To Guard the Earth

Torah of the Earth: Exploring 4,000 Years of Ecology in Jewish Thought
Arthur Waskow, editor
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REVIEWED BY BERNIE FISCHLOWITZ-ROBERTS

A number of things struck me in reading this two-volume anthology about Judaism and the environment. One bright note is the number of well-known Jewish thinkers who are concerned about the environment and finding ways to protect it. While consciousness is certainly greater than at any point in the past, the issue is not on the agendas of many Jewish organizations, and a vast amount of education is needed to make the Jewish community aware of the extent of global environmental problems and required changes. This anthology has the potential to bring about some of that much-needed education of the Jewish community.

The challenges humanity faces with the present global environmental crisis are numerous and difficult, pointed out clearly and cogently in numerous pieces in the "Zionism and Eco-Judaism" sections (which constitute the second volume of the anthology). These essays include Alon Tal's and David Brooks' discussions of the state of Israel's environment, two pieces on opportunities for cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians on environmental issues of concern to both peoples, and Ellen Bernstein's discussion of the problem of suburban sprawl in Pennsylvania.

Traditional Sources

In the first volume, which covers the periods of biblical Israel and rabbinic Judaism, the reader finds different perspectives on the extent to which Jewish texts indicate a concern for the environment, and how central those concerns were in the lives of various thinkers. As is often the case in anthologies, especially one of this breadth and depth, there is some inevitable repetition in texts selected. Nonetheless, readers will benefit from seeing differing perspectives on the same texts. This collection makes clear the importance that Jewish scholars and thinkers have placed upon humanity's interactions with the natural world.

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One running theme picked up by many of the authors was the centrality and importance of Shabbat and the *sh'mitah* (jubilee) year. I am now much more aware of the power of observing Shabbat — and the cessation of commercial and most technological activities — as a way to demonstrate the necessity of giving the planet a rest from the onslaught of consumption, pollution and ecological degradation that occur constantly and whose pace has quickened substantially since the Industrial Revolution.

As an example, Arthur Waskow notes that, in addition to renewing the earth, observing the *sh'mitah* year can renew human communities, too:

> Stop work for even just one day, and for that day hierarchy dissolves: no boss, no employee. Stop work for an entire year, and the institutions of society, normally so useful, periodically dissolve. People are freed up, the imagination is freed up, the Breathing-Spirit of the world blows where it likes.

Yet the point is made that merely observing Shabbat does not excuse destructive behavior on the other six days of the week, and indeed compels us to change our everyday behavior to bring it more in line with Shabbat.

Rights and Responsibilities

A central issue this anthology examines is the balance between individual rights and communal responsibilities — perhaps the central issue in humanity's relationship with this planet. A number of essays made clear the Jewish textual bases for restrictions on individual property rights in the service of communal needs, especially social and environmental ones.

Waskow cites Meir Tamari, a modern scholar, who states that

> over and above the economic considerations involved in ecological cost-benefit analysis, there is a moral element involved. . . . In the Torah scheme of things, the Jew is educated to understand that the public has rights in his property, and therefore his own property rights are necessarily and consistently limited.

Similarly, Michael Lerner reminds readers that Jewish law

> has retained its strong commitment to the notion that moral claims of the community supersede any property rights. When private property rights are used in a selfish way, the rabbis believed, they would almost certainly lead to the destruction of the community.

As, for example, the Congress considers Administration proposals for controversial tax cuts, these concerns for community are particularly timely and relevant. Living in a society which embraces individualism often

at the expense of concern for community, the reader is reminded of why more of a community focus is essential to solving our environmental and social problems.

Noticing Nature

In addition to the relations between individuals and the community, humanity's attitudes toward the natural world — and how those attitudes were shaped — are also examined in some detail. Fred Dobb makes an important point, stating that the rabbis understood miracles "not as the suspension of the natural order, but as that natural order itself." As news reports remind us on a regular basis, human-induced climate change has profoundly affected this planet's natural orders, and it is possible that our political system will only realize the seriousness of our environmental problems when our daily lives are so disrupted that life as we know it becomes impossible This suggests the important role that motivated Jews — and all people who respect the life of this planet — can play, bringing the wisdom of prior generations of scholars and making those lessons relevant to our times.

Everett Gendler's essay "On the Judaism of Nature" raises some profound points. He contends that our alienation from nature and "astonishing indifference to natural surroundings" came about partially as a reaction to Biblical assaults against nature cults. He discusses ways that Jewish rituals can reconnect with natural cycles and reverse decades of alienation from the natural world.

Arthur Green makes a powerful case for vegetarianism as a desirable modern day kashrut. Drawing on the *mitzvah* of *tsa'ar ba'aley hayyim* (compassion for, or prevention of cruelty to, animals) as well as environmental concern over excessive resource use, he asserts that those values, in addition to the Jewish tradition of abhorring violence, makes vegetarianism a natural choice.

While I found Green's suggestion of vegetarianism to be on solid ground, consistency to principles of compassion to animals and protecting the environment mandate, in my view, abstention from consuming dairy products and eggs as well. Egg-laying hens and dairy cows suffer to an even greater extent than animals raised for their flesh, and end up being killed at a fraction of their normal lifespan. Since Jewish tradition dictates that causing unnecessary suffering is unethical, and there is no need for animal products in the human diet, I suggest Green might have gone one step further in prescribing an explicitly vegan eco-kashrut.

From Attention to Protection

At a compassionate living workshop I recently attended, the conference leader used an outdoor activity to bring home to us the beauty of our natural surroundings that are often ignored (or not appreciated fully) in the course of our daily lives and routines. One person would close his or

her eyes, and his/her partner would lead that person on an eyes-closed silent walk, pausing at various spots to look at, smell, touch, or otherwise interact with natural objects the partner thought were particularly notable. Having one's eyes closed for a long period of time, and then suddenly opening them to see a budding plant, feel a tree trunk, smell a flower, or listen to chirping birds, causes one to realize the unmistakable beauty of our natural surroundings — and it makes it much more difficult to take it for granted again. This activity was designed to cause us to fall in love with the earth and thus become more involved in protecting it.

In a similar vein *Torah of the Earth* provides both the intellectual, historical, and spiritual justification for an increased level of concern — and more importantly, action — to preserve and protect God's creation.