

Green Pilgrim Theology in Jewish Tradition

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Executive Summary

Pilgrimage, *aliyah l'regel*, was a central practice in Judaism almost from its origins. The Bible declares three times, "three times a year shall all of your males appear before the Lord your God. (Exodus: 23:17; 34:23; Deuteronomy, 16:16). This tradition continues today. In 2010, 4 million overseas visitors came to Jerusalem. There were 8 million individual visits to the Western Wall, the principal Jewish religious site.

This statement, drafted at the invitation of the Alliance for Religions and Conservation's Green Pilgrim Cities Network considers how Jewish pilgrims and pilgrimage sites today should manage *aliya l'regel* so as to minimize its negative environmental impact. Jewish tradition contains a wealth of environmental wisdom and ethics avoiding waste and wanton destruction, (*ba'al taschit*) and acting in a way that reflects God's role as Creator and our responsibility to be wise stewards of creation. Jews should live up to these requirements in all they do, especially when engaged on a religious journey.

In addition, traditional Jewish sources about the ancient pilgrimage experience to Jerusalem were acutely conscious of the environmental dimension of the pilgrimage – its potential impact on public health, safety and the aesthetics of the city. (*Mishnah Avot, 5:1*) They describe the beauty of Jerusalem. (*Talmud, Sukkah 52a*), the spiritual grandeur of the pilgrimage (*Mishnah, Bikkurim, 3:3-4*) and show a keen awareness of how the influx of many thousands of pilgrims risked defiling the city with dirt, stench, disease and commercial exploitation. They outline measures that the city and religious authorities undertook to ensure, as far as humanly possible, that the *aliyah l'regel* was managed so as to maintain the beauty and cleanliness of the city, (*Talmud Bava Kamma 82a*) the health of pilgrims and residents and the dignity of the pilgrimage. There is also an awareness in the sources that a *walkable* pilgrimage promotes humility and enhances the spiritual quality of the experience. (*Mishnah Bikkurim 3:4*)

We can learn from these sources that the city and religious authorities are responsible to ensure that Jewish religious travel today, whether to Jerusalem or other sites, is managed so as to maintain the dignity and beauty of the journey and religious sites; to travel with as little cost to the planet as possible and particularly to encourage walking, to stay in places where resources are used wisely and carefully, to eat and drink sustainably and ethically, and to leave a positive footprint on the earth.

Introduction: Jewish Pilgrimage.

This short paper considers the sources for a green pilgrimage theology in Judaism. It is written at the invitation of ARC, in the context of their Green Pilgrimage City network.

Pilgrimage was a central practice in Judaism almost from its origins. The Bible declares three times, "three times a year shall all of your males appear before the Lord your God. (Exodus: 23:17; 34:23; Deuteronomy, 16:16). These three occasions were the pilgrimage festivals of *Pesach*, *Shavuot* and *Sukkot* (usually rendered in English as Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles, respectively.) At those appointed times Jews converged in their masses on Jerusalem. From the building of the First Temple in 1003 BCE until the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, (with an interlude of about 70 years during the Babylonian exile,) the Temple in Jerusalem was a central pilgrimage destination for Jews from throughout the Land of Israel, the Mediterranean and the fertile crescent.

The biblical injunction was understood to be optional. It was meritorious, though not essential to travel to Jerusalem on the pilgrimage festivals. Nevertheless, large numbers of Jews responded to the bible's exhortation. Whole families made the journey, not just the males. The book of Psalms holds numerous descriptions of the joyful throng of celebrants ascending to Jerusalem.¹ Psalm 84, for example conveys something of the anticipation and yearning that accompanied the experience:

"How lovely is your dwelling place,
O Lord of hosts.
I long, I yearn for the courts of the Lord;
My body and soul shout for joy to the living G-d.
Even the sparrow has found a home.
And the swallow a nest for herself in which to set her young,
near your altar, O Lord of hosts, my king, my God.
Happy are those who dwell in your house;
They forever praise you.

Happy is the man who finds refuge in you,
Whose mind is on the pilgrim highways...
They go from rampart to rampart,
Appearing before G-d in Zion....
Better one day in your courts than a thousand (anywhere else.)

Josephus in his "Antiquities" writes of hundred of thousands of Jews ascending to Jerusalem for the pilgrimage festivals. Arguably the practice of *aliya*

¹See also Psalms 42 and 122 for evocations of the Temple pilgrimage experience.

l'regel (literally, ascending to Jerusalem on foot), was the original, prototypical religious pilgrimage experience.

After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, Jews continued to make pilgrimages, now tinged with sadness, to Jerusalem, in so far as political and physical conditions allowed. From the same juncture, Jerusalem began to be regarded as a Holy City and a pilgrim destination for Christianity, and then later for Islam too. From the early twentieth century Jews were able to travel to Jerusalem in ever greater numbers. In 2010, 4 million overseas visitors came to Jerusalem. There were 8 million² individual visits to the Western Wall³, the principal Jewish religious site.

In addition to Jerusalem, three other places in the Land of Israel are designated as Holy Cities in Jewish tradition, Hebron, Safed and Tiberias. These are also destinations for religiously inspired travel, as are grave sites of various saints and scholars dotted around the country. Over the past twenty years Eastern Europe has opened up as a venue for Jewish pilgrimage, principally to the graves of celebrated *Hassidic rebbes* by their latter day followers. Of these, by far the largest destination is the grave of Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav in the Ukrainian town of Uman. 35,000 *Hassidim* went to Uman for *Rosh Hashanah*, the Jewish New Year in 2010. Although this is a growing phenomenon it is still very small compared to the number of Jews who journey to Jerusalem.

Towards a Green Jewish Pilgrimage Ethic.

The Seven-Year Plan for the Jewish People commissioned by ARC in 2009, details the sources in Judaism for the sacred obligation to walk lightly on the earth and protect God's creation. One possible approach to constructing a green Jewish pilgrimage ethic would be to take all that as read and add that one should do likewise, and all the more so, when engaged in religious pilgrimage. That is true, of course, but it adds little to our understanding of why *pilgrimage* should be a particular focus of green thoughts and deeds.

A different and potentially more interesting approach would be to inquire as to what Jewish sources about pilgrimage can teach us about how to be pilgrims in a more environmentally conscious way. The thousand year long history of *aliyah l'regel*, Jewish pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem generated an immense religious literature about that event – how to prepare for it, how to journey, how to stay in Jerusalem and conduct the attendant rituals, and how the city arranged itself to cope with the immense influx of travelers. Surveying this literature can provide us with insights about how a city and the pilgrims who travel to it should act to promote public health and hygiene as well as the beauty, cleanliness, and dignity of the city and of the pilgrimage experience. These dimensions are not co-extensive with what we call "green" or environmental factors but they strongly overlap with them. This is the approach that we will follow in the present paper.

Pilgrimage and Tourism.

² Figures from the Jerusalem Municipality, 2011.

³ The Western Wall is the last remaining vestige of the Second Temple, and has been a place of prayer and pilgrimage for Jews for centuries.

To define the subject a little better, we should briefly gesture at the extensive sociological and anthropological literature around pilgrimage and tourism that has sprung up in the last 30 years or so. This began with Victor and Edith Turner's seminal book, *Image and Pilgrimage*, published in 1978.⁴ Among the features in the Turner's typology of pilgrimage are: the potentially transformative experience of a journey (*Image and Pilgrimage* contains arresting photographs of pilgrimage journeys, including for example penitents going a mile on their knees to the shrine of Guadalupe in Mexico); the initiatory and potentially transformative effects of the pilgrimage that "cuts across the boundaries of provinces, realms and even empires"; the pilgrimage as an escape from everyday life; the gathering of pilgrims at the pilgrimage site forming a unique *communitas*, a type of ideal community that is a more egalitarian and less hierarchical; and the pilgrim returning to his or her normal life having taken a step or two further on the spiritual journey.

Naturally, the Turner's typologies have been challenged by subsequent anthropologists. Their depiction of pilgrimage as a unique time-out-of-life experience was questioned by Erik Cohen, a pioneering anthropologist of tourism. Cohen argued that there is more of a continuum between anthropology and tourism. Certainly there, are recreational tourists who mainly want to enjoy themselves; but also, Cohen argues many people are "existential tourists", who travel to a place looking for meaning and even transformation. And the same trip may have recreational and existential aspects. Cohen characterizes the difference between pilgrim tourism and recreational tourism as follows:

"pilgrimage and tourism differ in terms of the direction of the journey undertaken. The pilgrim and the pilgrim-tourist peregrinate towards the socio-cultural center while the traveler and the traveler-tourist move in the opposite direction."⁵

Cohen's modification of the Turners' typology is relevant for understanding Jewish pilgrimage today. As noted above, by far the largest destination of Jewish religious journey's today is Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the designated pilgrim center in Judaism while the Temple stood. Yet for more than 1900 years there has been no Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. The city continues to be the religious center of Judaism attracting millions of pilgrims and "existential tourists" yet there is no universally agreed pilgrim ritual in Jerusalem to be undertaken in the absence of the Temple. For most Jewish visitors, religious motivations, experiences and occasions (visits to the Western Wall, to ancient synagogues to the Yad Vashem holocaust memorial co-exist on a continuum with other more recreational reasons and experiences in undertaking a trip to Israel and to Jerusalem.

Beauty, Dignity and Public Health in Jerusalem

⁴ *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (1978), Victor Turner and Edith L. B. Turner.

⁵ Erik Cohen, (1992). For another highly influential essay on typologies of pilgrimage and tourism, see Bauman, Z. 1996. 'From Pilgrim to Tourist - or a Short History of Identity'. In *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. S. Hall and P. du Gay. London, (1996). Bauman treats pilgrimage as a metaphor for personal identity in the modern era; the search for identity is a journey with a clear direction that is to be achieved; tourism, on the other hand, is an apter metaphor for identity in post-modernity; acquiring an identity is a more eclectic process with no clear direction of movement.

Numerous rabbinic statements testify to the extraordinary beauty of Jerusalem when the Temple stood. "Whoever has not seen Jerusalem in its glory never saw a really fine city...ten measures of beauty were given to the world; nine of them went to Jerusalem, and one of them was shared by everywhere else."⁶

Even more relevant for us are the rabbinic statements on how the city must *maintain* its beauty through insisting on the highest standards, of aesthetics and public health. A rabbinic list of ten laws that were propagated uniquely for Jerusalem, includes the following:⁷

"One must not make jutting out balconies in Jerusalem...in case they hurt the pilgrims.

One must not make rubbish dumps in Jerusalem, because of the pests and rodents...

One must not make furnaces in Jerusalem, because of the smoke;

One must not make gardens and orchards in Jerusalem (except for the rose gardens that were there from the days of the early prophets) because of the rotting waste;

One must not raise chickens in Jerusalem, because of the holy sacrifices (i.e. because chickens peck around in the garbage and may bring rotting insects into contact with the sacrifices.)⁸

One may not leave a corpse overnight in Jerusalem without burying it."

We can posit a range of reasons behind these laws and at the same time identify a common environmental theme. The jutting balconies are an issue of public safety in crowded streets. The prohibition of rubbish dumps and furnaces serves public health and aesthetics – such issues are the bread and butter of environmental activists! The law against gardens and orchards may rub up against modern environmental sensibilities. Are we not in favor of urban gardening? However, the explanation makes clear that the issue is the filth, waste and bad smells that accompany gardens and orchards. The prohibition about raising chickens is explained in connection with the danger of making the sacrifices impure, but might well also have to do with associated dirt and smells. Finally, the reason for the law about not leaving a corpse overnight is not elucidated; it may be meant to prevent the spread of ritual impurity in Jerusalem.⁹ But it could also be a public health measure against the spread of disease in a crowded, heavily visited pilgrimage city.

These laws maintaining the beauty and sanitation of Jerusalem do not map precisely on to a contemporary environmental agenda, but in their purpose and effect they do overlap significantly with green concerns. Their import is in recognizing the place of Jerusalem as the central destination for Jewish pilgrims and the consequent

⁶ Babylonian Talmud (B.T.), *Sukkah*, 52a.

⁷ B.T. *Bava Kamma*, 82b.

⁸ This is the explanation of *Rashi*, France, 1040-1105

⁹ In Jewish Law, contact with a corpse is the primary source of ritual impurity;

special obligation to keep the city clean, healthy, beautiful and safe for the millions who visited it.

Preparation for the Pilgrimages and the Journey.

There is less material in Judaism on the journey to Jerusalem itself compared to what may be found in other religious traditions; most of the Jewish sources focus on the pilgrimage experience with the city itself. Nevertheless, there are sufficient indications from the sources as to how to shape the conditions of a Jewish pilgrimage journey.

The rabbis speak of the need to prepare the city and the roads leading to it for the influx of pilgrims at the winter's end:

....On the fifteenth of the month of Adar (which usually falls in March) we fix up the roads and the public spaces and the water pools and baths take care of all necessary public works..."¹⁰

A parallel source elaborates:

"On the fifteenth, the *Bet Din*, (the preeminent *religious* authority in Jerusalem), would send out emissaries to fix the paths and roads that had become pot-holed and damaged during the rainy season.

What is interesting about these sources is that they show a religious imperative for the authorities to ensure that the roads and other infrastructure for pilgrims were safe, usable and pleasant in advance of the pilgrim festivals. The phrase about the water pools and paths reflects an emphasis on ensuring the supply of fresh water which is seen in other sources. The Talmud tells a famous story¹¹ about the heroic endeavours of Nakdimon Ben Gurion, one of the wealthy figures in Jerusalem to ensure that there would be adequate fresh water for the pilgrims.

Further sources describe the beauty and dignity of the journey to Jerusalem; for example this one about when pilgrims brought on offering of their first fruits for the *Shavuot* festival¹²:

"Those who come from nearby bring figs and grapes: those who come from far away bring dried figs and raisins; and an ox walks before them, its horns overlaid with gold, and a wreath of olive leaves on its head.,,, A flautist plays before them until they reach the Temple Mount. Even Agrippa the King puts the basket of fruits on his shoulder and enters, going forward until he reached the Temple Court."

These sources emphasize the beauty of the journey as an integral part of the pilgrimage. The last sentence also serves to stress that the journey was an *aliyah l'regel* an ascent *on foot*. We see that this was not merely because there were no cars and planes at that time; there is also a dimension of humility involved in walking that is intrinsic to the religious experience of pilgrimage. Agrippa the king no doubt had

¹⁰ *Mishnah, Shekalim, 1:1*

¹¹ *B.T. Ta'anit. 19b.*

¹² *Mishnah, Bikkurim 3:4.*

other ways of traveling, but shouldered his own basket of fruits and walked to the Temple Court. A pilgrim experience that is walkable has a different spiritual quality to one that is only drivable.

Jerusalem during Pilgrimage,

Pilgrims were required to stay in Jerusalem for the entire Passover week, and also for the eight days of Sukkot.¹³ This could mean an influx of hundreds of thousands of guests to the city. There are numerous sources that evince an awareness of the potential public health, environmental and social problems that could result. To cite one of the best known:

"Ten wonders were done for our forefathers in the Temple:

A woman never miscarried on account of the stench of the meat from the sacrifices. The meat of the holy sacrifices never turned rotten. A fly never appeared in the slaughterhouse... When the people were standing they were jammed together; yet when they bowed down and prostrated themselves, they had plenty of room; a snake and a scorpion never bit anyone in Jerusalem; And no one ever said to his fellow, the place is too crowded for me to stay in Jerusalem."¹⁴

This source points out the great potential for disease, bad hygiene and social unrest when myriads of visitors swelled the population of Jerusalem during pilgrim festivals, thronged the Temple courts and undertook rituals that included the slaughter of a great many animals. How we should take the purportedly miraculous manner in which public health and social harmony were maintained is an open question. What is clear is that the rabbinic authorities were acutely conscious of the potential environmental hazards of the mass pilgrimage to Jerusalem. One might reasonably infer that these days when miracles are less reliably reported, human authorities must take responsibility for ensuring that large scale pilgrimages are handled in a way that maintains health, and promotes the dignity of the pilgrimage experience!

Several sources point to the atmosphere of sharing and solidarity that characterized Jerusalem during the pilgrimage festivals:

"Nobody ever had occasion to say to his neighbor, I have been unable to find a stove for cooking the Pesach meal in Jerusalem, or I have been unable to find a bed to sleep in Jerusalem."¹⁵ (Avot d'rabbi Natan.)

A further source recounts that residents of Jerusalem were forbidden to charge rent for accommodating pilgrims in their homes (although the guests were encouraged to leave a gift as a token of gratitude to their hosts.¹⁶) What might have been an opportunity for crass, commercial exploitation of the pilgrims becomes a moment of generosity, sharing and the creation of *communitas*.

¹³ Mishna Zevachim 11:7.

¹⁴ Mishnah Avot, 5:5.

¹⁵ Avot d'rabbi Natan

¹⁶ Tosefta Ma'aser Sheni.

Conclusion

The traditional Jewish sources about the ancient pilgrimage experience to Jerusalem were acutely conscious of the environmental dimension of the pilgrimage – its potential impact on public health, safety and the aesthetics of the city. They describe the beauty of Jerusalem, the spiritual grandeur of the pilgrimage and show a keen awareness of how the influx of many thousands of pilgrims risked defiling the city with dirt, stench, disease and commercial exploitation. They outline measures that the city and religious authorities undertook to ensure, as far as humanly possible, that the *aliyah l'regel* was managed so as to maintain the beauty and cleanliness of the city, the health of pilgrims and residents and the dignity of the pilgrimage.

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