
Conservative Judaism

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The Sharpening Struggle for Israel's Environment¹

*David B. Brooks and
Joseph Shadur*

The fortieth year of the State of Israel—1988—looked promising with respect to her environment. For the first time, a Ministry of the Environment had been established by the government.

Located at the junction of three continents, Israel has long been viewed as lying athwart trade routes and political interests. In a similar way it straddles ecosystems—close to the southern limit for northern habitats and close to the northern limit for southern ones. This means that her 20,000 square kilometers, over half of them arid or semi-arid, constitute an amazingly varied and highly sensitive environment with a wealth of landscape and species diversity.

Some 2,600 species of plant life (130 of which are indigenous to Israel), 480 bird species, seventy breeds of mammals and ninety types of reptiles may be found in Israel.²

The rapid development of Israel as a modern nation aspiring to Western standards has placed extreme pressure upon these delicately balanced, vulnerable ecosystems. Ecological problems were almost totally ignored by the generation of state-builders who—in the effort to absorb immigrants, secure defenses and establish an infrastructure—unwittingly destroyed unique natural resources. Spurred by the alarming damage to hallowed and beautiful landscapes and the evident loss of flora and fauna, a dynamic environmental movement arose, culminating in 1953 with the creation of the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI).

¹Portions of this article were previously published in David B. Brooks, "Israel and the Environment: Signs of Progress", *Reconstructionist* LV:4 (March-April, 1990), pp. 17-19.

²"The Protection of Natural Values in Israel", *Israel Nature Bulletin*, XIII:3 (Summer, 1990/5750), p. 5. See also Joseph Shadur, "Nature Protection in Israel", *Ariel* Number 55 (1983), and Yehuda Feliks, *Nature and Man in the Bible* (New York: The Soncino Press, 1981).

Religion," *Journal of the American
Metaphorical Theology* (Philadelphia:

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From hesitant beginnings, the SPNI has grown into Israel's largest non-political voluntary organization, with a superb national educational network encompassing hundreds of thousands of people, spearheading a strong environmentalist lobby. Its concentrated nature conservation activities have brought much of the public and many politicians to understand that *not only the health of Israel's citizens but the health of its economy depends on careful protection (and, in too many cases, restoration) of the environment.*

Thus in late 1988, when a new government was being formed and an additional cabinet seat was required to balance the coalition, the choice fell to environment, and the Ministry of the Environment came into being. Perhaps this is not the kind of origin from which legends are made, but nevertheless it was the right move at the right time, a step that had long been advocated by the SPNI and by Israel's leading environmentalists.

The previously existing Environmental Protection Service (EPS), a department of rather circumscribed powers within the Ministry of the Interior, became the core of the new Ministry. Dr. Uri Marinov, the competent head of EPS, became its Director-General. The EPS had been created in 1973, following the first United Nations Conference on the Environment in 1972. Despite its chronically inadequate budget, the EPS developed a good professional staff and made a significant contribution to tackling the wide gamut of environmental problems in Israel.³

Placing environmental affairs on an authoritative footing within the Government was needed above all, to give them high priority in decisions involving natural resources. Creation of the new Ministry was a beginning toward integrating within its jurisdiction all governmental functions dealing with the environment. The Ministry of the Environment now has primary authority in the fields of air and marine water quality, noise pollution and solid and hazardous wastes. It shares responsibility for environmental planning and for Israel's protected nature and historic areas—national parks and nature reserves.

Progress, however, has been slow. Other government ministries, aware of the growing political power in environmental affairs, have clung tenaciously to their "turf". For example, the Ministry of Agriculture controls pesticides and water policies, and the powerful Nature Reserves Authority remains under it. The Ministry of Health enforces water quality standards. Thus, as we know from the past, the mere establishment of a new ministry cannot assure effective implementation of its purported mandate.

Moreover, the initial energies of the Ministry of the Environment may have dissipated, at least in part. The capable, young first Minister of the Environment, Ronni Milo, who for a time seemed likely to provide the Ministry with clout in the Cabinet, has moved to politically greener pastures as Minister of Police. His previous cabinet function has been assumed by the Prime Minister, who understandably is busy with other concerns.⁴

³*Israel Environment Bulletin*, Special Anniversary Issue, XI:2 (Winter-Spring, 1988/5748).

⁴Since the preparation of this article, Yigal Bibi has been appointed Deputy Minister of the Environment. Mr. Bibi, a political scientist, served as mayor of Tiberias for almost ten years and

Given the current combination of political uncertainty and administrative vacillation, it is clear that the prime moving force on behalf of Israel's environment will continue to be the concerned public. The role and the initiatives of the SPNI as self-appointed watchdog will remain crucial. This is not to say that no one in government or in politics understands or sympathizes with environmental causes. Some two to three dozen Knesset members, from all factions of the House, consistently pursue environmental issues and often advance relevant legislation. But their hands are restrained too frequently by political considerations and by the overbearing influence of vested interests.

In view of the decided ambiguity in the traditional Jewish approach to nature⁵ and a general lack of understanding for environmental concerns by many of Israel's planners and builders, the SPNI in the sixties and seventies initiated and campaigned for legislation to protect threatened natural values, to set aside protected nature reserves throughout the country and to establish the Nature Reserves Authority as an effective statutory enforcement agency. In addition, SPNI was among the first environmental groups in the world to establish its own research capability. Much of the research is carried out in the organization's own field stations, and in some cases has been critical to the Society's goals. For example, it was SPNI research which demonstrated the potential of detailed knowledge of bird migration in avoiding collisions with aircraft and the resulting losses of life and equipment.

Saving Migratory Birds—and Air Force Pilots

Because of its location at the junction of continents, Israel is a funnel for the major south-to-north (Spring) and north-to-south (Fall) migrations of tens of millions of birds including raptors, storks, pelicans and smaller species. Damages from collisions with aircraft (mainly military jets, which fly at low altitudes and high speeds) were causing loss of planes and pilots as well as loss of bird life. In collaboration with the military, SPNI initiated a three-dimensional mapping of migration routes and climatic factors that, together with radar and volunteer ground spotters, is now so accurate that the timing and location of bird flocks can be predicted within close time and distance parameters. At critical times and locations, military flights are diverted to higher altitudes or grounded altogether. The benefits are evident: collisions between birds and planes have been reduced to nil, yet the times of restricted flying are minimal. Total cost of the project was only about \$500,000.

All of this research was accompanied by the development of a ramified nature

has been a member of the Knesset since 1988. He is a member of the powerful Knesset Finance Committee.

⁵The contrasts are set out in many of the growing number of articles on Judaism and ecology. See especially Marc Swetlitz, "Introduction", and the articles by Gordis, Schwarzschild, and Shapiro in the collection of essays reprinted by the environmental organization *Shomrei Adamah*: Marc Swetlitz, editor, *Judaism and Ecology, 1970-1986—A Sourcebook of Readings* (Wyncote, Pennsylvania: *Shomrei Adamah*, 1989).

conservation education effort, which has made Israel a model in this respect for both advanced and developing countries.

With the emphasis placed upon urgent nature and landscape conservation measures, however, less attention was paid to increasingly severe but less evident problems of a more dispersed kind. Disappearing wildflowers, poisoned birds of prey, hunted gazelles and littered beauty spots are much more visible and emotionally upsetting than the gradual onslaught of emphysema from air pollution, toxic effluents seeping into ground water, or proper disposal of human and industrial wastes. As some of these problems approach catastrophic proportions, SPNI is intensifying its efforts to arouse public awareness and to demand action from the government. There is no shortage of issues:

- Air pollution in Israel, particularly from automobiles, continues to soar. Carbon monoxide, lead and hydrocarbon emissions all went up by around fifty percent, and nitrogen oxides (one of the sources of acid rain) by nearly seventy-nine percent in just eight years, from 1980 to 1988!
- The need for a suitable toxic-waste treatment facility has long been evident. The existing Ramat Hovav site in the Negev has been improperly maintained, with toxic leachates endangering water supplies. Budget cuts have regularly deferred construction, and illegal dumping is common.
- The Jordan, with all its hallowed associations and its unique landscape of copious flowing water in a dry land, has been overexploited and is threatened with near disappearance by further water diversion projects. The once-beautiful Yarqon river, flowing through Tel Aviv, is today little more than an industrial sewer.
- Per hectare use of pesticides in Israel rates among the highest in the world, and regulations to protect consumers from pesticide residues in food are quite lax.
- While Israel has about eighteen percent of her land in national parks and nature reserves (more than most other countries), the protected areas are inevitably quite small. Almost every one is subject to encroachment, to adverse impacts on flora and fauna from developments in surrounding areas and even to excessive public use (including tourism). Large areas of nature reserve and open-space landscape, especially in the Judean and Negev deserts, are used for military training, which causes much irreversible damage to natural ecosystems.

And the list of such issues is longer still.

These and other problems are regularly treated in the quarterly journal of the SPNI, *Israel—Land and Nature*, and were summarized in the most recent edition (1988) of *The Environment in Israel*, Israel's official state-of-the-environment report. This is Israel's fourth state-of-the-environment report, although it is the first to be issued since 1979. Despite the ten-year lag, publication of the report is still worthy of note when one recalls that the United States has never managed to produce a full state-of-the-environment report, and Canada published its first five years ago.

The report includes chapters on Land Use Planning, Energy, Resource Man-

agement and Pollution Control (divided into Water, Marine Water and Air), Solid Waste, Toxic Substances and Noise. Most of these chapters follow a common pattern. The major sources of the problem are first identified, and then the efforts to deal with the problems (by no means always successful) are described. Subsequent sections cover research, the legal framework, and special considerations. Most chapters conclude with a section entitled "Future Trends".

As an official statement, *The Environment in Israel* is remarkably frank. The report refers, for example, to "flagrant violations" of pollution control orders by specific companies. Military aircraft are "the worst offenders" in producing noise in excess of permissible levels. The process of setting standards for pesticide residues "has moved at a snail's pace". In a few cases the frankness falters, as when the term "flexible implementation plan" is used to make a delay in building the second phase of a toxic waste treatment facility seem less of a problem than it is. (The chapter on toxic substances is one of the few which fails to include a section on future trends.)

Nevertheless, the tone of the state-of-the-environment report is generally upbeat. The marine chapter highlights one of the key accomplishments of recent years: a law prohibiting marine pollution from land-based sources. This complements an existing law prohibiting pollution from ships, and thus gives Israel a comprehensive base for protection of the marine environment. As one result, the amount of tar washing up on beaches has been cut by a factor of 150 since 1979.

There is a special angle to the success story in the marine environment. Recognizing their common interests in protecting the sea from pollution, sixteen nations in 1976 formed the Mediterranean Action Plan. Supported by the United Nations Environment Program, the Plan has become a model of regional cooperation, and one largely free of the acrimony that has prevented other efforts at cooperation between Israel and her Arab neighbors.

The chapter on fresh water describes how Israel became a world leader in recycling sewage for agricultural use. In 1970, there was only one sewage treatment plant in all Israel; most human waste just flowed into rivers or the sea. By 1988, despite more than a doubling of sewage volume, ninety percent of municipal sewage was collected in sewers, eighty percent was treated and sixty percent re-used.

Fresh water quality, in contrast, continues to deteriorate, mainly because of industrial practices that had become established before environmental quality was an issue. The result: growing pollution loads in rivers, and increased incursions of brackish water into critical aquifers as fresh water is pumped out. With the influx of hundreds of thousands of new immigrants, the issue requires immediate solutions. *Israel is close to the point where the availability of potable water will actually decline.* The options are few; conservation can clearly help, but few now deny that water will have to be reallocated from crop irrigation to industrial and household uses, despite the traditional place of agriculture in the history of Zionism and its important role in Israel's economy and export.

The record shows that early efforts to bring environmental issues to bear on industrial enterprises do pay off. For example, efforts to control air quality

around the large Maor David power plant at Hadera were successful because they were initiated at the planning stage, but efforts to reduce air pollution caused by Nesher Cement's aging plant in Haifa were less successful. A similar contrast is found between the watershed planning efforts of the Kinneret Limnological Lab and the Lake Kinneret Authority, established respectively in 1968 and 1971, and the continuing struggle to rehabilitate the Yarqon River against the opposition of industrial interests.

Over the years, Israel has developed some unique educational and enforcement mechanisms. To support its anti-litter campaign, the Ministry of the Environment—with the full cooperation of the SPNI and related bodies—has entitled volunteer inspectors and trustees from the general public to report violations of the Cleanliness and Anti-Litter Law. Among the first of many achievements of SPNI has been the near-reflex reaction inculcated in every Israeli child—and most adults—to desist from picking wildflowers. As a direct result, many endangered species and magnificent carpets of wildflowers have returned to embellish the countryside.

Productive, positive coordination in planning has developed between SPNI landscape conservation experts and some of the key governmental construction agencies, such as the Public Works Department of the Ministry of Housing. There is close cooperation with the Ministry of Education Youth Division regarding school hikes and outings and environmental education programs. The public at large has been kept informed and involved in environmental issues by intensive SPNI-initiated media exposure. A particularly significant struggle throughout the past year, one that is still unresolved, has centered on opposition to the construction of a mammoth Voice of America transmitter station in the Aravah Valley, which would present many potential hazards to Negev ecosystems, landscapes and historical sites and—not least—to the inhabitants of the central Aravah valley.

Fighting a New Threat

Israel's arid regions in the Negev and on the Judean desert, including the Aravah in the Great Rift Valley, are the only parts of Israel where pristine wilderness can still be experienced. They offer the last refuge in the world for certain species of wildlife, such as the Negev Lappet-Faced Vulture. The military, claiming imperative security needs, has closed over eighty percent of the Negev to the public. As a result, portions of the fragile desert have been damaged beyond repair.

Now there is a new threat that affects the small remaining parts of the Negev still open to unrestricted public use. The Government of Israel has signed an agreement with the United States permitting construction of a Voice of America transmitting station in the Aravah. It would be among the largest and most powerful in the world. Indeed, so large and powerful would it be that the Israel Air Force found it would endanger its training runs and demanded access into one of the last open and protected parts of the region.

Under the lead of the SPNI, Israeli, European, African and American environmentalists are fighting the projected transmitter. More than half the members of the Knesset have signed a petition to Prime Minister Shamir urging him to deny approval. A coalition of important United States environmental groups has raised the issue in the Congress and has pointed out that the project may violate the U.S. environmental impact assessment regulations. Important parts of the environmental studies required by the Israel government have been left incomplete, and the effect on migratory birds, which pass over the Aravah in their millions, is unknown.

Unfortunately, pressure to build the Voice of America transmitter is great. The Israeli National Council for Planning and Construction at first blocked construction and then set aside its own decision. Alleging that undue political pressures were exerted on Council members, the SPNI and the settlers of the Aravah Regional Council appealed to the Israel High Court of Justice, which issued a temporary restraining order. Thus construction of the transmitter has been delayed, but it has not been stopped.

What of the future? Will Israel's environmental quality in the year 2000 be better or worse than in 1990? There have been significant achievements, especially in the growing awareness by national and private planning agencies of the need for sustainable development. Events of the past year, however, have exacerbated the problems and threaten to undo many environmentally progressive measures. The tremendous influx of immigration from the U.S.S.R. has caught Israel's government largely unprepared. In order to meet the unquestioned need for housing and jobs, there have been almost overwhelming pressures to abrogate environmentally appropriate planning procedures and to discard meticulously worked out land-use determinations. Hasty *ad hoc* solutions to these problems are almost certain to cause irreversible damage to precious open landscape, water sources and air quality. It would also seriously prejudice the vital long-term needs of Israel's expanding population for outdoor recreation.

As one commentator cautiously puts it, the answer will lie in "a sensitive and complex function of policy, awareness, implementation, law enforcement and other components of environmental management". Put bluntly, there are pressures to allow pollution and to reduce ecological reserves. In many cases the pressure comes from people with considerable political clout. It is too easy to accept exaggerated "requirements" for electrical power put out by Israel Electric Corporation, to accede to the "need" to use more pesticides, to ignore the "accidental" release of some pollutants.

As many other countries have found to their great expense, Israel can no longer relegate environmental quality concerns to secondary levels of importance. They are no less vital to the well-being—and the survival—of the Jewish State than defense, economic viability and absorption of immigrants.

For Further Reading

The fourth (1988) edition of *The Environment in Israel* [Hebrew] is published by Ministry of the Environment in Jerusalem. The soft-cover report of 294 pages includes ten maps, seven tables and five graphs. No price is indicated. Those interested in environmental affairs in Israel can also request the free English-language quarterly, *Israel Environment Bulletin*, by writing to the Israeli Ministry of the Environment, POB 6158, Jerusalem 91061, Israel.

Better known, more comprehensive and profusely illustrated with photos and drawings is the quarterly journal, *Israel—Land and Nature*, which is included with overseas membership in the SPNI. This membership is also an effective way of registering personal concern for Israel's environment and nature conservation efforts. SPNI membership entails periodic off-the-beaten-track tour listings, and discounts on a number of outdoor and museum services throughout Israel. Send thirty-six U.S. dollars to SPNI, 4 Hashefela Street, 66183 Tel Aviv.

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Synagogue Environmental Resources

*Greg Robbins with
Ellen Bernstein*

The environmental crisis is a true crisis of *values*. It reflects the state of our relationship with the natural world. It challenges us to create a way of life, a culture, that is environmentally sustainable, one that both evokes and expresses a deep understanding of our place in the world. As Jews, when we turn to our religious and cultural legacy for the inspiration and tools to face this challenge, we find that Judaism embodies both an environmental ethic and a viable practice of stewardship. Unfortunately, that environmental wisdom has lain dormant for generations. We must revive, invigorate, and extend the Judaic system of ecological thought, ethics and practice, and we must involve the Jewish community in environmental affairs.

The organization known as *Shomrei Adamah* ("Keepers of the Earth") serves the Jewish community by providing educational and holiday materials, as well as practical suggestions, for this task. Rabbis and other Jewish professionals must begin to take leadership roles in this area if the Jewish community is to successfully navigate this long, hard and necessary process. There are four major areas in which synagogues can become models of ecologically sound behavior: (1) *ritual* (2) *education*, (3) *physical plant* and (4) *special projects and programs*. The following suggestions are culled from our files.

Ritual Life

Shabbat, both as a day of "not doing" and as a "remembrance of creation," is a powerful counterbalance to our abuse and disregard of nature. Our culture, with its emphasis on economic growth, its obsession with newness, and its constant search for (usually energy-wasting) stimulation, urgently needs a respite. During the twenty-six hours of *Shabbat*, we live a relatively "low