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Maimonides and *The Guide to the Perplexed*: An Environmental Ethic for Our Time

George Gittleman

In 1991 I was a first-year rabbinical student living in Jerusalem. The winter that year was unseasonably wet resulting in an incredibly verdant spring; the desert bloomed. Having been penned in for a number of months, everyone was going outside. I personally remember walking in the Judean desert in a state of reverie amongst a sea of purple, red, and yellow wild flowers. I was not the only one transfixed by the season, for in the midst of this "spring fever" a Haredi rabbi ruled "there was nothing Jewish about being outdoors!" Apparently, yeshivah students were also enjoying the beautiful spring weather and flora at the expense of *talmud Torah* and at the risk of illicit encounters with the opposite sex!

This may seem extreme, but in fact it reflects a deep current in Jewish tradition that can be hostile towards nature, more often perceiving the natural environment as having merely instrumental value to humanity. The classic example of this perspective in Rabbinic literature is this often-quoted saying from *Pirkei Avot* 3:7: "Rabbi Jacob said: One who walks by the road, studying, and interrupts his study and says, 'How lovely is that tree!' or 'How lovely is that furrow!'—Scripture imputes it to him as if he lost his soul!" In a more contemporary vein, Steven S. Schwarzschild's article, "The Unnatural Jew" sums up this Jewish perspective when he writes:

Jewish philosophy and culture followed a more unnatural path.
God and man are totally distinct from and superior to nature.
The universe is not even *in potential* structured as it ought to be

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by spontaneous natural forces, and therefore reason and morality ought to whip it into shape....The main line of Jewish philosophy (in the exilic age) has paradigmatically defined Jewishness as alienation from and confrontation with nature.¹

Dr. Schwarzschild may be correct when he describes this as "the main line of Jewish philosophy," but it is not the only perspective. A compelling alternative can be found in the greatest and most influential Jewish thinker and communal leader of all time, Rabbi Moses Ben Maimon, also known as the Rambam or Maimonides (1135–1204). In his writings one finds a philosophy affirming the value and goodness of creation qua creation, independent of its relationship with humanity. In grounding goodness in the natural order, Maimonides short circuits any tendency toward alienation from the environment; moral perfection is not transcendent of nature, but rather, it depends on living harmoniously in the web of being, which is inseparable from nature.

Contemporary Jewish writings on the environment trend in two directions; one defends Judaism from those in the environmental movement who see the Judeo Christian Ethic as one of the primary causes of the current crisis;² the other more positive approach aims at proving Judaism's "greenness," primarily by bringing from the background to the foreground environmentally friendly Jewish texts and their interpretations.

The more positivistic discourses on Judaism and the environment certainly invoke the goodness of creation (Gen. 1:31), but often lack a holistic approach, failing to see where environmental issues fit in a larger picture that encompasses not just how our behavior affects the environment but the deeper moral and social issues that influence that behavior. Isolating Judaism and the environment from other core Jewish issues, like questions of social justice, is tantamount to treating the symptoms of a disease without addressing its fundamental causes—offering symptomatic relief but no cure. Such compartmentalization will do little to affect the kind of real change that is necessary if we are going to alter the trajectory toward environmental collapse toward one of healing and sustainability. As the Jewish environmentalist, Jeremy Benstein writes:

Environmentalism is about much more than just the physical environment. It has come to include issues of direct human im-

fact, such as pollution and public health, and beyond to issues of community well being, participatory democracy, justice and equality. . . . Environmentalism goes beyond the limited questions of harming nature or preventing pollution and raises the deeper questions about what it means to be human, what real progress is, and what sort of society we are striving for.³

Any workable Jewish environmental ethic must include within it a life ethic that supports its approach to how human beings are to inhabit and interact with the totality of the world around us; Maimonides offers us such an ethic. His writings cover an astonishing array of subjects including Jewish Law, theology, philosophy, Bible, and medicine. One can find references to environmental concerns scattered throughout his writings, but the focus of our discussion will be chapters 10, 11, and 12 of the third part of his famous philosophic work, *The Guide of the Perplexed*.

An Analysis of the Text

It is extremely difficult to characterize *The Guide*. As Shlomo Pines explains in his introduction to his translation, the philosophic concepts under discussion in *The Guide* are "often dislocated and broken up; sometimes wholly unconnected subjects are brought together; in a word, order is turned into disorder."⁴

As challenging as it can be to understand *The Guide* in its entirety, parts, like the chapters of our focus, are quite clear and stand alone, without relying too much on the larger context of the book. These three chapters are central to Maimonides' discussion of the nature and causes of evil. Though not concerned with environmentalism per se, these chapters are easily applied to our current global predicament, and they amount to a compelling, holistic foundation for a Jewish environmental ethic.⁵

Like the good Aristotelian thinker that he is, Maimonides begins his discourse by defining what he means by evil and its opposite, good. While we might define evil in relation to intent (as opposed to misfortune, for example), for Maimonides, evil is synonymous with limitation, or as Shlomo Pines translates, privation. Maimonides states this unequivocally when he writes, "all evils are privations."⁶ Any privation, including ignorance, is considered evil.⁷

Good, on the other hand is that which is eternal and unchanging. Thus God is the paradigm of good and all that God creates, by

definition, is good: "His being, may He be exalted, [is] the absolute good and regarding all that proceeds from Him being indubitably an absolute good."⁸ While evil is a function of being material (coming in and out of being), good flows from its source in the Divine; God's perfect goodness begets goodness in whatever God creates.⁹

Maimonides' assertion of the goodness of all being might be enough in itself to establish the foundation of a Jewish environmental ethic, but, as we shall see, his case is made stronger by his elaborations on the manifestations of evil and the implications of beings' goodness.

With his definitions in place, Rambam elaborates on the theme. Evil, he argues, has three primary manifestations, the details of which he describes in ascending order relative to their impact on humanity.

Our first challenge, Maimonides argues, is that we are human, material, limited by nature. Disease, birth defects, natural disasters, anything that results in our deterioration or destruction is simply manifestations of our material nature, our humanness (as apposed to divinity, which is not material and thus is not susceptible to limitations). While this form of evil is inherent in being material, in as much as humanness is a part of being, which emanates from divinity, it holds within it the potential for a level of perfection relative to its place in creation. This is true of all of creation/being.

In other words, our limitations are mitigated by our share in being/God's perfection. This distinction is important to our environmental concerns in as much as it places power and responsibility in humanity's hands to minimize limitations and to maximize the potential to dwell with perfection in being. It also allows Maimonides to assert that even though "stuff happens," life and health is more the norm than the exception; privation does not in fact dominate human existence.¹⁰

The second "species" of evil according to Maimonides are "those that man inflict on one another, such as tyrannical domination of some of them over others."¹¹

The third (and most relevant for our discussion) form of evil is "inflicted upon any individual among us by his own action; this is what happens in the majority of cases, and these evils are much more numerous than those of the second kind. All men lament over evils of this kind; and it is only seldom that you find

one who is not guilty of having brought them upon himself."¹² We are, for Maimonides, our own worst enemies. We heap trouble upon ourselves without end. This is especially evident when it comes to "all vices...[such as] concupiscence for eating, drinking, and copulation, and doing these things with excess in regard to quantity or irregularly or when the quality of the foodstuffs is bad. For this is the cause of all corporeal and psychical diseases and ailments."¹³ Giving into these excessive desires we unwittingly exploit the weaknesses already manifest in our corporality (we maximize privation and minimize the good/perfection). This in turn contaminates our soul, the result being we "acquire the habit of desiring things that are unnecessary either for the preservation of the individual or for the preservation of the species."¹⁴ We, in other words, because of excesses in consumption fall into a kind of idolatry, making things that are not of ultimate value our ultimate concern.¹⁵ This delusional view of reality perpetuates a desire for things that is infinite:

If, for instance, your desire is directed to having silver plate, it would be better if it were of gold; some have crystal plate; and perhaps plate is procured that is made out of emeralds and rubies, whenever these stones are to be found. Thus every ignoramus who thinks worthless thoughts is always sad and despondent because he is not able to achieve the luxury attained by someone else.¹⁶

The result of this form of idolatry for Maimonides is a total loss of perspective, not unlike the end result of addiction; the person afflicted will do almost anything to get that which they believe they have to have, with little if any awareness of the personal or societal consequences.¹⁷

The antidote to this sorry state of humanity is, according to Maimonides, wisdom as manifest in Jewish tradition and, though he does not state it openly here, we can reasonably infer from other places in *The Guide*, observation of the natural world through science and rational thought.¹⁸ It is Maimonides' contention that with wisdom as our guiding light, humanity can minimize our natural privations and maximize our innate goodness/perfection. This will result in a desire for only what we truly need (an end to idolatrous consumption and the various evils it carries with it like scarcity

and the resultant conflicts), which in turn will make manifest the Creator's intended harmony between creation as a whole and humanity within the greater framework of being. In other words, wisdom uncovers the true goodness imbedded in the natural order. To live wisely is to live in harmony with creation.

Thus, Maimonides argues, air is the most abundant and the cheapest to acquire, second to water and then food, each being available relative to its importance for life: "Accordingly in every city you find water more frequently and at a cheaper price than food. Things are similar with regard to foodstuffs; those that are most necessary are easier to find at a given place and cheaper than the unnecessary."¹⁹ Contrast the general abundance of basic human necessities with the scarcity of what Maimonides deems luxurious: "musk, amber, rubies, and emeralds." Maimonides points out that no one can claim a true need for these items and their superfluous nature is reflected in their availability or lack thereof.²⁰

The fact that creation contains within it all we need to thrive (if we live wisely) is in itself a manifestation of both God's goodness and the goodness of creation.²¹ The goodness of creation is basic to Maimonides' interpretation of evil. It is also essential to our adaptation of this section of *The Guide* as the basis for a more integrated Jewish environmental ethic in three ways: it affirms the intrinsic value of the natural world against the view that the true good is found only through transcending the physical/temporal plain;²² it is holistic and egalitarian, affirming the worth of all creation; and it offers a vision of symbiotic harmony between all being.

The Equality of Being and a Vision of Symbiotic Harmony

Just as important for forming a Jewish environmental ethic as affirming the basic goodness of creation, Maimonides also works against a hierarchical view of creation where humanity is at the top and the rest of nature falls somewhere below us, in value or importance. In essence, Maimonides sees humankind as one of many species sharing in the beneficence of being. Maimonides does give a nod to humanity's superiority, writing that "Man is the most noble among things that are subject to generation," but in the same section he also emphasizes the "smallness" of humanity's place in the totality of creation.²³ Maimonides' egalitarian

view of creation is remarkable, especially considering the fact that he is working against much of the traditional, anthropocentric view of creation, first described in Genesis and carried forward in much of the Jewish canon. Thus I think it is fair to say that here, Maimonides offers a radical alternative perspective of creation vis-à-vis humanity, something not too far removed from what is today referred to as deep ecology or Gaia (named after the Greek earth goddess) in the secular ecological movement today. Basic to this more radical form of ecology are two principles that echo Maimonides' writings, self-realization and biocentric equality. Self-realization describes the interconnectedness of all being and its "intrinsic relation" with its surroundings. Biocentric equality gives all creation equal status. Gaia is a synthesis of these principles, which sees the planet "as a self-regulating organism, endowed with homeostatic impulses that give it something akin to intelligence. The myriad events that occur around the world at any moment... actually comprises a kind of planetary intention, in which all life strives to perpetuate life."²⁴ The name Gaia aside, it is not a far stretch to perceive Maimonides' assertion of creation's goodness as being akin to the basic premises of deep ecology. This is especially true considering the other corollary of goodness and being: Maimonides' belief that intrinsic to the essential structure of the material world is the possibility for a harmonious relationship between all of creation, the impediment of which is merely a lack (privation) of wisdom.

Before we move from Maimonides' understanding of evil to fully developing a Jewish environmental ethic, it is worth noting that the standard categories of Jewish environmental discourse—*bal tashchit* (the prohibition against wanton destruction), *tzaar baalei chayim* (the laws regarding not causing undue pain to living beings), Shabbat and *Sh'mitah* (the Sabbatical Year and all the laws pertaining to its observance)—can be subsumed under Maimonides' view of goodness in relation to creation in as much as they all affirm the worth of the environment on its own terms, not contingent upon its value to humanity. Thus, goodness becomes an organizing principle bringing together otherwise unrelated aspects of "green" Judaism into one coherent and holistic ethic. This in itself is a worthwhile addition to the discourse on Judaism and environmental ethics. Perhaps even more important is what follows, for in applying Maimonides' definition of evil to environmental

issues, we actually move beyond the object of the problem, the environment, to its cause.

Evil, Idolatry, and Environmental Healing

Applying Maimonides' perspective today, one could argue that the root problem of our current environmental crisis is our culture, which makes an idol out of material wealth, among other things. This false value is a lens that distorts reality to such a degree that it puts our lives and the life of the planet at risk. Maimonides could not have predicted the kind of global consumption we have today, nor its consequences. Nevertheless, his words are prescient in describing the mindset that has played a large part in leading us to the edge of environmental collapse:

For whereas all necessary things are restricted and limited, that which is superfluous is unlimited. If, for instance, your desire is directed to having silver plate, it would be better if it were of gold; some have crystal plate; and perhaps plate is procured that is made out of emeralds and rubies, whenever these stones are to be found.... In most cases such a man exposes himself to great dangers, such as arise in sea voyages and the service of kings; his aim therein being to obtain these unnecessary luxuries.... If one restricts oneself to what is necessary, this is the easiest of things and may be obtained with a very small effort. Whatever in it that is seen as difficult and hard for us is due to the following reason: when one endeavors to seek what is unnecessary, it becomes difficult to find even what is necessary. For the more frequently hopes cling to the superfluous, the more onerous does the matter become; forces and revenues are spent for what is unnecessary and that which is necessary is not found.²⁵

The objects of consumption may have changed since Maimonides' time, but the desire for the "superfluous" has not; thus we find ourselves today, in pursuit of the superfluous at the expense of the essential on a global scale.

While an analysis of the various ecological issues related to consumption is beyond the scope of this paper, a brief excerpt of the United Nations Global Human Development Report from 1998 will suffice to illustrate the scope of the problem we face. It also shows the nexus of consumption, related environmental issues and social justice:

Today's consumption is undermining the environmental resource base. It is exacerbating inequalities. And the dynamics of the consumption-poverty-inequality-environment nexus are accelerating. If the trends continue without change—not redistributing from high-income to low-income consumers, not shifting from polluting to cleaner goods and production technologies, not promoting goods that empower poor producers, not shifting priority from consumption for conspicuous display to meeting basic needs—today's problems of consumption and human development will worsen.... Inequalities in consumption are stark. Globally, the 20% of the world's people in the highest-income countries account for 86% of total private consumption expenditures—the poorest 20% a minuscule 1.3%. Runaway growth in consumption in the past 50 years is putting strains on the environment never before seen.²⁶

We are on the brink of environmental collapse, driven to a large degree by a global culture of consumption the cause of which mirrors Maimonides' understanding of the most prevalent form of evil—what we do to ourselves—and what I have further analyzed as a kind of idolatry where the unnecessary becomes confused with the essential. And, as the UN report makes clear, this distortion of priorities is not only reflected in the environment but also in the global distribution of wealth; the people who need natural resources the most, receive and consume the least.

A Maimonidian perspective on ecological issues in general and the mass culture of consumption in particular would provide two related correctives: a shift from unbridled consumption to sustainability, while recognizing our place as one of a myriad of interconnected parts connected to the rest of the web of being. From this holistic perspective, environmental degradation and scarcity need not be seen as a natural state of creation. Creation has within it all we need to survive and even thrive, if we live wisely. Scarcity is a result of unwise, idolatrous behavior on our part. An idolatrous approach to consumption leads to evil (think gold, oil, land, etc.). Human causes of evil arise whenever we adopt a goal that is not suitable for the world. If we learn to live wisely, we will find that there are enough natural resources for everyone. On the other hand, making things of ultimate concern that are not of ultimate value will always result in scarcity/evil; there will never be enough wealth, power, honor, etc., for those who define such as their ultimate goal(s).²⁷

Fifteen years ago I spent a summer as a rabbinic intern in Anchorage, Alaska. Less than an hour's drive south lies Portage Glacier. It's a beautiful drive, and a common tourist attraction that Laura, my wife, and I visited more than once while we were there. At that time, the glacier was almost at the road. Now, it's another thirty-minute walk to get to the glacier. Climate change is no longer a subject of speculation; it is happening before our very eyes. And, while climate change/global warming receives a lot of attention, it is just one of many serious environmental challenges we face, almost all of which relate in some way to overconsumption, which, as we have already shown, is at the center of Maimonides' understanding of the primary cause of evil in the world: "The habit of desiring things that are unnecessary either for the preservation of the individual or for the preservation of the species; and this desire is something infinite."²⁸ The desire is infinite, but as we are realizing more and more every day, the earth's resources are not.

The perilous state of our environment is, as Al Gore so aptly coined, an inconvenient truth. The Jewish community, archly ethical yet focused on its own continuity, has been slow to wake up to the looming environmental crisis. Our collective narcissism is understandable, given the array of challenges we face; nevertheless, the resulting myopia is both dangerous and counter to the higher aspirations of our own tradition which exhorts us to be an *or l'goyim* (a light unto the nations).²⁹ Convenient or not, the Jewish community can no longer remain passive to environmental concerns. It is time we woke up to our responsibility to the earth, marshalling our texts and traditions to confront the evil of environmental degradation. We are not lacking in wisdom, what's needed now is the will to apply Jewish teachings on the environment to the current crisis. To that end Maimonides' philosophic writings offer us additional religious insight into the root cause of the problem, idolatry, as well as a governing principle for healing; embracing the goodness of all creation.

Notes

1. Steven S. Schwarzschild, "The Unnatural Jew," *Environmental Ethics* 6 (1984): 347–62.
2. For the classic example of this critic, see Lynne White, "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155 (March 10, 1967): 1203–7.

3. Jeremy Benstein, *The Way Into Judaism and the Environment* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2006), 12.
4. Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (London: University of Chicago Press, 1963), vii.
5. I am grateful to Moshe Habertal for his reading of this section of *The Guide*, and the Shalom Hartman Institute, which made my study with Moshe possible.
6. Maimonides, *The Guide*, vol. III, 439–40.
7. *Ibid.*, 440.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, 444.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, 445.
13. *Ibid.*, 445.
14. *Ibid.*, 445.
15. I have used Paul Tillich's definition of "idolatry" here for its elegance and simplicity. See Tillich, Paul. *The Dynamics of Faith*: New York: Harpers & Row, Publisher, 1957. For a thorough discussion of Maimonides and idolatry see Halbertal, Moshe, Avishai, Margalit. *Idolatry*: Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press., 1992.
16. *Ibid.*, 445.
17. Maimonides, *The Guide*, vol. III, 446.
18. *Ibid.*, 446.
19. *Ibid.*, 447.
20. *Ibid.*, 447.
21. *Ibid.*, 446–47.
22. It is worth contrasting Maimonides' view of creation with Gnostic as well as some Christian and Jewish views (Chabad Hassidism, for example), which see the physical world as something to transcend. Maimonides is explicit in his polemic against such views, "Often it occurs to the imagination of the multitude that there are more evils in the world than there are good things. As a consequence, this thought is contained in many sermons and poems of all the religious communities, which say that it is surprising if good exists in the temporal, whereas the evils of the temporal are numerous and constant. This error is not found only among the multitude, but also among those who deem that they know something." *Ibid.*, 441.
23. *Ibid.*, 442–43.
24. Eric Rosenblum, "Is Gaia Jewish?" in *Judaism and Environmental Ethics*, ed. Martin D. Yaffe (Lanhan, MD: Lexington Books), 184.

25. Maimonides, *The Guide*, vol. III, 446.
26. See <http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Consumption.asp>.
27. I am indebted to Moshe Habertal for this reading.
28. Maimonides, *The Guide*, vol. III, 445.
29. Isa. 42:6.