



Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

“EACH AFTER THEIR OWN KIND”: A JEWISH CELEBRATION OF BIODIVERSITY

Of all that the Holy Blessed One created in the world,
God created nothing without a purpose.
—Shabbat 77b

The world is a wonder.

It was Albert Einstein who noted that Judaism expresses “a sort of intoxicating joy and amazement at the beauty and grandeur of this world, of which humankind can just form a faint notion. . . . Life is sacred—that is to say, it is the supreme value, to which all other values are subordinate.” Just open a window as a new day dawns, and we are engulfed in a symphony of sounds and smells as the world awakens. Whether in cities or suburbs, one cannot help but exult as the birds sing out their morning prayers and the rustling leaves offer their gifts to the world. How many of us, in a place of natural beauty—the Grand Canyon, the Aravah in Israel, or even our own backyards—can fail to feel the pulsing mystery that life offers? How many of us, at such times, know from the inside that life is really a gift?

The miracle of life is but the beginning of that gift. For humanity receives the additional gift of consciousness. We are uniquely aware of being alive, and our hearts swell with a sense of oneness that links us with other living things. As children, we easily speak to trees, mountains, and animals, knowing intuitively that we are connected spiritually to all else. As adults, sadly, that insight often withers, occasionally erupting through stifling layers of civilization and education at special moments—a sunset at the beach, or with special individuals—a beloved pet or a trip to aquarium, zoo, or wilderness.

Creation is surely a marvel. Sit quietly in a quiet spot in a park, and the apparent calm soon surrenders to a rich bouquet of clamoring life: as birds, insects, animals and plants dance their unrehearsed choreography of sheer being. Think how rich our lives are because such abundance is there! Think how impoverished our world—and our souls—would be were that rich diversity to diminish.

We all have a need to feel part of life’s variety. And life has a need for us to act on its behalf. We call that variety “biodiversity”, and we are its caretakers. We are the guardians of life

Biodiversity: Some Background

“Biodiversity” signifies the variety of living things on Earth, the array of species, both plant and animal, the genetic variation within each species. Life reveals a marvelous propensity to increase its diversity with the passage of time. From an anthropocentric perspective, the term also denotes the way living things constitute a resource base for humanity. This diversity is responsible for a range of global functions necessary for human survival, such as the biochemical flows of energy (through photosynthesis), water, carbon, nitrogen, and phosphorus, as well as providing a pool of genetic resources. Biodiversity offers other less utilitarian benefits as well—aesthetic (the beauty of so many living forms and their interaction) and intellectual (constituting a library of facts and relationships).

Life’s diversity conveys important scientific, aesthetic, and utilitarian benefits. Humanity, as a species, is finally becoming aware of the complex ways in which living things interact to maintain the delicate balance that sustains life itself. Even a little rupture in that complex interaction can create unforeseen and harmful consequences elsewhere in the system, just as breaking one strand of a spider’s web can create chaos at the far end of her handiwork. In the past, human presence and action may have threatened the biology of particular locales, but we lacked the power and the numbers to constitute a threat to the health of the environment worldwide. Our intervention was sufficiently limited that the survival of most species did not depend on our actions.

Humankind now has the capacity to alter the environment on a global scale; we have made ourselves a force of nature. Able to mold and disrupt nature, we are nonetheless subject to the vagaries of the world around us. The consequences of human action now constrain and threaten human survival. Our assault on the ozone layer, tropical coral reefs, and the Amazonian rain forest are but a few prominent examples. Hence, we are simultaneously actors and objects of our own new-found (and little-comprehended) powers. We have taken ourselves hostage, and our release depends on our ability to preserve the fragile ecological balance that rests on the foundation of biodiversity.

Biodiversity is, however, not only a matter of scientific, aesthetic, and political concern. Diversity is a matter of pressing Jewish concern. Since Judaism understands nature as God’s creation, cultivating marvel at the teeming abundance of life and the diverse array of living things is foundational to our religious experience. Indeed, the experience of holiness through nature has inspired most of the world’s religious traditions. Each faith tradition has responded to the wonder of the world in its own way; in Judaism, the pre-eminent response has been to see humanity as God’s stewards, responsible to “guard and tend” creation. As the psalmist reminds us, “the heavens belong to God, but the Earth was given to humanity.” Our special obligation is to assure the continuing viability of creation, to maintain the Earth’s bounteous ability to nurture life. Since Judaism recognizes humanity as God’s stewards, our commitment to sustain diversity is nothing short of a religious mandate: a mitzvah.

Yet our role as steward is nothing more than a mitzvah either; after all, we have as much right as any other creatures to pursue our own benefit. Indeed, Biblical/Rabbinic tradition would go so far as to insist that human beings are unique among all created things, since we alone are made in God’s image. Sole possessors of consciousness and language, people are privileged to reflect the sacred within the mundane and to translate the worldly into the spiritual. Judaism creates a

fruitful tension by insisting that people are both a part of creation and apart from it; we are little higher than the beasts, and “little lower than the angels.” As unique creatures within creation, we can legitimately use the rest of creation to meet our needs as a species (just as do all the other animals). Reflecting God’s image in the world, however, we must also consider how well we are managing the world on behalf of its Creator.

As Jews, we are the heirs to an ancient heritage through which we can reflect on our place in the world and our responsibilities to God, humanity, and creation. While the issue of biodiversity per se reflects a modern environmental concern, both in the realm of Jewish legend and in Jewish law, Sages across the millennia have expressed their marvel at the variety of living things and a concern for the integrity of creation. As the prophet Isaiah reminds us: “God did not create the world as a wasteland, but formed it for habitation.”

While Judaism certainly allows people to use the resources of the world to sustain human development and well-being, permitting taking animals’ lives for human nutrition and health and harvesting plants for human civilization, the Jewish balancing act—established from the beginning—is to “guard and to tend” the garden in which we live, but which we do not own.

Biodiversity in Jewish Narrative: Creation & The Flood

While halakhah (Jewish law) implements Jewish values and commitments in practice, aggadah (Jewish narrative) provides the context for generating and articulating those same values. To understand biodiversity within the world of Torah, one must look to biblical/rabbinic tradition and to its grand, sweeping stories of what creation means. I refer specifically to the Beginning, at the opening of the Book of Genesis, and to the great modification and re/creation that was the Flood.

Several features of the creation story inform a Jewish understanding of biodiversity. The first is the emphatic repetition of *le-minehu* (its own kind): “God said: Let the earth sprout forth with sprouting-growth, plants that seed forth seeds, fruit trees that yield fruit, after their kind (*le-minehu*) ... God saw that it was good.” Again, “God created the great sea-serpents and all living things that crawl about, with which the waters swarmed, after their kind (*le-minehem*), and all winged fowl after their kind. God saw that it was good.” “God made the wildlife of the earth after their kind (*le-minah*), and the herd-animals after their kind (*le-minah*), and all crawling things of the soil after their kind (*le-minehu*). God saw it was good.”

The repetition of “its own kind” and the immediate judgment that these categories are good affirms the importance of the different species of living things. Each type of plant and animal contributes to the cumulative goodness of God’s creation. The establishment of each new type brings divine satisfaction, a further embodiment of the divine will for life. Each new species adds something beneficial and necessary to the world. As the Psalmist notes, “How great Your works, Adonai, in wisdom have You made them all.”

The Sages note that the Torah’s creation story teaches us to recognize that humanity does not have pride of place in creation; God does. Humans were not created first “so they should not grow proud—for one can say to them, ‘The gnat came before you in the creation!’” The Sages compare the way God prepared the world for us to “a ruler who built a palace, dedicated it, prepared a meal, and only then invited the guests.” Humanity is a guest in God’s world: “The

earth and its fullness belong to Adonai.” Creation, with all its diversity, reflects great wisdom and foresight. Those species are not ours to abuse or destroy, since they (and we) belong to the Holy One. Hence, a faithful reading of the creation story should enhance our sense of reverence for creation and our humility in the face of God’s wondrous work.

Those same values—of humility and awe—emerge from the story of the Flood and Noah’s ark. “The earth had gone to ruin before God, the earth was filled with wrongdoing. God saw the earth, and here: it had gone to ruin, for all flesh had ruined its way upon the earth.” Here the Torah deliberately updates itself: God’s act of creation is very good, but the chaotic abuse by humanity has ruined it! Our actions have ruined the earth not only for ourselves, but impose unwanted consequences on all living creatures: “all the residents of the world are governed by one and the same destiny.” In an attempt to restore creation, God resolves to send a flood, and instructs Noah, “a righteous, wholehearted man” to construct an ark: “From all (ritually) pure animals you are to take seven and seven (each), a male and his mate, and from all the animals that are not pure, two (each), a male and his mate, and also from the fowl of the heavens, seven and seven (each), male and female, to keep seed alive upon the face of all the earth.” Such a command can only make sense if the survival of each and every species matters. Indeed, rabbinic tradition expresses that value through a midrash in which the dove chastises Noah for endangering the survival of doves as a species: “You must hate me, for you did not choose from the species of which there are seven [in the ark], but from the species of which there are only two. If the power of the sun or the power of cold overwhelmed me, would not the world be lacking a species?” The story of Noah’s ark powerfully affirms the value of each existent species, and highlights the role of humanity as God’s partner in the preservation of biodiversity, despite our ability to threaten that same variety.

Biodiversity in Halakhah (Jewish Law)

The value of biodiversity that undergirds two of the foundational stories of the Bible also finds repeated expression in the application of halakhah (Jewish law). Just as the mitzvot (commandments) generally concretize the values of aggadah, here too, Jewish law expresses the importance of diversity through the pedagogy of mandated action. The mitzvot symbolize and implement our most sacred commitments as Jews. Rabbinic tradition understands the mitzvot that follow as reminders of the value of maintaining species diversity and as an agenda for actually preserving them.

- Kilayim: This category of Jewish law prohibits mixing diverse species together. It covers six kinds of mixed species: mixed seeds, grafting trees, seeds in a vineyard, crossbreeding animals, pulling cattle, and mixing linen and wool in garments (shaatnez). Kilayim is prohibited by halakhah as an unwarranted tampering with the categories established by God’s creation. In a similar vein, the Jerusalem Talmud understands the biblical verse “My statutes you shall keep” as referring to “the statutes I have engraved in the world,” in other words, the laws of nature. Creation comes from God, implying that the alteration of a natural law or the modification of a species constitutes an impermissible violation of creation. Ramban, the great medieval philosopher and sage, explains “God has created in the world various species among all living things, both plants and moving creatures, and God gave them the power of reproduction, enabling them to exist forever as long as the Blessed God will desire the existence of the world.” The prohibition of kilayim is an affirmation of species and diversity as they currently exist.

Sending the Mother Bird Away: The Torah records the insistence that one who gathers eggs from a nest must first shoo the mother away. While the Torah doesn't reveal a reason for this practice, medieval rabbis were emphatic in linking this mitzvah to the preservation of species: In the Sefer Ha-Hinnukh, we are told that "God's desire is for the endurance of God's species ... for under the watchful care of the One who lives and endures forever... it [every species] will find enduring existence through God." Ramban speculates that "it may be that Scripture does not permit us to destroy a species altogether, although it permits slaughter [for food] within that group. Now, one who kills the dam and the young in one day, or takes them when they are free to fly, it is as though he cut off that species." Both of these authoritative rabbis understand this mitzvah as demonstrating the importance of maintaining each species of plant and animal. Jewish conduct must support the divine intention that each species thrive.

- Slaughtering the Animal and its Young: Leviticus 22:28 prohibits slaughtering the mother ox or sheep and her young on the same day. As with the rule about releasing the mother bird, this law was understood in terms of assuring the continuation of existent species. In this area, Jewish thinkers articulate an explicit notion that providence extends over entire species. Just as environmental ethics values the species over the individual member of the species, Jewish thought insists that each species of animal has a "right" to exist that comes from, and is protected by, God. In the words of Sefer Ha-Hinnukh, "One should reflect that the watchful care of the Blessed God extends to all the species of living creatures generally, and with God's providential concern for them they will endure permanently."

- Kashrut: The Dietary Laws: While the dietary laws don't speak directly to the issue of biodiversity, they do express the Biblical emphasis on species as categories deserving attention and respect. In two separate lists, the Torah delineates categories of animals that may and may not be eaten. One thoughtful scholar has suggested that the categories of tahor (pure) and tamei (impure) actually tell us what part of creation is available for our use (what we call "pure") and what part not authorized for human benefit (what we call "impure"). That remarkable observation highlights that Judaism sees much of creation as existing for the satisfaction and self-expression of God, not humanity. Jews are not allowed to eat most animal species, and designating them as tamei reminds the observant Jew that the purpose of the world is not to please people. As the Midrash notes, "It is not thanks to you that rain falls, or that the sun shines—it is thanks to the animals."

Each of these mitzvot directs Jews to demonstrate their reverence for creation as it is. Taken together, they form an essay in deeds on the subject of serving the Creator by maintaining the creation as we find it. If God made all these species deliberately, we can do no less than assist in their continuing vitality. If God's loving care extends over the range of living things, our love must be sufficiently strong to keep them alive—as a tribute to our Creator, as the best defense for our own survival, and as an abiding expression of our love of life.

Implications

The beginning of Jewish values is the Beginning. Recognizing God as Creator, the Torah asserts that the world is not haphazard, coincidental, or meaningless. Rather, as the expression of divine exuberance, as the embodiment and recipient of God's bounty, creation is saturated with meaning and value. Its merit does not result merely from its usefulness to people, but from its

status as God's creation. Each new species inspires the divine judgment "it is good" because the goodness of creation is enhanced by the addition of each new group. Consequently, each species has a vital role to play in the unfolding pageant that is life. We impoverish that drama each time we reduce the cast of characters. We literally diminish the greatness of God when we diminish the greatness of God's sovereignty.

In our role as stewards, humanity can preserve the diversity of living creatures. Embodied in forms ever more intricate and diverse, life becomes a polyphonic symphony in praise of its Source. The more the types of instruments, the more intriguing the melody; the more the number of species, the more resplendent the creation.

The Kabbalists saw biodiversity not in terms of a symphony at work, but of a congregation at prayer. In the words of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, "every blade of grass sings poetry to God" and Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook affirmed that "everything that grows says something, every stone whispers some secret, all creation sings." For creation to function as a congregation, humanity must train ourselves to identify with all creatures and with all creation. We must discipline our desires and work for the well-being of the whole.

For the Jew, God's unity pervades creation: all are connected to each, and each to all. The unity of what God has created envelopes us, providing us with context and with goal. The diversity of all living things constitutes yet another rainbow, in which each species' distinctiveness adds to the resplendence of the totality, and in which any group's extinction impoverishes and endangers the rest.

At present, the oneness of all living things is hidden, masked by our species' self-reliance and self-regard. But the illusion of humanity's dominion, maintained by our selfishness and delusions of power, will one day give way before the unification of God and God's name. That vision of unity, of a time in which God, humanity, and creation live together in reverent balance is as contemporary as environmental ethics and as ancient as Scripture. Our covenant, as Jews and as God's stewards, impels us to assure the flourishing of the diversity that God created. Our calling, as Jews and as caretakers, is to exert our best efforts to protect all of life, and to fortify our faith in the bounteous flowering of life:

Praise God, sun and moon,
Praise God, all bright stars...!
Praise Adonai, all who are on the earth,
All sea monsters and ocean depths...
All mountains and hills,
All fruit trees and cedars,
All wild and tamed beasts,
Creeping things and winged birds,
All monarchs and peoples of the earth!

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