

The World as Sacred Space

Judaic Teachings and Ecological Consciousness

FRED SCHERLINDER DOBB

IN A RECENT CLASS on Jewish environmental ethics, one participant asked: "If our tradition sees the world as sacred enough to deserve our utmost protection, then why haven't I heard this before — and how did we let things get so out of whack?"

She was right: Judaism's record, while mostly teaching concern for the Earth, is mixed. The world's holiness, though present in Jewish teachings, is often hard to discern. Today, amid mounting concern about what we are doing to the Earth, we need to reconsider our tradition's position on Godliness-in-the-world — and emphasize those elements in Judaism that see the world as holy. We need to resacralize the world.

Thankfully, Judaism's evolution has long incorporated first-hand experience of the world's holiness. The Bible describes a world holy to God and created for its own sake (Psalm 104), in which the animate heavens and Earth bear vocal witness to Divine glory (Psalms 96, 148) and *kol haneshamah t'halel Yah* — all that breathes should join the hallelujah chorus (Psalm 150). The prophets similarly ascribed holiness to the land, holding it in covenant (Jeremiah 32) and seeing the whole world as full of God's glory (Isaiah 6). Even earlier, Abraham had to "walk himself through the land" (Genesis 13:17), the "good land," to know it. And such "earthen" holiness could not have been more personal for Job (Job 38-42), who learned out of the whirlwind that the world exists as God wants it to exist.

Neither nature nor humanity is at the center of the ancient Jewish worldview; God is. Still, the world's holiness was

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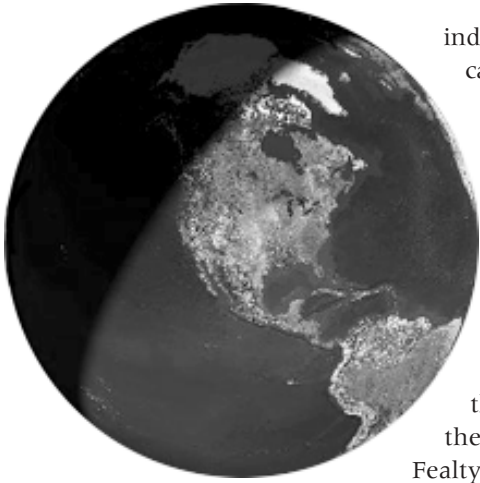
tangible and direct. The Jewish festival calendar, with its close attendance to lunar, solar, natural and agricultural cycles, reinforced this consciousness. The rabbis of the Talmud, many of whom themselves worked the land, could say things like "nothing in the Divine plan is superfluous" (*Exodus Rabbah* 10:1); they knew whereof they spoke.

In the medieval and modern periods, a sad history placed limits on most Jews' access to land. As our connection with nature became less personal, many Jewish teachings became detached from their landed origins. Even now, with so many Jews at home in the city rather than the country, some consider us an "unnatural" people. Yet in the past two centuries, many Jews rediscovered the world's sacredness. Examples include the Zionist leader A.D. Gordon's insistence on having bits of earth under Jewish fingernails; his kibbutz-mate Rachel Blaustein's poetic odes to the land, along with Saul Tschernokovsky's neo-pagan Zionism; Mordecai Kaplan's *piyyut*, "God the Life of Nature;" Marge Piercy's brilliant gardening poems; and the growth of the modern Jewish environmental movement. Today we inherit ancient agricultural wisdom, medieval distance from nature, and contemporary reconnection with the Earth. What will we prioritize within this rich heritage?

We can emphasize those strands of tradition that advocate a bookish,



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indoor life of piety, or we can “read” nature as God’s open holy book. We can locate divinity squarely within the world, lending credence to efforts to protect it, or identify God as “other-worldly,” paving the way for paving over the world without theological consequence. Fealty to the tradition

demands a sober assessment of its teachings: how much is God within, and/or beyond, the world? Yet real respect for ourselves, for others, for our descendants and for all Creation must also enter the mix, demanding real engagement with the world and real efforts to resacralize it.

Pantheism, the view that all of Creation is sacred because God is in everything, has been a major Jewish taboo over the generations. Where earlier Mesopotamian myths saw gods (such as Tiamat) as the stuff of existence, the God of Genesis is above the fray, the Actor whose mere Word brings about existence. Yet even here, nature plays a key role: Earth and sea bring forth life (Genesis 1:11; 1:21), and God does nothing without counsel from heaven and earth (Genesis Rabbah to 1:26).

As Judaism’s great “naturalist” theologian, Mordecai Kaplan was often mistaken for a pantheist. Yet his conception of God as the “Power that Makes for Salvation,” while operating through and experienced through the world, is not limited to it. This theology, often termed panentheism, comes with a strong Jewish pedigree. Panentheism gives us permission to resacralize the world, so long as we never ignore that Whole which is greater than the sum of its parts.

A related theological issue is God’s presence within the world (immanence) versus God’s distance above and beyond it (transcendence). Immanence comes easily to our Christian friends, with their God-incarnate; but Judaism also balances the two, even lending subtle priority — from Psalms to Hasidism — to Divine presence in our world.

Finally, the dualism between amoral nature

(Creation) and moral law (Revelation, Torah) is perhaps Judaism’s greatest obstacle to seeing nature as holy. Where Greek and other systems upheld nature as ideal, classical Judaism demanded a morality that transcends “base” human or animal nature. Still, nature can be regarded as instructive, even sacred, without causing immorality. The book of Proverbs walks this thin line, bidding lazy people to “go to the ant, study its ways, and wise up” (Proverbs 6:6). So does Job, who suggests that we “ask the animals . . . and the birds” and “converse with the land” (Job 12:7-8). Even Amos’ famous call for justice to roll down like water (Amos 5:24) is an apt use of natural images to motivate righteous human behavior. In each case, we become better people by learning from nature; the world is the necessary setting for these sacred scriptural lessons.

This understanding privileges creation without knocking revelation. It locates and strengthens human morality within the natural world, but does not reduce ethics to naturalism. This preserves Creation’s vital importance within Judaism, leaving the door open for the many reasons why even ‘amoral’ nature should be considered holy — one of which is that humans, while bearing the divine image, remain part and parcel of nature.

“If I am not for myself, who will be for me; but if I am [only] for myself, what am I?” asked Hillel (*Avot* 1:14). Hillel brilliantly begins with the self, as humans are wont to do, but compensates by upping the ante, making us less-than-human (“what” rather than “who”) if we miss the second half of the equation.

The same mandate applies to group identity: we must certainly stand up for those with whom we share key affinities, yet if we only concern ourselves with Jews/Americans/people-like-us, we fail the higher test. So also with species: we must stand up for humanity — *and* for the tens of millions of other creations. Even as we focus on what is nearest, Hillel reminded us to look up and out, to enlarge our circles of concern and compassion. Judaism offers an ongoing tension between universalist and particularist impulses, even as the tradition generally gives precedence to the universal. The time has come to universalize one more notch, encompassing now the entire created order.

The Kotzker Rebbe justified the odd name of the stork — *hasidah*, from ‘loving-kindness’, in Leviticus 11:19 — because, he said, it goes out of

its way to feed other injured or ill storks. It is nonetheless *treyf* (not kosher), since it only extends this *hesed* to fellow storks, not to other species. To be hasidim we must take care of our own; to be kosher we must take care of others. Martin Buber, whose thought has been emulated by many sensitive environmentalists, rightly saw “I-Thou” potential not just between two humans but also with trees and cats and rocks, since each created thing is like a hologram: Each of us is a part, containing the secret of the whole.

If we despise or waste something in this hologrammatic, material realm, we are actually destroying a piece of ourselves. The German Orthodox rabbi, Samson Raphael Hirsch, called *bal tashhit*, the “eco-mitzvah” of not wasting, “the first and most general call of God.” His Hasidic counterpart, Shneur Zalman of Liadi, saw all of visible creation as God’s “outer garments.” From either perspective, Creation is sacred.

Modern science goes beyond holograms to fractals, where seemingly unpredictable patterns actually replicate themselves at different levels of magnification. Fractals remind us that all is connected, and that we differ in degree, not in kind, from the rest of Creation. If God is holy, and we-made-in-the-Image are holy, then the world, too, must exhibit that holiness. Phyllis Trible calls the human in Genesis 1-3 “both a part of, and apart from,” the rest of the created order (*Andover Newton Quarterly*, March 1972). Since human beings share 80 percent of our DNA with mice and 99 percent with chimpanzees, Trible agrees with Kohelet (Ecclesiastes 3:19) that we are more “a part of” than “apart from.”

Nature’s wildness pervades our very being. *Avot d’Rabbi Natan* (section 31) sees humanity and nature as twins: “Whatever the Holy Blessed One created in the world, God created in Adam. God created forests in the world and forests in Adam. God created a wind (*ruah*) in the world and a wind in Adam . . .” Liberation theologian Leonardo Boff adds (in *Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm*, 1995): “When reconciled with ourselves . . . we can, without coercion, live with our own kind (social ecology), and also with all other creatures (environmental ecology), as, indeed, brothers and sisters.”

All the Earth is our home; we should not foul our own nest. Logic or survival alone would yield that inescapable conclusion, but we get there as well from a good look at the cosmos, or at our own tradition. *Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh, Adonai*

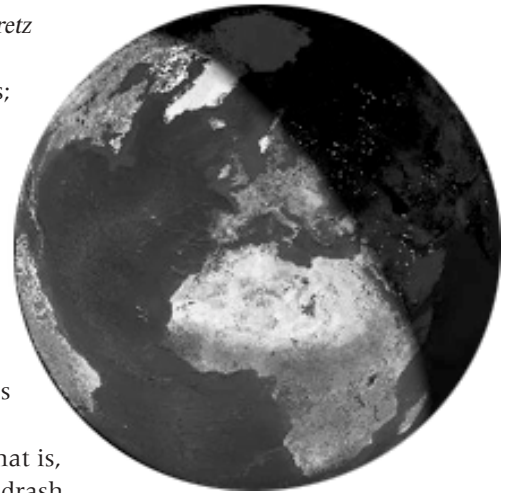
tzeva’ot, m’lo kol haaretz k’vodo. “Holy, holy, holy, is God of Hosts; the whole world is filled with God’s glory” (Isaiah 6:3).

The whole world may contain divine glory, but in many Jewish sources, one land is more glorious than others: *haaretz*, simply “the land,” that is, *Eretz Yisrael*. The midrash boasts: “ten measures of beauty descended to the world: Jerusalem took nine, and the rest of the world, one.” Here Judaism easily made hierarchical distinctions: “The land of Israel is the holiest of all lands;” “nothing can be perfect, except in Israel.”

How do we reconcile the world’s holiness with “the Holy Land,” especially when *eretz* or *adamah* sometimes connote Earth and sometimes connote Israel? Reconstructionists often expand the impact of our sacred text by interpreting “the” land as meaning “all” lands — as with the second paragraph of the *Shema* (Deuteronomy 11:13-21), which warns us not to serve false gods lest we “speedily be evicted from the good land that God is giving us.” Such broader interpretations raise environmental consciousness — but are they true to tradition?

Yes and no. Again, we encounter the creative tension between the particular and the universal. Just like humans within the council of all beings, *Eretz Yisrael* is both “a part of” the community of lands/nations, and “apart from” it. Israel is particularly holy from our vantage point, special to us (and to others, if differently so) — but this truth must not and cannot mean denigrating other lands.

We must reconstruct our understanding of *Eretz Yisrael*, just as we have reconstructed *Am* (people) *Yisrael*: from election to vocation, from being chosen to doing the choosing, from being objectively better to being better for us. Kaplan is not our only help here. Judith Plaskow use-



WE MUST RECONSTRUCT

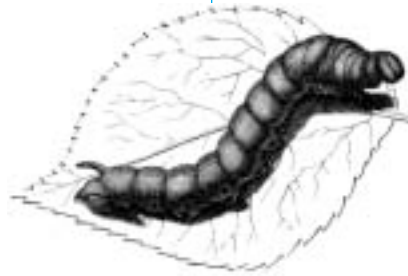
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fully intensified the critique of chosenness from a feminist perspective (in *Standing Again at Sinai*, 1990), implicitly making it applicable to lands as well as peoples. A. D. Gordon, the great theoretician of labor Zionism, prescribed that “even in the lands of the Diaspora, Jews must look to labor, to nature” (“Labor,” in his *Collected Essays*). We must see holiness in Tiberias and Toledo and Toronto, Dimona and Denver and Delhi alike.

What actions would help actualize this perception of the world as sacred? Environmentalists speak of “living lightly on the Earth,” or “limiting our ecological footprint.” Every action we take — where we live, what/when/if/how we drive, what we eat, for whom we vote, how we invest, and so on — has a clear environmental impact. We must be willing to ask tough questions regarding the impact of our daily choices — and then be willing to heed the answers. Our descendants, our fellow humans and the trillions of organisms with whom we share this Earth




deserve no less.

To the questioner who asked why she had not heard about Jewish sensitivity to the world’s holiness: Better now than never! Newcomers to this eco-Jewish synthesis can start by visiting www.coejl.org, the website of the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, of which all four major movements plus most national Jewish organizations are a part.

Despite our fractiousness, Jews — and our non-Jewish neighbors, with whom we share the National Religious Partnership for the Environment (www.nrpe.org) — can agree on protecting God’s good Creation.

During a recent silent retreat at Elat Chayyim, a Jewish retreat center in the Mid-Hudson Valley of New York, I had difficulty calming my mind, but appreciated the stillness, which helped me to see more clearly the glory that is Creation. I kept reflecting on something I’d read about a Zen practitioner who reported: “No paranormal experiences that I can detect. But you wake up in the morning and the world seems so beautiful you can hardly stand it.” Our group’s slow and sacred return to speech after four silent days began by contemplating and discussing biblical verses; by chance I was given Psalm 104:24, recycled in the weekday *yotzer* liturgy: *Mah rabu ma’asekha Adonai; kulam b’ḥokhma asita, mal’ah haaretz kinyanekha*. “How great are Your works, O God; all of them You made in wisdom; the Earth is full of Your handiwork.” Enough said; the world is sacred space.

The prayer in which this line appears is the universal “creation” prayer, thanking God for the natural cycles that affect all people and species. This first blessing surrounding the *Shema* segues into *Ahavah Rabbah*, the particularistic “revelation” prayer that thanks God for our people and its unique history, book/s, and path. Again we encounter that timeless tension between the universal and the particular — only this time it is resolved, twice daily, by the *Shema*. Hear O Israel: the particularistic God of Jewish history whose Name (*YHVH*) appears at key moments in the life of Israel, and our universalistic God of nature whose Name (*Eloheinu*) dominates the creation story, are in fact One and the same God (*YHVH eḥad*). 

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