

## A JEWISH ECOLOGY CHANGING HOW JEWS THINK ABOUT THEMSELVES AND THEIR COMMUNITIES

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*Vast numbers of Americans who regard themselves as Jewish or who are of Jewish parentage and upbringing simply have no faith in the conventional religious sense of that term. They adhere to an identity that is rooted in an ancient faith. But their claim to that identity implies little or no commitment to its religious roots.*

Jewish Population Study, 2000

*Eighty percent of Jews say that they find God in nature.*

Rabbi Lawrence Troster, GreenFaith, 2007

*We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.*

Aldo Leopold, Grandfather of environmental movement, *A Sand County Almanac*, 1949

*And you shall learn Torah from the mouth of nature.*

A.D. Gordon, 1910, *Mivhar Kitavim*, trans., David Gedzelman

### I. PROBLEMS/ PROPOSAL ADDRESSES

- The environmental crisis
- The abandonment of Judaism by Jews
- The lack of connection between American Jews, particularly Jewish youth, and Israel

### II. THE IDEA: EXPANDING OUR NOTION OF JEWISH IDENTITY IN AN ECOLOGICAL AGE

This proposal employs Mordechai Kaplan's framework of *believing*, *belonging* and *behaving* to analyze the limitations of commonly-held conceptions of Jewish religion and identity, and to offer new directions for enhancing the experience of Jewishness today – for the sake of ourselves, our communities and the world.

#### A. Believing

Of the three components of religious identity as defined by Mordechai Kaplan: *believing*, according to theologian Neil Gilman has been the neglected dimension of Jewish life.<sup>1</sup> One does not need to have a particular idea about God or to believe in God at all in order to be counted as a Jew. Judaism is most often defined in terms of one's actions and bloodline, not one's relationship to God.

That the "believing" dimension of Judaism has been neglected, that the question of God has too often gone unexplored, has had profound consequences for Jewish life. Those people in search of a *personal* relationship with God (whether they use God language or not), those in search of a more meaningful or soulful life, may abandon the Jewish community because they may not find what they are looking for in synagogues. This may be, in part, because the primary sense of God that is portrayed in Jewish life is the God of the *nation* Israel, the God of history, the God, who led the Israelites out of Egypt, out of paganism, idolatry and oppression to freedom and justice.

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<sup>1</sup> Neil Gillman, *Sacred Fragments*, JPS, 1990

But the *God of the nation* and of *history* is not Judaism's only image of God; God is also creator, and this image may speak powerfully to large numbers of Jews including those who have a particular concern for nature and environment. God as creator is constantly in *relationship* with the creation. The creator God has been often described as the God of individuals, families, communities, cosmos, the harvest, the animals, the weather. The God of creation is ever present, "renewing creation every day"<sup>2</sup> and is available to all of us. The imagery of creation may even speak to those who are uncomfortable with (or downright reject) "God language;" or who see themselves as secular: they too have deep spiritual yearnings, and the language and values associated with creation and cosmos may resonate with their experience.

Grappling with our understanding and portrayal of God is a critical endeavor because how we perceive God or how we define our spirituality – whether we are conscious of this or not – affects how we see our selves and our relationship to the world, how we construct our values and how we act. How we understand God is an integral aspect of our identity.

For a multitude of reasons, in Judaism, the image of God in *history* has acquired more *kavod* than the image of God in *creation*.<sup>3</sup> It is critical, at this unique moment in time – when the world is challenged by ecological concerns and synagogues are struggling to attract and retain Jews – to engage the language, values and theology of a creator God. I am not arguing that the image of a creator God is more significant than the God of history; I am arguing that the creator God has been undervalued and we must strive for a balance.

The image of God as creator may be particularly compelling to at least two significant populations of Jews. First: those who find a sense of the divine in nature. In my own teaching, when asking students about their experience of the sacred, most would recall feelings of unity and a sense of the infinite "on top of a mountain, by a river, in the woods." My students were not so different from their biblical ancestors who experienced God in an oak tree at Mamre, a burning bush, on a mountaintop, and in the wilderness. The image of the creator God is everywhere alive in the Bible and in certain Jewish texts (Lurianic Kabbalah and its notion of *tikkun olam*, and Hassidut in particular) – however **we have not taken this image seriously enough**. If we want to "open wide the tent," if we want to reach many more Jews, then we need to take advantage of the biggest tent, the one that has no walls, that is: nature, God's tent.<sup>4</sup>

The image of God as creator may also be meaningful to the population of Jewish seekers and even secular Jews who are yearning to expand their inner lives. In a world in which striving and progress are overly valued (in a world in which the image of the God of

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<sup>2</sup> Daily liturgy

<sup>3</sup>We Jews take pride in the *supernatural* God of history, who lifted us out of the unending cycles of nature, and gave us the possibility for progress and a future. We are traditionally less interested in the God who created and sustains the world. The idea of a creator God carries a sense of God in *nature*. Pagan religion and their nature deities posed a real threat to early rabbis, and in response, many of them minimized the value of nature in Judaism. They understood the many references to nature in biblical texts as allegory – the Song of Songs being the most obvious example.

<sup>4</sup> I. Kings 8

history/progress takes precedence over the God of creation) these Jews are seeking greater awareness and connection to self, community and world.

The sense of awareness and connection to self and world is implied in the imagery of the God of creation who created a world in which everything is deemed good and all is interconnected.<sup>5</sup> This notion of God fosters an appreciation of the ordinary and an experience of the moment-to-moment blessings of life. The image of a God whose name, YHVH, means “Being” or “Presence” can provide the foundation for a spiritual practice of greater personal presence.

The language and imagery of creation and a creator God may fill a void and speak to a variety of audiences—from spiritual seekers to interfaith families to nature lovers to those who are concerned more specifically about the environment—because the idea (experience) of God in nature is *universal and accessible*. Even Jews who are skittish about conventional God language can find new meaning in their Jewishness by connecting it to the language of nature, the cosmos and ecology.

## **B. BELONGING**

Mordechai Kaplan suggested that the primary form of Jewish identification was “belonging;” we think of belonging in terms of our people, our extended family, our bloodline, or in the language of the Bible, our *bayit*, our *household*. Ecology, which derives from the word *ecos* or house, extends the meaning of *house*, traditionally conceived as the human house, to the whole earthy household. Israel’s pioneer poet, Saul Tchernikovsky was attuned to these relationships: to him, “nature was God’s *household*.”

Just as we need to lift up the sense of God as *creator*, so we need to embrace a larger sense of community, a community that includes creation or nature. We are made of flesh, blood and soul like the creatures; we share the same earth, breathe the same air; our lives and worlds are interwoven, interdependent: together we occupy God’s house. We belong to all of nature even as we have responsibility to look after her.

However this sense of belonging to nature is undermined, in part, by our entrenched consumer culture and the many depersonalizing aspects of our technological age. Today, we are more apt to consume artifacts of nature than to have a direct relationship with her, and we live as much in an artificial or virtual reality as a natural one. How can we care about nature and the future of the world if we don’t have a more immediate relationship to her, if we don’t have a sense of belonging to the land, if we do not understand that our very identity is connected to land?

The early stories of Genesis provide a paradigm for our alienation from the land as well as our connection to her. Story after story concerns some transgression, which ultimately results in the people’s displacement from the land. Indeed the entire biblical corpus is a story about the primacy of place, about the longing (and belonging) of a people for a place. When the Israelites lived consciously and morally, the land was

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<sup>5</sup> All together, the interconnected universe is proclaimed *very good*. (Gen 1. 31)

bountiful; when they acted corruptly, the land dried up. Today, in an age characterized by spiritual malaise and rootlessness, stories of alienation from and connection to the land can be profound and relevant.

As Aldo Leopold urged 60 years ago, we must expand the definition of community to include the land – not just for the future of the earth, but also for our souls. Leopold seemed to understand land in the same way the Hebrew does. *Eretz* means both the earth as a whole and land in particular.

For American Jews, expanding our notion of community to include the land, means recognizing the earth, the land where we live, and the land of Israel as the very ground of our being. No one understood this better than the early Zionists. *And on that day,* wrote A.D. Gordon, *you shall open your eyes. . .and you shall peer into the eyes of nature and you shall see . . . your own image.* Gordon believed that a Jew could only find redemption by working the soil, and the Jewish nation would only be reinvigorated through the revival of Israel, its true habitat.

Some contemporary religious Zionists have taken this message to a messianic extreme, claiming their inalienable right to the land of Israel. With the ever-tense political situation in the Middle East centered on “the land,” more and more Jews today, including Jewish youth have grown alienated from Israel and perceive land in geopolitical terms only; they have no sense that land can also be the source of sustenance, spirituality and (ecological) security. Even the established community seems to ignore the fact that the very existence of Israel means that we are responsible for stewarding at least one piece of the earth.

The good news is that expanding our sense of community and cultivating a connection to land, nature and earth can be joyful and healthful, and a profound act of *tikkun olam*. The land of Israel and her burgeoning community of over 90 grass-roots environmental organizations can capture the imagination of Jewish youth and American Jews and can build community and identity across denominational and political divides.

### **C. BEHAVING**

How might our behaviors change if we gave greater *kavod* to the Creator and expanded our sense of community to include the land and whole world? I have begun to sketch out a vision below. Ultimately this conversation must take place with a range of stakeholders and could involve Brandeis students.

#### *Avodah*

No matter what their Shabbat practice, all Jews would become cognizant that Shabbat *rest* (including the ceasing of work and a diminution of use of electricity and fuel) is ecologically and personally restorative, and offers a joyful *time-out* for us as a people and for all creation. Shabbat would be celebrated in synagogue as creation’s holy day (as well as a reminder of the Exodus) and elements of the service could take place outdoors. Beyond the synagogue, JCC’s or other non-religious Jewish organizations would organize Shabbat *tiyullim* (walks) for those who prefer to observe Shabbat in nature.

Rosh Hashanah, the day that the world was born (*ha yom harat olam*), would feature the sense of God as creator. A dramatic reading of Genesis 1, prayer outdoors, and a rededication to the earth could become part of the Rosh Hashanah experience. Sukkot, celebrated with friendly sukkah-building competitions and sukkah-walks, would be widely adopted (perhaps beyond the Jewish community) as the ecological holiday par excellence; it would regain its biblical standing as *the most joyful holiday*. The *shalosh regalim*, literally the three walking days, would become times of spiritual pilgrimages.

### **Torah**

School and professional curricula would integrate ecological thinking, values and practices—including an understanding of Israel’s ecology—at every academic level. An ecological understanding of Torah and Jewish texts would foster meaningful Shabbat *parsha* discussions. Outdoor programs including Israel programs, wilderness programs and farming programs that integrate Jewish values would become part and parcel of the Jewish educational experience. Jewish youth would begin to choose environmental careers as lawyers, educators, planners, farmers, scientists, and artists.

### **Gemilut Hasidim**

Caring for and sustaining the *land* of Israel would become a central concern of the organized Jewish community. Service learning trips for environmental restoration for youth, families and college students; and *tzedakah* and philanthropy directed at conservation and environmental programs at home, in Israel and in the larger world, would become standard Jewish practice.

Synagogues would begin to integrate ecological thinking into their food planning, their architectural planning and their landscape planning. Synagogue compost heaps and community gardens, meditation gardens, and orchards would provide opportunities for both connecting to nature and *tikkun olam*. School children would bake *hallah* with wheat and decorate their sukkot with gourds grown from synagogue gardens.

The Jewish community would explore the possibility of adopting principles of *eco-kashrut*. Green building practices, green purchasing practices and green cemetery practices would become normative. Synagogues or JCC’s would partner with local farms and would become hubs for community-supported agriculture (CSA’s) and a host of community-wide right-livelihood projects.

## **III. POSSIBLE COURSES TO BE TAUGHT AT BRANDEIS**

### **The Place of Creation/ Nature/Land in the Bible: Part 1**

This course addresses such questions as: What is the nature of God in the Bible? What is the nature of humans; the nature of nature and the land? What is our place in creation? Readings will include the Creation accounts, Noah, other selections from Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

### **The Place of Creation/Nature/Land in the Bible: Part 2**

This course is a continuation of the course above; readings will include selections from Kings, Joshua, Judges, Prophets, Song of Songs, Job, and Psalms.

### **The Idea of Nature/Creation in Jewish thought throughout History**

This course will examine the place of nature/land/creation in Jewish thinking by examining texts of thinkers from the various periods of Jewish history including Bahya Ibn Pakuda, Spinoza, Maimonides, Rosenzweig, Buber, Heschel, Hans Jonas, Ahad ha Am, Rav Kook, A.D. Gordon. Relevant hassidic and kabbalistic texts will be studied. Guest teachers will be invited to teach certain sections.

### **Seminar: Changing how Jews Think About Themselves and the World**

This course will explore the dynamics of change, review best ecological practices, and engage students in experiment with effecting change in the Jewish community. (based on the ecological ideas in this proposal).

## **IV. BOOK: A JEWISH ECOLOGY: NEW VISIONS OF GOD, COMMUNITY AND SERVICE**

**Audience:** The immediate audience for this book includes Jewish educators, rabbis, leaders and the Jewish public. It may be of interest to new audiences who are less responsive to conventional Jewish offerings. (The book may include guest writers, and may capture some of the “feel” of *The Jewish Catalogues*)

### **Part I: Believing and Belonging**

- How we lost the idea of God as creator and lost a connection to creation.
- Re-claiming God as creator: Reading the Bible ecologically.
- Ecological thinkers and texts throughout Jewish history.
- Ecological thinking and land-centered movements in modernity: Kibbutzim, Jewish farming, Jewish contemplative and spiritual traditions, eco-Judaism, Israeli environmental movement.

### **Part II. Behaving**

- Honoring Shabbat, Jewish holidays and Jewish time – ecologically.
- Best practices: How contemporary Jewish/Israeli organizations are modeling ecological practices in their work today (in their own voices).
- Institutional models: How synagogues and other Jewish institutions can re-invent themselves in response to an ecological age.
- Individual models: Expanding Jewish identity to include nature and land.