

Environmentalism in Israel, 2018

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Rabbi Barry H. Block

Israel today is an advanced, industrial nation, with most of its population living in and around the major population centers in the middle of the country, within commuting distance of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. The reality of 21st Century Israel doesn't match the image with which many of us were raised, a picture that never accurately reflected reality. Yes, we were taught about historic sites of Jerusalem's Old City. Beyond that, the Israel presented in pictures and stories was of agricultural pioneers, of the kibbutz and moshav, of egalitarian societies where everybody worked together and shared what they produced. We heard about the early Zionist pioneers who had "drained the swamps and made the desert bloom," creating a lush agricultural landscape where it seemed that none had been for the two millennia since the Temple was destroyed and our people dispersed.

Early Zionists did see themselves as reclaiming our ancestral heritage in the Land of Israel. Ancient Israel was largely agricultural, as we see in the opening lines of this week's Torah portion. Acknowledging gratitude for having reached the Promised Land after centuries of Egyptian bondage and decades of desert wandering, they bring the first fruits of their produce to the Temple in thanksgiving.

Notably, Rashi insists that "not all fruits are subject to the duty of bringing to the Temple their first fruits." Instead, our ancestors brought only seven species native to the Land of Israel – wheat, barley, grape, fig, pomegranate, olive, and date.ⁱ Our Israelite ancestors didn't have the luxury of growing nonnative produce, lacking the agricultural technology to do. Once 20th Century pioneers drained swamps in the lush Jezreel Valley of northern Israel and irrigated croplands in the Negev Desert, they gained the opportunity to farm diverse varieties of produce.

But there's a problem. "Draining swamps" is the same activity that we now know as destroying wetlands, which is harmful to the environment and a wide array of plant and animal species. "Making the desert bloom" requires tremendous amounts of fresh water in an arid environment where life's most precious resource is scarce.

Water is Israel's most endangered commodity. In the early years of the State, a National Water Carrier began to bring water from the Sea of Galilee – in Hebrew, the Kineret – to Israel's population centers in the middle of the county and ultimately to irrigate agricultural lands in the south. Over the decades, water levels in the Kineret have dropped dramatically. The mythically “mighty” Jordan River, flowing south from the Sea of Galilee, dwindled to a trickle.

This summer, most of my time in Israel was spent at Jerusalem's Shalom Hartman Institute. One day, though, I traveled south with a group from Hartman's Rabbinic Torah Seminar. We visited the Dead Sea, where I had been many times, though never with the purpose of exploring the environmental impact that the modern Jewish State has on its own natural resources and environment. I will never look at the Dead Sea the same way again.

Since 1960, the water level in the Dead Sea has fallen precipitously. Once one large lake, saltier than the ocean, the Dead Sea now consists of two separate pools, as it has for several decades. Perhaps I saw the larger Dead Sea on my first trip to Israel in 1976, when I was about to turn thirteen, but every time since then, I've seen, but never really noticed, that it's divided in two. Had I ever given the matter any thought, I would've wondered how the southern pool is maintained. After all, the Dead Sea's only source of water is the Jordan River, which flows into it from the north. What feeds the southern pool?

The answer lies with the Dead Sea Works, a gigantic factory that extracts salt, potash, magnesium chloride, and other minerals and chemicals at the southern tip of the Dead Sea. As the Jordan brought less and less water south, the shallower, southern part of the Dead Sea began to dry up. The factory's owners had two choices if they wished to continue their productive and lucrative industry: They could build a new factory, much farther north. However, the less expensive option was to build a canal to bring water from the remaining Dead Sea into the now-dry seabed in the south, creating an artificially-fed southern sea. That resolution was good for multiple Israeli and Jordanian interests, particularly the tourism industry. Hotels abound almost exclusively on the shores of what would otherwise have become a dry seabed.

Industry, whether tourism or the Dead Sea Works, means jobs. The factory and hotels provide sorely-needed employment for much of the urban population of southern Israel, in relatively poor communities such as Dimona.

Because the Dead Sea Works' evaporation pools are two meters deep – that is, designed for evaporation – some environmentalists plausibly claim that the factory speeds the Dead Sea's decline. For dramatic effect, they say, "The Dead Sea is dying." The northern pool of the Dead Sea, though, is quite deep, so the Sea is in no real danger of disappearing altogether. But the Sea's decline bears real consequences. Thousands of dangerous sink holes, some large enough to swallow a house, have opened up in areas surrounding the Dead Sea, as ground water is displaced by the recession of the Sea.

When I visited Israel in 2011, on a mission with then-Mayor Julian Castro of San Antonio, I visited a desalination plant and was told that the technology would soon supply 100% of Israel's water needs from the Mediterranean. Today, "70% of [Israel's] drinking water comes from desalination plants."ⁱⁱ More are set to be built. Much of the desalinated water is pumped directly into the Galilee, providing water not only for Israel but also for its Jordanian neighbors and the Palestinian territories of the West Bank.

After visiting the Dead Sea and touring the impressive Dead Sea Works, our group went to Kibbutz Neot Hakikar, just to the south of the factory. There, dates grow abundantly, reminding us of the fruits of our Torah portion.

At the Kibbutz, we met Bilha Givon, Executive Director of Negev Bar-Kayma, called "Sustainable Development Negev" in English. Bilha told us that she used to be a confrontational environmental activist, frequently organizing protests and appearing on the front pages of newspapers. Several years ago, though, she gave up all of that to embark on a more collaborative, and ultimately more successful, approach.

Negev Bar-Kayma "describes a process that started with a complete lack of trust in 2005, and which, through a common resolve by the factories and the residents [of the area], has wrought a fundamental change in relations between the Dead Sea Works and the nearby residents. ... The goal ... has been to improve environmental quality and quality of life for the populace by bringing the two entities closer together, while changing the worldview of the ... decision makers" at the Dead Sea Works. "Mutual understanding of each other's needs through familiarity and involvement has made it possible to discover ways to deal with environmental hazards caused by the industry, such as damage to natural landscapes and ecosystems, impact on changes in Dead Sea levels, air quality and other hazards that create regional conflicts."ⁱⁱⁱ Emissions of greenhouse gases have decreased. Air quality has improved. And the relationships between the

area's largest employer and agricultural settlements nearby are better than they have ever been.

Our Torah portion, which begins by prescribing a celebration for entering the Promised Land with gifts of first fruits, ends with a lengthy recitation of blessings and curses. Fourteen verses expound upon all the good that will come to Israel if the people are faithful. Fully 55 verses describe detailed destruction that will befall the people if they turn away from God.

In Israel, 2018, on the eve of 5779, curses that come to a nation that neglects its native, natural environment are all too evident, especially on the banks of the Dead Sea, remote from Israel's population centers. And yet, there is hope. Hope in desalination, a new approach to draining the swamp of environmental disaster and making the desert bloom. Blessing in the cooperation built on trust by Negev Bar-Kayma.

Perhaps Negev Bar-Kayman may be a model to us at this penitential season. If we, like industry and communities in southern Israel, seek to understand those who have been our adversaries, we may build a better future together.

Amen.

ⁱ Rashi to Deuteronomy 26:2.

ⁱⁱ Melanie Lidman, "Desalination isn't the magic bullet, Water Authority warns Israelis," *The Times of Israel*, June 5, 2018.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Industry-community-place-environment relationships: The Case of Dead Sea Works and Dead Sea Settlements," unpublished document of Negev Bar Kayma.