



## Generalising about Jews

Clive A. Lawton

---

Requests for use or re-publication of this article should be made (via Shap if necessary) to the writer, who retains copyright. If re-published in part or full elsewhere, the article's publication in World Religions in Education 2008-9 should be acknowledged.

The transliteration of specialist terms and the opinions expressed in this article are those of the writer, not of the Shap Working Party.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

#### Clive A. Lawton

A Shap Chair in the 1980s, Clive edited and compiled Shap's Calendar of Festivals for fifteen years. Formerly an A Level Chief Examiner in RS, a headteacher, Deputy Director of Liverpool's LEA and on SOAS's Faculty of Religious Studies, Clive now works freelance round the world and has advised several SACREs on Religious Education and the development of their Agreed Syllabuses.

\*\*\*\*\*

It's probably best to come clean at the outset. I've no idea what 'Jews' think about the environment. After all, one of the great characteristics of the Jews is our argumentativeness, and why should we all agree on this, a comparatively new issue in its current guise and only really noticeable as we've all got richer and the world has got smaller.

I can tell you of my brother, a very sincere and committed Jew, who will avoid driving a car at almost any cost, including inordinate public transport journey times, because he thinks it's environmentally unacceptable. Or my friends, also utterly observant Jews, who were eating organic foods before most other people had even heard of them, because 'the world was given to us in trust'. Or the kosher chicken farmer who's locked in a battle with the Soil Association because they will not allow him to use their organic logo on his chickens since they are kosher and apparently the Soil Association has some hang up about the method of kosher slaughter. (So if observant Jews don't eat organic chicken, it's not because they don't want to, just that we aren't able to recognise them.)

Any observer of Haredi Jews will note their strikingly unmaterialistic lives. There's not much consumerism there. You couldn't accuse them of wasteful consumption – or could you? Those same Haredi Jews will prioritise hospitality over most other things – including washing up – and so paper plates and plastic cutlery play a large part in many a Haredi home.

Then again, many Jews pride themselves on their practical physical solidarity with the State of Israel, including visiting and holidaying there whenever possible, with no thought of their carbon footprint. And widely scattered Jewish families – mostly, don't blame us, not our fault – value family reunions over reducing air miles.

So there's no way to generalise. And even if there were standard patterns of behaviour, it would be difficult to know whether each Jew manifesting that behaviour was doing it for the same reasons, and that those reasons were 'religious'. But you want me to generalise and so I shall. Generally speaking, concern for the environment is creeping up the Jewish community's



list of priorities. But this is as much because Jews are typically fully paid-up members of the Western world's 'people with a conscience' club, as it is because of Jewish teachings. As a rule, Jews accept scientific findings when demonstrated and Jews have had little difficulty in moving with the scientific times through the ages, whether it's evidence of evolution or that the Earth goes round the sun. If the evidence for global warming is incontrovertible, then we're not going to controvert it.

But that readiness to enthuse about the achievements of the human mind tends also to encourage Jews to want to think their way out of problems rather than retreat from impending doom. Remember, Jews have had rather more experience of impending doom than most. As the old Jewish joke has it: When God finally despairs of humanity and announces that, despite former promises to the contrary, he has now decided to destroy the world with one final flood in two weeks' time, nearly all the world goes into paroxysms of repentance, regret and recrimination. Not the Jews. They reckon they've got two weeks to learn to live under water...

We have few fond memories of life on the land and peasantry holds few attractions. Most Jews have long been urban dwellers (the kibbutz creators and 'Return to the Land' movement of early Zionism was a self-conscious aberration from most Jewish norms, since Jews had largely been prevented from working the land. So suggestions that we should address the difficulties of the environment by simplifying and 'retreating' technologically does not resonate comfortably with most Jews.

But as we note and react to the current trend of concern for the environment, we find many teachings in the Jewish tradition that reinforce the practising Jew's desire to respond, and the need to reassure ourselves that we're not acting in a way which is merely fashionable and not in keeping with Jewish teachings.

One of the central principles relating to environmental concern is the whole body of teachings extrapolated from the command in the Torah in Deuteronomy not to destroy the fruit trees around a city when besieging it. From this, rabbis through history have elaborated ideas and rules about not wasting and treating the world's natural resources with care. This principle – 'Bal Tashchit' (Do not destroy) – has become the cornerstone of many an environmental initiative. In earlier days, almost universal Jewish poverty meant that no one was going to waste things anyway, but now, in more affluent times, Bal Tashchit is invoked to save paper, energy, use sustainable resources and so on. Bal Tashchit also means that one should not use a more valuable thing if a less valuable one would do, and thoughtlessly pulling leaves off a tree would also be unacceptable.

The practices of Shabbat have also enshrined a day a week of leaving the world alone. This is not a day of self-abnegation but a day of enjoying the world as you find it, not as you manipulate it. Orthodox Jews won't travel on that day, only walk, won't play CDs and DVDs, only sing if they want music, won't even carry things about but leave them in the general place in which they found them. Imagine a world in which the entire world's population didn't drive for one day a week! Of course, this is not an abstemious day, in the sense of going without – indeed, we might even find ourselves leaving the central heating on and opening windows because we'd set it up wrongly on the day before Shabbat, but it does teach something about living within the world as it happens to be, even if it happens to be that way because we organised it that way on Friday. Not answering the phone when it rings and not turning on a light when you go into a dark room requires almost super-human self control for those now accustomed to instant responses and solutions.

On another front, the laws of Kashrut require that generally one only eats animals which are reared for the purpose and no wild animal is ever going to become extinct because of the activities of observant Jews. But current information about the cost of rearing meat is not yet



addressed by any Jewish teaching and there is not yet any suggestion that one should moderate one's meat intake and be a bit more vegetarian – though Jewish tradition does claim that the ideal original state of humanity was vegetarianism and meat-eating was only a concession to the waywardness of humankind following the Flood.

Laws concerning the land of Israel were, of course, for a long time in abeyance. But since the establishment of the State of Israel a whole host of Torah rules have kicked back in. The requirement for the land to lie fallow one year in seven has led, for example, many Jews in this last year (a sabbatical year) to buy produce from anywhere but Israel! Without the Temple rituals there is no need any longer for the first fruits of a tree to be set aside for sacrifice or for the first two years of a tree's produce not to be sold, but there is still a New Year for Trees in the Jewish calendar, which Jews celebrate by seeking out the produce of trees in particular – resulting in many challenging conversations about what constitutes a tree and where avocado pears grow and so on. Israel remains the only country in the world to have started the 21<sup>st</sup> century with more trees than it started the 20<sup>th</sup>. Indeed, one of the most popular ways to mark special celebrations like barmitzvahs and wedding anniversaries is to plant trees in Israel. For example, the Queen's Jubilee was marked by the British Jewish community by planting a forest in her name.

As must be evident, the urbanisation of the world's population has made it less aware and less sensitive to the balance that must be maintained in nature. A number of Jewish practices have ameliorated this in Jewish tradition. No practising Jew fails to notice sunset and new moons. We mark our days and months by them. We watch for nightfall to know when Shabbat has finished. We have to ask ourselves regularly how something grows to know which particular blessing to say on it. When we sit in our open-roofed booths on Sukkot in September/October, we note the weather keenly!

Then there's the somewhat obscure but significant set of rules in the Torah about not mixing species – either by yoking together animals, like an ox and an ass, or weaving together natural threads, like wool and cotton, or by hybridising two different natural types, like producing a 'geep' (or was it a 'shoat?'), that cross between a goat and a sheep. Such rules were invoked to produce responses to GM foods, though there is as yet (of course?) no consensus on what such teachings tell us. Generally, the more Orthodox are more lenient than Progressive Jews on such matters, and are therefore more open to such experimentation and new technologies, perhaps because they are more suspicious of fashionable attitudes, so if the general public is resistant to something, they're tempted to not go with the crowd but come to their own conclusions and back the scientists, or because they apply cold logic to issues as they arise, rather than warm feeling.

Another reason perhaps for the Orthodox tendency to take a more permissive line on issues relating to the treatment and use of the natural world than Progressive Jews is that there is a long-standing Jewish tradition that the world exists to serve humanity and not the other way around. According to this view, we certainly have responsibility to hand the world on in a fit state to our descendants, but it's ours to use. The concept of animal rights has no purchase in Jewish tradition. Don't misunderstand me. Animal welfare is an almost paramount concern: We must feed our animals before ourselves. We must not cause any animal unnecessary suffering. We must not kill animals just for sport. We must not muzzle an ox on the threshing floor and so on. But we can do with the world what we will consonant with handing it on in a fit state. The same principle is taught in the Talmudic story of the old man planting trees that he'll never live to enjoy, because, as he says, 'there were trees here when I was young'. However, the Talmud does not just tell whimsical stories. It sets rules for green belts round town, proper planning controls including air quality in terms of noxious smells, and other principles of environmental management.



That, of course, is the current dilemma. As it says in the Midrash, the millennia-old collection of homiletic rabbinic teachings, when God created the world, he led Adam round it and encouraged him to admire its beauty. He then admonished him to care for it because, if he were to spoil it, there would be no way of replacing it. Note, though, that this is about caring for the world and handing it on in a fit state, not preserving it or avoiding changing it. There is no intrinsic respect for nature for its own sake. In the traditional outlook – with which many Progressive Jews will no doubt disagree – nature exists for human benefit. But that's not a narrow understanding of current human needs only, and Jews have a millennia long consciousness of how history works. Of course we should not cause animals to become extinct, but Judaism is fairly unsentimental about the fact that some animals do die out and others emerge. We don't have to halt nature either.

The mystical tradition of Judaism, Kabala, has taught that the spiritual world was shattered at Creation and it is the job of the Jews to help put it back together again. The term used for this task is 'Tikkun Olam', repairing the world. In recent years, this ancient phrase has been re-applied, initially by Progressive Jews, as placing a responsibility on Jews to engage in a host of socially responsible activities, be it helping with world poverty, engaging in inter-faith activities – or caring for the environment. The Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, published a book in 2005 dealing with such issues and called it *To Heal a Fractured World*.

One of the most significant areas of Tikkun Olam relates to world poverty. The Jewish charity I chair – Tzedek: Jewish Action for a Just World – is an organisation which works with the world's poorest, helping them to help themselves. Here the fact that the Hebrew word for charity is drawn not from something about kindness but from the word meaning 'justice' accentuates that there is a duty at work here, not just a virtue. The Torah sabbatical principle that all debts were wiped out once every seven years rapidly became unworkable as a money economy developed, but the principle remains as an inspiration. Indeed, slightly misapplying the relevant concepts, the Jubilee Debt Campaign took the word Jubilee from the Torah – though the 50 year Jubilee was a time when all property reverted to its original owner, thereby preventing anyone from accumulating too much wealth or anyone losing out too severely because of the failures of their parents and grandparents.

An increasing number of synagogues are seeking Fair Trade status by buying Fair Trade products whenever they can, and the huge adult education organisation with which I'm involved, Limmud, only uses Fair Trade tea and coffee and at its summer seminars uses recyclable or biodegradable products in a self-conscious endeavour to model such behaviour.

In my daughter's really quite Orthodox Jewish girls' school she tells me that a number of girls have taken responsibility for putting up notices around the school exhorting their fellow pupils not to waste and be more careful of the environment. For example, there's a notice in the toilets warning users not to take more paper towels than they actually need to dry their hands. This is surely a good sign that practising Jews care. But then again, the sign was needed!

### **Useful websites**

[www.bigjewishgreen.org](http://www.bigjewishgreen.org), for a number of good articles and insights into responses from a range of Jewish perspectives to environmentalism.

[www.noahproject.org.uk](http://www.noahproject.org.uk), for British Jewry's environmental organisation, resources, contacts etc.

[www.coejl.org](http://www.coejl.org), the website of the American organization, Coalition for the Environment and Jewish Life, originally driven by Progressive Jewish outlooks but increasingly engaging people from across the spectrum.