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## **The environment in Jewish law**

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Early Zionism, The Biblical Landscape, And Ecology

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## EARLY ZIONISM, THE BIBLICAL LANDSCAPE, AND ECOLOGY

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**QUESTION:** Did the early religious Zionist settlements in Israel concern themselves with recreating the biblical landscape and shaping an environmentally friendly policy of land use, or were they solely concerned with resettling the land, tilling, and building a modern state? (L.F., Los Angeles, CA)

**ANSWER:** The creation of a Jewish state was seen as settling Jews in the Land of Israel as farmers. The obstacles were immense and included draining malarial swamps, reclaiming long neglected farmlands, rebuilding irrigation systems and adding new ones, and reforestation, not to speak of the issues surrounding land ownership and the nomadic and peasant population that lived on the land. The idealized image of the land that emerges from the early Zionist literature has little to do with the biblical landscape. We should also remember that our picture of the biblical land must be pieced together from descriptive fragments found in the biblical books. The settlers came largely from Europe and sought to construct an economically viable agricultural base. They planted crops that they needed and that could be sold. Modern Israeli agriculture must produce what is commonly consumed nowadays and must compete on the world market. During one period oranges totally unknown in biblical times, were grown for export. They did not become common in the Mediterranean Basin until the late Roman period. Now they

are no longer a primary crop, as worldwide competition has shifted. Vines for wine products were a major biblical crop. When Moses sent spies to visit the land and report to the Israelites in the desert, they brought back enormous bunches of grapes. Although superficially wine products may appear as a continuation of biblical agriculture, this resemblance is only superficial. The modern grape and the way in which it is grown, hybridized, and grafted was unknown in biblical times. Yet, in order to compete on the current market, both for taste and economically, modern agricultural methods must be used. The olive tree, which has not changed as much as other crops through the centuries, continues to be an important plant grown in Israel. However, as the production of olives is very labor intensive, it is not a major commercial crop. The production of flowers, certainly not commercial in biblical times, has become significant. More important advanced techniques, including genetic and allied research, have led Israel to be among the world leaders in exporting high-tech agriculture and plant materials. In the matter of reforestation, a long-term project with few immediate economic pressures, the settlers chose trees that were suited to a particular purpose, such as eucalyptus species to assist in the draining of swamps or trees that they knew and felt were suitable for the eroded hills. To the best of my knowledge, little discussion of biblical species was undertaken till quite recently.

Land development was undertaken as possibilities became available. Agricultural zoning as well as the protection of agricultural lands from the encroaching urban sprawl represented a much later concern.

In the rabbinic literature of this period many issues of a new Jewish state were discussed, but the one that you have raised was not among them. The chief agricultural problem for the early Orthodox Jewish settlers was the Sabbatical year, a biblical commandment, which later Jewish tradition limited to the Land of Israel. As the vast majority of Jews lived outside the Land of Israel, it had been mute for centuries. Most Jews who lived in the Land of Israel during the Middle Ages or the early modern period were urban, so the issue of the Sabbatical year was not raised again in a practical manner. Theoretical discussions appeared in the halakhic literature or in commentaries on the biblical texts, but without practical ramifications. This changed with the founding of Zionist settlements. The initial settlements

were not established by religious Zionists, so in the early years of the mid nineteenth century this was not a real issue. When it was raised, there were many considerations not the least of which was simply establishing which was to be the Sabbatical year, because it had not been counted for two thousand years. That was followed by trying to avoid the issue, growing plants hydroponically, etc. As most food used in modern Israel is not grown in the Land of Israel itself, the issue remains mute for most consumers even if they are strictly Orthodox.

The biblical landscape has been recreated in a parklike setting as an educational tool by Neot Kedumim, in a similar way to the Rodef Shalom Biblical Botanical Garden of Pittsburgh. These projects are useful as educational tools for understanding the Bible, but they do not lend themselves as models for practical agriculture.

Even these efforts have faced many problems as the modern descendants of ancient plants are often quite different. Although we know that barley, wheat, emer, and other grains were grown in the biblical period, the modern hybrid versions have changed these crops. In some instances it is possible to breed the plants back to their original form.

The early religious Zionists were idealists who sought to create a viable Jewish existence in the land of the Bible. This, rather than environmental concerns, made up their agenda.