

Pattern, Paradox and Divine Sparks

A weave of interlocking connections forms the fabric of the world, whether we are speaking 'kabbalese' or ecology.

By Rabbi Natan Margalit

It's a cloudy spring day and I'm walking in a forest with my 3-and-a-half-year-old son Nadav on the lookout for frogs. It's not even a big forest, just a few acres that the developers didn't get to. Maybe the little stream was too much trouble to work around, maybe there were zoning laws keeping this forest off limits. Nothing special. A mossy fallen log is crumbling and becoming part of the forest floor. The light filters through leaves and branches in a play of shadows. Mud is squishing in the toes of my sandals. Nadav points out the skunk cabbage's huge leaves and decides to use one to wrap up a bunch of mud to take back for I-dare-not-guess-what purpose. It's nothing special, but it's enough to calm my mind, awaken my heart, even for a few minutes. And Nadav is never in a better mood than when he's looking for frogs in a creek.

Why is this messy, muddy little forest so much more attractive to me than the neat, vinyl-sided houses a few yards away? Psychologists have been coming up with theories as to why nature is good for us, but I have always felt intuitively that Judaism is about life, and I've been curious to look for the theological roots of nature's pull. I believe Judaism, and especially the mystical parts of Judaism, helps us understand nature and

its almost magical power to charm us, and this understanding can help us protect nature, and ultimately ourselves. At the same time, nature can open up new perspectives on our own texts and traditions.

An experience of the unity of all things is a major component of mystical experience, and it is also a big part of what is generally called spirituality. Many people report that they get a sense of this unity in nature, whereas in synagogue . . . not so much. Why is that? Could it be that while what we think of as standard Jewish theology holds up God as Creator, separate from the creation, Jewish mysticism posits a continuum between God and the world? Jewish mystical theology proposes that the world is in a sense made from God. In these matters one can speak only in metaphors, and light has been a favorite: in the kabbalistic cre-

► **RABBI NATAN MARGALIT** is director of Oraita: Institute for Continuing Rabbinic Education of Hebrew College in Newton Centre, Mass.

ation story, God's light is infinitely bright, encompassing and thus nullifying all else. The creation of the world is God limiting that light and allowing it to be "clothed," or covered, so that the Oneness can be divided into the multiplicity that is the world. That original Unity is broken down at first subtly with the emergence of Divine thought, followed by words, then physical matter. The "garments" of God's oneness become thicker and denser, but the Divine sparks animate all.

When I look at the shadow play of leaves and sun and bark, it is not hard to imagine Divine sparks. I know that I am not separate from nature, and it becomes harder to ignore, abuse or destroy it.

Yet, there must be more to it than an intimation of the Divine sparks. Why here in this little forest or on a beach, desert or wetlands do I feel those sparks more than in the city or back in those neat rows of the housing development? Aren't they also part of the Divine? They undoubtedly are, but somehow we've managed to create environments that block out a lot of the Divine light.

The most basic building blocks of kabbalah, the *sefirot*, will perhaps give us a clue. The *sefirot*, 10 emanations of God that kabbalists believe hold the secret to the inner structure of the cosmos, are often pictured in the image of a person, with three forming an upward-facing triangle on top, shown as the head, followed by two downward-facing triangles in the place of the torso and hips, and one lonely *sefirah* on the bottom, shown as the feet. We also sometimes see charts with a complex array of arrows going up and down and across these triads and meridians. However they are charted, these are always graphic attempts to show a dynamic, multidirectional pattern of Divine energy.

It flows down from above, but also side to side and even back up. One of the fascinating aspects of kabbalistic thinking is the way that our human actions have an effect on the worlds above and below. All is inter-related and connected.

It is this weave of interlocking connections that form the fabric of the world whether we are speaking "kabbalese" or ecology. The world is the garment of God; when its patterns are intact, there is beauty and life, and when it is broken, ugliness and death. We break the pattern when we try to control too much, make the world in the image of our machines: when we try to be gods.

What is it that bothers me about those neat-looking vinyl sidings? They do, after all, have the virtue of not needing paint, and lasting practically forever. And that is a great thing if we only look at the snapshot of the house as it is today but avert our eyes away from their source and their destination. As Judith Helfand has shown in her documentary film "Blue Vinyl," the problem is that the vinyl will also last practically forever in a landfill, or in the air if it is burnt, contributing poison to the environment as a cost of its convenience. For me, it seems to embody our attempt to deny the dynamic flow of life. It breaks the pattern.

Paradox is the bread and butter of mysticism and also of nature. The kabbalistic and ecological paradox of patterns is that their multiplicity leads us to oneness. We've all had the experience of dread as we start to memorize a long poem. It looks like a dizzying array of words, but as you learn it, it seems to magically get smaller and more manageable. What started out as a thousand words you now see as four stanzas, which then connect to one another until you can feel the unity of the poem and hold it all in your mind as one integrated composition. That is when the life of the poem emerges. And this is the way that a walk in the forest or a visit to the crazy quilt patterns of small family farms renews a sense of liveliness and hints at an underlying Oneness. Both the ecologist and the kabbalist know that the way to release those sparks of holiness is to acknowledge our interdependence, to keep the patterns intact and the energy flowing.

Another paradox: that bit of forest that seems so messy actually produces no waste while the ordered, efficient subdivision is a waste factory, sending it out by the truckload and down the drain and into the air. In Jewish mysticism as well, the Divine spark, in a person, an action or even a subdivision, may be hidden underneath heavy garments, even thick shells, but it is there to be transformed and redeemed. Whether in nature or spiritual reality, there is no person without his or her hour; nor any thing that does not have its place (to paraphrase Avot 4:3): waste is not a necessary category. Whether I'm stomping through streams in search of frogs or reading Aramaic texts, I'm enlivened by the life that runs through both. I've learned from ecologists that patterns run through all living systems, and from the Jewish mystical tradition I know that it is just such patterns that draw me closer to the One Source of Life. When I look at my son gazing wide-eyed at a tadpole, I don't need anyone to teach me that I love him; I only pray that the fabric of life will be intact for his generation and beyond. ■