

Rabbi Everett Gendler has long been active in civil rights, the peace movement, ecumenism, and most recently as an advocate of a more eclectic and inclusive religious symbology. Rabbi Gendler here reflects an increasing sentiment among young Jews that Judaism has allowed itself to become so historicized that the tie with the natural world has been broken and has ceased to be a source of wonder, energy, and instruction. Another important claim being made in this essay is that established religious groups have beguiled us into thinking that Judaism by its historical nature is a monolithic and normative tradition; any strands or components which are distant from institutional Judaism now, therefore, must be inauthentic and not truly of the tradition. Rabbi Gendler's observations are an articulate dissent and departure from this line of thought.

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On the Judaism of Nature

by EVERETT GENDLER

Each of us, I think, approaches the official tradition of Judaism with a particular set of inherited tendencies and lived experiences: archetypes, somatotypes, infantile impressions and childhood visions, adolescent agonies and all the rest. For each of us, surely, the living tradition of Judaism must be somehow distinct, different, individual. If not, what is the meaning of our religious being?

I was born in Chariton, Iowa, and lived there eleven years. A small town surrounded by open country, nature was omnipresent. Des Moines, the "city" of my adolescence, also enjoyed her presence. So did I.

Not that I was conscious of it at the time. It seems to me now, in retrospect, that not until after ordination from seminary and a period of time spent in the valley of Mexico did nature as such come more fully to my awareness.

The realization of this awareness took time, its relation to my religious outlook more time still. The entire process, I now know, was furthered by graduate academic studies and by poetry. J. J. Bachofen, Johannes Pedersen, Erich Neumann, Erwin Goodenough, Mircea Eliade, D. H. Lawrence, e. e. cummings, William Blake, Saul Tchernichovsky, Lao Tzu, Kenneth Rexroth, the Besht, Reb Nachman: these, finally, were among my latter day teachers, and I mention them for others more than for myself. It is true, their names do constitute for me a doxology of sorts, and their effect on me is mildly magical. But perhaps it might be that for a few others as well, with similar sensibilities, these men might serve too as the good companions, those who, however indirectly, help make our selves known to ourselves.

From this, then, the re-evaluation of official Judaism, and the pained perception of its present plight: sea-sited synagogues with sea-views bricked over! tree-filled lots with windowless sanctuaries! hill-placed chapels opaque to sunsets! the astonishing indifference to natural surroundings!

Was Judaism always this way? I very much doubt it.

However powerful the Biblical assault on ancient nature cults, elements of those cults persisted, however purified and sublimated, for centuries thereafter among loyal Jews. This much, I think, is convincingly established by the evidence in Raphael Patai's *The Hebrew Goddess*. This underground stream, flowing from the most ancient of times down to the present, re-emerges strikingly at times—in Kabbalah, Hasidism, and recent Hebrew poets such as Saul Tschernichovsky—as the re-assertion of both the Natural and the Feminine components of religion.

Further, whatever merit there may be to the claim that post-Biblical Judaism is very much an urban development, it must be remembered that cities until quite recently were rarely so totally cut off from natural surround-

ings as are our present megalopolitan sprawls. However removed from landholding by legal disabilities, the Jews of Eastern Europe were nevertheless constantly aware of it and often envious of those who were privileged to have direct proprietary contact with it. Many are the reminiscences of Hebrew and Yiddish writers which focus on *heder* memories of their natural surroundings. And a perusal of the very moving photos in the Polish Volume *Wooden Synagogues* (by Maria and Kasimierz Piechotka) makes quite vivid the rural locations (at least by our standards) of so many of these incomparably expressive structures.

Important, also, is the evidence from the persistence of various folk customs into recent decades. An especially telling instance concerns *Shavuot*, the least nature-oriented of the three pilgrimage festivals.

It is a custom to put trees in synagogues and homes on *Shavuot* . . . and to spread grass about in the synagogue . . . to recall that at the giving of the Torah the Jews stood upon a mountain surrounded by foliage. The *Maharil* used to spread fragrant grass and flowers on the floor of the synagogue in celebration of the holiday, and if *Shavuot* fell on Sunday, the *Maharil* would bring them in before *Shabbat* . . . On *Shavuot* the *shamash* used to distribute fragrant grass and herbs to every worshipper in the synagogue . . .

—J. D. Eisenstein:

A Digest of Jewish Laws and Customs

And what of the *Seder* traditionally celebrated by the Sephardim on *Tu B'shevat*, when some thirty varieties of fruits, nuts, grains, and wines are consumed with special *kavanot* (intentions) and accompanied by readings from the Bible and the Zohar?

Most significant of all, however, has been the faithfulness of the folk to the rhythms of the moon throughout the ages.

In the biblical period, *Hodesh* or *Rosh Hodesh* (New Moon) was a holiday at least comparable to the Sabbath. Commerce was prohibited (Amos 8:5), visits to "men of God" were customary as on Sabbaths (II Kings 4:23), and New Moon is grouped with Sabbaths and festivals as a major holiday in the Jewish religious calendar (Hosea 2:13; II Chron. 2:3, 8:12-13, and others). It is interesting to note that, quantitatively speaking, the New Moon offerings prescribed in Numbers (28:9-15) and Ezekiel (46:3-7) exceed those prescribed for Sabbaths.

The moon was, of course, the most visible heavenly marker of the passage of time. As such, she was essential to the determination of festivals and sacred celebrations. At the same time, however, her numinous quality constantly tempted people to worship her (Deut. 17:2-7; Jer. 7:18, 44:15-19). It seems likely, then, that Hayyim Schauss is correct in suggesting that the prevailing rabbinic attitude toward the moon was also hostile, and that in so far as *Rosh Hodesh* survived at all, it was due to the loyalty of the folk, not the representatives of the severely anti-pagan official tradition (Schauss, *The Jewish Festivals*).

This folk feeling for the moon should not be hard to comprehend even in our own terms. As Mircea Eliade has pointed out:

The sun is always the same, always itself, never in any sense "becoming." The moon, on the other hand, is a body which waxes, wanes and disappears, a body whose existence is subject to the universal law of becoming, of birth and death. The moon, like man, has a career involving tragedy, for its failing, like man's, ends in death. For three nights the starry sky is without a moon. But this "death" is followed by a rebirth: the "new moon." . . . This perpetual return to its beginning, and this ever-recurring cycle make the moon the heavenly body above all others concerned with the rhythms of life . . . they reveal life repeating itself rhythmically

. . . it might be said that the moon shows man his true human condition; that in a sense man looks at himself, and finds himself anew in the life of the moon.

—*Patterns in Comparative Religion*

Small wonder, then, that a folk desirous of maintaining some significant connection both with cosmic rhythms and with the self should preserve its lunar festivities despite official frowns. Nor is it surprising that women, whose bodily functioning includes built-in, periodic natural rhythms, were most closely related to the lunar rhythms.

Work on Rosh Hodesh is permitted . . . but women are accustomed not to work on Rosh Hodesh . . . weaving and sewing were especially avoided on Rosh Hodesh. . . .

—Eisenstein, *op. cit.*

Other observances on *Rosh Hodesh* include these:

It is a mitzvah (recommended practice) to have an especially ample meal on Rosh Hodesh. . . .

In some countries, Yemen, for example, it is a custom to light candles on the eve of Rosh Hodesh both in the synagogues and on the tables at home, just as on Sabbaths and Festivals. Some people prepare at least one additional special dish in honor of Rosh Hodesh and wear special festive garments.

—Eisenstein, *op. cit.*

Of all this and more, how much is practiced today? Except for the announcement of the new month in the synagogue on the Sabbath preceding—and I do mean new month, not new moon; it is all very calculated, calendrical, and non-lunar—very little, from what I have noticed. As for the ceremony of *kiddush hal'vanah* (the sanctification of the waxing moon), an out-of-door ceremony dating from Talmudic times which requires visual contact with the moon between the third and fifteenth days of the lunar month, and which also includes dancing before the moon

—except for a few Hasidim, how widely is this practiced or even known today? Yet it is prescribed even in the Shulchan Aruch, the classical sixteenth-century code of Jewish law.

These few examples do, I trust, establish that the present Jewish institutional alienation from nature was not always the case, and that it is, in fact, a comparatively recent development.

An attempt to analyze why this has happened would take us far afield and lengthen this essay beyond its appointed limits. More important are some of the psycho-religious consequences of this estrangement from nature.

Two or three poetic formulations are among the best brief statements on this subject that I know.

Great things are done when Men & Mountains meet;
This is not done by Jostling in the Street.

—William Blake

They know not why they love nor wherefore they sicken
& die,
calling that Holy Love which is Envy, Revenge & Cruelty,
Which separated the stars from the mountains, the mountains from Man
And left Man, a little grovelling Root outside of Himself.

—William Blake

Oh, what a catastrophe for man when he cut himself off
from the
rhythm of the year, from his union with the sun and the
earth.
Oh, what a catastrophe, what a maiming of love when it
was a
personal, merely personal feeling, taken away from the
rising
and setting of the sun, and cut off from the magic connection
of the solstice and the equinox!

That is what is the matter with us.
We are bleeding at the roots, because we are cut off from
the earth
and sun and stars, and love is a grinning mockery, because,
poor
blossom, we plucked it from its stem on the tree of Life,
and
expected it to keep on blooming in our civilized vase on
the table.

—D. H. Lawrence

Nor should one overlook the important lament by Tchernichovsky over

the distress of a world whose spirit is darkened,
for Tammuz, the beautiful Tammuz is dead.

It seems increasingly clear that whatever the penalties which man may have suffered when he was subjugated to nature, his "liberation" from nature has become, in fact, an alienation which is truly a dreadful freedom. No longer attuned to the cosmic rhythms about him, increasingly entombed by the contrived, man-made elements of his environment, he neither knows himself as microcosm nor has any felt, enlivening connection with *chei ha-olamim*, the Life of the Universe (a term for the Divine which twice occurs in the traditional morning service).

Where, today, does one find that confirmation of being expressed in this rabbinic statement?

Whatever the Holy One, blessed be He, created in the
world, He created in man . . .
He created forests in the world and He created forests in
man . . .
He created a wind in the world and He created a wind in
man . . .
A sun in the world and a sun in man . . .
Flowing waters in the world and flowing waters in
man . . .
Trees in the world and trees in man . . .
Hills in the world and hills in man . . .

Whatever the Holy One, blessed be He, created in His world, He created in man.

—*Abot d'Rabi Natan*, Version A, Ch. 31

The self shivers in solitary confinement, and each detached attempt to discern one's true being seems to catapult the self into an abyss, or finds the self facing sets of mirrors which merely cast further and further back, in dizzying regress, that very image of the self which was seeking its substance.

Without grounding in felt being, what of relating, of love? The ever-shifting, estranged-from-the-universe subjectivity often means simply a mutual sense of being lost together—hardly a solid basis for a lifelong relationship which should help children also gain some orientation in this world.

Also, what does it mean to grow up, as increasing numbers of children do today, with so little contact with other growing things? How does it affect personal growth when almost all easily-observed, rapid developmental paradigms are of other-determined end products, not self-determined growth? What does it mean to have numerous examples of making and processing all around one, but few if any examples of that slow, deliberate, self-determined unfolding of inner potential which is so amazing to watch in the transformation of seed into plant? The separation from the vegetation cycle may have consequences for the spirit that we have hardly begun to comprehend.

And what may be the effects of this estrangement from nature on the environmental crisis which we face? It is hard to imagine that there is no connection between the devaluation and disregard of nature on the one hand, and her maltreatment and shameful exploitation on the other.

These considerations, for the most part historical and theoretical, are meant to suggest that a vital and relevant Judaism for this age must begin to reclaim seriously its nature heritage. Such a suggestion has, I think, much to support it as evidenced by the way that people do, in fact, respond to such nature elements. Let me cite a few examples.

For some four summers, we held Friday evening services out of doors at the Jewish Center of Princeton, weather permitting. The setting itself was the attractive lawn behind the sanctuary, flat but ringed by shrubs and bushes, with a number of older, substantial trees in view. The hour of the service was advanced somewhat (from eight fifteen to seven forty-five P.M.) to take full advantage of sunset, twilight, and in late summer, the dusk. Nature elements in the traditional service were emphasized; special readings appropriate to a nature setting were included in the service; periods of silence and meditations on trees and shrubs were part of the worship; and the varying qualities of the "twilights" (*aravim*) were also a focus of attention.

I can report that the reaction to this, among adults as well as young people, was almost universally favorable, and often enthusiastic. In fact, except for a few occasions when the bugs were especially bothersome (no, we did *not* spray!), the out-of-doors services were deeply appreciated by nearly all involved.

Another practice which received a generally favorable response was connected with the morning service of Sabbaths and festivals. When there was no *Bar Mitzvah* and our numbers were not increased by people unfamiliar with the building, on bright days, temperature permitting, we would leave the sanctuary immediately after the *Barchu* and head out of doors. There, under the skies and in the

face of the sun, we would chant together that part of the service which celebrates the gift of Light and the radiance of the luminaries. And on days when it was not possible to go out of doors, this part of the service was prefaced by a focusing of attention on the light streaming in through the many windows in the sanctuary. In both cases, the added power of this part of the service was quite perceptible.

Speaking to various groups, I have found that, for the most part, people have responded with considerable interest as nature elements in Judaism were brought to their attention. They often seemed eager to relate to more of these elements in their own lives, and were also extremely appreciative of the nature poetry which I might read on such occasions. Such examples as these could be multiplied if space permitted.

I make no claim that such findings constitute a "scientific" survey of the total scene today. I am convinced, however, that they do represent the expression of a profoundly felt need among many people for a renewed relation to *chei ha-olamim*, the Life of the Universe. I am also convinced that contemporary Judaism, if it is to be a living religion, must respond to this need by a renewed emphasis on those many nature elements which lie dormant, neglected, sublimated, and suppressed within the tradition.

At one period of history it may have been the proper task of Judaism to struggle against nature cults in so far as they represented man's subjugation to nature. Over the centuries, however, the reverse has occurred, reaching a frightening climax in our age: man's almost total alienation from nature. Consequently, one of the crucial religious tasks of our age is to work toward man's integration with nature, with all that implies societally, psychically, and theologically.

The elements of religious renewal are many, and the paths to the Divine various. But for at least some of us in this age the following expresses, far better than we could ourselves, how it appears to us:

And if you ask me of God, my God,
 "Where is He that in joy we may worship Him?"
 Here on earth too He lives, not in heaven alone,
 And this earth He has given to man.

A striking fir, a rich furrow, in them you will find His likeness,
 His image incarnate in every high mountain.
 Wherever the feeling of life flows—in animals, plants,
 In stones—there you will find Him embodied.

And His household? All being: the gazelle, the turtle,
 The shrub, the cloud pregnant with thunder;
 No God disembodied, mere spirit—He is God-In-Creation!

That is His name and that is His fame forever!

—Saul Tchernichovsky (c. 1900)
 (tr. by R. Cover, E. Gendler, and A. Porat)