1999

Ecology and the Jewish Spirit: Where Nature and the Sacred Meet

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ECOLOGY AND THE JEWISH SPIRIT: WHERE NATURE AND THE SACRED MEET. Edited, and with Introductions by Ellen Bernstein. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1998. Pp. 277. $23.95.

It's a real shame, but all political and social movements, at some point, break up into factions. The factions debate their relative necessity, claim authority over areas of discourse and action, and generally vie for power. They stop coordinating and communicating with each other. There are occasional acts of sabotage. The competition of the market economy (including the grant-funded non-profit sector) and the expanse of human vanity demand this distinction. Everyone needs to find their niche. An ecologist understands this as well as an economist, an activist as well as a lobbyist, a rabbi as well as a lawyer.

In her Introduction to the thirty seven essays collected in *Ecology and the Jewish Spirit: Where Nature and the Sacred Meet*, Ellen Bernstein, founder of Shomrei Adomah, an institution dedicated to illuminating Jewish ecological perspectives and renewing Jewish spirituality, identifies the environmental crisis as "at heart, a crisis of values." This identification, a response to the piecemeal, problem-solving approach prevalent in the mainstream legislative, legal, scientific, technological, and academic communities, informs Bernstein's purposes in editing this book: to further the work of Shomrei Adomah, to reinject a sense of mystery and reverence into the debates about the environment, and to endorse the inherent value of Nature.

Already red flags are waving, and banners are boasting opposition: "Impractical!" "Impossible!" "Clean Air Takes Work, Not Prayer!" But the environmental movement necessarily encompasses individuals, groups, and perspectives both religious and secular, political and not. *Ecology and the Jewish Spirit* avoids polemics— the project is not to foster conflict or alienate factions— and Bernstein limits her introductory critique to labeling the mainstream approach reductionist and overly utilitarian. She does, after all, see God in Nature. In place of argument, the book provides an alternative orientation towards the relationship between humanity and the environment in the contemporary world, without forcing the reader to choose sides, or convert.

Bernstein divides the book into three interrelated sections:

Sacred Place, Sacred Time, and Sacred Community. The first two sections consist of two categories of essays: historical analyses and scriptural interpretations, and personal narratives that evoke the possibilities and practices joining Jewish spirituality to Nature. The third section addresses, first, the place of humanity in the cosmos and, second, the relationships and responsibilities amongst people and between humanity and the environment. Though the book's division offers a useful, if somewhat haphazard, framework, the diverse essays lack a formidable coherence. Given the enormity of the essays' subject and the breadth of the issues they raise, their relatively short lengths preclude rigorous analysis.

While reading the book I often drifted into memory. It is autumn. The High Holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur cycle around, and my family shuffles over to synagogue for our annual prayers of supplication and praise. Why does my father, each and every year, at each and every service, fall so obviously asleep during the rabbi's sermon? Moreover, why does my father always feel the need to discuss the issues raised while he so serenely slept? Allow me to answer both questions at once: the situation arises because, while the rabbi's words import the weight of learning, they are for the most part dull. Or more accurately, perhaps the rabbi, full of lively ideas and relevant considerations, phrases his words in such a way as to make them *sound* dull. His voice is nasally, and his syntax drones. Many of the essayists in this collection suffer the same difficulties.

Yet, there are tasty vittles for the mind and soul tucked into the book's pages. Factoids, interpretations, and stories to inspire the creative spirit and motivate the novitiate mind. In the section Sacred Place, one author explains that in Genesis God acts directly on humanity, while in Deuteronomy the land becomes the intermediary between people and God. If we follow the agreement of the covenant, we will receive not only the land of Canaan itself, but also the rains to nourish the land and our bodies. If we fail to live up to our end of the bargain, then the land will go dry and collect pollution. The pollution corresponds to the ethical and moral failings, the spiritual pollution, of humanity. In this contractual arrangement, our actions introduce the cause. Nature and God respond.

Another author introduces the concept of panpsychism, the omnipresence of mind. She claims that the legal element of reciprocity in the covenant suggests an awareness and intention present in Nature. She supports her argument with readings of Psalm 148, the Song of the Three Jews (an Apocryphal addition

to the Book of Daniel), and *Perek Shira*, a mystical hymn from sometime between the fifth and seventh centuries. Each of these works portrays the characters of the natural world— the animals, plants, wind, rain and stars— praising God in song, word, and proclamation, blurring the distinction between metaphor and literality.

An historical essay illustrates the influential conception of divine property which arose during the Babylonian exile. Driven from their ransacked Temple, their sacred center, and their blessed holy homeland, the Jews needed to find ways to maintain their identity, support their community, and foster their spirituality. The Babylonian rabbinate, and other exiled Jews, responded by imbuing the land on which they lived with religious significance through the observance of Jewish law. This act recognized the holiness inhering in all land, defined the observance of Jewish law as the principle of Jewish identity, and thus perpetuated the survival of Diaspora communities.

The narratives examining Judaism's sense of Sacred Place include: a re-telling of the story of Job that emphasizes his connection to, and the aura of, the desert; a personal exposition of how the experience of walking and wilderness forms one author's identity as a wandering Jew; and a short story by Robert Sand revealing the relationship between person, history, and place on a rainy morning in Newark, New Jersey (another sacred center for a different generation of Diaspora Jews).

The section Sacred Time introduces the distinction between cyclical and linear time. Linear time represents the assertion of God as an actor in history, which is how many American Jews understand God's Presence in the Bible. Cyclical time represents the timeless and eternal aspects of divinity, the God of Paradox, and moves in the rhythm of the festival year.

One author recounts the history of the development of the Jewish calendar. During the years in Egypt and Exodus, the Jewish people relied on the sun to determine the seasons and the moon to determine the dates of festivals. The seasons and festivals were inextricably linked in the celebrations of harvest and liberation. In the time of the Monarchies, when Israel split into Ephraim in the north and Judah in the south, the calendar became a political tool used for social and bureaucratic unification. Living in different climates, the people of Ephraim experienced different seasons in different times than the people of Judah and so lived by a different festival cycle. In Babylonian times, the rabbis inserted the leap month of Adar, seven times every nineteen years, into the calendar, and re-named the

months with ordinal numbers to represent their growing monotheism. During the Rabbinic age, the ritual of declaring the new moon took place in a courtyard in Jerusalem where individuals would claim witness to the new moon, and the rabbinate court would declare it, and there would be great dancing and merrymaking throughout the city. This history exhibits the vitality and flexibility of the relationship between place, time, and community.

Another author discusses the potentially ecological orientation of the Sabbath. He points out that one is not meant to use energy excessively, nor purchase any material goods on the Sabbath. It is a day of living simply. Several analytical essays throughout the book address this issue of consumption. One notes that the Halachah, the body of Jewish law, promotes balance between work and rest, between transformation and preservation, and emphasizes modesty and restraint. Another points to Judaism's focus on the details of day-to-day living as a possible medium in which to consider what we eat, what we wear, what we buy and from whom.

In an attempt to reinvigorate the festival cycle with contemporary relevance, a series of personal accounts tell of religious renewal through ritual reconstruction. Here the values and practices of individuals, whether planting barley or canoeing down a river, supplant the large-picture emphases of legislative and political change.

The final section, Sacred Community, examines the place of humanity in the cosmos and our moral relationships in this world. One essay examines the relationship of chaos and order in the two creation stories of Genesis: cosmic and anthropological. Other essays look more closely at the Jewish laws of agriculture and charity and the requirements imposed upon polluting businesses. Unfortunately, the particular details of these laws are more than a bit dated, and they do not prove particularly illuminating in thinking about sustainability, economic inequality, or environmental justice.

Ecology and the Jewish Spirit, in its attempt to reinvigorate Judaism with relevance and significance, succeeds in providing a general sense of the sorts of things that progressive, reconstructionist, environmentalist Jews are thinking about. In introducing a variety of alternative approaches to Nature, it adds its own disparate voice to the discourse considering the relationship between humanity and the environment. Yet, while it warms my heart to know that there are others out there who revere the great mystery, and the words in these pages tickle my intellect,

the essays generally fail to excite my own sense of the Sacred in Nature.

Mike Burger

THE FORGIVING AIR: UNDERSTANDING ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE by Richard C.J. Somerville. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996, Paperback 1998. Pp. 195. $ 13.95.

The Forgiving Air by Richard Somerville is a remarkably readable and enjoyable text that provides lay readers with a basic understanding of complex global environmental issues. Recently updated and released in paperback, the book translates technical atmospheric and climate science into a form well suited for the non-scientist. Somerville emphasizes the importance of an educated public versed in basic atmospheric science that will be better able to participate in ongoing environmental dialogues. As a researcher and educator, Somerville believes that "the most appropriate contribution [he] can make . . . is to provide an account of the relevant science that is accurate, balanced, concise, up-to-date, and reader-friendly." *The Forgiving Air* fulfills that responsibility.

The book is a multi-faceted educational tool that provides not only a primer on basic atmospheric science, but also a broad understanding of the history and challenges faced by atmospheric scientists in examining complex global environmental problems. The book is organized into nine chapters, each designed to stand largely on its own. Three of the chapters are dedicated to specific atmospheric phenomena— depletion of the ozone layer, the greenhouse effect, and acid rain— and provide brief overviews of the chemical and physical science of each. The additional chapters are a more general introduction to atmospheric research and outline scientific, political, and social solutions to atmospheric environmental problems. In the last chapter, Somerville emphasizes the practicalities of doing scientific research and the importance of funding both big and little science in a field where discovery is often unpredictable.

Although *The Forgiving Air* is not a comprehensive text, the work is well-written and scholarly. While those already well-versed in global change issues and atmospheric science will find this book fairly basic, lay readers will embrace its interdisciplinary, non-threatening approach to the translation of hard atmospheric science. The author approaches the subject by using