**The (permanent) attitude toward water as part of the environment - Case studies from Palestine and the state of Israel, 1920 – 1960**

The Israeli parliament in 2004 voted to amend the Water Law. This law, which was legislated in 1959, was intended to determine the statutory ownership over water within the state and to define various aspects of water management in Israel. The law specified the possible uses for water. It was only in 2004, as a part of amendments to the law, that the law’s goals were defined as guaranteeing the availability of water for nature and the environment. The amendment was the result of a campaign led by environmental and other organizations, and one may learn, indirectly from this struggle, of the dire state of the water springs and rivers throughout the country. In view of this campaign and the parliamentary decision, the question arose— in all the years which preceded this legislation, what had been the attitude toward our water sources? This lecture will focus on the period beginning with the early days of the British Mandate in Palestine (1920), following the end of the first world war, and through to the 1960s, when the construction of Israel’s largest-ever water project was completed—the National Water Carrier.

To understand its attitude toward water we must understand the country’s hydrological conditions. The State of Israel is located in an arid and semi-arid region, where the largest supply of water is situated in the north, and the south is a desert. The number of perennially flowing rivers is small and in addition to the rivers of the north, the Yarkon stands out in size in the center of the country. While there are many springs in mountainous regions, these are small. This hydrological reality contrasted sharply with what the Jewish immigrants were familiar with in their native countries in eastern and central Europe. Furthermore, the water infrastructure in the country—certainly before the British Mandate (1917-1948)—was insufficiently developed and was based on traditional methods. Not all homes had running water back then.

The Jewish settlement in the country during the mandate period was based mainly on an ideological concept—Zionism. Driven by this ideology, Jews immigrated to the country intent on working toward the independence of the Jewish community. According to de Shalit’s research, those immigrants’ attitudes toward the environment shifted over the years; from a romantic approach, where the immigrants sought to integrate with nature—to an approach focused on development. As part of this latter approach, beginning in the 1930s, all resources were mobilized to serve Zionist ideology. After the state was established in 1948, and as the scientific approaches toward the environment began to evolve (worldwide and in the State of Israel as well), the attitude toward the environment changed as well and the state authorities took measures to preserve the environment and to protect it for future generations.

De Shalit does not address attitudes toward water in his study. The study presented here is intended to flesh out his research as much as possible. In view of the need to establish towns for the Jewish settlers and in the absence of readily available surface water, the Zionists went to great lengths to study and understand the possibilities for water-use within the state’s territory. Beginning in 1920, on the eve of the era of development, as de Shalit calls it, and even during the romantic period according to him, the Zionists worked intensively on water research, building water projects based on drilling, and on professional management of the water economy. To a large extent, the Zionists’ preoccupation with water (during this period) was based on research (termed by de Shalit: the scientific approach), which was intended to help achieve maximum utilization. The information was not intended only for current needs and for establishing towns, developing agriculture, etc. As we know, a struggle ensued between the Palestinian national movement and the Zionist movement during the British Mandate—a struggle for the future of this land. Against this backdrop, water knowledge served the decision-makers within the Zionist movement well, when it came to the fight for the land’s boundaries and its division.

And what about the development? As I already explained above, in the 1930s the country underwent considerable development, in which the Zionists were intensively involved. This effort saw the establishment of towns and villages, draining of swamps, and planting of forests—all part of the struggle for control over territory and more. The Zionists’ attitude toward the environment was that it was a space that needed to be conquered. As with the rest of the land’s resources, water was earmarked for maximum utilization in order to safeguard the Zionist endeavor. In view of the reams of information amassed, Zionist institutions also worked on planning future water projects. These plans were intended to prepare the land for its continued development. As part of this effort, various estimates were made as to the amount of water throughout the country. Water, according to the various plans, was intended to come under complete human control, where its ultimate destiny was clear—settlement and agriculture. In other words, water was intended to serve ideology.

But what happened after the State was established? After a chapter in the national struggle was closed, did the attitude toward water change?

Immediately following the establishment of the State and the stabilization of its borders, the State set about to implement the country’s development plans. According to the provisional borders which were set for the State, and in view of the waves of immigrants arriving after the end of the war in 1948-1949, engineers began leading the formation of national and regional plans for water management. As a part of these plans, the State sought to realize those plans which had already been prepared during the mandate era, when the land had still been an arena of national conflict. One of the first large-scale projects the State undertook was the diversion of water from the Yarkon to the Negev. The river’s waters began being diverted southwards in 1952 (220 million cubic meters per year), eventually drying it up, and turning it into a sewage canal. As far as the officials and engineers in charge of the project were concerned, its construction was a dream come true. From the standpoint of the needs of the new settlements, it was clear the Negev needed that water. But what about the river itself? And what about the living conditions of those near the river? Only two years after the works had begun was an attempt made to halt the project and save a small amount of water for the river. Although this decision was motivated by ethnocentric considerations, it indicated a new direction—preserving the resource for other uses besides settlement and agriculture. Despite protests, the fate of the river was sealed. A few years after the pumping began the Yarkon became a river of sewage.

This period of exploitation with no regard for other needs persisted into the 1960s with the construction of the National Water Carrier. With the abundance of information gathered about the country’s water supply, water was significantly exploited, resulting in severe degradation of the water springs, rivers, and groundwater. It appears that the attitude toward water as a resource to be used for maintaining an ideology lingered on even after the state was established. There are many possible explanations for this—economic, social, political, and so forth. The feeling that “there’s no water”, which had dogged the population due to the country’s unique hydrological situation, transformed into a desire to fully exploit the water, going so far as to degrade and lose the water supply and the entire aqueous environment (rivers etc.) in the process. Even when environmental preservation work began, and after laws were passed which were intended to enable the establishment of nature reserves (1963) and, later on, to protect the land’s archaeological sites (1978), water was still excluded from the environmental discussion.

It was only in 2004 that the legislature placed responsibility on State institutions for allocating water to the environment. This happened about fifty years after the start of the main projects for removing water from the environment and designating it for human consumption. There were various reasons for this change. Among them was the entrance of environmental discourse into Israeli society, but there were also changes which came about in the water sector with the advent of the use of desalination plants. This reality of a readily available supply of water made it easier to include water as a part of the environment. However, the most significant change is cultural, and it is related to the changes in man’s relationship with the environment all over the world, and specifically in Israel. With this shift, water had become part of environmental discourse.