theism, then all is God, and nature is intrinsically sacred; but we cannot have a human ethical system in the usual sense that Judaism has known it.

We should, instead, think of God as both Being and Becoming—what is called a panentheistic deity. Panentheism assumes that the universe and everything in it is part of God, and that God is also more than the universe. “God is all reality but not all reality is God.” Gaia is part of God, but not all of God. Therefore, the immanence of God is displayed in nature (through order, cooperation, and relationships) and we are part of Gaia and thus part of God. But God is more than nature, and also stands outside of nature as Creator. We are part of this nature and bound to the laws of nature and Gaia, but we are also the “brain cells” of Gaia. And as the tselem (image) of God, we have the mandate for the cognitive anticipation of Gaia’s needs, which ultimately are our own needs. The brain is the locus of consciousness and in control of the body, both in the autonomic nervous system and in conscious choices. But the brain is also dependent upon the body for survival, and is significantly influenced by changes in the body.42

If the Earth does reflect our morality, then certainly it is humanity’s “environmental debt” that is growing each year. Life is poised on a delicate balance. We must end the “war against nature” that governs so many of our attitudes towards the Earth. Perhaps our new-found environmental awareness is the “real” awakening of Gaia, an awakening that will lead us out of our childhood into the divine image that awaits us.43

Our Covenant With Stones
A Jewish Ecology of Earth

Bradley Shavit Artson

You will have a covenant with the rocks in the field.2

Environmentalism heralds a fresh conception of the individual and society in relation to the natural order, offering a new understanding of what it means to be human. Such a general reevaluation of the human condition elicits a Jewish response, in this instance evidenced by articles on Judaism and the environment. Rabbis and scholars of various perspectives who grapple with this popular movement strain Jewish writings through the standards of the Green perspective to argue the relevance of Jewish tradition. Consciously written to refute charges that Judaism (or the “Judeo-Christian heritage”) is the source of the problem, many of these essays are insightful, but most are episodic.

The preponderance of these efforts assume that judgment ought to reflect

1I want to express my gratitude to Rabbi Elie Spitz for his helpful critique, and to Dr. David Kraemer, Associate Professor of Talmud and Rabbinics at the Jewish Theological Seminary, for this generous gift of time and insight in discussing this issue with me. My debt to Rabbi Max Kadushin, 77 is readily apparent throughout this paper. Any errors are exclusively my own.


the standards of the environmental movement rather than an internal Jewish assessment of how our tradition and our God would have us relate to the world. In fact, such an evaluation should emerge organically from the categories of Jewish civilization and its writings, rather than from any wholesale adoption of contemporary environmentalism’s standards. In practical terms, this apologetic effort has compiled a growing list of Jewish quotations which—removed from their original context or perspective—fit the established categories of environmentalism. Ruptured is the organic, Jewish relationship between Biblical verses and Rabbinic wisdom. The pillaged loot gathers dust in the storehouse of ecology.7

Such an approach may have been a necessary first step toward alerting Jews to the questions and criticisms raised by environmentalists. But the price we pay for that endeavor is a contextless collage of Rabbinic and Biblical sayings, avoiding the more comprehensive consideration of how Jewish tradition might respond to the larger question of living responsibly with nature, not to a specific political agenda.8 Such a procedure has an additional flaw: it conceives objective truth and universal morality to environmentalism when that movement simply embodies another particular perspective from which to examine the human condition.

We need a second stage, one which explores helpful conceptions of the Earth and humanity from within the context established by Jewish thought and writings. Although our tradition may say little directly about air pollution9 or about the polar ice caps, it does dwell at great length on how Jews are to live with the soil, on the sanctity of the Earth and its produce, the holiness of one particular place (Eretz Yisrael) and on particular times (Shabbat, Yovel, and the Sheminitah). Perhaps if we begin with intrinsically Jewish categories we might construct a Jewish ecology, enriching the traditional structure of Judaism with a consciousness of environmental issues rather than simply tailoring Jewish religious life to fit within the crustacean bed of a dismembered ecological Judaism.

7This same phenomenon, of framing external categories into which Jewish quotations or discussions are then made to fit, is the subject of heated debate within the study of religion generally. See, for example, the critique offered by E. P. Sanders, Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977, especially the introduction, “The Holistic Comparison of Patterns of Religion.” For a related critique, see also “In Comparison A Magic Dwells,” in Jonathan Z. Smith, Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jerusalem, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982. While both offer mutually exclusive approaches, they agree that removing an idea, term, or value from its context intrinsically distorts.


9Solitary passages from the Babylonian Talmud, such as Bava Metzia 101a restricting which types of wood may be burned on the altar to avoid excessive smoke, and Tamid 29b stating that smoke and the odor of a toilet are always undesired intrusions, are not sufficient to establish a Rabbinic ethic of air pollution. For an insightful discussion of this jurisprudential issue from the perspective of Jewish ethics generally, see Daniel H. Gordis, “Significance Through Symbol: Redeeming Authority in Jewish Law.” University Papers, Los Angeles: University of Judaism, 1986.

Territory Without Map: The Sanctity of the Soil

Jewish tradition is especially rich in its attention to the sanctity of the Land of Israel (kedushat ha-aretz).10 Since the topic of human relationships with the Earth is also a central concern of environmental movements, this subject might provide a useful model, allowing us to trace the contours of a central value-concept within Jewish religion while subsequently seeking more practical application.

Attention to the earth as a place of religious meaning pervades the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh).11 The Creation narratives focus attention on the importance of the Earth, to the extent that the term itself (adamah) lends its name to the ultimate earthing (Adam).12 The theme of creation, emphasizing God’s sovereignty over the entire planet, repeats itself in several prophetic passages as well. Isaiah urges his audience to

Lift high your eyes and see:
Who created these?
He who sends out their host by count,
Who calls them each by name.
Because of His great might and vast power,
Not one fails to appear.13

Moses, standing before the burning bush on Ḥoreb, receives the command to “remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground.”14 The same ideology which portrays God as Creator of the heavens and the Earth also establishes a link between all lands and God. Perhaps this appreciation of the entire planet as the creation of the loving God also contributes to the venerable Israelite tradition extolling the wilderness as a place of holiness and purity.15 As the source of all places, God’s sanctity must somehow touch every place.

Yet there is a dichotomy at the core of the Biblical understanding of the sanctity of soil. The whole world may be sacred, but one particular part of it boasts a special degree of holiness. While Israelites can observe their laws anywhere,16 there is an uncleanness which permeates the nations of the world. Thus Hosea speaks of the Israelites who “shall eat unclean food in Assyria”17 and Amos portrays the “unclean soil” to which Israel will be ban-
ished.  The Land of Israel is clearly the focus of the Hebrew Bible’s passion for land.

Repeatedly, the Torah describes the Land of Israel as “a good land,” one whose bounty reflects God’s beneficence, not the result of any merit or labor on Israel’s part. The sanctity of Eretz Yisrael overrides the sanctity of all other places; it is only in ancient, pre-conquest times “that a site outside the Promised Land can be described as holy.” So sacred is the land that Jews may offer sacrifices only there, and only there is food considered ritually clean. Throughout the Tanakh, the Land represents both promise and goal; Israel observes the mitzvot in order to merit the Land.

Paradoxically, God’s sovereignty over the Land of Israel emerges from the creation story itself. God made everything. Therefore, all lands, Israel included, belong to God. In the Book of Leviticus, that reasoning provides the base for God’s inalienable ownership of the Land:

The Land must not be sold beyond reclaim, for the land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me. Throughout the land that you hold you must provide for the redemption of the Land.

God’s ownership of the Earth is total, and the selection of Israel is a Divine prerogative.

The distinction of the Land of Israel is but one consequence of God’s role as creator. Obeying or violating God’s will entail immediate consequences for continued existence and well-being on the Land. A series of agricultural laws—peah, orlah, kilayim, terumot, and bikkurim—provides repeated evidence of God’s ownership of the Land of Israel. That the human farmer is only a tenant undergirds all of these requirements—of abstention, of Temple donation, or of provision for the poor. The ultimate proprietor is God alone. In the words of the Talmud, “God acquired possession of the world and appointed it to humanity, but God always remains the master of the world.”

The consequences of violating God’s will also link Eretz Yisrael to the rest of the Earth. Many passages warn that expulsion from the Land is the price of

scorning the mitzvot. Its soil is no passive piece of property; it is living and responsive, and there is a dynamic between the People Israel and their Land. Acts of hostility toward God result in acts of hostility toward the actors themselves. The Earth is not only a witness to the covenant (brit) but a participant in the unfolding drama of righteousness, chastisement and rebuke. Other nations, as well as the Land of Israel, share that involvement:

The earth is withered, sear;
The world languishes, it is sear;
The most exalted people of the earth languish.
For the earth was defiled under its inhabitants;
Because they transgressed teachings,
Violated laws, broke the ancient covenant.

The biblical view of the world is not distant or objective; it demands immediate involvement and consequence. That observance and non-observance of the commandments have geographic, territorial and cosmic consequences points to the truth that ecology is indissoluble from morality, land and law being mutually dependent, and that a people is ultimately responsible for the maintenance of its “place.”

In short, the Biblical conception of the relationship between the People Israel (Am Yisrael) and the Land of Israel (Eretz Yisrael) is one of covenant (brit).

Rabbinic law and legend also begin with the centrality of Eretz Yisrael. In the words of Mishnah Kelim: “The Land of Israel is holier than all [other] lands.” Far more than in Scripture, large sections of the Mishnah are devoted to the agricultural laws of tithing, which are obligatory only within the Land (with the exception of kilayim, orlah and, according to Rabbi Eliezer, eating barley before the omer). Further, the purity system is fully applicable only within the Land. Consequently, the impurity of the other lands—a notion which has roots in the Hebrew Bible—continues into Rabbinic thought as well.

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18Amos 7:17: See also Isaiah 52:11.
19For example, Deuteronomy 8:7-8.
20For example, Joshua 24:13.
21Harry Orlinsky, “The Biblical Concept of the Land of Israel,” in Lawrence A. Hoffman, ed., The Land of Israel: Jewish Perspectives, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986, p. 53. This observation was made in the Meekhitra, Pidya, 1: “Before the Land had been especially chosen, all lands were suitable for divine revelation; after the Land had been chosen, all other lands were eliminated.”
22Rashi understood this paradox and comments on it. See his first comment to Genesis 1:1, on נפשו.
23Leviticus 25:23-24. This reasoning is made explicit in the Talmud (Sanhedrin 39a): “The Holy Blessed One said to the children of Israel, ‘Sow for six years and leave the Land at rest for the seventh year, so that you may know the Land is Mine.’”
24Leviticus 19:9-10; Deuteronomy 24:19-21, and Mishnah Pea.
26Leviticus 19:19; Deuteronomy 22:9-11, and Mishnah Kilayim.
27Numbers 18:8,12, 24-26; Deuteronomy 18:4, and Mishnah Terumot.
28Exodus 23:19; Deuteronomy 26:1-11, and Mishnah Bikkurim.
29For a few examples, see Leviticus 18:24-30; 20:22-26; Numbers 25:34; Deuteronomy 4:40; 21:6-9; Psalms 106:28f.
30See, for example, Isaiah 1:2; 41:1; 49:1.
31Isaiah 24:4-5
34Mishnah Kelim 1:6.
36Mishnah Orlah 3:9; Tosefta Terumot 2:13; Tosefta Orlah 1:8; Tosefta Kidushin 1:9-10,12.
37See Mishnah Mikva‘ot 8:1.
38Mishnah Oholot 2:3; 17:5; 18:6-7; Mishnah Taborot 4:5; 5:1; Mishnah Nazir 3:6; 7:3; Tosefta Mikva‘ot 6:1; Tosefta Oholot 17:7-18:11.
Often, the Mishnah postulates the overlap of the People (Am Ti'ras) and the Land (Eretz Ti'ras), the two primary concentrations of holiness. Even within the Tannaic period, however, the existence of significant Jewish populations in Syria, Egypt and Babylonia required some adjustments to the notion of a single holy Land. Although the People Israel in the Land of Israel (am yirael b'erets yirael) remains the ideal, a growing number of cases requires distinctions previously unnecessary in Biblical thought. For example, Gentiles living in the Land are exempt from the requirements of shevi'it, hallah and terumah. This adjustment reflects a new reality, that “Mishnah’s Rabbis clearly wish to do justice to both principles—both Holy Land and Holy People—without fully embracing the one over the other.”

A similar readjustment is reflected in a dispute between two tannaim over whether or not produce exported from the Land of Israel requires the taking of hallah. Rabbi Eliezer insists that it does, implying a single source of holiness emanating from Zion. Rabbi Akiva, however, postulates a conception of multiple holiness by ruling that such produce is exempt. For Rabbi Akiva, the entire world potentially is sacred space. Different areas are subject to different standards, different rules. People in the land and outside the land alike have their own special roles to play.

Quite clearly later Rabbinic traditions follow Akiva’s lead, enlarging the scope of the investigation of what the individual’s roles should be, in different places, but especially outside the Land, and at different times. The goal is perception of everyday life as participation in a sacred realm of ultimate significance.

Reiterating the sanctity of other lands exercises a profound effect on Rabbinic Judaism, reinforcing the portable holiness which Jews take with them wherever they dwell. That recognition of the sanctity of land beyond Eretz Ti'ras provides for halakhic accommodation of Jewish settlements in Syria as well as one prominent opinion prohibiting aliya from Babylonia to Israel:

Whoever goes up from Babylonia to the Land of Israel transgresses an imperative commandment, for it is said in Scriptures, “They shall be carried to Babylonia, and there they shall be, until the day that I remember them, says the Lord.”

Rabbi Yehudah even goes so far as to equate living in Babylonia with living in Israel.

These views reflect a specific Rabbinic agenda: to align Jewish religion to the reality of Jewish settlement beyond the borders of the Land of Israel.

Without ever abandoning their commitment to the mitzvah of settling the Land (yishuv ha-aretz), the Sages transferred their ideal from living on the land to observing the law.46 Whereas the Torah esteems living in Israel as the goal of pious observance, the Rabbis invert that estimation; they cherish living on the Land because it allows for greater observance. Here the Land does not embody the goal; the Land becomes the means:

Rabbi Simlai expounded, “Why did Moses, our Rabbi, yearn to enter the Land of Israel? Did he want to eat of its fruit or satisfy himself from its bounty? But thus spoke Moses, ‘Many commandments were commanded to Israel which can be fulfilled only in the Land of Israel. I wish to enter the Land so they may all be fulfilled by me.’”

The re-estimation of yishuv maintains the centrality of the Land (since certain mitzvot can be fulfilled only there), but shifts the weight of Jewish piety to the observance of deeds which can be performed anywhere.48 The liturgy of the seasons reflects this alteration, emphasizing the needs of Babylonia and concentrating the attention of other Jewish communities on their rhythm as a distinctly religious concern.49 The calendar—long a source of contention between the Sages of Israel and those of Babylonia—presents a similar struggle, with authority ultimately taken by the Geonom of Babylonia.50 Perhaps as early as the canonization of the Torah in the Second Temple Period, but certainly following the destruction of the Temple and the rise of the Synagogue, Rabbinic Judaism adopted an attitude of provisional portability: a willingness to roam the world until the messianic age restores the nexus between Land and People:

What the Mishnah does by representing this cult, laying out its measurements, describing its rite, and specifying its rules, is to permit Israel, in the words of the Mishnah, to experience anywhere and anytime that cosmic center of the world described by the Mishnah:

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40James Sanders argues, in Torah and Canon, that this transformation was engineered long before the Rabbis, during the First Babylonian Exile. That argument has merit, but does not affect the substance of my position, which is that Judaism of the Biblical period reflected a religion that presupposed living in the Land of Israel, and that later Judaism was made portable.

41Sotah 14a. See also Mishnah Kelim 1:6. “There are ten degrees of holiness. The Land of Israel is holier than any other land. Wherein lies its holiness? In that from it they may bring the omer, the first fruits, and the two loaves, which they may not bring from any other land.” That same exclusive prerogative forms the principal subject of Mishnah Hallah 4:1-1.1

42Even prophecy, which is linked in fact to the Land of Israel, was a possibility in other lands as well. The Mezudos, Psuk 1, makes note of this at least three times.


44For the history of the Ben Meir calendar controversy, see Henry Malter, Life and Works of Saadia Gaon, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1921.


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46Mishnah Shevi'it 5:7; Tosfeta Hallah 2:6; Tosfeta Terumah 4:13.


49Mishnah Hallah 4:11.

50Ketubbot 110b-111a.

51Ketubbot 110b.
The Earth is the Lord’s: Blessings For Food

This dual geography of holiness becomes clear with the example of the blessings recited before eating different types of food (birkhot ha-nechenin).52

Understanding the significance of specific berakhot requires a moment’s reflection on the social importance of structure and of categorization. Meaning is not intrinsic; it is conferred by the people involved. A ritual, for example, reveals little about the role that ritual plays in the life of those engaged in it, unless the words and intentions of the participants of the rite are also available. While investigating meaning,

the thing to ask is not what their ontological status is... The thing to ask is what their import is: what it is... that in their occurrence and through their agency, is getting said.53

One key to ritual, as with other social rites, is what it can reveal about a context of understanding, how the worshipers construe the world around them and their place in it.

Ritual not only reveals structures of perception and purpose. It also helps to shape that purpose: “Ritual did not merely encode ideas that could be expressed otherwise; rather, it created the essential categories of human thought.”54 When a recitation or symbolic action express a value-concept, that performance not only articulates a specific way of seeing the world; it also shapes and reinforces that vision. In our case, an examination of Rabbinic blessings for food reveals the effort to recognize the sanctity of the entire planet, to ground that holiness in God’s ownership, and to maintain the special status of the Land of Israel.

The Biblical command to praise God for food specifies that this obligation applies only within the Land of Israel:

For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land...a land where you may eat food without stint... When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to the Lord your God for the good land which He has given you.55

There is no reported Biblical implementation, but the clear assumption behind this instruction is that the Land of Israel is uniquely holy, and that the landedness of the Jews rightly elicits a unique gratitude. Food grown in God’s land requires a means to transfer ownership from God to humanity. Blessings, in this understanding, represent a delivery system by which food in its naturally sanctified state of nature is removed from that natural habitat not only physically but conceptually, so that it may be transformed for use by ordinary human beings.56

To eat without blessing, according to the Rabbis, is not only theft. It represents a desecration of the Temple-based system of purity and holiness:

Our Rabbis taught: It is forbidden to enjoy anything of this world without a berakah, and whoever enjoys anything of this world without a berakah commits sacrilege (ma’af). Rav Judah said in the name of Samuel: To enjoy anything of this world without a berakah is like making personal use of things consecrated to heaven.57

The Rabbis’ assumption that blessings are appropriate both in and out of the Land should be noted from the outset. They place no limitation on the location of the meal or the source of the produce to be consumed. The Torah prescribes gratitude to God as Sovereign of Israel; the Rabbis extend that response to the world:

It is written: “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof” (Psalms 24:1), [yet] “He has given the earth to human beings” (Psalms 115:16). There is no contradiction. The first verse reflects the situation before we say a blessing, whereas the second verse applies after the blessing has been said.58

Characteristic of their ability to mediate a complex agenda, the Rabbis also reinforce the notion of the Land’s sanctity (kedushat ha-natziv) through the insertion of specific berakhot in the blessings after meals, including birkat ha-mazon and berakah abat mei-in shalosh, both of which distinguish between produce characteristic of the Land and all other produce. Yet the actual source of the grains, fruit, or vegetables is now irrelevant. What counts is that their species grows in Eretz Yisrael.

In at least one other significant way, the series of blessings over food sanctifies the entire Earth. The central organizing category which distinguishes which type of berakah to recite is whether (and, if so, how) food emerges from the soil. Once the produce is identified as a type of fruit (p’ur), further distinctions arise: Does the food emerge from the Earth directly or does it grow on a vine or a tree? Other possible categorizations seem not to matter. “Over something which does not grow from the Earth, one says shmah-bakol.”59

There is no necessary or intrinsic reason to worry about the nuances of distinct agricultural products while lumping together fish, meat and poultry. By establishing the categories of berakhot the way they did, the Rabbis lent significance to the soil, to what emerges from the ground, and to the sanctity of

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52The discussion which follows is based on the work of Lawrence Hoffman, particularly his “Introduction: Land of Blessing and Blessings of Land”, in The Land of Israel: Jewish Perspectives, pp. 1-23. Hoffman’s interest is primarily what the structure of blessings reveals about Rabbinic attitudes toward the Land of Israel. Our interest in this case is to examine what that same structure reveals about Rabbinic attitudes toward the Earth in general.


54Deuteronomy 8:17-18.

55Hoffman, op. cit., p. 12.

56Berakhot 35a. A series of such quotations continues on the following side (35b), calling such a practice “robbery” against God and the Jewish People. See also Tosaft Berakhot 4:1.

57Berakhot 35a.

58Mishnah Berakhot 6:3.
all ground everywhere. The categories of the berakhot themselves valorize the Earth as a sacred and sustaining presence. "[B]lessings achieve the primal function of freeing that produce from its sacred state." They also enforce the insight that a sacred place is anywhere that life can thrive, that a sacred time is anytime Jews gather to eat and to pray.

Application and Conclusion

Only after such consideration are we in a position to utilize one Jewish category to address the issues raised by the environmental movement. Starting from within Judaism, a religious path becomes both possibility and pathway.

First, the Hebrew Bible asserts that a place is intrinsically holy, constituting the prime reward for good living (in this case, for mitzvah observance). The Rabbis presume that a place is made holy by the righteousness and piety of its inhabitants. The land, in their view, is a necessary prerequisite for observance. People can soil the Earth.

Second, humanity relates to soil in relationship. Our planet is not a mute "fact", suitable only for measurement, testing and objectification. Rather, a full human relationship to the world is one in which the Earth is loved and cultivated, a partner with Jews and all other people in the service of God, creation and human life. There is a dynamism to human-planetary interactions: our behavior allows the Earth to fulfill its covenantal relationship, and our planet, in turn, provides humanity with further grounds for gratitude to God. The Earth is both witness and participant in our sacred covenant (brit).

Third, the early Rabbis, perhaps building on the precedent established in Second Temple times, strive to articulate a notion of holiness which includes not only Eretz Yisrael but the rest of the world as well. Through focusing the berakhot for food on pe'iros and their sub-categories, by adding liturgical petitions on behalf of the weather outside the Land of Israel, by providing for multiple models of land-sanctity, the Mishnah and the Talmud maintain a claim for the holiness of the whole earth, without relinquishing a special Jewish estimation for Israel itself. "Israel living in its Land has consequences for the entire world. When Israel lives in its Land, the entire earth can become sacred space."

As Jews, our loyalty begins with Eretz Yisrael. But we are not only Jews. As human beings, we also owe fealty and love to the entire planet, as well as to that corner of it which is home. The path of the Bible and early Rabbinic tradition is one of expanding concentric circles, broadening the notion of holiness into a provisional portability that permits a relationship with the sacred anywhere and anytime. That same schema sanctifies all the earth, summoning us, as Jews and as humans, to a relationship of love and piety with our beleaguered planet.

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60 Hoffman, op. cit., p. 15.
61 Primus, op. cit., p. 106.