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## **The environment in Jewish law**

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Introduction

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## INTRODUCTION

Environmental concerns are at the top of the agenda around the world. There is hardly a newscast or a newspaper that does not mention them on a daily basis. The issues range from the changing global climate to how those changes affect a nearly extinct owl in the forests of the western United States. Global climate change is a worldwide phenomenon, but concern on such as air quality in congested cities will differ greatly in Los Angeles and Mogadishu. Thus some responses to environmental problems need to be international or national, while others will be highly localized.

The broad issues deal with our approach to the natural world. To what degree do we really understand it and the interactions of the various forces of nature? The decisions that we make are not abstract; rather they involve the underlying philosophies of different groups and religions. Are we to live with nature, or shall we dominate it and place it at our service? With either approach, or several others that are possible, the precise meaning of these concepts needs to be identified.

If nature is to be preserved, then the question of what is enough is instantly raised. Do minor species, about which, granted, we know very little, deserve to be taken into consideration? If we preserve large areas primarily for future recreation, how sacrosanct shall they be and when can they be considered for some development?

Economic considerations play a major role in all environmental decisions. Global issues bring about a conflict between the developed lands and those of the Third World. Can the latter develop without going through the polluting stages of industrialization? On the local level, there is always a price to be

paid for cleaner water and air or reduced levels of noise. The struggle between different economic groups is continuous and often quite bitter.

Human welfare is always at the core of the discussion, but the term has very different meanings for those who are well-off and those who are hungry. Shall food production, cheap transportation, and basic housing take priority over a declining infant mortality rate, longer life expectancy, and better medical care?

These questions have not been raised in a significant manner till the last half century. Some concerns were always expressed, but in a very limited and localized fashion. As major portions of the world remained unexplored, and relatively untouched by modern developments there was no need to deal with these issues till the latter part of the nineteenth century. Such questions are endless, and we know that the answers will determine the quality of life for future generations. As we seek answers, we naturally turn to our religious heritages. Each tradition has been asked the same questions by its adherents, and each faces somewhat the same predicament.

Judaism has been no different from the other world religions. Our tradition dealt with small segments of these issues, but they were secondary or even peripheral to earlier generations. Although there is some isolated appreciation of the natural world and concern for it in the midrashic literature, the halakhic tradition has even less. As this latter tradition depends largely on questions asked, in other words on real-life situations rather than on speculation, little material is available as no one raised the issues or asked the questions.

This means that modern Judaism must build on a slim foundation of the few issues that have been raised and then look at the underlying principles to see what guidance may be given. This requires a major effort and new approaches. It may also require an entirely new and different outlook upon the natural world from what we followed in the past.

The essays in this volume seek to make a beginning in this direction. They wish to go beyond the hortatory rather vague approaches of others who have written about Judaism and the environment. We need an underlying philosophy and a halakhic approach that will develop into detailed guidance. Discussions on these issues is vital as questions on these matters continue to be raised with increasing urgency.