stewardship, not devastation. If we are to act as God's designated overseers of the world, surely we should protect our charge, rather than destroy it. Given that both interpretations are plausible, which is correct?

Because of these ambivalences, many have said that there can be no "true" Jewish environmentalism and that attempts to create one force a political agenda on a tradition with no opinion about it. This is not the case, however, for three reasons.

First, there is the pressing nature of environmentalism itself. If the scientific consensus about global warming is correct (and today, it is disputed only by a few marginal outliers and paid lackeys of big business), then climate change may become the greatest crisis of the 21st century. And it is largely an ethical crisis, caused by how we act and how we balance our selfish desires against the greater good. Environmentalism is personal, not political; it begins with our own ethical actions and from there widens to the political choices we make. As such, it is a quintessentially Jewish question. Surely, if it stands for anything at all, Judaism stands for the proposition that our ethical actions matter - indeed, they matter to God. Given the enormity of contemporary environmental problems, a Judaism that ignores them would risk irrelevance. Yes, the context is novel, to many, but the general imperatives are not.

Second, we are not totally in the dark; there are precedents in Jewish law for environmental regulation. The most polluting industry in the time of the Talmud, for example, was that of leather tanning, which creates what we now call air pollution and water pollution, both of which were known even in Talmudic times to cause health problems. And, we find, the rabbis set forth all manner of regulations, regulating where tanneries can be sited and how damages are to be apportioned. Many Jews logically extend these ethical norms to other pollution-causing activities, be they individual (wasting energy, generating greenhouse gases) or collective. Once again, this is not novel; it is how *halacha* has progressed for centuries.

Third, in addition to the "hard" legal material, there is abundant "soft" material in our poetic and mystical traditions to support a Jewish environmental ethic. The psalmist gazes at the stars and is inspired to religious poetry. The mystic envisions the world as a complex ecosystem of energies, balances and interrelationships. And, time and time again, we read of our heroes retreating into nature for spiritual communion, sometimes even perceiving God in nature itself - not as part of nature, not solely as a natural force, but as what Wordsworth called "a motion and a spirit which impels all thinking things / and runs through all things / whose dwelling is the light of the setting sun" and which the Hasidim recognized as the *ruach hakodesh* (divine inspiration). Clearly, to regard the world as God's creation is to revere it, to respect it and not to treat it as a commodity.

For all three of these reasons, I think it is clear that the fundamental norms of Judaism - not a few outlying verses but basic tenets of the faith - lead to the conclusion that we must respect, revere and honor the natural world as God's creation. But what does that Jewish environmentalism mean in *tachlis*, in practice?

First, and perhaps as a threshold matter, a Jewish environmental ethic is not going to consist of touchyfeely, hortatory and ultimately toothless statements about being nice to Mother Earth. No, it will entail requirements, obligations and admonitions. It's all very nice to accentuate the positive, feel good about changing light bulbs from incandescent to fluorescent and plant a tree in Israel every now and then. But if we're serious that Judaism requires environmental stewardship, then we have to say some difficult things.

For example, owning an SUV, except in rare cases, is a transgression of *bal tashchit*, the prohibition on waste. Not an alternative lifestyle - a violation of the law. Except when such a vehicle is actually

needed, it wastes energy and unnecessarily accelerates climate change, all in the name of serving the *yetzer hara*, the selfish inclination. Likewise, buying a house far bigger than one needs or failing to recycle are also violations of *bal tashchit*. The details will, of course, vary, and there is little black and white; for some people, a large car is necessary to take children to school while for others, it's just waste. But the norm, and its moral-religious weight, is clear. Selfishness is not stewardship and disregarding the Earth is not an act of *kedusha* (holiness).

This kind of language may not be popular, but I submit that this sternness of vision is what our Jewish tradition demands. Of course, we must not be judgmental; none of us is perfect and none can stand in judgment of another. Nor need we be dour or fanatical; life is a gift to be enjoyed, and Jewish law is famously accommodating of humanity. Sometimes, *nu*, you make accommodations. But the Ten Commandments are not suggestions. The Golden Rule is not a "guideline." If Judaism means anything, it means taking seriously our ethical responsibilities - and not waffling on the details.

Second, and moving to the substance, there are, I think, a few basic practical norms that flow naturally from *bal tashchit*, from rabbinic notions of environmental responsibility and from the general sense of the natural world as sacred and God-created. These include:

**Fight climate change.** God did not create the world so we could slowly incinerate it. Jews must demand that our leaders sign binding emission reduction agreements. We must factor environmental impact into our consumer choices. We should consider offsetting our climate expenditures by planting trees (including in Israel, via the JNF's new carbon-offset program and other mechanisms). Ignorance is no excuse. If you want information, watch Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*; if you doubt Gore or want more information, read the reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. In general, we must regard climate change as an ethical dilemma, important to God and demanding our political and personal involvement.

**Consider eco-kashrut.** One way Jewish environmentalism has evolved in the last decade is "eco-kashrut" - not in the sense of literally expanding the kashrut regulations but in asking new kinds of questions about health and environmental responsibility. Was this animal slaughtered ethically? Is this produce local (and thus not shlepped across the world by burning oil) and if not, could I substitute it with some that is? Is it ever O.K. to eat on foam plates?

**Green our homes and institutions.** We can teach our children environmental values (and general ethical norms like thrift, cooperation, self-restraint and personal responsibility) by greening our homes and synagogues. The Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL)'s Greening Synagogues initiative can give your shul clear instructions on how to do better. To me, a vast synagogue edifice atop a meticulously pesticided lawn is something close to abomination. I think what God wants of our places of worship is holiness and ethical integrity, not an artificial ideal of nature on a leash. Which are the more Jewish values?

**Encourage our rabbis to get serious.** For traditional Jews, all these norms are nice enough, but without a rabbinic *teshuvah*, they have no force of law. Even for nontraditional Jews, a rabbinic imprimatur says much about the importance of the value. Thus, we need to educate the rabbinate about the grave nature of these problems and encourage them to reach their own decisions about their application to Jewish law. Imagine a Jewish law that said nothing about using a car on Shabbat or had no opinion about abortion, chemotherapy or organ donation. It would become irrelevant - precisely the danger in this case.

These norms, and many more like them, are all derived from applying the traditional rules of *bal tashchit* and the imperatives of the Jewish religious tradition to contemporary problems. They are no less Jewish than asking whether one may use electricity on Shabbat or pay workers less than a living wage.

But they are not matters of opinion. We may disagree about political issues, but ethical responsibilities are not subject to our preference. Environmentalism is not a luxury, not paganism, not a fad and not the latest cause of the left. It is a serious ethical and practical response to unprecedented changes on our planet, including the quadrupling of world population in the last century and a massive spike in average temperature. And so we turn to Judaism in this matter, not in order to fit everything into the Jewish religion or because other Jewish values are somehow insufficient, but because we turn to Judaism for advice, and law, on all pressing ethical questions. That's what it's there for. And, no surprise, it reminds us to be less selfish, more responsible and "holy, for I the Lord am holy."

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## **No: Not every issue is a Jewish issue**

**by Edward Bernard Glick**

Many Jews, particularly those who are young, educated, secular and well off, see themselves as citizens of the world. I met these Jews - Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist and unaffiliated - when I was a full-time professor and now I encounter them in places like Portland, Ore., where I have retired, and the San Francisco Bay area, which I often visit.

If these Jews were to publish a manifesto, its first paragraph would read: "As universalists in spirit and ethics, and as a scattered people who, except in Israel, always live in two cultures, we Jews must take the lead in narrowing national and religious differences. It is incumbent upon us to save the world."

For the Jews I am describing, saving the world is much more important than saving the Jewish people - including the people of the State of Israel. While they may not wish to see the Jewish state wiped off the map, as Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad has frequently vowed to do, too many of them would not sit shiva if Israel were to perish.

While Noam Chomsky, Tony Judt and Norman Finkelstein may be the three most famous anti-Israel members of the Jewish professoriate, they certainly are not the only ones. Sadly, I have encountered more than one Jewish academic who feels that Israel might have to be sacrificed for the "greater good." And what is that greater good? The prevention of nuclear holocausts. For without Israel, they reason, the Arabs and Muslims will be placated, Islamic terrorism will vanish forever, and the earth will be a much safer and better place in which to live.

Many of these young, educated, secular and well-off Jews are consumed not with traditional Jewish concerns like group survival, but with new postmodernist and politically correct concerns - environmentalism chief among them. As their coreligionists before them have done, they take their cue from *tikkun olam* (repair of the world) and from Hillel's famous Talmudic triad, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, who am I? If not now, when?" However, to my mind, they erroneously emphasize the second sentence in favor of the others.

Who can possibly be against ecology, which is the branch of biology that deals with the interactions between organisms and their environment? Who can possibly be opposed to American Jews doing everything they can to cleanse the environment? Indeed, I own not one but two Toyota Priuses, and I am delighted that my cars are spewing fewer unhealthy toxins into the atmosphere. I am also

happy that I am doing my part to decrease America's dependence on Arab oil. But that does not mean, when I am wearing my Jewish cap instead of my American cap, that I want to make the environment a more predominant Jewish issue than, say, the state of Jewish education in the Diaspora.

In 2001, the political scientist Manfred Gerstenfeld suggested in a Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs publication that we should create a new academic discipline: Jewish Environmental Studies. His proposal makes sense in Israel, where nearly every citizen is Jewish and almost every problem, from security to the environment, is *ipso facto* a Jewish one. But in the Diaspora, as Hillel Halkin has written, "There are Jews who care - as we all should - about the physical health of the planet we live on. But for that, you don't have to be Jewish."

Outside of academia, there are a growing number of Jewish writers and organizations making environmentalism a cause célèbre. For example, the Jewish group Hazon (which means "vision" in Hebrew) lists on its Web site eight reasons for the greening of Judaism: the Genesis creation stories; Judaism's agricultural roots; the cycles of the Jewish year; the Sabbath, which "teaches that there are higher values than production and consumption"; *shmitta*, the biblical concept of letting the land rest every seventh year; the biblical concept of *peah*, which enjoins Jewish farmers to leave a corner of their fields unharvested for the poor to pick and which "connects ecological issues with human values"; the writings of rabbis and scholars from Maimonides to Abraham Joshua Heschel on protecting God's creation; and the frequent references in Jewish texts and synagogue sermons to the Torah as the "tree of life."

There is also the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL), whose catchy slogan is "Protecting Creation, Generation to Generation." On its Web site, COEJL proudly proclaims that it "represents 29 national Jewish organizations spanning the full spectrum of Jewish religious and communal life and serves as the voice of the organized Jewish community on environmental issues in Washington, D.C., and around the country." It proclaims as well that it "has enacted a distinctively Jewish programmatic and policy response to the environmental crisis."

But this is precisely my point: the environment is a problem, but it is not a *Jewish* problem and therefore it does not belong on a Jewish agenda. Eco-Judaism and its ideational and organizational offshoots are irrelevant to the Jewish community. They are irrelevant because Jews in America are totally free to operate within other groups. Since even the Jews, as wealthy as they may be, have finite fiscal and human resources, it is unnecessary and unwise to create another "branch" of Judaism; and to establish, staff and fund - and add still another entity to - what the late Dr. Nahum Goldmann, president of the World Jewish Congress, used to call "our over-organized Jewish chaos." Instead, since life is always a matter of priorities, Jews - as Jews - should turn their energies to areas that are existentially crucial to the Jewish people.

In this 21st century - when intermarriage is rife; when even Jews who marry other Jews have a negative birthrate; when United States Jewry is declining in number, percentage, prestige and power; when Islam seeks to subjugate all other faiths and the Koran preaches that "the unbelievers are your inveterate enemies"; when Iran threatens Israel with nuclear annihilation; when European Jews face levels of antisemitism not seen since the days of Adolf Hitler - American Jewry must remember and reorder its priorities *constantly*.

Global warming is not a greater threat to Jews than Islamic terror. Using longer-lasting light bulbs is not on a par with putting a *mezuzah* on your doorposts. Driving a hybrid automobile is not a biblical or a Talmudic mitzvah. Biking to work may make you feel virtuous, but it doesn't make you more Jewish. And recycling your trash and newspapers does not give you any special consideration when you finish walking on this earth and ascend to Heaven. What may give you a leg up with the Almighty is what you did personally to continue the marvelous thousands-year-old Jewish journey. It is not tribalism or particularism to want the Jewish people to continue to live. Those American Jews

of any age or status who have no interest in or who reject the concept of *hemshech* (Jewish continuity) have been mis-educated by both their parents and their teachers.

If Hillel were alive today, he would tell the extreme tikkun olam-nikim that they are misinterpreting him. If he were speaking to them in modern Hebrew, he would tell them to get their *adifuyot* (priorities) in order and remind them that the most important sentence in his "Sayings of the Fathers" verse is the first one: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" and not the second. He might also tell them: saving the owls, the trees, the whales, the frogs or even the environment is not more critical than saving the Jews because before the Jews can save anything or anyone, they must first save themselves. Before they can be either good or bad in this world, they must first be.

Diaspora Jews, including those in the United States, are accustomed to living in two societies: a Jewish one and a larger one of which they are part. In both societies, they are obliged to take stands each day. But they are also obliged to note that not every issue is a Jewish one. For if every issue becomes a Jewish issue, then nothing is a Jewish issue. And if nothing is a Jewish issue, then the Jewish journey will come to an end, and no one, including the most devoted Gentile environmentalists, will worry about the Jews, fight for them and, when they are bloodied and beaten, weep for them.

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