

How 'Green' Is the Torah

By: Rabbi Tzvi Price

In recent times, the environmentalist movement has gained in popularity and legitimacy. Zoning boards and city planners are now taking into account such environmental issues as the need for open spaces, restricting pollution, and coexisting with nature. What is the Torah's attitude with regard to society's newfound respect for the environment?

In parshas Masei the Torah provides for the establishment of cities for the Leviim. The pasuk says, "Hashem spoke to Moshe in the plains of Moav, on the Jordan at Jericho, saying: Command the Children of Israel that they shall give to the Leviim, from the heritage of their possession, cities for dwelling, and open space for the cities all around them shall you give to the Leviim. The cities shall be theirs for dwelling, and their open space shall be for their animals, for their wealth, and for all aspects of their life." (Bamidbar 35, 1-3) The pasuk indicates that the area surrounding the city was meant to be a useful public resource, a kind of public courtyard.

However, this open area served another purpose. Rashi explains that the Torah wanted the area around the city to remain clear of urban or agricultural development. As Rashi says, "[The area was] a wide, vacant space surrounding the outside of the city in order to be an aesthetic enhancement for the city. And they were not permitted to build a house there, or to plant a vineyard, or to sow a field." In essence, Rashi is describing a Torah zoning law, and this law would indicate that, indeed, the Torah does require environmentally sound urban planning. You might say that the Torah was 'green' a long time before 'being green' was in style.

The Torah's concern for a healthy, unpolluted environment can be demonstrated by a number of laws that are found in Choshen Mishpat. For instance, in 414:1 the Shulchan Aruch states that one may not put out garbage (and by extension, other forms of pollution) in a public property, and if one did, the Rabbis would fine the person. In 155:22 we find that the halacha mandated that production, storage, and maintenance facilities that smelled or produced damaging air pollution be placed at a distance far enough away as to not cause harm to the inhabitants of the town. Although the Shulchan Aruch does not directly discuss the issue of air pollution which has a more global effect, we may assume by extension that if such air pollution could be shown to be significantly harmful to the inhabitants of a large area, then the Torah would forbid its production.

Even noise pollution is regulated by Choshen Mishpat. In 156:2, we find the following halacha. Neighbors may force a new store to close if the noise made by the customer traffic is loud enough to disturb the neighbors' sleep. The issue of low-flying airplane traffic near an airport which disturbs the sleep of the people who live near the airport would be governed by this halacha.

Given the similarities between the ideals of the Green Movement and those of the Torah, one should ask whether there are any differences. The Torah's concern for maintaining and fostering a healthy environment is primarily based on its concern for Mankind. Man needs a healthy environment in order to be healthy and productive. Choshen Mishpat demands that one not damage his fellow man by polluting. As long as this is the Green Movement's underlying motivation, then the Torah encourages and praises its activities.

However, one has the sense that something else might be motivating them.

Given the modern philosophy of Evolution that places Man as an equal to the plants and animals, it is no wonder that modern society would develop an ethic of environmentalism. After all, animals don't pollute. Plants don't pollute. Why do we have the right to pollute? Why should we have the right to hurt the planet when we are not more important than anything else on the planet?

The Torah stands in stark contrast to this attitude. The Torah demands of us to "fill the world and conquer it!" (Breishis 1:28) We are the masters of the planet, not its equals. Yes, we must watch over it. However, we must do so with the correct understanding.

We know that Hashem gave us the planet in order that we have all that we need in order to worship Him. A Jew's environmentalism should be motivated by that knowledge. Yes, the Torah may look 'green,' but looks may be deceiving.

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