[*JSRNC* 15.4 (2021) 529-530] JSRNC (print) ISSN 1749-4907
http://doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.18868 JSRNC (online) ISSN 1749-4915

Book Review

Tanhum S. Yoreh, *Waste Not: A Jewish Environmental Ethics* (New York: SUNY Press, 2019), 306pp., $95 (pbk), ISBN: 9781438476698.

As a scholar who worked for an NGO on waste management in the past and reflects on questions rooted in religion, science, and environmental ethics, I was caught by this book's call to go beyond the dichotomy of dominion vs. stewardship and to understand the Jewish concept of *bal tashhit* (waste not) as an environmental principle. During the pandemic we have witnessed a dramatic increase in waste production, which mainly stemmed from disposable plastics. What we have experienced has important implications for the study of religion, nature, and culture. *Waste Not* provides us with a perspective to understand these implications within a broader environmental framework.

Tanhum S. Yoreh, a scholar of religion and the environment, describes his aim at the beginning of the book as to understand the intellectual evolution of *bal tashhit*, the prohibition against wastefulness, originating from Deuteronomy 20:19-20. According to the author, most studies dealing with Judeo-Christian environmental ethics depart from either Genesis 1:28 (the dominionist approach) following Lynn White Jr.'s well-known critique or Genesis 2:15 (stewardship ethics). Yoreh instead attempts to build an alternative framework for the Jewish environmental ethics based on a broadened interpretation of *bal tashhit*. He argues 'that although *bal tashhit* has predominantly been used throughout history as an economic concept, its ethical and environmental parameters also often factored into its conceptualization' (p. 14). He also links the prohibition against wastefulness with the prohibition against self-harm (Genesis 9:5) and traces both concepts' intellectual origins as an original contribution to the literature. For this, the method of tradition history is employed. To create a cartography of *bal tashhit* and the related notions, the author engages in a dialogue with a collection of materials in four chapters: 'Classical Rabbinic Texts', 'Bible and Biblical Commentaries', 'Codes and Their Cognates', and 'Responsa'.

The first chapter relies on rabbinic texts such as Midrash, Mishnah, Babylonian Talmud, Tosefta, and Minor Tractates. It begins with a note that although the rabbinic tradition emerges in 70 CE, the concept of *bal tashhit* is never mentioned until the Babylonian Talmud (p. 39). This chapter focuses first on Deuteronomy 20:19-20, which is on cutting trees during a siege, and the related rabbinic commentaries. Secondly, it deals with general comments on the concepts of *bal tashhit* and self-harm. Concerning the former, the author observes that trees' intrinsic value was sacrificed for the sake of 'an economic, utilitarian' principle. Further, understanding wastefulness as a way of self-harm is said to develop during the amoraic era. However, Yoreh criticizes the lack of emphasis on indirect harm as a long-term sustainability problem (p. 97). The author

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concludes the chapter by indicating that Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–1888) provided us with 'the most environmentally mature understanding of *bal tashhit*' for modern Jewish environmentalism (pp. 99-100).

Chapter 2 analyzes the verses of Deuteronomy 20:19-20, Genesis 9:5 (9:4-6), Leviticus 19:27 (the probation against 'destroying' one's beard), and 2 Kings 3:19, 25 (the commandment about the scorched-earth policy) as well as the glosses about them to conclude that they could not be understood in a single way (p. 163). Again, Hirsch was the only scholar who implicitly related Genesis 9:5 and Deuteronomy 20:19-20 and interpreted *bal tashhit* as the guarantor of the responsible implementation of the dominion principle. In other words, Hirsch had responded to Lynn White Jr.'s claims almost a century before White Jr. proposed them (p. 160).

While Chapters 1 and 2 concentrate more on the theoretical aspects, Chapters 3 and 4 address the legal codes and modern explanations for unique situations. The legal codes constituted a new phase in the conceptualization of *bal tashhit*. As one of the greatest Jewish philosophers and jurists in history, Maimonides changed the evolutionary path for *bal tashhit* as a general prohibition against wastefulness in the twelfth century. In a sense, he brought back the classical rabbinic idea of the concept in a more explicit manner (p. 199). According to the author, the scholars, with a few exceptions, followed the Maimonidean interpretation of *bal tashhit* and avoided focusing on the prohibition against self-harm (p. 202). Lastly, it is essential to note that the number of modern-day rabbis commenting on wastefulness is very limited, and none of them approach the idea from an environmental framework (pp. 228-29). Thus, Yoreh identifies three stages in the conceptual evolution of *bal tashhit*: the classical rabbinic era, the amoraic era, and the Maimonidean era. He also reads Hirsch's scholarship as a key source of the moral comprehension of the prohibition (pp. 235-42).

This book makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the prohibition against wastefulness as an environmental principle. It presents the possibilities and limits of the Abrahamic tradition to develop an environmental framework. It is particularly important to see that the mainstream approach to the prohibition is compatible with a utilitarian anthropocentrism. Considering that most of the materials discussed in the book are either God's message to the Israelites or interpretations of it, this raises some questions: Is the Abrahamic God a utilitarian? How should God's message be understood today? Under which conditions are there exceptions? As Carl Schmitt once put it, the sovereign is the one who decides on the exception. In the case of *bal tashhit*, who or what is the sovereign? God or the rabbis or the capitalist system? I believe these questions require answering from a genealogical perspective to transverse diverse ethical positions and transcend utilitarian anthropocentrism. In other words, a genealogical approach to *bal tashhit* invites us to look at the history (and tradition history) suspiciously through not just a specific set of beliefs but also lived practices. Finally, any environmental principle obtained from the Bible, the rabbinic texts, or codes can be considered 'religious' and ignored by a non-believer. However, it may equally be a 'secular' principle for everyone as it governs worldly environmental affairs in a specific way. This also points to the significance of taking a post-dualist, postsecular approach to the study of religion and environment.

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