

Appreciating Nature

Thought for the Day

Ephraim Borowski (Director, Scottish Council of Jewish Communities)

Broadcast on Radio Scotland, 8 February 2012

Have you noticed how much hot air there's been around wind farms this last week? Golfers don't want them near St Andrews or Aberdeen, Home Counties MPs don't want them in their back yards, and the navy claims they'll be a hazard to submarines – which reminds me of the legendary response given to the arrogant commander of an aircraft carrier, “this is a lighthouse. I suggest YOU change course”!

But renewable energy is a serious issue, so it's disappointing that many of the objections are purely subjective. Of course there may be good arguments against some technologies – I'm not an expert, so I can't judge – but I do know that appealing to some supposed duty not to interfere with nature isn't one of them!

Almost everything we do interferes with nature. I'm not just talking about roads and runways, or power stations and pylons, but building houses, growing crops for food, shearing a sheep to knit a cardigan, even weeding your garden, all divert nature from the path it would have followed without human intervention. What matters is not worshipping nature, but respecting it.

That's what today's odd-sounding Jewish festival of “the new year for trees” is about – not worshipping trees or tying ribbons round them, but remembering that they matter. In fact today was the start of the new tax year for agricultural produce in ancient Israel, part of the first social security system in history, with an obligation to leave part of everything one grew for the poor. Even in Israel today, many of these rules are still observed.

Jews also give thanks for our food both before and after eating. The wording depends on whether it is fruit or vegetable, animal or artificial, and if that forces us to think about where food comes from, then, in an age when many children don't know that their burger comes from a cow and their bun from the ground, isn't stopping to think about nature and our interaction with it a good thing?