



Samson Raphael Hirsch:
He Doesn't LOOK Like a
Tree-Hugger

Orthodox Judaism today has presented several strong views on many issues, usually centering on hot-button social issues such as gay marriage, or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. That's why it was a real surprise for me to read about the strong environmentalist stance of [Samson Raphael Hirsch](#), the founder and true intellectual giant of Modern Orthodox Judaism.

Hirsch was anything but a progressive. He loudly condemned Reform Judaism and castigated any Jews who strayed from Orthodox Jewish legal mandates. But he also emphasized the need for Jews to learn secular knowledge and to engage with the non-Jewish world.

Because he was a true conservative in outlook, for Hirsch, the preservation of nature was part and parcel of Judaism. He went out of his way to interpret Genesis 1:26, which is normally translated as stipulating that humanity "rules" over nature, a very environmentalist spin. As I observed last week, most scholars see the Hebrew verb in that instance as "רָבַד," but Hirsch insisted that "רָבַד" hardly connotes conquest or sovereignty. Conquest, he said, is better expressed by the verb "כָּבַד," which the Brown-Driver-Briggs lexicon indeed does translate as "subdue," or "bring into bondage." "רָבַד," Hirsch argued, is better thought of as "guiding" instead of "dominating" or "conquering." (It's not clear why there could not be two words with the same implication, but that's for another post).

Hirsch then extended his argument from the sixth day (humanity's creation) to the Sabbath. The Sabbath, he contended, was created "to guard the world against man." Man, he

argued ”

can fashion all things in his environment to his purpose — the earth for his habitation and source of sustenance; plant and animal for food and clothing. He can transform everything into an instrument of human service. He is allowed to rule over the world for six days with God’s will. On the seventh day, however, he is forbidden by divine behest to fashion anything for his own purpose. In this way he acknowledges that he has no rights of ownership or authority over the world.

In one sense, this shouldn’t be surprising at all. As I have argued previously, whatever religious views on the environment might be, it is undeniable that religious thought is not a subspecies of utilitarianism, and thus, [religious thought would remain skeptical of embracing the utilitarian tenets of modern economic thought](#). In previous generations, [this brand of religious thought would be called “conservative”](#) (although of course not the same as Conservative Judaism). In the contemporary United States, where “conservative” actually means a type of radical anti-egalitarianism, it doesn’t seem to fit. But it should; it’s time for the Orthodox Jewish community to embrace and explore the environmentalist aspects of its tradition.