

# Zionism, Israel and the Conservation of Nature

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The relationship between Judaism and nature conservation is the focus of a book, “Conservation and Democracy,” published in 2006.<sup>[1]</sup> In addition to numerous short contributions on this subject, it includes an appendix containing the first reprint of a historical document about “Judaism and nature conservation” from 1932. To accuse Jews of being not friends of nature, rather a threat to ecology (what ever that means) is a typical example of antisemitism, not only, but particularly in Germany. This short review can just shed some light on this phenomenon by focusing on Judaism and nature conservation. This article is part of a new discussion about “[how cool is Zionism](#)” or “Neo-Zionism”?

The Israeli landscape architect Tal Alon-Mozes examines, from a Zionist perspective, the environmental roots that preceded the founding of the state of Israel. She investigates three important *tropes*: First, the “myth of Palestine as a desert,” second, the “myth of making the desert bloom” and third, the “myth of the return to nature.” Biblical and modern concepts competed and still compete with each other. In particular, the view of agriculture as offering a means to connect with nature was a modern idea. As a further example, she

introduces the proposal of Yehoshua Margolin (1877-1947) to situate kindergartens inside gardens. Margolin wrote books and study plans on 'nature studies' for kindergartens as well as grammar schools and founded the first Hebrew-Pedagogical Institute in 1932.

Henning Eikenberg adds to this and reports about the history of nature conservation in the State of Israel. It is striking that, in Israel, the programs of the Ministry of Environmental Protection are funded up to 75% not by the state budget but by entrance fees and donations, many of them from the Jewish diaspora. That pattern is consistent with the origins of the nature conservation movement, which developed from the bottom up rather than being initiated by the state. For example, the NGO Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI), a key player, was founded 35 years before the establishment of an independent Ministry of Environmental Protection in 1988. One of the founders of SPNI was the Zionist Heinrich Mendelssohn (1910-2002). In the Weimar Republic, he was *inter alia* a member of the Zionist student group Kadimah. In 1933 he emigrated to Palestine. A zoologist, he helped found the Tel Aviv University. Mendelssohn "is considered today as one of the founding fathers of environmental protection in Israel."

Alois P. Hüttermann completes this volume with a short description of nature conservation in ancient Israel. After the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 CE, the Jews were driven into less fertile agricultural areas. Normally, such plots would appear suitable for herds of smaller animals such as sheep or goats. The rabbis knew, however, that these animals' grazing habits would denude the pastures and cause desertification, so it was decided to forbid Jews to keep smaller animals. As a result, desertification did not occur. Hüttermann proposes using this approach to prevent desertification today (for example, in Mauretania, Iran, or China).

## Siegfried Lichtenstaedter: "Nature Conservation and Judaism" (1932)

Appended to the volume is *Nature Conservation and Judaism* by Dr. Siegfried Lichtenstaedter. A 48-page text published in 1932, it is a very significant document about the German nature conservation movement. It is based on a speech given by the author "on March 4, 1931, in the framework of a Jewish community study course in Munich." The exclusion of Jews from the nature conservation movement after 1933, the Holocaust, and the impact of anti-Jewish environmentalists after 1945 caused this document simply to be ignored until now. Gert Gröning, Professor of "gardening and open space development" at the University of Art in Berlin (UdK) and one of the founders of critical research into the history of environmental protection and the open space movement in National Socialism and in the Federal Republic of Germany, rescued this text from the oblivion caused by ignorance or the desire to downplay the role of Jews in environmentalism. Born in 1865, Siegfried Lichtenstaedter was a state official and a publicist from 1898 to 1932. From 1897, when his initial work, *Culture and Humanity*, appeared through the Weimar era, he published works on anti-Semitism, such as *Antisemitica* in 1926. As anti-Semitism in imperial Germany was no less widespread than in the Weimar Republic, he often used a Turkish pseudonym, "Dr. Mehemed Emin Efendi."

Lichtenstaedter begins *Nature Conservation and Judaism* by noting that conservation was in fact a new movement, with the Yellowstone National Park in North America, created in 1872, the first big park designed to protect nature. This new-found love of nature stands in opposition to the ancient Roman aversion to the Alps – "foeditas Alpium." Attention to unusual stone outcroppings, the extinction of entire animal species (such as the *Stellerschen* sea-cow ("*Borkentier*") first discovered in 1741 that had already disappeared by 1768), or environmental threats to plants drove Lichtenstaedter to seek

the institutional origins of nature conservation. Along with the establishment of various organizations he cites, for example, Bavarian rulings against “disfiguring advertisements” or medieval conservation laws. Nevertheless, he concludes that: “The theoretical foundation is unsatisfactory.” Some of his findings are undoubtedly problematic, for example, his reference to Swiss nature researcher Paul Sarasin, who called for the protection of “threatened races of men”. Similarly, his call for ‘linguistic conservation’ begs the question as to why languages, that is to say human culture, should be included in nature conservation. Lichtenstaedter’s passages dealing with Jewish laws, on the other hand, are very interesting. The first that he mentions and analyzes is the most important: the institution of the Sabbath Year. While the Christian concept of the Sabbath simply views the Seventh Day as a time to rest and think ‘about God’, he shows how universal, pragmatic and sensible the Jewish law of the Seventh Year was:

“When ye come into the land which I give you, then shall the land keep a sabbath unto the Lord. Six years thou shalt sow thy field, and six years thou shalt prune thy vineyard, and gather in the fruit thereof; But in the seventh year shall be a sabbath of rest unto the land, a sabbath for the Lord: thou shalt neither sow thy field, nor prune thy vineyard. That which groweth of its own accord of thy harvest thou shalt not reap, neither gather the grapes of thy vine undressed: for it is a year of rest unto the land.”[\[iii\]](#)

Lichtenstaedter comments that it is doubtful “whether a similar law exists or existed in any other religion.” He mentions that in the 1890s, collections were taken up outside Palestine so that Jewish settlers could celebrate the Sabbath year in the Holy Land. It is a proud Judaism that expresses itself so by demarcating the limits of economic exploitation:

“How much higher is our Torah than the conscience of the so-called cultural world!”

He analyzes another law from the book of Moses according to which young birds and eggs that fall together with a nest can be kept, but the mother bird should be let go. This is because the grown mother bird can lay new eggs right away, while the young birds that have fallen as well as the eggs are lost no matter what:

“This is nothing else but a zoological protection of nature – to my knowledge the first such law in the history of religion and culture, as far as it is known to us.”

Then he discusses the law *“Bal taschchith”*, “you should not ruin anything”, directed specifically at military sieges or victories. The next law, the “prohibition on mixing” is obviously abstruse; it describes among other things the prohibition on wearing “clothing from different cloths (wool and linen)”. Even Lichtenstaedter considers it irrational, as the orthodox position, according to which the 1555 Codex *“Schulchan Arush”* is still determining. He dismisses two traditional Jewish approaches, the “fossilized point of view” and the “garbled point of view” as insignificant and unhelpful for tracing the genesis of nature conservation. Much more useful is the approach of trying to “return to the Torah”. At any rate, Lichtenstaedter sees the conditions for demonstrating the close relationship between Judaism and nature conservation completely realistically – 1932 – in a sad light:

“By this we do not, by any means, want to underestimate the difficulties and concerns, that pose natural obstacles to a leading role for Judaism. As things stand now, if we were to push ourselves to the fore, the response would be more or less: what? Judaism preaches nature conservation? Then there can be only one solution: Destroy whatever can be destroyed, lay waste what can be laid waste, exterminate what can be exterminated! We must therefore exercise a certain restraint; address narrower, more refined circles rather than the broad public, particularly at a time when it is vulnerable

to incitement and being made stupid. Above all, the most important thing is for us to act in the spirit of our religion.”

Lichtenstaedter closes his talk by clearly opposing the *völkisch* ‘nature and homeland protectors’ who were already all too audible during the Weimar years:

“With absolute certainty one can state: the widespread ‘modern,’ ‘patriotic’ or *völkisch* concept that ‘only one’s own people or one’s own race (anthropological, imaginary or feigned) has merit and whose existence is therefore absolutely justified’ stands in irreconcilable opposition to Jewish moral teachings.”

The non-Jewish, German protectors of nature took another way after 1933, like most Germans. Nature conservation was not the only area in which the longstanding hatred of Jews, ‘non-Germans’ and Judaism ‘ripened’.

“On June 25, 1942, Lichtenstaedter was deported from Munich to Theresienstadt with the Transport II/9. Of the 50 people in this transport, 46 were killed and 4 liberated. Lichtenstaedter was murdered on December 6, 1942, in Theresienstadt.”

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[i] Gert Gröning/Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn (ed.) (2006): Nature Conservation and Democracy!?, Munich: Martin Meidenbauer [in German]. The German original of this article was published here, including the quotes of the references in this article <http://www.hagalil.com/archiv/2008/01/tu-bischat.htm> .

[ii] Leviticus 25: 2-5, King James version.