

FAITH AND BIOS1

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Religious faith is not biocentric but theocentric; to set anything other than God in the centre constitutes idolatry. Nature bears God's "signature," mirrors His glory; yet to equate God with nature is pantheism. Six principles emerge from the Bible to govern our attitude to the biosphere in which we are placed:

- Creation is Good; it Reflects the Glory of its Creator. "God saw everything He had made, and indeed it was very good." (Genesis 1:31). Judaism affirms life, and with it creation as a whole.
- Biodiversity, the Rich Variety of Nature, is to be Cherished. In Genesis 1, everything is said to be created "according to its kind." Genesis 9 tells the story of the Flood, of how, in the ark, Noah conserved male and female of each species of animal, so that it might subsequently procreate.
- Living Things Range from Lower to Higher, with Humankind at the Top. Genesis 1 depicts a process of the creation of order out of primeval chaos. The web of life encompasses all, but human beings - both male and female (Genesis 1:27, "in the image of God") - stand at the apex of this structure.
- Human Beings are Responsible for the Active Maintenance of all Life. Setting people at the top of the hierarchy of creation places them in a special position of responsibility toward nature. Adam is placed in the garden of Eden "to till it and to preserve it" (Genesis 2:15), and to "name," which implies, understand, the animals.
- Land and People Depend on Each Other. The Bible is the story of a chosen people and a chosen land; the prosperity of the land depends on the people's obedience to God's covenant. In a global context, this means that conservation of the planet depends on the social justice and moral integrity of its people and a caring, loving, attitude to land, with effective regulation of its use.
- Respect Creation - Do not Waste or Destroy. Bal tashchit "not to destroy" (Deuteronomy 20:19) is the Hebrew phrase on which the rabbis base the call to respect and conserve all that has been created.

This formulation is based on Jewish sources, largely shared with Christians. These principles must guide our Biblical hermeneutic in both preaching and teaching. Concern for bios is an ideal enterprise with which to stimulate religions to work in harmony; either we all learn to share the planet, or we all perish.

Religious Values and Bios

Ecology, from the Greek oikos "home," may be loosely interpreted as "The science of understanding and looking after our home." There is only one home and we must conserve our planet and share its resources peacefully.

What has religious faith to contribute to this? Jews and Christians share a Biblical tradition about creation and can, jointly, affirm a wide range of values relating to the created world. The first part of my paper defines and illustrates six leading values in the Judeo-Christian attitude to nature; the second part indicates some problem areas; in the final part recommendations for teaching and preaching will be made.

Creation is Good; it Reflects the Glory of its Creator

"God saw everything He had made, and indeed it was very good" (Genesis 1:31). Judaism affirms life, not just human life but that of the biosphere as a whole. So, is Judaism, or for that matter Christianity or Islam, biocentric? Certainly not. Faith focuses not on bios, but on God.

Nature bears God's "signature," mirrors His glory; yet to equate God with nature is pantheism. Therefore we rejected Spinoza, deism and deus sive natura; therefore we now reject careless talk of Gaia as an "earth-goddess," a divinity in her own right; there is only one God and only He may command.

Rav Kook (1865-1935), drawing on Jewish sources from the Psalms to Lurianic mysticism, beautifully acknowledges the divine significance of all things. Aryeh Levine, visiting him, writes: "I recall that with God's grace in the year 5665 (1904/5) I visited Jaffa in the Holy Land, and went to pay my respects to its Chief Rabbi (Rav Kook). He received me warmly ... and after the afternoon prayer I accompanied him as he went out into the fields, as was his wont, to concentrate his thoughts. As we were walking I plucked some flower or plant; He trembled, and quietly told me that He always took great care not to pluck, unless it were for some benefit, anything that could grow... Everything that grew

said something, every stone whispered some secret, all creation sang ..." 2 Kook hears the hymn that nature sings to God. He sings not in praise of nature, but with nature in praise of God, in line with Psalms such as 104 and 148.

Biodiversity, the Rich Variety of Nature, is to be Cherished

Genesis describes how everything is created "according to its kind"; Adam then names each animal. Noah conserved in the ark a viable population of males and females of each species.³ Several Biblical commandments stress the distinctness of species. Nowadays, we should interpret dietary lists, the laws prohibiting mixtures of seeds, or of wool and linen, or forbidding the yoking or cross-breeding of different animals, as demonstrating the religious duty of maintaining biodiversity.

Under this heading we should also consider the diversity of habitats. 3.5 billion hectares of land, the area of North and South America combined, is affected by desertification; almost 3 billion hectares of forest have been destroyed in the past century; wetlands and other special habitats have been lost, and with them numerous irreplaceable plant and animal species. Clearly, this is contrary to Biblical teaching.

Living Things Range from Lower to Higher, with Humankind at the Top

Genesis 1 depicts the creation of order out of primeval chaos. The web of life encompasses all, but human beings - both male and female (Genesis 1:27, "in the image of God") - stand at the apex of this structure. There is a hierarchy in created things. The hierarchical model carries practical consequences. First, the higher bears a responsibility toward the lower, traditionally expressed as "rule," latterly as "stewardship." Second, in a competitive situation, the higher takes priority over the lower. Humans have priority over dogs so that, for instance, it is wrong for a man to risk his life to save that of a dog though right, in many circumstances, for him to risk his life to save that of another human.

The Spanish Jewish philosopher Joseph Albo (1380-1435) places humans at the top of the earthly hierarchy, and discerns in this the possibility for humans to receive God's revelation.⁴ According to Albo, just as clothes are an integral part of the animal, but remain external to people, who have to make clothes for themselves, so are specific ethical impulses integral to the behaviour of particular animals, and we should learn from their behaviour: "Who teaches us from the beasts of the earth, and imparts wisdom to us through the birds of the sky" (Job 35:11).⁵ The superiority of humans lies in their unique combination of freedom to choose and the intelligence to judge, without which the divine Revelation would have no application. Being in this sense "higher" than other creatures, humans must be humble toward all. Albo, in citing these passages and commending the reading of Perek Shira⁶, articulates the attitude of humble stewardship toward Creation which characterises rabbinic Judaism.

Setting people at the top of the hierarchy of creation places them in a special position of responsibility toward nature. Adam is placed in the garden of Eden "to till it and to preserve it" (Genesis 2:15), and to "name," which implies to understand, the animals. We cannot sit idly by and see the forests destroyed, but must act to prevent the destruction and actively seek understanding of our environment.

Land and People Depend on Each Other

In the past, Jews and Christians parted company in interpreting those sections of the Bible concerned with the land. Jews read them literally, as the land of Israel, but Christians rejected the plain meaning. Today, in the awareness of our common responsibility for the planet, Jews can apply the principles universally, and Christians can regain an appreciation of their relevance.

The Bible (e.g. Daniel 11:16,41) refers to the land of Israel as *eretz hatzvi*, "the fairest of all lands." Judaism developed within a specific context of chosen people and the chosen land; it has emphasised the inter-relationship of people and land, the idea that the prosperity of the land depends on the people's obedience to God's covenant. For instance: "If you pay heed to the commandments which I give you this day, and love the Lord your God and serve Him with all your heart and soul, then I will send rain for your land in season ... and you will gather your corn and new wine and oil, and I will provide pasture ... you shall eat your fill. Take good care not to be led astray in your hearts nor to turn aside and serve other gods or the Lord will become angry with you; He will shut up the skies and there will be no rain, your ground will not yield its harvest, and you will soon vanish from the rich land which the Lord is giving you" (Deuteronomy 11:13-17). Two steps are necessary to apply this link between morality and prosperity to the contemporary situation:

- The Bible stresses the intimate relationship between people and land. The prosperity of land depends on the social justice and moral integrity of the people on it, and on a caring, even loving, attitude to land with effective regulation of its use.
- Conservation demands the extrapolation of these principles from ancient or idealised Israel to the contemporary global situation; we need education in social values together with scientific investigation of the effects of our activities on nature.

This year is marked by religious circles in Israel as the Sabbatical Year (Leviticus 25:2-4). The analogy between the Sabbath (literally, rest-day) of the land and that of people communicates the idea that land must "rest" to be refreshed and regain its productive vigour; land resources must be conserved through the avoidance of over-use. The Bible links this to social justice. Just as land must not be exploited, so slaves must go free after six years of bondage. The Sabbatical Year (*shemitta* = release) cancels private debts, thus preventing the accumulation of debt

and the economic exploitation of the individual. We must work out how to apply these ideas to reform our contemporary social and economic structures.

Respect Creation - Do Not Waste or Destroy

Bal tashchit ("not to destroy" - see Deuteronomy 20:19) is the Hebrew phrase on which the rabbis base the call to respect and conserve all that has been created. Some of the best illustrations of rabbinic exegesis and development of halakha (law) relate to aspects of environmental pollution. Deuteronomy 23:13,14 insists that refuse be removed "outside the camp," that is, collected in a location where it will not reduce the quality of life. The Talmud and Codes extend this concept to a general prohibition on dumping refuse or garbage where it may interfere with the environment or with crops.

The rabbis forbade the planting of kitchen gardens and orchards around Jerusalem on the grounds that the manuring would degrade the local environment,⁷ they would have been deeply concerned at the large-scale environmental degradation caused by traditional mining operations, the burning of fossil fuels and the like. Other specific environmental hazards for which the rabbis sought to legislate included smell, atmospheric pollution and smoke, and water pollution. Modern Israeli law, such as the Hazard Prevention Law, passed by the Knesset on 23 March 1961, draws on traditional Jewish formulations.⁸ A well-founded Jewish tradition supports world action today to safeguard the world's water, clean up the seas, and dispose cleanly of radioactive and toxic chemical wastes.

Sample Ethical Problems Relating to Conservation

This is a brief review of some of the areas where religious teaching risks conflict with secular conservation practices. It poses more questions than there are answers.

Animal versus Human Life

Judaism consistently values human life more than animal life. If I am driving a car and a dog runs into the road it would be wrong to swerve, endangering my own or someone else's life, to save the dog. But is it right to take a human life, e.g. that of a poacher, to save, not an individual animal but an endangered species? There is nothing in Jewish sources to support killing poachers in any circumstances other than those in which they directly threaten human life. If it be argued that the extinction of a species would threaten human life because it would upset the balance of nature, it is still unlikely that Jewish law would countenance homicide to avoid an indirect and uncertain threat of this nature.

Even if homicide were justifiable in such circumstances, how many human lives is a single species worth? How far down the evolutionary scale would such a principle be applied? After all, the argument about upsetting the balance of nature applies just as much to microscopic species as to large cuddly-looking vertebrates like the panda, and to plants as much as to animals. The tsetse fly is no less a part of the interdependent fabric of nature than the whale. Judaism, true to the hierarchical principle of creation, consistently values human life more than that of other living things, but at the same time stresses the special responsibility of human beings to "work on and look after the created order" (Genesis 2:15).

Procreation versus Population Control

In Cairo this September, the United Nations will a conference on population. At a preliminary meeting at United Nations headquarters in April, hundreds of women brought about a plan of action to ensure that the Cairo conference would not be deflected by pressure from the Roman Catholic Church and other denominations facing up to the central issues of contraception and population control.⁹

Thomas R. Malthus (1766-1834), early in the Industrial Revolution, established that a population cannot exceed that number which can be sustained by available resources; if there is insufficient food to feed everyone, someone will die. But whereas resources increase only arithmetically, population increases geometrically.

If the population doubles every 25 years (currently, it doubles every 23.34 years in Nigeria, every 18.99 years in Kenya), in 500 years we would require 220 times as much food to be produced (that is, 1,048,576 as much), which is clearly an unattainable requirement. During the expansionist phase of the Industrial Revolution, European nations over-exploited resources and engaged in mass migration and imperialistic ventures to cope with "excess" population. Such methods are no longer available or acceptable.

In Malthus's day the world population reached 1 billion. It is now fast approaching 6 billion. The World Bank predicts stability at 12.4 billion in 2085; the World Watch Institute says population cannot exceed 8 billion if the world is to avoid massive deaths from starvation and disease.¹⁰ Increased food production already causes environmental degradation. Redistribution will not help, even if it were practical and affordable, and even though it could temporarily alleviate local famines.

What has Judaism to say on this matter? There is general agreement that at least some forms of birth control are permissible where a potential mother's life is in danger, and that abortion is not only permissible but mandatory up to full term, to save the mother's life.¹¹ Even though contraception may be morally questionable, it is preferable to abstinence where danger to life would be involved through exercising normal sexual relations within a marriage.¹¹ Such matters are not just questions of "permitted" and "forbidden," but require sensitive personal counselling.

Halakha places the basic duty of procreation above personal economic hardship. But what about general economic hardship, which can arise (a) through local or temporary famine and (b) through the upward pressure of population on finite world resources? The former situation was in the mind of the third century Palestinian sage Resh Lakish when he ruled: "It is forbidden for a man to engage in sexual intercourse in years of famine."¹²

Upward pressure of population on world resources is a concept unknown to classical sources of the Jewish religion, and not indeed clearly understood before Malthus. Feldman remarks, "It would be just as reckless to overbreed as to refrain from procreation." ¹¹ In my view, as the duty of procreation is expressed in Genesis in the words "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth," it is not unreasonable to suggest that "fill" be taken as "reach the maximum population sustainable at an acceptable standard of living but do not exceed it." In like vein the rabbis utilised Isaiah's (45:18) phrase "God made the earth no empty void, but made it for a place to dwell in" to define the minimum requirement for procreation - a requirement, namely one son and one daughter, which does not increase population.¹³

Of course, there is room for local variation amongst populations. Although as a general rule governments nowadays should discourage population growth, there are instances of thinly populated areas or of small ethnic groups whose survival is threatened, where some population growth might be acceptable even from a global perspective.

Nuclear Energy, Fossil Fuel, Solar Energy

Can religious sources offer guidance on the choice between nuclear and fossil, or other energy sources? It seems that they can have very little to say and that it is vitally important to understand why their potential contribution to current debate is so small, especially in view of the extravagant views expressed by some religious leaders. The choice of energy sources rests on estimates of cost-effectiveness, environmental damage caused by production, operational hazards, clean disposal of waste products, and long-term environmental sustainability.

Religious considerations have no part to play in assessing these factors; they are technical matters, demanding painstaking research and hard evidence, but having nothing to do with theology. There could be a religious view of overall strategy. Moral theology might suggest that scientists should pay more attention to finding out how to use less energy to meet demands for goods than to finding out how to produce more energy. However, unless such advice stems from asceticism, it is merely a counsel of prudence, not dependent on any characteristically religious value.

Who Pays the Piper?

Who should pay for conservation? The dilemmas involved in this question are exceedingly complex. Should rich nations pay to "clean up" the technology of poorer nations (e.g. should Western Europe pay for Eastern Europe, but not at the expense of India)? Should governments distort the free market by subsidising lead-free petrol and other "environment-friendly" commodities? How does one assess environmental efficiency and social costs, and how should such costs be allocated between taxpayer, customer and manufacturer? At all levels, religions will have an input, from the aspect of social justice.

Directed Evolution

After writing about the progress from physical evolution, via biological evolution, to cultural evolution, Edward Rubinstein continues: "Henceforth, life no longer evolves solely through chance mutation. Humankind has begun to modify evolution, to bring about non-random, deliberate, changes in DNA that alter living assemblies and create assemblies that did not exist before. The messengers of directed evolution are human beings. Their messages, expressed in the language and methods of molecular biology, genetics and medicine and in moral precepts, express their awareness of human imperfections and reflect the values and aspirations of their species."¹⁴

These words indicate the area where religions, Judaism included, are most in need of adjusting themselves to contemporary reality - the area in which modern knowledge sets us most apart from those who formed our religious traditions. Religion as we know it has come into being only since the Neolithic Revolution, and thus presupposes some technology. But can it cope with the challenges posed by modern information technology and molecular biology? I do not know, but I expect that religious communities, by working together, will make a better response than anyone could, alone.

Teaching, Preaching and Bios

The principles outlined above must guide the way we preach, and teach, scripture. We must call for the production of new scriptural commentaries, textbooks and catechisms, which interpret with sensitivity to bio-issues, and we must train our clergy and teachers to use them. Concern for bios is, moreover, an ideal enterprise to stimulate religions to work co-operatively. They have a common interest, some common scriptures and many common values.

Therefore, in educating better for the environment we will also educate better for a world which can accommodate many religions peacefully. Concern for our common home should lead us to set aside the mutual antagonisms which in the past have led to religious wars and human destruction. The Hebrew prophet proclaimed, "The wolf shall live with the sheep the lion shall eat straw like cattle" (Isaiah 11:6 f); he perceived clearly the link between the harmony of nature and the peace of humankind.

References

1. Much of the material in this article first appeared as Norman Solomon, Judaism and Conservation, in the London-based journal of the World Jewish Congress, *Christian Jewish Relations XXII* (Summer 1989). Since then it has been reworked, updated and published in the following formats: as Chapter 2 (pages 11-36) of Norman Solomon, *Judaism and World Religion* (Macmillan, Basingstoke, and St Martin's Press, New York, 1991), a rigorous examination of the ways in which traditional sources are used to address contemporary issues; as Chapter 3 (pages 19-53) of *Judaism and Ecology*, edited by Aubrey Rose (Cassell: London and New York, 1992); and as the chapter on Judaism in *Attitudes to Nature*, one of a series of University textbooks edited by Jean Holm with John Bowker (London and New York: Pinter Publishers, 1994).
2. Reminiscence by Aryeh Levine in *Lahai Roi* (Hebrew) Jerusalem 5721 (1961) pp 15-16
3. We would not today regard a single pair as a viable population, but presumably that was what the biblical text meant to convey.
4. Joseph Albo *Sefer Ha-Iqqarim III:1*
5. See Babylonian Talmud *Eruvin 100b*
6. *Pereq Shira - the Chapter of Song* - may be as old as the fourth century, and was popularised by the Hasidei Ashkenaz in the twelfth. Each of its five or six sections comprises some 10-25 biblical verses, each interpreted as the "song" or saying of some individual creature. St Francis of Assisi's *Cantico del Sole* has much the same flavour.
7. Babylonian Talmud *Bava Qama 82b*
8. See, for example, Meir Sichel's admirable paper *Air pollution - smoke and odour damage*, in *Jewish Law Annual V* (Boston University and E J Brill: Leiden, 1985) pp. 25-43. He provides a translation of the Israeli legislation referred to.
9. *Scientific American*, June 1994, p.7-8
10. Chowdhry, K. (1993) Population growth, food security and equity. In: Vlavianos-Arvanitis, A. (ed.) *Biopolitics - The Bio-Environment. Proceedings from a Hellenic-Indian Symposium*. Biopolitics International Organisation, Athens, pp. 14-21
11. Feldman, D.M. (1974) *Marital relations, birth control and abortion in Jewish law*. Schocken Books, New York
12. Babylonian Talmud *Taanit 11a*. The ruling was adopted in the Codes (*Shulchan Arukh: Orach Hayyim 240:12 and 574:4*), but its application was restricted to those who already have children.
13. Babylonian Talmud *Yevamot 62a*
14. Rubinstein (1989) *Stages of evolution and their messengers*. *Scientific American*, June 1989, p. 104

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