

## Noah and the Ethics of Environmentalism

**By Eric I. B. Beller**

In testimony before a Congressional committee earlier this year, Interior Secretary James G. Watt was asked a question about preserving natural resources for future generations. In reply, Watt stated, "I do not know how many future generations we can count on before the Lord returns." This latest exposure of the religious substratum underlying Watt's anti-conservationist policies succeeded in multiplying the outrage of many already concerned over the fate of our coastlines, mountains, and wildlife. President Reagan had found not just any wolf for the chicken coup; he had found one who would sooner bring on the Apocalypse than compromise exploitation of the world's natural resources.

The vociferousness of the environmentalist response goes beyond any immediate material stake. Watt's vexing dogmatism poses not only a practical threat, but also an ideological one. In the previous decade, environmentalists pinned back the ears of industry apologists who spoke in the name of progress and profit. Pitted now against an adversary, who seems more than ready to invoke Divine will instead, environmentalists fear losing the public's trust and loyalty. As inheritors of a predominantly secular, liberal initiative, they fear drowning in a fundamentalist deluge.

Whether or not these fears prove fully justified, Watt's anti-conservationist rhetoric has achieved one ideological success already -- the proclaimed association between religiosity and unfettered resource development has suddenly proven itself quite potent. A second success seems likely -- that of leaving the impression that this association is the only one possible, that being religious virtually means adopting the Watt platform.

Such a notion must be rejected. It would be divisive and wasteful, indeed, were the environmental movement to do battle over the opposition's new religiosity rather than over its hackneyed platform. The loss would be philosophic as well as strategic. In overlooking or rejecting traditional religious sources, environmentalists would lose access to paradigms of the very ethic they espouse, that of reverence for all life, not just human life. It is time for those of us who believe this most deeply to speak up. I would begin with the story of Noah.

### **Noah Worked for Survival of All Species**

The outlines of Noah's story are well known -- the warning, the building of the Ark, the ingathering of the species, the Flood, the re-inhabitation of dry land (Genesis 6-9). The story's ethical content receives less attention. Noah's knowledge implies obligation. Forewarned of impending disaster, he must labor not only for self-preservation, but for the survival of all species (Genesis 6:13-21). Lest we deem this task secondary, Nachmanides teaches that Noah was

commanded to strive on behalf of the animals as he would for his own life. Each narrative segment ends with the report that Noah acted exactly as bidden, and with complete success.

Taken at all seriously, the story of Noah challenges us to undertake any effort, however immense, that is necessary for the survival of all species. The challenge translates into concrete positions on concrete issues. Had such a message been heeded two years ago, for instance, Congress would have honored the plain intent of the Endangered Species Act, which, as the Supreme Court had held, was "to halt and reverse the trend toward species extinction, whatever the cost." Instead, Congress ravaged it, first by watering it down, and, when that did not work, by exempting specific projects outright. Now, the Act is administered by James Watt. One response of concerned Jewish groups across the country could be to "adopt" local endangered species, to monitor and publicize their fate, and to help organize further efforts to save them.

It should be entirely possible to generate a more detailed and comprehensive environmental platform from the full range of Jewish sources. One forum potentially hospitable to such an endeavor is New Jewish Agenda, which has formed standing committees to work out informed positions across the spectrum of progressive Jewish concerns. At the same time, we must also share our ideas and pool our resources with secular organizations such as the Sierra Club. Mutual awareness and support will lay the groundwork for effective coalition politics later on.

### **"Who Creates All Varieties of Creatures"**

The story of Noah holds other lessons, as well. Perhaps the most basic is that limits and conditions attend the familiar grant in Genesis 1:26 of human dominion over our planet. Prior to Parshat Noach, it will be observed, no explicit permission to eat animal flesh appears in the Torah. (see Genesis 1:29.) Rather, it appears for the first time in Genesis 9:3, after the Flood has receded and Noah has completed his labors. One traditional commentary derives from Psalm 128:2, "You shall eat the labor of your hands." As Or Ha'chaim and Radak relate, Noah gained mastery over the species by working to save them. He had toiled to build the Ark and to provide for each animal's needs during the long confinement on board. By his actions he merited new rights.

We live in a time when proliferating modes of human land use, food production, and industrial development pose a global threat. We have abused our dominion with murderous, epochal effect. Is it too heretical to suggest that our right to eat meat depends on working in our day as Noah did in his to assure the survival of all species?

In our own household, we have answered this question by adding a blessing to our meal-time observances whenever we eat meat, fish, or fowl. (Since we

observe kashrut, are of limited means, and tend toward the vegetarian, these occasions come less frequently than one might imagine.) The blessing goes as follows:

Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha'olam, borei minei beriyot. (Blessed are You, Lord our G-d, Ruler of the universe, who has created all varieties of creatures.)

We have been making this blessing for two years. We experimented with other formulas, but found this one at once most powerful and most in keeping with the other brachot (blessings) over food. It has repeatedly heightened our sense of awareness of and responsibility toward all life.

A Jewish ethic of environmentalism would not confine itself to activities in the public sphere. Judaism teaches oneness and demands unity. Public and private remain distinct only insofar as the distinction facilitates the performance of mitzvot. The deeper theme is the passionate, purposeful integration of good deeds with study and worship. We ought not forget this theme as we venture into the arena of coalition politics.

### **The Threat and the Promise**

Unquestionably, secular environmentalism and its wellspring, ecology, perform an indispensable service in deciphering signs of global catastrophe. But the response should steer clear of pitting the secular against the religious. Rather, each can and must lend the other the vividness and strength of its insights. At the same time as we educate ourselves in science, we must tutor our imaginations to lift Noah's Ark from the picture books and must discipline our consciences to measure our conduct earnestly against our forebears'. The way out of the current miasma lies less in a transcendence of traditional teachings than in an enlightened rediscovery and rededication.