

The goat speech: Ecofascism in Palestine-Israel

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journals.sagepub.com/home/epdIrus Braverman¹ 

Abstract

One hundred and seventeen days into Israel's war on Gaza, the country's minister of interior, rightwing settler Itamar Ben Gvir, delivered a speech over the podium of Israel's Knesset. The main theme of this speech was the goat. This was dubbed by the media as the Goat Speech. While the media focused on the goat as a figure of speech, my essay will reflect on the real properties of goats and on the role that they have played in the political making of the natural landscape of Palestine–Israel. The essay will conclude with the realization that the ecofascist dream is not only of a Jewish ethnostate but of a green one, too.

Keywords

ecofascism, settler ecologies, goats, Palestine–Israel, Gaza

On January 31, 2024, 117 days into Israel's war on Gaza, former vigilante hilltop settler and now Israel's minister of national security, Itamar Ben Gvir, delivered a speech over the podium of Israel's Knesset. The main theme of this speech was the goat. The rumors about the enormous concessions that Israel was willing to make to Hamas for releasing hostages taken into Gaza on October 7, 2023, including the release of thousands of jailed “terrorists,” were a trick—a “goat clause”—he argued. According to Jewish tradition, the “goat clause” is something highly objectionable inserted into a proposal to make that proposal more agreeable when the clause is later dropped. Ben Gvir insisted that he wasn't fooled by this “goat” trick and vowed to oppose the rumored deal. He then declared triumphantly: “I would like to say clearly, Mister Prime Minister, [that] hundreds of fallen soldiers are not goats, the residents of the south are not goats, Israeli citizens are not goats, and I am not a goat!”

The media dubbed this the “Goat Speech.”¹

While many Israeli media sources focused on the Goat Speech as a way to ridicule the extreme rightwing minister Ben Gvir's bizarre and erratic politics, I'd like to dwell more carefully on the mundane yet consistent symbolic, material, and ecological roles that the goat has played over the years in ecofascist and declensionist narratives advanced by the state of Israel. This speech arguably reflects the longer ideological and ecological history of the goat's relationship with the ecofascist state, which I

¹School of Law, University at Buffalo, The State University of New York

Corresponding author:

Irus Braverman, School of Law, University at Buffalo, The State University of New York, Buffalo, NY, USA.

Email: irusb@buffalo.edu

will sketch in this essay. I will show, specifically, how the far-right and ecological ideologies of Israeli settlers feed into one another to advance both the love of land and militant racist nationalism, and how the figure of the goat helps naturalize the ties that bind those together.² The goat thus affords “a glimpse beyond the most spectacular manifestations of ecofascism, such as mass shootings and other forms of genocidal violence waged in the name of protecting ‘the environment,’ to the more mundane ways that ecofascist ideologies pulse beneath the surface of the everyday.”³ Moreover, as this special issue’s convenors emphasize, the routinization of these ideologies in everyday speech and actions enables and even normalizes extraordinary violence.

In the mid-twentieth century, goats were by far the largest group of domesticated animals in Palestine and the main producers of milk in the region, as they had been for hundreds of years.⁴ Perceived by the British as devastating the natural ecosystem, local goat herding practices were targeted during the British mandate in Palestine (1917–1948). In a 1942 lecture, the director of the British Forestry Department in Palestine insisted that soil erosion caused by the goats’ overgrazing was a major cause for the degradation of the landscape in this region. In his view, the goat was the “main agent in the execution of the curses” that have befallen Palestine throughout the centuries and a “fitting symbol of all that is devilish and futile.”⁵

The 1948 Arab–Israeli war caused a major decline in the black goat population in the region. Estimated at 750,000 animals before the war, their number dropped sevenfold.⁶ Shortly after the state’s establishment, the black goat was configured by the state as its enemy and as an obstacle to the revival of the land. Representing the rebellious Arab farmer—the *fellah*—in the eyes of Israeli state officials, this animal became a scapegoat for everything that seemed to have gone awry with nature in this region and was even blamed for turning the landscape into a desert.⁷ Specifically, the goat was perceived by the state of Israel as a threat to the ambitious afforestation mission promoted first by the British and subsequently by the Jewish National Fund.

In 1950, Israel classified goat grazing as a criminal offense. The statute, formally entitled the 1950 Plant Protection Act, was the first environmental legislation enacted by the young state.⁸ Arguably, this law was meant to finish the job on both fronts: eliminating the goat was elemental to the work of eliminating the native who relied on the goat. Official discussions at the time support this correspondence between human and nonhuman eliminations, revealing the dehumanizing and racializing of Palestinians that accompanied such seemingly apolitical projects.⁹ Identifying humans as, or with, animals has been a way, across centuries and cultures, for classifying and prioritizing different forms of life and for expressing political alliances.¹⁰

Israel’s 1950 Black Goat Act set restrictions on goat numbers and herding ranges and prohibited this animal from entering forested areas or nature reserves.¹¹ By 2021, only a few thousand goats roamed the entire region of Palestine–Israel.¹² But in an ironic twist of fate, some seventy years after the enactment of the Black Goat Act, the state of Israel has recently recognized the black goat’s positive role in the ecosystem, and especially its effective contribution to the management of wildfires. As a result, in 2018 the Knesset officially canceled the 1950 Plant Protection Act.¹³

Yet Israel’s ecological reckoning with the black goat’s role in maintaining a healthy ecosystem has been lost on certain Jewish settlers, who still insist on the goat’s disastrous effects on the natural landscape. Held on a scorching July day at an illegal outpost in the occupied Jordan Valley, my interview with one of the Jewish settler farmers documented his continued resentment toward the black goat despite the legal changes. In his words:

Bedouins use the black goats; we don’t like them. . . . [The goat] chews and sucks the minerals out of the rocks and spits out the rest! We don’t like [the goat] on our farm, we don’t like it in the region. I keep telling [the Bedouins] to phase them out. The goats weren’t here at the time of the Bible; they only arrived here with the Romans during the Second Temple period. . . . To this day, there’s a law that prohibit[s] them. [But] nobody

adheres to this law. No one in the government even knows the difference between a sheep and a goat, let alone between a black and a brown goat.¹⁴

Read together with Ben Gvir's "goat speech," this statement illustrates just how intimately the goat has come to represent the Palestinians in the eyes of the Israeli state and just how intensely the settlers still despise the black goat, despite the reckoning amidst Israel's nature management community regarding its ecological importance. The settler's deep contempt toward the goat has become interchangeable with, and further enhances, the settler's deep contempt toward the Palestinian shepherd.

Moreover, this quote demonstrates the biblical underpinnings and the broader religious and even mystical fervor of the Jewish settlers' orientation toward the goat. Importantly, the demonization of goats is anchored in biblical and other ancient Jewish texts as well as in Jewish folklore.¹⁵ On Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, two male goats were chosen by the chief Cohen (i.e., the high priest) for sacrifice in the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. One was sacrificed on the temple altar, the other embodied the sins of the Israelites and was then sent away to a place called "Azazel" at the edge of the desert.¹⁶ Although this practice was discontinued after the Second Temple's destruction, in modern Israel the hellish place to which the goat would have been sent is commonly thought to be Gaza. This is likely because the word Gaza, when pronounced in Hebrew, is "Aza." Though Gaza bears no proven relationship to the biblical Azazel, the association somehow stuck. Building on the scapegoat metaphor, the modern place of Gaza is deemed by many Israelis to be cursed and condemned—a place "we hope will sink in the sea," as the now-lauded Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin reportedly remarked in 1992, more than a decade before Israel's "disengagement" from Gaza in 2005. Journalist Meron Rapaport reflected in 2018: "Everything that has taken place in this conflict reflects itself in Gaza. It is its black mirror."¹⁷ The black goat, the biblical sacrifice, and the black mirror of both in Gaza are thus deeply rooted in religious Jewish texts.¹⁸ As the quintessential Jewish sacrifice animal, the goat's blood literally soaks the earth, establishing the alliance between God, the people of Israel, and the land of Israel.

This brings us to the ethno- and eco-national aspects of the goat. The black sacrifice goat is tied to traditions executed during the last idealized nationalistic moment of the Second Temple, with many of the mystical settlers believing in erecting the Third Temple under a "real" Jewish state that will eventually replace the current secular version. This animal is additionally tied with ecological convictions about how to heal the land damaged by the "inferior" population of black goat-loving Palestinians. More than a figure of speech by the rightwing minister of security, the goat is a soldier in the war over land, natural resources, and the identity of the true and righteous side in this war. Such righteous and "superior" Jewish soldiers have declared: "hundreds of fallen soldiers are not goats. The residents of the south are not goats, Israeli citizens are not goats, and I am not a goat!" The ecofascist dream is not just of a Jewish ethnostate but of a green one.¹⁹

ORCID iD

Irus Braverman  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4352-001X>

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1. Times of Israel, "Ben Gvir warns he will not allow deal." January 31, 2024. https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/ben-gvir-warns-he-will-not-allow-deal-that-releases-thousands-of-terrorists/.

2. Irma Kinga Allen et al. *Political Ecologies of the Far Right: Fanning the Flames* (Manchester University Press, 2024), 3; Janet Biehl and Peter Staudenmaier. *Ecofascism Revisited: Lessons from the German Experience* (New Compass Press, 2011), 16.
3. Chloe Ahmann in Ahmann, Chloe, Mona Bhan, Alexandra Coțofană, Radhika Govindrajana, Julia Leser, Zeynep Oguz, Yuka Suzuki, and Noah Theriault. 2024. “Darker Shades of Green: Everyday and Emergent Ecofascisms.” Virtual roundtable at the American Anthropological Association Meeting, November 22 (used with permission).
4. Tamar Novick, *Milk and Honey: Technologies of Plenty in the Making of a Holy Land* (MIT Press, 2023).
5. Ibid. See also Mona Bieling. 2022. British Environmental Orientalism and the Palestinian Goat, 1917–1948, *DIYÂR* 3(1): 67–84.
6. Novick, *Milk and Honey*.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. For an exploration of the normative animal–human positionings in the Palestine–Israel context, see Irus Braverman, *Settling Nature: The Conservation Regime in Palestine-Israel* (University of Minnesota Press, 2023).
11. Novick, *Milk and Honey*.
12. Braverman, *Settling Nature*, 303n70.
13. Braverman, *Settling Nature*, 302n74; Novick, *Milk and Honey*, 76.
14. Quoted in Braverman, *Settling Nature*, 145.
15. Novick, *Milk & Honey*, 73–76.
16. It is debated amidst the Jewish sources whether the Azazel goat would perish on her own or tossed off a cliff. See, e.g., Convivium, 2018. <https://www.convivium.ca/articles/yom-kippur-and-the-tale-of-two-goats/>.
17. The Jerusalem Post. 2018. “Look Gaza in the eyes.” May 29. <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/look-gaza-in-the-eyes-558676>.
18. This is reminiscent of German mysticism, which is also tied up with homeland (“Heimat”) and racism and with the infamous mystique of “blood and soil.” Biehl & Staudenmaier, *Ecofascism Revisited*, 31.
19. Alex Amend (2020), “Blood and Vanishing Top Soil.” *The Public Eye*.

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Irus Braverman is SUNY Distinguished Professor of Law, Adjunct Professor of Geography, and Research Professor at the Department of Environment & Sustainability at the University of Buffalo, The State University of New York. Braverman published seven monographs and seven edited collections. Her most recent monograph, *Settling Nature: The Conservation Regime in Palestine-Israel* (University of Minnesota Press, 2023) discusses the deployment of national parks and biodiversity protections for settler colonial ends.