

Israel: Environmental History in Hebrew

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, scholarly interest in environmental history has increased dramatically in Israel. Much of Israeli environmental history is written in English. However, in this paper I focus mainly on scholarly work written in Hebrew since 2010 as a way to expose recent Israeli environmental historical research that is inaccessible to non-Hebrew speakers. Here I give a representative sample of recent Hebrew studies thematically classified as follows: *Water, Waste, Trees, Ideology and Activism*, and *‘Conquering the Wilderness’*. As I turn to examine environmental historical writing in Israel, it is worth noting that Hebrew monographs on core environmental history topics are quite difficult to find. It appears that leading Israeli scholars prefer to publish first in English and then occasionally have their work translated to Hebrew. Nonetheless, unlike the small number of monographs, dozens of articles have recently been published in Hebrew on core issues of environmental history.

An Environmental History of Israel

Before focusing on Hebrew publications, mention should be made of two English books subtitled ‘An Environmental History of Israel’. The first is Alon Tal’s *Pollution in a Promised Land – An Environmental History of Israel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). This textbook focuses on understanding the macro processes in Zionist and Israeli attitudes towards nature over time. Tal concentrates on the formation of governmental and NGO institutions, as well as the main environmental struggles in the country, relying on numerous interviews and personal experience as a leading figure in Israeli environmental NGOs. The book was translated to Hebrew in 2006, under the title *Ha-sviva be’Israel: mash’abei teva, mashberim, ma’avakim u-medinyut – me-reshit ha-tsiyonut ve-ad ha-mea ha-21* [The Environment in Israel: Natural Resources, Crises, Campaigns and Policy – from the Advent of Zionism until the Twenty-first Century] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2006). A second book is *Between Ruin and Restoration: An Environmental History of Israel*, edited by Daniel E. Orenstein, Alon Tal and Char Miller (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013). This important edited volume deals with a variety of environmental issues from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as the landscape (Ruth Kark and Noam Levin), human influence on animals (Yoram Yom-Tov), British influence on environmental legislation in Israel (David Schorr), etc.

Water

As a key issue in the Middle East, several scholars deal with water history. A good source for understanding water supply challenges of Israel is Assaf Selzer's, *Mekorot: sipurah shel hevrat ha-mayim ha-leumit: 75 ha-shanim ha-rishonot* [Mekorot: The story of the Israel National Water Company – the first 75 years] (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 2011; Hebrew). Here, Selzer follows the fascinating history of the modern water system that stretches across Israel from the relatively rainy North to the desert in the South by focusing on the national water company, Mekorot, from its establishment in 1937 until the 2000s. At first glance, the book is an official institutional history, with large chrome pages, numerous pictures, maps and copies of documents. Yet, a second look reveals that it is systematic scientific research backed by hundreds of references to historical primary sources. In six thematic chapters, Selzer discusses the foundation and the challenges faced by Mekorot; the company's influence on Israel's development; the relations of Mekorot with other organisations and the Water Act (1959) as a milestone; the workers and management of the company; the constant attempts to find new water sources; and current activities of the company. The book provides a comprehensive overview of coping with water challenges in Mandatory Palestine and Israel, and the construction of an advanced water management company.

While Selzer deals with national water history, Avi Sasson conducts several studies on local traditional water facilities. Sasson's latest study, co-authored with Haim Mamalia, analyses how in 1908–1917, the Ottomans overcame the rough arid conditions in their new administrative town in the Negev desert, Auja al-Hafir.¹ The new town was built following the 1906 agreement between the Ottomans and Britain on the border between Ottoman Palestine and Egypt. During the Great War Auja al-Hafir was a key position for the Ottoman troops due to its water system.

Waste

Historical studies on waste vary between studies of urban environment and military waste during wartime. In a study on World War I garbage sites in the Negev desert, Amnon Gat maps the remains of these sites left by the British army along the Palestine frontline of March–November 1917.² Using 41 samples collected in an archeological survey, Gat shows what waste sites can teach

1. Avi Sasson and Haim Mamalia, 'Ma'arakhot ha-mayim be-Auja al-Hafir (Nitsana) – typologia shel mitkaney mayim be-shalhei hatkufah ha-othmanit (1908-1917)' [Watering systems typology in Auja al Hafir (Nesana) in the late Ottoman period 1908–1917], (*Cathedra*, forthcoming, 2019).
2. Amnon Gat, 'Ma lemedim me-ataray ashpah briti'im mi-milhemet ha-olam ha-rishona?' [What do we learn from British garbage sites from the First World War?], *Cathedra* **165** (2017): 99–128.

us about the nutrition of British soldiers during the war. A second historical waste study is my own examination of different methods and approaches to waste treatment in Tel Aviv from 1918-1948.³ During these years, Tel Aviv grew rapidly, and for the first time in Israel a municipal dumpsite became a regional environmental hazard.

Trees

During the British Mandate of Palestine, trees became a political tool. Planting trees by the British authorities and the Zionist movement often represented western values of progress in the shadeless Middle East. Hizky Shoham traces the roots of the Zionist planting ceremony of Tu Bishvat, which became a national planting day.⁴ Shoham shows that, although this traditional Jewish holiday dated to the Middle Ages, planting trees was not part of it. The article claims that the planting praxis was adopted at the beginning of the twentieth century, stemming from the nineteenth century American Arbor Day. A different use for planting trees is examined by Yoram Fried and Gideon Biger, who studied military tree planting in Israel during the 1950s.⁵ The Israeli army used tree planting mainly along roads, in settlements and at military bases. In addition, the army planted barriers of prickly pear cactus. These actions aroused tensions with civilian organisations that dealt with planting as well. In fact, a wide scale planting project was started in the country by the British during the British Mandate. A critical point of view on this project was published in Alon Tal's, 'British Planting, An Unrealized Promise'.⁶ Tal examines the British plantings in comparison to the vision laid out for these plantings. The article is based on a wider study published in his book, *All the Trees of the Forest: Israel's Woodlands from the Bible to Present*, which was translated to Hebrew a year later.⁷ Although the title suggests a book that covers about 3,000 years of woodland history, it mainly discusses the twentieth century.

3. Yaron J. Balslev, 'Ir ivrit im aspha ivrit: ha-tipul ba-psyolet shel Tel Aviv bi-tekufat ha-mandat' [Hebrew city with Hebrew waste: Waste treatment in Tel Aviv during the British Mandate], *Israel* 24 (2016): 271–300.
4. Hizky Shoham, 'Min ha-ir u-min ha-kfar? Al hivatsrut ha-neti'ot ha-tiksiyot beh Tu bi-Shvat' [From the town – and from the village? The creation of planting ceremonies on Tu Bishvat], *Israel* 22 (2014): 21–44.
5. Yoram Fried and Gideon Biger, 'Ha-Yi'ur ha-bitmoni be-Israel bi-shnot ha-hamishim: me-imut svai-ezrachi le-shituf peula' [Security forestation in Israel during the 1950s: from military-civil conflict to cooperation], *Yaar* 14 (2015): 40–49.
6. Alon Tal, 'Ha-neti'ot ha-britiyot – mandat she-lo hitmamesh' [British planting, An unrealized promise], *Merhavim* 7 (2016): 159–188.
7. Alon Tal, *All the Trees of the Forest: Israel's Woodlands from the Bible to Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); trans. into Hebrew as *Kol atsei ha-ya'ar: ha-horesh be-Israel mi-tekufat ha-tanah ad yame'inu* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2014).

Ideology and Activism

Several scholars study the subject of historical environmental ideology and activism. In *A Green Shout: The Story of Environmental Activism in Israel*,⁸ Benny Furst discusses the evolution of environmental struggles of civic society in Israel. Furst focuses on environmental struggles and activists from the 1960s public campaign for protecting wild flowers into the 2000s. The book explains the historical and theoretical origins of the civic processes that generated about 130 green organisations all over the country. A second study on green activism, by Miri Shefer-Mossensohn, deals with the roots of environmentalist thought in Turkey.⁹ Shefer-Mossensohn shows how Turkish environmentalists attempt to base their ideals on early Islamic sources, matching pre-nation state values to local issues. By analysing recent environmental struggles, the study claims that in addition to Islamic sources, Turkish environmentalists also adopt aspects of modern western environmental thought. A third paper by Firas Hamad and Daniel Mishori, uses a different methodology for exploring present environmental praxis.¹⁰ Their paper presents the components of environmental and social sustainability in the Arab village of Tzur-Baher in East Jerusalem. The findings show that village elders hold traditional ecological knowledge handed down to them from earlier generations; whereas the younger generation, having grown up in a modern world, are torn between nostalgic emotions towards a healthier and more community-supported past, and an indifferent or even hostile attitude to some of these traditions.

'Conquering the Wilderness'

As a small developed country, one might say that modern Israel is largely void of wilderness. This situation is rather new, as even in the 1950s–60s the northern and southern parts of Israel were considered by many to be a wild terrain. Maya Duany's article on the changing approach towards the Hula Drainage Project as a symbol for 'conquering the wilderness', is an example of such a discussion about local wilderness.¹¹ In this article, Duany follows the public

8. Benny Furst, *Yerukim zo'akim: Sipuro shel ha-activizm ha-svivati be-Israel* [A Green Shout: The Story of Environmental Activism in Israel], (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2018).
9. Miri Shefer-Mossensohn, 'Hagut ssvivatit muslemit mul asiya – Turkia ke-dugma' [Islamic environmental ideology and activism – The Turkish example], *Ecology & Environment* 4, 4 (2013): 292–297.
10. Firas Hamad and Daniel Mishori, 'Nahlat ha-klal ve-yeda ekologi masorti ba-kfar Tzur Baher: Kayamut ecologit-hevratit be-avar ke-hashra'a la-hovev' [Commons and traditional ecological knowledge in the village of Tzur Baher: Past sustainability as an inspiration for the present], *Negev* 9, 2 (2017): 69–85.
11. Maya Duany, 'Mi-siman kri'a le-siman shlila: shinu'i ha-yahas le-yibush ha-Hula ke-semel le-kibush ha-shmama' [From a question mark to a negative mark: The changing approach towards the Hula drainage project as a symbol for conquering the wilderness], *Tel-Hai Galilee Studies* 3 (2018): 29–48.

reaction towards the national drainage project of the Hula Lake and swamps conducted in 1951–1957. Duany finds that the project was first considered positive and beneficial, showing the vision and abilities of the new Israeli state. However, scientists have since revealed this project's several negative environmental effects, motivating parts of the lake to be re-flooded after 1994. This decision to re-flood was a milestone, and in the last two decades, the Hula Drainage Project is usually considered an historical offence against Nature. A different way of interpreting this topic is through the visual image. Using this approach, Avivit Agam Dali examines how the concept of 'conquering the wilderness' was apparent in Israeli commercial ads from 1948 to 1960.¹² Agam Dali focuses on well-known Israeli graphic artist, Otte Wallish, who used this concept in 58 of his promotional images in which a barren and unproductive wilderness is contrasted with modern agriculture and settlement. A third article on wilderness takes the reader to nineteenth-century America. The paper by Uri Katz examines the westward migration that stemmed from rumours and information regarding abundant natural resources such as minerals and animals.¹³ Katz claims that conquering this wilderness, or the frontier, served the American economy more than the people who travelled to the West.

To conclude, I would like to emphasise that, first, despite the long and rich history of human–nature relations in Israel, which includes thousands of years of written history, most scholars who deal with environmental history study the modern era in general, and the twentieth century in particular. Second, and unsurprisingly, most Israeli scholars who study past environments deal with Israeli topics. This trend is noticeable mostly in Hebrew writing, whereas in English we can find more Israeli studies about the Middle East and other parts of the world.

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12. Avivit Agam Dali, 'Erhei kibush ha-shmama u-bituyam ha-grafi ba-pirsomot shel Otte Wallish (1948–1960)' [Values of 'conquering the wasteland' to make the desert bloom and their graphic expressions in Otte Wallish's advertising (1948–1960)], *Social Issues in Israel* **18** (2014): 28–106.
 13. Uri Katz, 'Me-habehala la-zahav le-behala la-bizon: Mabat me-hadash ba-individualizm ha-amerika'i' [From gold rush to bison rush: A new look on American individualism], *Zmanin* **115** (2011): 1–6.