

HOLY EARTH

PARABOLA

TRADITION, MYTH, AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING



FALL-2007

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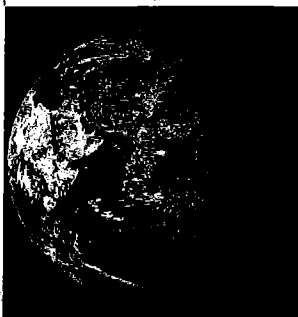


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TRADITION, MYTH, AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

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An anonymous photographer, circa 1900, found two peasant girls in Jerusalem offering fruits of the earth, and recorded their gentle pride in their proffered abundance. We chose this image because it is set within a holy city within a holy land, where apparently barren ground yields sustenance—just as do the traditions enshrined in that city—and for its resonances of the human, the earthly, and the eternal.

The image was created through the photochrome process. A photochrome is a color photographic lithograph produced from an original black and white negative. The final prints are created by using a variety of color impressions from multiple lithographic stones. This resulting image can look more like a painting than a photograph.

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A SENTIENT UNIVERSE

Everett Gendler

It is taught: R. Jose says:

Alas for creatures who see but know not what they see,
Who stand but know not upon what they stand.

TALMUD, HAGIGAH 12B

MOSES SAW THE DIVINE FACE TO FACE. Still, God had to remind him, "Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground" (Exod. 3:5). Considering that Moses, the greatest of all prophets, did not fully comprehend the nature of the ground upon which he stood, it is not surprising that we, too, remain oblivious to the underlying mystery of nature.

A tree stands in front of us: it appears solid. But the molecular physicist, examining it with utmost scrutiny, observes that there is more open space than substance in the tree. What else might we miss upon first observation? This tree is clearly alive, but by ordinary human measure, it is without will, desire, emotion, or spirit. Perhaps we lack adequate senses to perceive the nature of the tree's inner life. Does the tree "feel" as we do? Consider the grass beneath our feet, the sand, the soil, the stones. Consider the stars overhead. Does sentience or panpsychism, in any sense, characterize the rest of the universe?

These terms need not alarm us. *Sentient*, though solemn

"THE ARK OF THE LAW." (6TH CENTURY BCE)

DETAIL FROM THE PAVEMENT OF THE BETH ALPHA SYNAGOGUE, ISRAEL



sounding, simply means “sensing, feeling, having some degree of awareness.” And as for *panpsychism*, which is a near synonym for *sentience*, it is neither a New Age notion nor an ancient Greek practice connected with the god Pan. It is simply the idea “that the basic physical constituents of the universe have mental properties, whether or not they are parts

TO ACCEPT SERIOUSLY GOD’S COVENANT WITH OTHER LIVING CREATURES AS WELL AS WITH THE EARTH ITSELF RAISES QUESTIONS THAT ARE DISCONCERTING, YET EXCITING.

of living organisms.”¹ In other words, every “material” particle, however small, is not only “matter” but to some degree “mind,” even if it remains forever beyond our experience.

GENESIS 9: THE COVENANT WITH THE EARTH

Everyone knows that the Bible does not claim that independent, distinct spirits or souls are found in nature. In this way, Judaism differed from other faiths of its time. This does not mean, however, that Judaism understands nature as lifeless and lacking all spirit or feeling. After all, one can have spirit without spirits. In the biblical account of Creation, God, while connected with nature, is not entirely limited to it. The Divine is, in some significant way, more than nature. Yet, this does not necessarily mean that Creation is lacking in spirit or mind. In fact, a fresh look at Gen. 9:8-17 will quickly confirm that the Bible itself presupposes some degree of sentience in Creation,

even in the earth itself (*italics added*):

And God said to Noah and to his sons with him, “I now establish My *covenant* with you and your offspring to come, and with every living thing that is with you—birds, cattle, and every wild beast as well—all that have come out of the ark, every living thing on earth. I will maintain my *covenant* with you: never shall again flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

God added, “This is the *sign* that I set for the *covenant* between Me and you, and every living creature with you, for all ages to come. I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall serve as a *sign* of the *covenant* between Me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth, and the bow appears in the clouds, I will remember My *covenant* between Me and you and every living creature among all flesh, so that the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting *covenant* that I have established between Me and all flesh that is on earth.” Then God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the *covenant* which I have established between Me and all flesh that is upon the earth.”

In this passage, both the terms *brit*, “covenant,” and *ot*, “sign,” apply to all living creatures and to earth, not only to humans. Upon first consideration, the reader, who tends toward rationalism, is likely to dismiss the wording as a mere figure of speech. Yet, the sevenfold repetition of *brit* and the three-fold repetition of *ot* prevent easy dismissal. (Seven and three are, in many traditions, sacred numbers.) Their repeated use and their specific references to living creatures and the earth imply that the notion of divine covenant in relation to earth and its life must be taken seriously. While the covenantal references do in four

instances specify human beings, in those same four instances the other living creatures are included as well. Two covenantal references pertain generally to all living creatures, while the seventh speaks exclusively of God's covenant with the earth.

To accept seriously God's covenant with other living creatures as well as with the earth itself raises questions that are disconcerting, yet exciting. A covenant is reciprocal. It involves an exchange of responsibilities and duties. What does this imply about the status of earth and its living creatures? If the earth can participate in a covenant, then the earth has some qualities of a living being. Johannes Pedersen, one of the twentieth century's greatest biblical scholars, argues that

...the Israelites do not acknowledge the distinction between the psychic and the corporeal. Earth and stones are alive, imbued with a soul, therefore able to receive mental subject-matter and bear the impress of it. The relation between the earth and its owner...is a covenant-relation, a psychic community, and the owner does not solely prevail in the relation. The earth has its nature, which makes itself felt and demands respect.²

Therefore, according to Pedersen, the important thing is to "deal kindly with the earth, to uphold its blessing and then take what it yields on its own accord."³

When Pedersen uses the term *soul*, he does not mean something immaterial and unrelated to the physical composition of an object or person; he means the collection of innate tendencies or inclinations of that entity, or what we would call its nature or character. "Earth and stones are alive," concludes Pedersen. They are "able to receive mental subject-matter."⁴ In this perspective, some ele-

ment of the mental or spiritual characterizes all of Creation.

Similarly, Professor Monford Harris, a philosophy professor at Spertus College, argues that the natural world was alive for the ancient Hebrews. It could be used, it could be appropriated, but it could not be violated. "Man has

THE WORDING OF THE PSALM IS CLEAR: THE SAME PRAISE ASKED OF HUMANS IS ASKED OF THE OTHER NATURAL ELEMENTS.

covenantal relationship, community, with the natural world,"⁵ writes Harris, adding that in the terms of Martin Buber, an "I-Thou" approach to the natural world must complement and constrain our more ordinary, more instrumental "I-It" approach.

PSALM 148: THE SOUND OF NATURE'S SYMPHONY

The fact that earth and all living beings are bound by covenant to God implies that Judaism takes universal sentience for granted: all of Creation must be alive with feeling. Yet rarely do we think of the Bible as making such a claim. Why is this? How did we come to see all the world—except our species—as essentially inert, lifeless, and lacking sentience? We are not lonely soloists in this world, the only ones capable of experiencing and expressing. There is a vast symphony singing, if we could only hear. Grasses whisper and animals sing the praises of God. The Bible tells us this again and again.⁶

Psalms 148, which is included in the

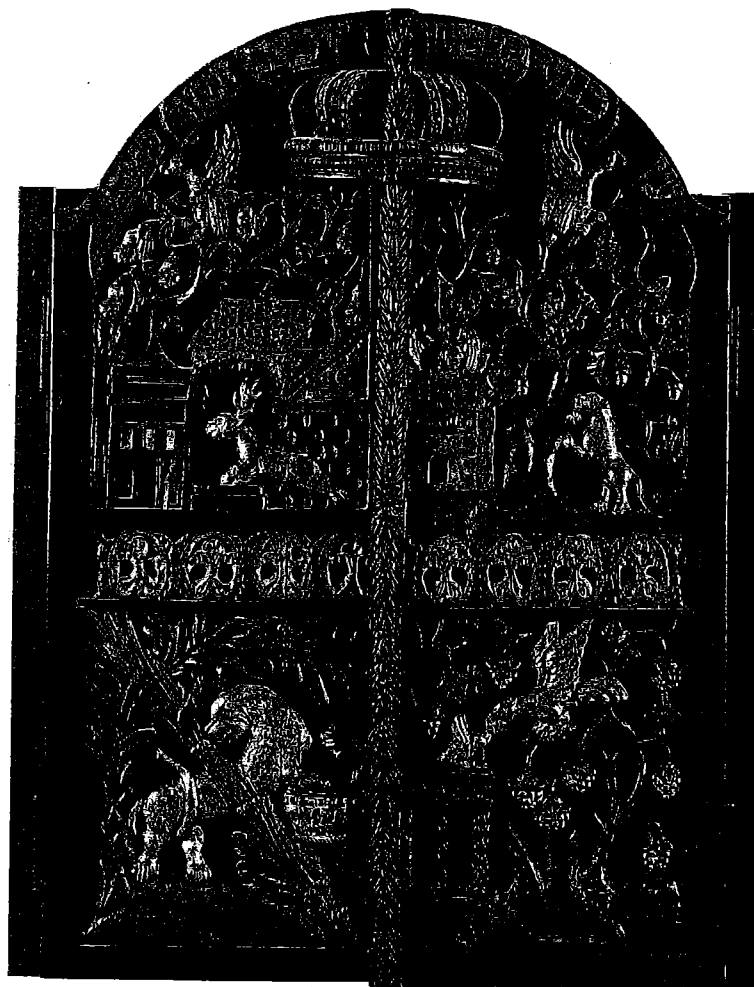
daily morning service of the Hebrew prayer book, is particularly rich in this regard. Observant Jews recite it 365 times a year.

Praise God, sun and moon;
praise God, all you shining stars!
Praise God, you highest heavens,
and you waters above the heavens!...

fruit trees and cedars!
Wild animals and all cattle,
creeping things and flying birds!

Kings of the earth and all peoples,
princes and all rulers of the earth!
Young men and women alike,
old and young together!

Let them praise the name of the Lord...



ARK (TORAH SHRINE) DOORS FROM THE BUTZIAN SYNAGOGUE, CRACOW, POLAND
"BE STRONG AS A LEOPARD, LIGHT AS AN EAGLE, FLEET AS A DEER, AND STRONG AS A LION TO DO THE WILL OF THY FATHER" IS INSCRIBED OVER THE WOODEN DOORS, 17TH CENTURY

Praise the Lord from the earth,
you sea monsters and all deeps;
fire and hail, snow and frost,
stormy wind fulfilling God's
command!

Mountains and all hills,

Among those summoned to "praise the Lord" are sea monsters and the deeps of the oceans, fire and hail, snow and frost, and stormy wind. So, too, are mountains and hills, fruit trees and cedars, wild animals and cattle, creeping things and fly-

ing birds—together with kings, peoples, princes, rulers, men, and women. The wording of the psalm is clear: the same praise asked of humans is asked of the other natural elements.

Yet, rarely do these words touch our hearts. Rather, we defend ourselves from the fantastic possibilities suggested here. First, we tell ourselves that the psalms are not referring to *literal* praise. Instead, the authors are implying that the orderly functioning of nature is itself a kind of praise for the Creator. What could be more of a hymn to God than the dance of crackling fire? Doesn't a hummingbird hail the Creator simply by hovering near a flower? Surely, nothing more than this is meant by the repeated phrase, "praise God." Alternatively, we reason that to "praise God" is simply a figure of speech and need not be taken literally.

If we think about it, however, we might well ask: Why do we overlook what is written? Isn't such a denial of the simplest meaning of the text illogical? In fact, such a reading is contrary to the principles of Jewish scriptural interpretation.

If orderly functioning is all that the term "praise" implies, then it is superfluous to ask for such praise; it *already* exists. In Ps. 19:2-5, for example, the alternations of day and night, the regularity of the sun's circuit, and the patterns of the heavens are deemed sufficient praise of their Creator, without words to embellish them:

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims His
handiwork.

Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the
earth,

and their words to the end of the world.

But Psalm 148 demands more. It asks for *intentional* praise of the Creator not only from humans but from all realms of nature. It asks for praise *beyond* simple existence. The psalm presupposes a response from nature. Why ask for praise from something that is not capable of giving it?

As for the second way we defend ourselves from feeling the wonder of the psalmist, we dismiss the praises of nature as metaphorical. It is disappointing that even so distinguished a scholar as Nahum Sarna, the preeminent biblical commentator, avoids the issue of sentience by using precisely this device. Commenting on Psalm 19, in which "the poetic notion of nature's constituents [extol] their Maker," he cites Psalm 148 and Job 38:7. He admits that in Psalm 148 all heavenly beings and objects are called upon to "rhapsodize God" and that in Job "we are told that at the creation of the world, 'The morning stars chanted in unison, and all divine beings shouted for joy.'" Sarna then blunts the sharpness of the language by declaring, "We are dealing, of course, with figurative language."⁷

"Of course" is hardly a compelling argument. It is, in fact, no argument at all, but circular reasoning, an appeal to commonly held beliefs. Confident that the psalmist or Job was either in error or carried away by human emotion upon contact with "the timeless magnificence of the celestial scene," Sarna seeks to explain the dynamics underlying the figurative language. Obviously sensitive to "the inward, spiritual experience" that the starry skies can evoke in us, Sarna can only suggest that the psalmist "projects this situation onto the heavens and the heavenly bodies, which are now all per-

sonified.”⁸ Thus Sarna, like many other commentators, succumbs to the post-Cartesian intellectual fashion that asserts the radical distinction, the total difference, between minds and matter.⁹

In fact, Sarna departs from the principles of traditional Jewish interpretation when he denies what the text is plainly saying. The Talmud says, “A verse cannot depart from its plain meaning.”¹⁰ Guides to the Talmud reiterate this point: “The text does not lose its literal meaning.”¹¹

One rabbinic authority, Rabbi Kahana, held that this rule applied only when Torah lays down laws and principles of behavior, but not to “proverbial or poetical passages.” But another authority, Mar b. R. Huna, argued that the rule applied to the poetic passages as well, and it was this view that prevailed.¹² The plain, the literal, the natural meaning of a text is what is meant. Therefore, whatever further interpretations of the language may stimulate, there is good reason to insist on the literal meaning of Psalm 148: Creation is being called to praise God.

It seems that the early rabbis also interpreted Psalm 148 literally:

As Scripture says, *The Lord hath made everything to bear witness to His glory* (Prov. 16:4). He created the heavens to sing His praises, and so they sing them, as it is said, *The Heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament sheweth His handiwork* (Ps. 19:2). And even as the heavens and all that is in them sing praises of God, so also the earth and all that is in it sing His praises, as it is said *Praise the Lord from the earth....*

After God’s praises are sung from the heavens, who ought to be the first on earth to sing His praises? He that is larger than his fellow creatures. And who are the largest? The sea-monsters, of whom it is

said *And God created the great sea-monsters* (Gen. 1:21). Therefore, the first on earth to sing God’s praises are the sea-monsters, to whom it is said *Ye sea-monsters, and all deeps* (Ps. 148:7).¹³

Here, the literal meaning presupposes that, to some degree, all of Creation is sentient, feeling, and able to respond to this encompassing cry of “Halleluyah, Praise the Lord!”¹

1 Thomas Nagel, *MORTAL QUESTIONS* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 181.

2 Johannes Pederson, *ISRAEL: ITS LIFE AND CULTURE* (London & Copenhagen: Oxford University Press, 1959). I–II, p. 479.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Monford Harris, “Ecology: A Covenantal Approach,” *CCAR JOURNAL*, (Summer 1976): 103–04.

6 For example, Ps. 19, 96:11–12, 98:7–9; Isa. 44:23, 55:12; Job 38:7.

7 Nahum M. Sarna, *SONGS OF THE HEART* (New York: Schocken Books, 1993), p. 78.

8 Ibid.

9 Cf. “All that is either spatial or conscious.... What is spatial is not conscious: what is conscious is not spatial.... All things are either bodies or minds; substances are either spatial or conscious.... The world falls thus into two completely different and completely separated realms; that of bodies and that of minds.” W. Windelband, *A HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY* (New York: Macmillan, 1901), p. 405.

10 *SONCINO TALMUD* (London: Soncino Press, 1936), Shabbat 63a; cf. Yebamot 116, 24a.

11 Z. H. Chajes, *THE STUDENT’S GUIDE THROUGH THE TALMUD* (New York: Philip Feldheim, 1960), p. 177.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., 148:5.

Excerpt is from *ECOLOGY AND THE JEWISH SPIRIT: WHERE NATURE AND THE SACRED MEET* © 1998 by Ellen Bernstein (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing).

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