

"Jewish Textual Practice
and Sustainable Culture"

Natan Margalit

RIGHTEOUS INDIGNATION

A JEWISH CALL FOR JUSTICE

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For People of All Faiths, All Backgrounds

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Jewish Textual Practice and Sustainable Culture

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As my wife nurses our infant, I wonder about the reports that another's milk may contain dangerous levels of pesticides—one small example, but perhaps no better symbol, of how the sacred circle of life that connects us all has been badly damaged. Largely due to human intervention, the earth is out of balance.

Judaism tells us that one of our primary responsibilities to our community and to our world is *tikkun olam*. Writing in this anthology, Jane Kanarek has reminded us that while the literal meaning of *tikkun ha'olam* is to repair the world, the Rabbis particularly understood that task to mean “restore balance.” From a Jewish perspective, the world's ecological crisis requires us to ask, “How can Judaism contribute to the search for ways to restore the balance to our earth?”

With so many people writing and thinking about environmental change, why is the Jewish perspective important or useful? The answer, simply, is that we will need more than technical solutions to solve this crisis. Finding new sources of energy or some miracle crops is not enough. The market-based ideology that inspires product-based thinking is one of the main reasons we have come to this crisis. Instead of looking for solutions within our consumer culture, we need to transform the way

millions of people think by offering an alternative to the reigning market-based corporate culture of domination and exploitation.

Because we are calling upon Judaism to change the way we see, hear, and interact with our world, we must do more than mine our tradition for specific statements about particular practices or behaviors. While preserving natural resources such as trees (*ba'al tashchit*) and preventing cruelty to animals (*tza'ar ba'alei hayyim*) are important elements in any effort to restore ecological balance, they can take us only so far. In order to make a deep impact, we need to locate an “eco-theology” based in Jewish sources.

The benefit of a Jewish eco-theology will be twofold. Through the development of an eco-theology, Judaism can inspire the kind of foundational thinking that the environmental movement needs. At the same time, such ecological thinking may well help uncover aspects of Judaism that we may not have noticed before, enriching Jewish thought and practice.

None of this is simply theoretical. Bringing about foundational changes in the way we think is an essential part of changing our actions. Religions such as Judaism are not simply thought systems, but organized communities, and these communities are powerful vehicles of social, economic, and political action. Organizing our communities for practical activism today is essential; we need to use our political power in the present moment to advocate for cleaner transportation, a better deal for sustainable farming, increased recycling, and many other important causes, yet such practical activism is not enough. I advocate searching for an eco-theology because I believe that only with a clear new paradigm of thinking will we be able to harness the full power for activism latent in our communities.

A String of Jewels

Jewish eco-theology could begin with a midrash about Rabbi Ben Azzai, which refers to verse ten from the first chapter of Song of Songs: “Your cheeks are comely with plaited wreaths, Your neck with strings of jewels.”

Ben Azzai was sitting and learning and there was fire all around him. The other students went to Rabbi Akiva and told him. He

came and said, "I hear that you were learning and fire was all around you." He answered, "Yes." He said, "Perhaps you were dealing with the Chambers of the Chariot?" He answered, "No, I was sitting and stringing together words of Torah, and from the Torah to the Prophets, and from the Prophets to the Writings, and the words were as joyous as on the day they were given on Sinai, and they were as sweet as when they were first given."

(Midrash Shir HaShirim Rabbah, Parsha 1)

Although it hardly mentions the natural world, and is, in fact, a meditation on the process of learning Torah, this midrash points us in the direction of some building blocks for an eco-theology. First, we observe that Ben Azzai's *understanding comes through connecting, and that this brings joy*. Ben Azzai reaches a mystical state, not because he "solved" the problem of the Torah, or got the "right answer," but by connecting words and creating new juxtapositions. His Torah was a living Torah because he creatively found new patterns.

Writing in a 1980 essay "Solving for Pattern," environmentalist Wendell Berry contrasts the distanced, one-dimensional "solutions" of agribusiness with the complex, satisfying web of relationships that constitute the health of a small farm. Whereas corporate agriculture may create high crop yields, in fact this "solution" brings with it more problems, such as a heavy dependence on oil, loss of soil quality, pollution of water systems, and social damage to farming communities. A good farmer, Berry suggests, has an intimate knowledge of the particulars of his farm and skillfully manages the relationships that keep the ecosystem healthy. The crops feed the animals, whose manure enriches the soil for the crops; the shade of trees keeps the animals happy and provides wood, a home for birds, and roots to hold the soil. All form a complex pattern of health for a working farm.

The principle of a healthy, balanced farm is never "the more, the better," as with industrial economies of scale, but "how much is enough." The aim of the small farmer is to maintain the dynamic balance of relationships within the natural world she tends. The monotony of corporate agriculture's endless fields of a single crop contrasts with the pastoral beauty of the small farmer's fences, woods, animals, gardens, and diverse fields, which are not only beautiful but also essen-

tial to the energy cycles and relationships of a small farm. An absentee landowner can't have this kind of knowledge.

Caring and quality go together in maintaining the health of the land and the people on it. Our most important work needs to be thought about and practiced with attention to pattern. Only then will the work of the world be done with love, with life-enhancing care, and with joy.

Language and Nature

Returning to Ben Azzai's "string of jewels," we also notice in this midrash that "*the words were joyous*." In our culture, words often are taken to be either illusions, covering the real truth, or the opposite, beckoning us to the spiritual reality behind the mundane illusions of ordinary life. Judaism, however, doesn't separate words and world, spirit and things, but connects them. The Hebrew for *word*, *davar*, also means "thing."

In our spiritual seeking, we try to see beyond the world to a unifying Source, but in the process, we still affirm this world in all its rough, uneven, stubborn materiality.

Arthur Green, author of *Ehyeh: A Kabbalah for Tomorrow* (Jewish Lights), and others have pointed out that our creation myth starts out with language: "God said ... and it was." Language is embedded not only in human culture; it is the basis of all creation, all nature. Nature, the world, and all that is in it, is, in essence, a kind of language, a weave, or a text. In Jewish mysticism, the world is created through the letters of the alphabet. Just as we can read the letters and words of the Torah in order to gain access to a deeper, inner Torah, and ultimately, to the One behind all the words, so too can we read the patterns in the world at large in order to get intimations of the divine essence of nature.

This "reading" of nature is often not intellectual, but intuitive and emotional, such as when we feel a spiritual uplift walking in a beautiful forest or sitting on a beach watching the sunset. Yet, if we want to bring our daily lives more in line with these moments of insight, we need to learn how to understand nature, and then bring our economic, agricultural, and social systems into harmony with this knowledge.

This linguistic view of nature is not simply mystical; it has been articulated scientifically by one of the great, creative thinkers of the twentieth century, anthropologist Gregory Bateson. Bateson said that all life is characterized by “the pattern which connects.” He brilliantly connected nature to culture by showing that the perception of *difference* is the essential ingredient in all living systems, whether it be proteins reacting to differences encoded in a chain of DNA, a bird sensing a change in light or temperature and beginning a migration, or a Jew seeing three stars and knowing that it is time to start the new week. And, as in the notes of a melody or the composition of a painting, difference, and the relationships that differences create within a whole, is the essence of pattern.

In the modern world, we’ve broken that pattern of connection. We isolate, separate, and distance ourselves from one another, from the world, and even from our own being. The warnings of Jeremiah ring true for us, “They have forsaken Me, The Source of Life, and hewn themselves cisterns, broken cisterns which don’t hold water ...” The inert, human-created stone of the cistern, which doesn’t renew itself, is an apt symbol for our culture of technological arrogance, which has brought us many impressive gains but is now beginning to fail us. Will we return to the Living Source?

A Garden Ethic

One of the practical results of thinking in terms of patterns of nature and culture is that it gives us a way of understanding how we can act on and within our environment while still feeling a deeper sense of connection, a sense of belonging to a larger whole. A basic problem that still plagues environmental thinking today is the mental divide between Nature—pure, pristine, beautiful wilderness—and society—jobs, economy, prosperity, comfort, and growth. Unfortunately, in our culture, this dualism often gets unconsciously translated as “sentimental/serious” or “pretty/useful,” and, implicitly, “feminine/masculine.” In the old story of Western culture, we know which one usually triumphs.

Michael Pollan, an important contemporary writer on issues of our relationship to nature, claims that environmental thinking in the United States is still enthralled with the romantic tradition of Thoreau, and holds to a “wilderness ethic.” He suggests a more integrative alter-

native, what he calls a “gardener’s ethic,” because the gardener knows what it is to work with nature at the same time as she asserts human will upon nature, choosing tomatoes and carrots over weeds, and creating neat rows behind fences. Although Pollan makes no claim to connect his ideas to Judaism, I would like to suggest that his gardener’s ethic dovetails with our Jewish eco-theology, starting in the Garden (of Eden). In the Jewish creation myth, humans in the Garden of Eden were told *l’ovda u’l’shomra*, “to work it and guard it.” Our task is not to worship pristine wilderness, but to work the land with stewardship and caring. As we impose human order on the land, we also are commanded to listen to and respect nature’s inherent patterns.

One of the ways Pollan characterizes the gardener’s relationship with nature is as a running argument, one that the gardener doesn’t expect to win. Abraham, Moses, and Job fit into this mold, arguing constantly with God; indeed, the Jewish predilection for such arguments is part of who we are.

One argues when one feels securely a part of a whole, belonging to something larger than oneself. The good gardener knows that to vanquish nature would be self-defeating, as he ultimately depends on nature’s bounty for the fertility of his garden. The gardener, the garden, and nature are actually all parts of a larger whole. It might be tempting to spray pesticide to kill the insects that are eating your lettuce, but that “victory” would also kill off the good insects that are eating the harmful ones, leaving a residue that is harmful to humans, and weakening the garden plants’ own defenses.

Similarly, I suggest that the Jewish tolerance for differences of opinion can be traced to a sense of belonging. A sense of peoplehood goes deeper than any particular idea or dogma. A covenant with God exists on a more profound level than any of either partner’s actions. We are thus free to argue, complain, and protest, knowing that the deeper connection isn’t so easily broken.

A Jewish eco-theology starts from this same sense of belonging to a larger whole. As Jews, we must realize today that our sense of belonging and connection is with all of creation, no less than with the Jewish people or with God. We can assert ourselves in nature, “argue” with it, even make changes and improvements, but with the awareness that we are ultimately a part of nature, part of a greater unity.

Loosening Our Grip on the World

"I was sitting and stringing together words ..." Ben Azzai wasn't looking for the answer to the puzzle of the text. He was enjoying a continuing process of interpreting it. If we understand nature as a living set of patterns, like a text, we will understand that we are never in a position to dominate it or control it completely. One of the most destructive habits of modern civilization is to try to achieve perfect control over our lives and our environment. We go to great lengths for the perfect lawn, or the perfect room temperature, not really thinking about the cost. A garden ethic, or "to work and to guard," includes manipulating the world but in an organic give-and-take with nature, not seeking ultimate domination.

Life is not smooth. Difference, separation, and division are, in fact, essential to pattern. But, as with music, where the difference in tone creates melody and harmony, so too, paradoxically, can difference and multiplicity lead us to the One Source, as long as we see the differences within a larger whole. In the realm of time, Judaism separates out one day, Shabbat, in order to teach us the holiness of all days. At its best, Judaism maintains this pattern-approach with regard to peoplehood, holding on to our particularity at the same time as we affirm the universal holiness of all peoples. We need to apply this ethos equally to every area of life.

Just as Ben Azzai was joyous in his continual discovery and creation of changing combinations and new juxtapositions, so too should we not look to find the answer to life, to escape the ups and the downs, but to *live* life. It is a spiritual practice to construct economic, agricultural, and social modes that work together in dynamic patterns. When we do this, the whole world will be as happy as a new creation and as sweet as new life.

Wonder and Restraint

A Rabbinical Call to Environmental Action

WRITTEN UNDER THE AUSPICES OF THE COALITION
ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND JEWISH LIFE (COEJL)

COEJL is the leading Jewish environmental organization in the United States, representing twenty-nine national Jewish organizations spanning the full spectrum of Jewish religious and communal life. COEJL is a program of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA)

At this very moment, our Earth is hurtling through space at 18.5 miles per second while the sun burns with an internal heat of 20 million degrees. Forests and vegetation sweep the planet's atmosphere of carbon dioxide and provide oxygen and food for countless creatures. A 40-ton humpback whale sings a symphonic cycle of songs in the depths of the sea; a tiny hummingbird flaps its wings 4,500 times per minute as it sips nectar from flowers. The million-year-old messages of our DNA repair and reproduce themselves and create a spectacular diversity of human beings on Earth.

These interwoven testaments to the God of Creation, unveiled by our senses and by the probings of science, have stirred millions of people to become mindful guardians of the biosphere.

Now our Jewish tradition must, and can, do likewise.

As rabbis of long experience, we are moved by psalms of praise and blessing—"You have gladdened me by Your deeds, O Lord; I shout for joy at Your handiwork ..." (Psalm 92). We have studied the texts of Mishnah and Gemara explicating the Halachic duties derived from the law of *lo tashchit*, "you shall not waste" (Deut. 20:19). We