**פרקטיקות הלכתיות וסביבתיות בקרב חרדיות מקבוצות שוליים**

**Ultra-Orthodox women’s identities and environmental attitudes**

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**Abstract**

Mainstream Israelis tend to view the Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) public in general, and Haredi women in particular, as a cultural group that is unfamiliar with environmental attitudes and practices. However, there are numerous references to protecting the environment in the Halakha and the Bible and yet there is nonetheless a gap between what is prescribed and what is practiced. This article, based on a study conducted in two neighborhoods in the city of Beit Shemesh, discusses the relationship between Halakhic modes of action that exist in the private space of the kitchen unit, such as sorting lentils, and environmental modes of action, such as waste separation, that are part of the daily practice of women from two marginal Haredi groups: newly-religious, low-income Mizrahi families and new immigrants—‘hutzinkiyot’ [literally, outsiders]—from English-speaking countries. It will discuss the range between indifference to environmental issues and the possibility of introducing environmental awareness into their lives. The study is based on in-depth interviews and a cross-sectional analysis of the multiple identities of these women. A pioneering premise of this article is that there is a correlation between Halakhic and environmental modes of action, as well as a correspondence between the industrious profile of Haredi women and the environmentalist profile. Our findings do not indicate a connection between Halakhic practices and environmental interests among most of the women. Most Haredi women do not perceive sustainability as a value in itself, let alone a value that is at the top of their daily priorities. Their affiliation to environmental issues is more of a class-cultural issue than a religious-gender one and stems from social circumstances. The motivation to adopt a lifestyle perceived as sustainable is not necessarily related to knowledge, and therefore the environmental tendencies of Haredi women from these marginal groups vary according to the circumstances of their lives and their changing status in traditional Haredi society in Israel.

**Introduction**

Israel’s Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) society has been studied extensively in recent decades. This community is comprised of a variety of different sub-groups and is perceived as a conservative patriarchal society that maintains cultural continuity and guards the boundaries it has defined (Caplan 2003; Goodman 2002; Ben Shahar 2015). However, despite being a conservative society, it is undergoing rapid change and transformations in recent years (Malach, Choshen and Cahaner 2016).

Studies of the relationship between the Haredi public and the environment focus on a number of prominent topics, including Haredi attitudes towards environmental issues and Haredi perceptions of the space within which they live. The majority of these studies deal with issues related to cleanliness (Mark, Alfasi and Omer 2016) and the fact that the Haredi public tends to concentrate on what takes place within the confines of the home and has little regard for what happens in the public space (Shilhav and Kaplan 2003). Furthermore, despite many allusions to environmental protection in the Halakha and the Bible, there is a significant discrepancy between what is prescribed and what actually happens.

In recent years various public and private initiatives have attempted to encourage Haredim to protect the environment: For example, the “Rabbis’ letter” initiated by the student Shir Shifran[[1]](#footnote-1) (2019) aimed at enlisting rabbinical figures from the religious Zionist sector in a campaign against single-use dishes, or an initiative of Rabbi Yitzhak Eskapa, a member of the Bat Yam municipal council, to raise awareness of recycling[[2]](#footnote-2) (2021). Yet, environmental issues remain a very low priority within Haredi society, partly for economic reasons and partly because of ignorance and the fact that environmental education does not conform to the Halakhic values of this community (Alkaher, Goldman and Sagy 2018).

The discussion of attitudes towards the environment among the Haredi public suggests Haredi women as the focus of changes because of their increasing power within the community, the home and the family (Caplan 2003; Shilhav 2005). Haredi women are a particularly interesting group to follow in light of recent transformations in the realm of employment and gender in this society (Brown B. 2017). All the same, since there is a dearth of research about Haredi women’s attitudes toward environmental issues, and particularly those of Haredi women from marginal groups,[[3]](#footnote-3) this article will address the relationship between Halakhic modes of action in their daily lives and environmental modes of action in a city with a growing Haredi population, namely Beit Shemesh.

This article is part of a larger study undertaken in Beit Shemesh, aimed at examining attitudes towards environmental issues among Haredi women of marginal groups, mapping them on a continuum from indifference to environmental consciousness. The underlying assumption of this scheme rests upon the link between Jewish Halakha and the environment within the confines of Haredi private space. The meticulous observation of countless commandments and injunctions in the home kitchen can possibly dovetail with an environmental consciousness that also requires industriousness and attention to detail. In other words, we ask whether there is a link between Halakhic modes of action in the kitchen having to do with observing kashrut, treatment of food and of waste, and environmental modes of action such as waste separation.

Assuming that environmental consciousness and adopting an environmentally conscious way of living depend more on modes of action than on explicit ideology (Zaradez and Sela-Sheffy 2016), this article will examine Halakhic modes of action related to kashrut, food and waste practiced by Haredi women within the space of their homes, focusing on their activities in the kitchen. This will help identify the way that these Halakhic practices are realized in their daily domestic lives, and the extent to which it is possible to translate these into environmental practices such as a waste separation. Furthermore, it will consider whether it is possible to point to a conceptual affiliation between Halakhic injunctions and environmental thought as it is known today. These questions are addressed through in-depth interviews with Haredi women from Beit Shemesh, a city of 125,000 that has in recent years attracted a growing Haredi population (Central Bureau of Statistics 2019). Two neighborhoods with different characteristics in Beit Shemesh were selected: Mimizrach Shemesh, located in the eastern part of the city, and Ramat Beit Shemesh A, in the south.

This research used qualitative ethnographic research methods, semi-structured interviews and snowball sampling in the collection of data. The possibility that Haredi women could adopt an environmental consciousness is drawn from observing their practical interpretation of Halakha, as it is followed in their daily lives, as well as their preferences in observing certain customs in particular ways. We were able to identify the nuances of perceptions, moral codes and social conflicts of key aspects of their lives through in-depth interviews (Sela-Sheffy and Zaradez 2015). The research assumes dynamism and inconsistencies among various components of identity (Snow and Anderson 1987), which continue to be constructed throughout one’s lifetime, and thus also examines these women’s identity work. Their potential to be “environmental” depends on broad range of options, from indifference to environmental issues and the absence of environmental practices to the existence of environmental practices and of environmental consciousness.

The article begins with a survey of Haredi society in Israel, including the marginal groups which the women that are the focus of the study belong to. It then goes on to discuss the research methodology and its limitations, followed by a discussion of the findings related to the central ideas linking Halakah to environmentalism, first among the newly-religious women and then among the foreign-born immigrants. These findings will reveal the research and lead to the conclusions in the closing section.

**Israel’s Haredi society and its marginal groups**

The Haredi population in Israel numbers over a million, making up about 13% of the country’s total population. There are close to 400,000 Haredi women, including some 150,000 in the 20-59 age group. This population grows at an annual rate of four percent, due to a higher birth rate than other segments of the general population (Yearbook of Haredi Society in Israel 2019). The Haredim are organized in communities that exist alongside each other and are in a constant state of conflict with and dependence upon the general society within which they exist. The Haredi community elected to become “a society of scholars” (Friedman 1991), in which many men are occupied solely with the study of the Torah and many Haredi women work outside their home in order to support their families (El Or 1993). Women thus have a significant presence in public space, although this contravenes the values of Haredi society (Ben Shahar 2015).

Israel’s Haredi society is comprised of three major streams: Chasidim, Lita’im and Sephardim. There are also a number of smaller streams, such as communities of newly-religious Haredim, “modern Haredim,” and Haredim who are unaffiliated (Gal 2015). In contrast with the Chasidim and Lita’im, European in origin, the modern Sephardic stream (Shas) is considered more flexible in terms of adherence to the Halakha and it places importance on the societal arena as a means of attracting other traditional Sephardic Jews into its fold (Cahaner and Shilhav 2012). Further sub-groups within Haredi society have become more distinguishable in recent years: For example, “Hutzinikim” (literally foreigners, referring to immigrants) or “Sabras” (native-born Israelis); “open” and “closed,” and others (Cahaner and Shilhav 2012). Such distinctions are exemplified in the present study’s population, comprised of two marginal groups within Haredi society: women from the newly-religious (*Ba’ale Tshuva*) segment of the Sephardic-Haredi stream, and women from the Hutznikim stream, immigrants from the US and England.

Haredi women comprise about nine percent of Israeli Jewish women (Central Bureau of Statistics 2013). Thus, they can be said to be part of two minority groups: a cultural minority within Haredi society, and a sociological minority among Israel women (Ben Shahar 2015). The place of women in Haredi society is encapsulated in the biblical verse “All the treasures of the king’s daughter are within” (Psalms 45:14), and finds expression in Haredi texts, lessons on modesty in schools, in classes for women and more (Kehat 2008; Layosh 2014; Ben Shahar 2015). Haredi women each have seven children on average (Yearbook of Haredi Society in Israel 2019). This places a considerable burden on Haredi women and their daughters, but at the same time, it also makes them a source of education and influence, enabling them to shape the next generations of Haredim. Thus, the better the issue of sustainability is understood and internalized by Haredi women, the greater the chances that it will be incorporated in the education of their children.

**Methodology**

This research project employed qualitative research anchored in ethnographic methods and is based on semi-structured interviews and a careful discourse analysis of the interview transcripts. The research population is comprised of 14 Haredi women in Beit Shemesh, belonging to two marginal groups; one group in each of the selected neighborhoods: The first is comprised of seven Mizrahi women residing in the Mimizrach Shemesh neighborhood, located in the eastern part of the city and characterized by newly-religious residents of low socio-economic status, dense construction and neglected public spaces. The second group is comprised of seven “Anglo” Haredi women residing in Ramat Beit Shemesh A, a neighborhood in the city’s south which is characterized by residents of high socio-economic status, private dwelling and well-kept public spaces. In other words, the two groups are newly-religious Sephardic-Haredi women and “Hutznikiyot,” immigrant Haredi women, primarily from English speaking countries. For the sake of clarity and brevity, they will be called “newly-religious” and “Anglos” in this paper. The names of the women who participated in the study and are mentioned in the paper are pseudonyms.

Seven of the interviewees were born in Israel, four were born in the US, two in India, and one in England. They range in age from 36 to 54. All are married with between 4 and 13 children. Of the seven newly-religious women, two did not report on education, three have 12 years of education, one has 14 years of education, one has a high school education, and one has a matriculation diploma. Of the seven Anglos, one did not report on her education, and six have university degrees: one with a master’s degree in English education and Judaism, one with a master’s in speech therapy, and one with a master’s in epidemiology. Two have bachelor’s degrees in psychology and one has a bachelor’s in education.

Their employment status is diverse. Two of the newly-religious women are homemakers, as are two of the “Anglos.” Four of the newly-religious women work, as a nanny, a certified kindergarten teacher, an office worker, and a beautician. Four of the Anglos reported working, as a life coach, a teacher and guide for parents, a speech therapist, and a private tutor. Additional part-time occupations were mentioned: among the newly-religious, one woman owned a short-term rental unit. Another draws murals and yet another occasionally cooks and bakes for payment. Other pastimes that do not have to do with earning a living that were mentioned in the interviews: Three Anglos reported that they are, respectively, a social activist, a health advocate, and involved in photography and cooking. Two of the newly-religious reported being involved in art and in bringing women closer to Judaism.

Most of the women in this study were contracted through the mother of one of the authors, Sima Daudi. Daudi is a Sephardic-Haredi mother of 13, who became religious long ago and resides in the Mimizrach Shemesh neighborhood. She is well known in the community due to her activities in fundraising and charity. Before the women were contacted directly, Sima approached them about the study on Halakha and the environment. After several women expressed their willingness to participate in the study, they were contacted directly. Sima’s preparation was very helpful in enlisting the Haredi women to participate in the study (Arieli and Cohen 2013). Ultimately, out of 25 potential interviewees in the two neighborhoods, around half agreed to meet and be interviewed, and 14 interviews were carried out.

The time and place for the interviews were set according to the women’s preferences. The goal of the interview, as presented in the introductory phone conversation, included touching upon the subject of “the relationship between Halakha and the environment.” The interviews included reference to and thanks for making time for the interviews, in light of the fact that these were mothers of large families whose time resources are very valuable. After the subject of the interview was introduced, there was a promise of confidentiality and anonymity, and finally a request for the interview to be recorded for research purposes only. The main part of the interview was an open conversation, within which were incorporated questions that addressed various aspects of their Halakhic and spiritual worlds, work, identity, personal and social lives. 12 interviews took place in private homes and apartments, one in a coffee shop and one in a public park.

This article explores Halakhic modes of action having to do with kashrut, food, and waste practiced by Haredi women within the space of their homes. In Haredi families, the kitchen unit is considered to be under the exclusive responsibility and control of women. Within it, they maintain various Halakhic rules of kashrut in accordance with their degree of observance, individual choices and socio-economic conditions. This is the reason underlying the choice of the kitchen unit as the focus for examining the Halakhic modes of action practiced by these women, as well as the waste disposal practices of their family unit. A prominent example is the way they handle lentils and legumes: this requires a series of actions, such as verifying the kosher certification during their purchase, which differs for each woman, as well as the sorting of these legumes to remove damaged kernels. A flawed lentil or legume might indicate the presence of an insect, leading to a transgression against the laws of kashrut. Thus, the assumption is that the meticulous practices of sorting lentils or separating dairy and meat as part of daily life are charged with specific meaning and associations that are not necessarily Halakhic. These women’s space for action and negotiation is examined in light of their actual selective response to Halakhic rules, as shaped by their different life situations (Swidler 1986).

The analysis of the interviews attempts to gauge the level of importance ascribed to the ideational-interpretive dimension of practices rooted in Jewish Halakha. In some of the interviews, the women noted and cited these Halakhic ideas, some in references to written Halakhic sources and others from prayer. In some interviews, the interviewer mentioned certain Halakhic references in order to illustrate a Halakhic-biblical-environmental link, as well as in order to test certain connotative and associative aspects of these women’s thinking; and furthermore, in order to evaluate to what extent, if any, they believe that there are links of any sort between the Halakha and the environment.

The Halakhic references brought up by the interviewees are interesting in and of themselves, since they are part of a mode of action. The women’s impulse to cite Halakhic references appears to derive from a need to prove that they are knowledgeable. The act of citation imbues them with symbolic capital; that is, they garner respect by demonstrating their knowledge (Gurevitz and Arav 2012), thereby burnishing their image as Haredi women who are “expected” to be well-versed in the Bible. In this context, we did not test the accuracy or completeness of the citations against their sources, but rather noted their use or the reference to a given source.

The research field is a socio-cultural space that exists in two separate arenas that differ in ethnic background, socio-economic status, sub-group association, degree of adherence to tradition, and in perceptions of private space from an environmental perspective. The two neighborhoods discussed here include residents belonging to other sub-groups from the Haredi mainstream, such as Gur Hassidim. Nonetheless, this study focuses on groups considered marginal to Haredi society. The goal of the article is to contribute another dimension to existing knowledge on the relationship between identity and community, and the promulgation of an environmental agenda, specifically to Haredi communities within Israeli society, by integrating a range of perspectives and against the background of transforming cultural-Halakhic and environmental traditions.

**Findings and Discussion**

**The Environment and Halakha**

Jewish sources contain a broad spectrum of directives to protect the environment, as part of the respect humanity must pay to the Creator. However, in accordance with anthropocentrism, the interests of mankind trump those of all other species, and only mankind has moral standing (Mishori 2016). Lynn White (1967) has argued that the ecological crisis will continue to worsen, until we reject this religious Judeo-Christina axiom whereby nature has no right to exist other than in the service of mankind. Protecting the environment will ensure the survival of mankind, while its destruction will ultimately wipe out the human race.

Some believe that the world was created for the use of man, as is written in Genesis: “See, I give you every seed-bearing plant that is upon all the earth, and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit; they shall be yours for food” (Genesis 1:29). Yet, one can also find within the Jewish sources expressions of an eco-centric approach whereby ecological balance is of supreme importance and every component in the system has a right to exist and fight for its existence, as described by Aldo Leopold in his essay “The Land Ethic” (1949). According to the theocentric approach, God the Creator is positioned at the center of all creation and commands his creatures to realize the values for which the world was created. Each creature has a purpose in this world, though man, as a creature of intelligence, plays the main role (Vogel 2001). This approach recognizes the value of nature and discourages man from destroying nature (Ungar 2010). Yet, the Haredi public appears to pay no attention to the environment outside the confines of their homes, that is, to public space (Mark, Alfasi and Omer 2016).

Conceptually, new voices have in recent years framed the encounter between Judaism and sustainability as complementary (Hitzhusen 2002; Benstein 2006). Faith in God as the Creator intensifies the commitment to protect his creation, and therefore, man must assume responsibility for his actions for the sake of the next generations. The richness of the world of Torah can provide a meeting point between faith, morals and environmentalism and provide ways of dealing with the fundamental questions that arise out of that meeting (Sharlo 2011). Indeed, Judaism has successfully dealt with a wide range of spiritual and moral dilemmas throughout its history, and it has the capacity to deal with local environmental issues while facing the global ecological challenge (Mishori and Robinson 2011).

Based on the environmentalist infrastructure found in Jewish biblical sources, this study examined environmental aspects of Haredi women’s daily lives. This examination was in part interpretive, that is, it asked whether these women associate their Halakhic practices with environmental action, for example: sorting lentils as practice of kashrut and the environmental practice of waste separation. Identifying the conceptual links between Halakha and the environment can therefore also be located within an analysis of the absence that emerges from the study—in other words, by identifying additional environmental topics that are absent from Haredi discourse, such as conserving water, vegetarianism and more. Some of these topics are indeed altogether absent from Haredi discourse and are a very low priority in that world, sometimes for economic reasons, and sometime because of a lack of environmental knowledge and education adapted sufficiently to their cultural-Halakhic values (Alkaher, Goldman and Sagy, 2018).

**Is there a link between Halakhic practice and environmentalism?**

The kitchen unit is considered one of women’s main areas of responsibility in many cultures, and especially so in Haredi society. The women spend many hours of the week working in the kitchen, and especially during preparations for the Sabbath. They adhere to various rules of kashrut in accordance with their level of piety, choices and preferences, and socio-economic status. We examined the various uses of Halakhic prescriptions in the kitchen and the degree to which these uses are imbued with environmental significance.

***Halakha is not fixed***

The newly-religious Haredi women spend more time on preparations related to food and kashrut than the Anglo women. In comparison to Anglos, the newly-religious cannot afford to purchase products that have been “checked,” that is products which are more kosher and also more expensive. The prohibition against “wasting” or discarding food remnants that are still edible was raised frequently, while interest in the environment or imbuing their action with environmental significance was rare. **Bracha**, for example, described the meticulous sorting of legumes prior to their cooking, which is considered a Halakhic practice: On the one hand, she buys cheap kosher meat which does not require further koshering, but on the other hand, she describes a thorough examination of all grains and legumes before she cooks them. This Halakhic practice has no environmental significance for her. Her description reveals a series of koshering actions executed prior to cooking. The link between cleanliness and sacredness also comes up following a question whether she is familiar with biblical or Halakhic texts related to environmental protection: “We know that there is a divine presence where it is clean. So, you always have to clean. It really bothers me when it is dirty, I feel like it’s real blasphemy that everyone tosses whatever they want [in public]. A person who isn’t clean, he can’t put on tefillin. This is Halakha.” Bracha views sacredness as dependent on bodily and spatial cleanliness.

Like Bracha, **Nechama** described the Halakhic practices of her kitchen: “Usually it is very very clean. I really sift through the packaged goods, like we used to in the past, and check to see if any insects or bugs or anything like that float up and they come out really clean, each one.” Nechama separates dairy and meat in her refrigerator out of a desire to be particularly careful about mixing dairy and meat: “I have a dairy drawer. A drawer for milk and cheese and we usually try to put the milk on the bottom, so it doesn’t spill on the meat or anything like that.” Nechama describes Creation anthropocentrically, as a gift: “You received a beautiful world, you got grass, soil, roads. This is something that people worked on, took the trouble, and made and built. You have to protect what you can, not ruin it.” Nechama emphasizes her meticulousness when it comes to kashrut and links it to protecting Creation.

**Miriam** brought up several additional examples linking Halakha to the environment: “The Torah, the Halakha is not fixed and not ‘square.’ There are rules given in the Torah and that is what it is measured by. For example, there is a very beautiful phrase you can do lots of things with: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Just like you want to come to a clean park, make sure that when you go you leave it clean for someone else. Because just as you love yourself you should love the other. For example, a fruit tree, you cannot chop it down. It bears fruit, it gives produce, it has a usefulness in creation. Anyways, all of creation, we believe it was made by God, so it has more value for us. The land, the trees, the air, the sea, everything… Halakha is flexible, we don’t know how much. It is up to each and every one’s personal choice, it’s not generalized. But as a matter of principle, the Torah guides man on how to act towards creation.” Miriam demonstrates an anthropocentric perspective, like Nechama. She chooses to repeat declarations (“Love your neighbor as yourself… just as you love yourself, you should love the other…”) and uses them to present a “better” portrait of Halakha and its views on creation. She reinforces the environmental perspective she assumes I am after through the rhetoric she chooses. Thus, she also links the rule of observing *shmita* (sabbatical) years to protecting the environment by demonstrating how the Torah thinks of the trees as well: “For example, last year was a *shmita* year, right? You can’t go into the field and pick like crazy. You will destroy the tree. You need to also know how to pick it. The Halakha talks about this too. You can go in, you can take because it is unclaimed, so you can pick as you like, for your own needs, but you also cannot take a commercial amount, you can’t take and destroy the tree because it won’t grow healthy. So, the Torah thought about the tree too… even in sowing the land, there are rules how to sow, where to sow. For example, if you are planting grapes, you can’t plant anything in that vineyard. That’s the strength of the soil, that is what the soil has to give. The Halakha looks at this too, like the Bible, that God created the world and knows all things, what’s good for the soil, what’s good for the air, what’s good for this plant.” Miriam’s response makes a cohesive and reasoned connection between Halakha and the environment.

In contrast to the other newly-religious women who participated in the study, **Moria** provided an unusual environmental interpretation to the injunction “you shall not waste.” As the result of a lecture on the environment she had attended, she ascribes the injunction also to using disposable single-use dishes: “For me ‘you shall not waste,’ I thought that I take the cup, the spoon, I throw it away and it’s a shame. The ‘you shall not waste’ I got from them is that you are actually destroying the foundations. You are destroying the earth. Creation. After all… what happens to the plants? It really spoke to me then.” Moria drew her inspiration from a lecture she attended a few years earlier in the context of community education. She chooses to use the Halakhic injunction that forbid throwing away leftover food and applies it to single-use dishes. Thus, she plays to the environmental identity she assumes that I have.

**Hagit** describes in detail Halakhic practices having to do with kashrut and food she maintains in her kitchen, such as washing leafy vegetables and sorting legumes: “First of all, I buy vegetables from Hasalat [a company that pioneered growing and marketing glatt-kosher leafy vegetables that are free of insects and worms], and then you just have to finish it. In principle, if you do it under running water, that’s great. But if you want more, you can also soak with a little water from the dish washing liquid, a drop, with a lot. You soak it for a few minutes and rinse under a running water. Because the insects are actually on the outside, it’s not like it used to be on the inside.” Hagit reinforces the link between Halakha and the environment with quotes from the Bible and brings up the inclination to respect the environment and the people within it (especially the poor and destitute) because of the spiritual reward it involves: “When He created the first man, they say He said to worship it, meaning that I am giving you a perfect world, take care of it and don’t spoil it. There is the matter of the holy land, of the Land of Israel, that it has to be kept clean and beautiful. From a Halakhic perspective we have to take care that our area is clean. Just like we want the house to be clean, we should know that our environment has to be seen. It is part of our respect, and our respect for the holy land. But people tend to do this because it is written that whoever tithes can become rich, because God also acts accordingly and gives to him, so this entire point of view, all this sensitivity, so it allows more giving.” Thus, Hagit’s explanation provides additional values derived from the Halakha, beyond protecting the holy land.

The examples brought here from the interviews with the newly-religious women demonstrate the importance of Halakhic rules in their lives. They reveal that all these women perform Halakhic practices in their kitchens, but that the environmental perspective does not fit naturally into their dispositions.

***Recycling for charity***

Compared to the newly-religious, the Anglo women dedicate less of their time in the kitchen to work related to kashrut. This is made possible by purchasing more expensive, certified kosher food products, which they can afford. In addition to the attention to kashrut, the Anglo women raised the issue of “you shall not waste,” and some even collect bottles for recycling as an act of charity. Nonetheless, like the newly-religious women quoted above, most do not link Halakha to environmental issues.

**Bat-Sheva** describes Halakhic practices related to kashrut and food against the economic options she has. She separates meat, dairy and *parve* in her kitchen and notes that the element of time is significant for her: “I buy everything in vacuum packages, so I don’t have a problem with worms. So I invest another five, ten shekels in this, but it is worth it for me rather than starting to sort.” The theme of separation exists also in the sub-spaces of Bat-Sheva’s kitchen in the sense of a division into designated work spaces for meat, dairy and parve: “There’s the meat side and then there’s a section which is parve, where I also try to make dough and things like that, and then there is the dairy where there’s a sink and cabinets for dairy, which is separate. I also have two ovens, and if we’re talking about meat and dairy, so I have a meat oven and a dairy over, and also two gas, two stove tops… Today we rely on the kosher certification. Really really good certification, to not waste energy and time… we don’t tithe in our house, I buy everything already tithed, we’re spoiled.” Bat-Sheva mentions another Halakhic practice related to charity and indirectly to environmental practice—bottle recycling: “I don’t know how it’s done. We have someone in our neighborhood that we, like, bring the bottles to, it’s a gift to her. She takes it and gets money for it; she’s really a poor woman. So, we bring it to her as a charity. She lives next to us, that’s why I prefer to bring it to this neighbor, and she goes, she earns the money. It’s worth it to me and that’s it. It’s this kind of neighborhood charity. Like, she will earn the thirty cents.” In other words, for Bat-Sheva environmentalism is related to social caring, as a Halakhic moral code.

**Avigail** alsodescribes Halakhic practices related to kashrut in her kitchen. She tries to “help” by volunteering environmental information in a manner that underscores her enthusiasm for the topic of environmentalism, which is close to her heart: “Hasalat is not organic, that’s exactly what I’m saying, that in fact the problem is too much pesticides to keep out the bugs. So, I personally buy both. It may be harder to find the worms, or the insects, in the lettuce, they can get right into the stalk, but other things, like other leaves – parsley and basil – I do buy organically raised without chemical fertilizer, without pesticides. You got the right person because I invest an awful lot in this.” Avigail points out with much emphasis that she is very much occupied with the environmental issue, especially from the perspective of nutrition and kashrut. She describes in thorough detail her level of adherence to Halakhic practices in the kitchen: “If you see that the onion is closed and fresh and hard then there is no chance that there will be worms, there’s not much risk, so you rinse it on the outside. But still, in any case, if it’s not really that closed and tight, or you see space between the layers of onion, then you do open the onion, cut it like this into quarters and put it in water. Some people add soap.” Avigail speaks about the relationship between Halakha and environmentalism by referencing the directive “you shall not waste” and protecting creation from an anthropocentric perspective. “Sure, the Torah has protecting the environment and you shall not waste, and these are examples that they really drilled into our heads, not to throw away means not to make light of even small things. This kind of fits the Jews, who don’t like to lose and don’t like to waste, so it’s to protect, protect the environment, protect what you have, protect all the good we received.” Avigail considers herself someone for whom the environmental world is very present in her life, and she grounds this, among other things, in an anthropocentric perspective.

Like the other women, in response to the question of whether and how Halakhic practices are carried out in her kitchen, **Gila** described practices having to do with kashrut of food, such as sorting legumes and separating challah dough. She also prefers and can afford to buy produce in vacuum packaging and does not relate this to the environment: “I cook, usually for the day-to-day. Sometimes if there’s someone at home, I will tell them to chop the salad or cook, or check the barley or something like that. Sorting, yes. I buy a lot in vacuum [packaging], I do the challah separation. I buy ready-made and then I make the challah.”

**Dvorah** spoke of the link between the *shmita* year and its Halakhic consequences as performed in her home and kitchen: “It’s a little like shmita here, but for us it’s just a *shmita* year in that at home we separate the peels, separate the bottles, separate the papers, separate the boxes and we just get used to it, but I think it’s a little hard. In a *shmita* year we have three garbage cans. What’s from the sacred seventh year, from the land… can’t be discarded because it is sacred. But when something rots it cannot be sacred anymore. So, everything that is sacred doesn’t go in the garbage.” Dvorah makes an effort to draw parallels to Halakhic practices of *shmita* in her home. In her example she tries to create an equivalency between separating waste, which is “a little hard” and separating leftover food in order to follow the rules of *shmita*, which she observes carefully.

Additional arguments enlisted by the Anglo women in their attempt to link Halakha to the environment or the way the rules of *shmita* are implemented in the home kitchen do somewhat resemble the separation of wet organic waste, as noted by Devorah: “Maybe for example I baked a cake, using apples that are from the sacred seventh year, from Israel, then the cake now is also sacred. We observe this in the house. The first garbage can has the apple peel, today I peeled an apple and put it in the first can. Then I replace the first garbage can, which I can empty into a bag and throw away only after it’s been sitting there for three days. When it can be said that it’s already rotted. Then I rotate the garbage cans. Sunday, Monday, Tuesday. It’s a little hard. But you do it because it is Halakha.” There seems to be a similarity between the difference stages of separation of plants during a shmita year and the separation of waste in the environmental context. However, she does not make this connection.

**Conclusion**

Theinnovative assumption of this article rests upon the existing similarity between the industrious profile of Haredi women and an environmentalist profile. In other words, there is a correlation between Halakhic modes of action such as sorting legumes, kashrut, and separating dairy and meat and environmentalist modes of action such as waste separation. The study began with this question, but its findings led to a broader understanding of the context.

The article looked at Halakhic practices related to kashrut, food and waste observed by Haredi women belonging to two marginal groups from the city of Beit Shemesh—a city that in recent years is increasingly Haredi in character. The two groups were newly-religious women from the Mimizrach Hashemesh neighborhood and Anglo ‘hutznikiyot’ from the Ramat Beit Shemesh A neighborhood. The study looked at these women’s relationship to Halakhic practices having to do with kashrut, food and waste through their descriptions of the importance of these practices in their lives and the way they are implemented at home, especially in the kitchen unit—considered a key locus of their authority—as well as the connection between these practices and environmentalism. A large portion of the Halakhic modes of action that came up in the interviews with the newly-religious group included soaking legumes and sorting them, and adherence to the injunction against waste. A large part of the practices that came up in the interviews with the Anglo women included purchasing vacuum-sealed kosher legumes (that did not need sorting), observing the injunction against waste, and collecting bottles to be given away in accordance with the commandment to practice charity.

Most women participating in the study, from both groups, brought up sorting legumes and other kashrut practices such as separating meat and dairy or separating challah dough. In contrast to the newly-religious women who spend more time on kitchen preparations, the Anglo women can afford to purchase pre-sorted legumes, and this clearly indicates the class differences between the two groups. All the same, the link between Halakhic practices and environmental issues was not made by most women from either group. Women from both neighborhoods see the connection between Halakha and the environment as a matter of keeping Israel clean as the holy land. The strongest link noted by a number of the women is charity through the donation of bottles for recycling, and keeping the home, the environment and one’s body clean as a symbol of the sanctity of the land so as to properly worship God. Moreover, despite the technical similarity between the meticulous execution of Halakhic actions by Haredi women in their homes and environmental practices such as waste separation, the study reveals that these women do not attach environmental interpretations to their actions.

Most Haredi women, the study reveals, do not view environmental protection as an independent value, and it certainly is not high on their list of daily priorities. This is due to a lack of knowledge and education, spare time, and resources. Furthermore, the study found that aspects of cultural identity, such as degree of piety, socio-economic status and the like, have a significant impact on the potential for environmentalism among these Haredi women.

The study was limited to a specific spatial location: two neighborhoods with different characteristics in the city of Beit Shemesh. However, it is obviously tied to the public debate in broader socio-cultural contexts, including diverse ethnic, class and gender identities, and draws on a broad attempt to set municipal and private environmental agendas, since pro-environment activism is inseparable from social and ethnic identity (Mark, Alfasi and Omer 2016).

The research field, two neighborhoods in Beit Shemesh, serves as a test case for a mixed religious-Haredi urban environment where there are multiple voices and differences between the various religious and Haredi groups. The emphasis on defining ethnic and Haredi identity is linked to economic distinctions that can explain the tendency towards environmentalism or its absence. In other word, there is a link between economic status and the ability to practice environmentalism.

The main limitations of this study are the relatively small number of in-depth interviews using snowball sampling. Yet, the study brought to light distinct shared trends that illuminate the interviewees’ connection to the environmental agenda. The representation of the two neighborhoods—Ramat Beit Shemesh A and Mimizrach Shemesh—in the study population is limited both by the sample size and by the extreme difficulties in reaching marginal groups within a minority, that is, the newly-religious and the Anglo immigrants within the Haredi population of Beit Shemesh.

A follow-up study could deal with a larger group of women within a given Haredi geographical area. Furthermore, additional studies could examine women from a number of neighborhoods within a given city comparatively and also include leaders in the community, such as rabbis and their wives, opinion leaders, and others, so as to obtain additional internal perspectives about Israel’s Haredi society and its potential to participate in environmental action.

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1. See: <https://www.zman.co.il/43501/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See:<http://kav-itonut.co.il/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/%D7%97%D7%95%D7%9C%D7%95%D7%9F.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Marginal in the sense that they do not belong to groups such as the Hassidim or Lithuanians, which are part of the Haredi mainstream. In this article we refer to newly religious women and women who immigrated from English-speaking countries, called ‘hutznikiyot.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)