



The Sacred Earth

Jewish Perspectives on Our Planet

Study and Discussion Guide

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Introduction

Within Jewish tradition, different texts, stories, laws, and customs provide various ways to think and act. The realms of thought and action are separate but connected. Our thoughts and beliefs inform our perspectives on life, which then influence our behaviors. Likewise, our actions also have the power to influence our thinking and shift our beliefs. When it comes to addressing the climate crisis, environmental activists may jump straight to action. What behaviors can we change? What choices can we make to mitigate the destruction? What actions can we take to repair our world?

As a Jewish response to the climate crisis, *The Sacred Earth: Jewish Perspectives on Our Planet* does not merely focus on actions and behaviors. The realm of action is necessary, as we cannot repair the world without doing the work. However, we must not forsake the realm of thought. This study and discussion guide will be organized thematically based on these two realms. The first part, “Reframing Our Perspectives,” covers thought, while the second, “Pathways Forward,” addresses action. Each larger theme has smaller subthemes which will be explored through the chapters of *The Sacred Earth*.

Reframing Our Perspectives

The first part of the guide explores various ways we as Jews can change our perspectives of and relationships with the earth. Some chapters in this section explore theology, our conception of God, and our understanding of what God asks of us. These conceptions include the belief that God is present within nature, or the belief that God appointed humans to be stewards of the earth. Other chapters in this section explore Jewish understandings of time and the seasons, reshaping how our calendar year can connect us to the natural world and its transitions through time. Other chapters focus on how we conceptualize community and our connections to the living world. By reframing our perspectives, we can reevaluate our responsibilities to the natural world and its inhabitants, and thus find meaning and purpose to fuel our actions in repairing the world.

Pathways Forward

The second part of this guide leads us into the realm of action. While new outlooks can inspire and energize us, we still need to create pathways of action. There are several possible pathways, each offering different outcomes. Some may be familiar to us, such as activism or sustainability. However, additional pathways offer more access points. There is a pathway of experience, which creates interactions with the world and its inhabitants. A specifically Jewish pathway is that of ritual, which enables the translation of spiritual belief into embodied experiences. Prophecy and halachah are other pathways that can guide us in living out our core Jewish values.

How to Use This Guide

After reframing our perspectives to create strong foundations of belief, we can use pathways forward to engage in the actions of repairing our world. However, these categories of thought and action are not necessarily sequential, but mutually reinforcing. If we feel depleted or despairing, we can energize ourselves by reframing our perspectives. If we feel motivated but unsure how to act, we can find inspiration in the pathways forward. The cycles of thought and action will be a lifelong journey.

Just as our own journeys will not be linear, this guide does not need to be used in a linear fashion. Deliberately designed to put chapters in conversation together, this guide encourages readers to think thematically. It can be used in book clubs, adult education classes, social justice groups, teen programming, climate action task forces, or even as inspiration for a sermon or lecture. It can be used with large groups, or in *chavruta* (study pairs). It can also be used with the “jigsaw” method: group members split into *chavruta* to each learn different subsections, after which they rejoin the group to teach the others about their subsections. You do not need to have read the entirety of *The Sacred Earth* to use this guide. You could read through the guide from start to finish, or you could browse the subsections to select ones of particular interest. Each subsection is self-contained, only referencing the two to four chapters grouped within it. Every chapter of *The Sacred Earth* is represented in a group without repetition. Each subsection includes key quotes from the chapters referenced along with questions to foster discussion.

Since many chapters within *The Sacred Earth* share similar themes and topics, the separate themes established in this guide are primarily for the purpose of discussion. For example, most chapters could fit under the “theology” theme, and Part One of the book is specifically focused on theology. The chapters in this guide’s theology section were chosen not as the quintessential chapters on theology, but as perspectives to be in direct dialogue. Some chapters were grouped together because of similar ideologies or approaches, while others were paired because of their differing points of view.

Just as the pieces within *The Sacred Earth* represent a diversity of perspectives, so too will those who use this guide. Discussion often includes—and is strengthened by—disagreement. The goal of this guide is to foster discussion and sometimes disagreement for the sake of learning. Because of the possible sensitive nature within disagreement, it might be helpful to establish a classroom *b’rit* (covenant) for how to structure discussion. Carrying on the Jewish tradition of *machloket l’shem shamayim* (disagreement for the sake of heaven), may this guide be used to explore and honor the myriad ways we as Jews can be in sacred relationship with our planet.

Suggested *B’rit*:

1. I will use “I statements” when expressing my opinions, with the understanding that others may not agree with my opinions.
2. I will disagree with opinions, not people.
3. I will engage in discussion with the goals of *Torah lishmah* (learning for the sake of learning) and *machloket l’shem shamayim* (disagreement for the sake of Heaven).

Reframing Our Perspectives

Theology

Out of the thirty-six chapters in *The Sacred Earth*, twenty relate to theology. The following chapters, however, place theology front and center. Theology explores our understanding of God, including God's interactions with us and the natural world. Traditional theologies declaring that God is separate from us and the natural world have been used in defense of behaviors that harm our earth and the life upon it. The following chapters explore eco-theologies that may change our perspectives of and relationships with the earth.

Chapters:

5. A Natural Jewish Theology: God's Covenant with the Earth by Rabbi David Mevorach Seidenberg
17. The Sacred Whole of Creation: *Sefer Y'tzirah* and Jewish Eco-theology by Rabbi Jill Hammer, PhD
18. *Hitbod'dut*: Finding the Divine through Solitude in Nature by Rabbi Eli Herb

Key quotes:

5. "For humanity to meet this challenge, we need to de-center humanity and re-center the principle of life in all beings, which we may collectively call the biosphere or Gaia. . . . [T]he Israelites believed in a different kind of agriculture that would treat the land as sacred, as a subject with innate rights, needs, and desires. And they believed in a covenant between God and the land, even to the extent that the land's desires come before our own needs" (39; 41).
17. "The God of *Sefer Y'tzirah* is an immanent God, dwelling within Creation, not in hidden worlds. God does not rule the place from outside, but rather from within: God's rule extends from the shrine at the center 'out to eternity.' . . . How would we treat the water, the air, the animals and plants, other human bodies (including poor, Black and Brown, disabled bodies, which our culture frequently disregards) if we truly understood these entities as part of our own bodies, interwoven with each moment of our lives?" (153; 155).
18. "Among the elements of *hitbod'dut* that are uncomfortable to embrace as practice, *bitul*, 'self-nullification,' is perhaps the most frightening. Allowing the self to dissolve into the Infinite is terrifying because, in many ways, the act resembles death. . . . The practice is re-sourcing precisely because it puts us in direct contact with the vibrancy of the earth and the presence of God. Through these experiences, our faith grows, and the love of that which we are working so hard to protect, our Mother Earth and all her life forms, becomes inspired and deeply connected" (162; 164–65).

Discussion questions:

1. Gaia theology suggests everything has a soul, including animals, plants, and even the land itself. How might our behaviors change if we adopt this theology?
2. A theology of immanence suggests God is present within all of Creation and

thus all created things are connected through the godliness within them. Do you believe in this theology? How is this theology different from or similar to Gaia theology?

3. *Hitbod'dut* suggests we disconnect ourselves from external stimuli in order to feel more connected to God and nature. Have you ever “disconnected” to foster connection? How might you use *hitbod'dut* in your own life?

Divinity within Nature

Traditional theologies often place God outside of the natural world, imagining that God created the world separate from Godself, like an artisan crafting from clay. However, other theologies believe in an immanent God who cannot be separated from the natural world that God created, therefore locating God as present within nature. There are two main ways to conceptualize God within nature: God dwells in nature as God’s home and resting place, or nature as a part of, or an expression of, God. Both of these proclaim the holiness of our natural world.

Chapters:

- 10. *Adam v’Teva: A Renewed Relationship with Humanity and the Earth* by Rabbi Nate DeGroot
- 19. *Desert Torah: Listening for God in the Wilderness* by Rabbi Mike Comins
- 36. *Learning from Rocks: Sacred Stones in the Torah* by Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, DMin

Key quotes:

- 10. “At its core, Judaism is an earth-based religion. With all of this in mind, we must ask again: how is it possible that Judaism could have no word for “nature” for the first two thousand-plus years of its existence? For Jews, everything—including, and perhaps especially, nature—is part of the Divine. *Ein od milvado* (Deuteronomy 4:35), our Chasidim teach us: there is nothing other than God Godself. Given that, there was no need for our ancestors to distinguish between God and the natural world, between divinity and physicality, and between that which will be and that which is” (86).
- 19. “[T]he lower Judean desert can go years without rainfall. When that happens, the Jericho rose shrivels into a small ball of tangled fibers. It can detach from its roots and travel like a tumbleweed. When the drought is prolonged, a part of its seeds will feed on the rest to stay alive. And when the rain comes, the Jericho rose fully expands in four hours, turning green and reproducing before the moisture in the soil evaporates. Christian pilgrims named it the ‘resurrection plant.’ Thirst spawns creativity, patience, extreme receptivity, growth, and so much more that a student of Torah does well to emulate. . . . Like a desert plant, I choose life. I seek connection” (169–70).
- 36. “I propose that we look at this time from the perspective of stone—that we stand between a rock and a hard place in order to reimagine our relationship to the larger environment. Because we see our history in the face of a mountain, sacred moments in stone, we join the rabbinic imagination where rocks are the bearers of story. . . . Rock appears permanent and lifeless, but . . . the inanimate

is alive with narrative that calls us to treat the earth as sacred, to understand the places on which we stand as holy” (329).

Discussion questions:

1. Divinity within nature can be literal (the earth itself is holy) or figurative (the earth can teach us about divinity). Chapters 10 and 36 offer literal perspectives of divinity in nature, while Chapter 19 offers a more metaphorical perspective. Which perspective resonates more with you?
2. When have you experienced divinity in nature? How might you create or sustain such experiences?
3. Rabbi Sasso suggests we look at time from the perspective of stone. What other aspects of nature could facilitate a holy shift in perspective this way, and what perspectives might they offer?

Stewardship

Stewardship in this context is the belief that humans do not own any land, but rather work and keep the land that God owns. This concept of stewardship contrasts with the perspective that humans were gifted the earth to have dominion over (see Chapter 4). The key component of stewardship is the belief that we do not act for ourselves alone. Whether we are responsible to God, to our community, or to the land itself, stewardship emphasizes our humble position in relation to the earth.

Chapters:

4. Humanity and the Earth: Dominion versus Stewardship by Jeremy Benstein, PhD
24. Resetting the Planet through *Sh'mitah* by Nigel S. Savage
26. *Birkat HaMazon: A Call to Environmental Awareness* by Rabbi Dennis C. Sasso, DMin

Key quotes:

4. “This responsibility is at the root of the very important contemporary notion of stewardship. Classically, to be a steward is to be in the middle. . . . The steward is responsible *to* the one who is really in charge and at the same time responsible *for* the things entrusted. There is no traditional Hebrew term for the idea of stewardship, but it seems clear that this is another good translation of the biblical ideal of *l'ovdah ul'shomrah*” (35).
24. “I was struck that the Sabbatical year in the biblical narrative is not simply about having less, acquiring less, and living more simply. It is also very much focused on *aniyei amecha*—the poor of your community. Not buying books or liquor may have caused me to consume a little less, but it did not help anyone else. My intention was to put aside what I otherwise would have spent on books, liquor, and clothes in the course of a year and to find ways to give an equivalent amount of money directly to those in need, over and above whatever I normally give” (220–21).
26. “The second blessing, *Birkat HaAretz*, gives thanks for the ‘desirable, good, and

ample land' entrusted to our ancestors, for deliverance from bondage, for the ancestral covenant, and for the gift of Torah. . . . The particular focus of this blessing does not compromise its universality. It underscores the trust that even in times of adversity, gratitude is concretized in relationship to the land, a relationship of appreciation, reciprocity, and stewardship, rather than entitlement" (234).

Discussion questions:

1. How are these three examples of stewardship similar and different? Which model of stewardship do you resonate most with?
2. Chapter 24 introduces the idea of a modern *sh'mitah* where every seventh year a person makes a lifestyle change to reduce consumerism and help their community. What is a modern *sh'mitah* practice you could undertake? What is one our community could undertake?
3. Stewardship is ultimately about relationship and the responsibility that stems from it. Chapter 26 suggests that gratitude is a necessary component of our relationship with the land. How does gratitude affect your relationships? How could we use gratitude to be better stewards of the earth?

Interconnectedness

The following chapters explore the theme of interconnectedness. If everything is connected to everything else, then we are united with all things, and thus nothing is outside of our care. Living beings are connected to each other and to our earth through the gift of life and the experience of living. To care for God and ourselves is to care for the world and its inhabitants.

Chapters:

- I. Jewish Ecological Wisdom for the Anthropocene Age by Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, PhD
6. God as the Connective Tissue of the Universe by Rabbi Mordechai Liebling
- II. Reclaiming *V'hayah Im Shamo'a*: Our Actions Have Consequences by Rabbi Devorah Diana Lynn

Key quotes:

- I. "Instead of accentuating the transcendence of God and Creation, Kabbalah highlights immanence and interconnectedness. All aspects of reality manifest the presence of God, since the ineffable YHVH is 'stamped' or 'sealed' into all existents. Not only humans were created in the 'divine image,' but all beings, terrestrial and celestial, human and nonhuman, were so created" (8).
6. "The great lie of Western civilization is that we are essentially separate beings. It is not possible for humans to live outside of community with others, be that other humans or the other creatures with whom we share this planet. Perhaps foremost among my experiences of the Divine, I see God to be the Connective Tissue of the Universe. For me it follows that sin—a disruption of godliness—is any time we break or violate the connective tissue" (52–53).
- II. "The ominous language of closed skies and unproductive soil in the second

paragraph of the *Sh'ma* echoes the headlines of drought in the American Midwest; flaring and out of control wildfires in Australia and in the American West; melting permafrost and ice in Alaska, Greenland, Antarctica, and the Arctic; and rising seas, forcing island and coastal people from their homes and off the lands that once sustained them. The year 2020, with the COVID-19 pandemic and shutdown, demonstrated how quickly the entire globe could be knocked off-kilter. Paradoxically, our retreat from business as usual saw skies and waters clear and wildlife thrive. It was a grim demonstration of both our power as a species and our impotence” (95).

Discussion questions:

1. Chapters 1 and 6 depict a universal interconnectedness: everything is unified through God. Chapter 11 delves into a specific interconnectedness: weather and environmental disasters are connected to our actions. How are these various explorations of interconnectedness similar or different from each other? What resonates with you?
2. How might a perspective of interconnectedness inspire us to environmental activism? How can we incorporate this ideology into our own lives, and into our community?
3. When was a time you felt connected to something you previously saw as separate from yourself—a time when you felt there was a Connective Tissue of the Universe?

Community

The following chapters have a dominant theme of community. While community could be a vehicle of change and thus a path forward, these chapters focus on community as a mindset. This community mindset includes shifting our focus to community, rethinking what community is and to which communities we belong, and considering what responsibilities communities have.

Chapters:

29. The Land’s Still Small Voice Beckons Us All: Preserving a Collective, Zionist Environmental Ethic by Alon Tal, PhD
30. “You Are but Tenants and Settlers”: Ecology, Anti-colonialism, and the Theology of *Galut* by Daniel Delgado
34. Sustainable Eating and Eco-justice: Lessons from Jewish Tradition by Rosa Fink, Tanya Fink, MS, RD, and Rabbi Daniel B. Fink

Key quotes:

29. “Zionism has always been focused on meeting needs of the Jewish people as a collective entity. The Land of Israel and its environmental health were part of the common cause to which private interests were expected to yield. The needs of individual Jews were secondary. Indeed, for most of the past century, Zionism was synonymous with sacrificing for this greater good” (267).
30. “The theology of *galut* [exile] suggests a different path: that of belonging with the earth, a path of humility rather than power. In this worldview, we see *galut*

as a gift, a chance to generate holiness wherever we live. We see Judaism as both a land-based religion and a Diasporic one. We see any land we live in as a place with holy secrets to teach—but only if approached in the right way, with the right action and intention” (282).

34. “While affirming that our personal practices matter and each of us should do what we can to green our own dietary habits, we also recognize that such lifestyle changes often depend upon levels of wealth and privilege that relatively few enjoy. Furthermore, such a narrow focus can distract us from holding government and corporations accountable for their actions—and inactions—which play a disproportionate role in climate change. Personal responsibility is necessary but not sufficient; we must also address the deep systemic failings and inequities that demand major shifts in public policy” (311–12).

Discussion questions:

1. In each of these chapters, identifying with a community motivates individuals to take care of the land for the betterment of the whole community. What were some resonances or dissonances you felt in these chapters?
2. To which communities do you belong? How are you responsible for your communities? How are your communities responsible for you?
3. Western societies tend to prioritize individualism over community, while Judaism tends to prioritize community over the individual. How can we grow our community mindset? What practical steps can we take to prioritize our communities?

Time

These next chapters all share a theme of time. Time can refer to a natural phenomenon (the passage of time, the cycles of the sun and moon) or to a social construct (the marking of time in hours, days, months, etc.). Using time as a perspective can help us connect human-designed time with naturally occurring time, further linking us to our natural world.

Chapters:

2. *Healing Adam and Adamah: Ancient Torah, Action Today* by Rabbi Arthur O. Waskow, PhD
20. *Composting and Sacred Time: Lessons from a Pumpkin* by Rabbi Michael Birnholz
22. *The Climate and the Calendar: A Talmudic Perspective* by Rabbi Dvora E. Weisberg, PhD

Key quotes:

2. “How then do we put our minds and bodies, heart and soul, into the journey? I turn to the cycle of our holy days. Most of these days are the Jewish offspring of a long love affair between earth and humanity. Now that both earth and human earthlings—*adamah* and *adam*, in Hebrew—are wounded and in serious trouble, let us reawaken and reframe their offspring, our festivals and fast days, to rejuvenate their endangered parents” (16–17).

20. “One might say that the rind and innards are the past and the seeds are the future. The rind is the part of the pumpkin one cannot consume and is left behind. The seeds can be planted to create a new generation of plants to bear more fruit. On the other hand, the equation can be flipped completely. . . . [O]ne can see the rind decomposing with other vegetable waste, becoming the soil, ready and full of nutrients for the next generation. The seeds, in contrast, are the link to the past, holding the genetic memory of the plant at its core, ready to bring that past through the present into the future” (176).
22. “[T]he Talmud offers us several models for responding to the disparity between what we want and what we see. We can be like the three herders, attempting to force the world to adjust to our desires. . . . We can be like the king and the High Priest, prioritizing the financial or personal well-being of the powerful over the needs of the many. Or we can be like the Sages, recognizing that whatever our preferences, we must work in harmony with the natural world. Just as the Rabbis of late antiquity used the science of their time to establish the calendar, we can use climate science to determine what is required to protect the planet” (204).

Discussion questions:

1. According to these chapters, what are some benefits of linking the past with the future? How can we engage in the process of linking the two?
2. Rabbi Waskow suggests we experience our holy days through the lens of the climate crisis; for example, during Passover we could think about modern-day “plagues” resulting from climate “pharaohs.” How might you experience Passover or any other Jewish holiday through an environmental lens?
3. These chapters distinguish between the natural phenomenon of time (such as the decomposing of a pumpkin, or the changing of the seasons) and the social construct (the calendar cycle and its holy days). Rabbi Weisberg teaches how important it was that Jewish time synchronized with nature’s seasons. How do you see natural time infused in Jewish time, and why do you think the connection is crucial?

Pathways Forward

Experience

We have many experiences in our lives. In fact, we are constantly experiencing *something*, even if we are not mindful of what that something really is. These chapters focus on using experience as a motivation for action. By creating intentional experiences, whether in nature, with natural elements, or through creating art, we can tap into our spiritual and emotional selves to inspire us toward activism.

Chapters:

- 7. Earth, Water, Air, and Fire: The Four Elements as a Language for Sanctifying the Earth by Rabbi Jill Hammer, PhD
- 16. Awesome Heights: Mountains in the Bible by Rabbi Eric L. Abbott
- 21. The Weight of the World: Spiritual Grounding through Making Art by Rabbi Adina Allen

Key quotes:

- 7. “We see the elements throughout the Jewish year as well. Consider how many holidays are focused on one or more of them: Chanukah celebrates fire; Tu BiSh’vat, the festival of the trees, is a holiday of the earth; Lag BaOmer is a holiday of bonfires; Sukkot celebrates earth (through the *lulav*) and water (through the prayers for rain). On Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, the blowing of the shofar is, among other things, a ritual of breath and sound—gifts of air” (63).
- 16. “I recall a trip to Israel I led for college students when I guided them atop a rocky height in the desert. Far from the glow and cacophony of cities, in the pitch black of night with only stars and silence surrounding them, students came face-to-face with the still, small voice. They expressed notions of experiencing something profound, something ineffable—something radically amazing. . . . These biblical moments on mountains have something to teach us all: how to create intentional moments in which we can open ourselves up to the possibilities of wonder” (146).
- 21. “In the throes of despair, unable to evoke anything of hope to say, I turned to the Jewish Studio Process. I closed my computer, set an intention, opened my paints, and let myself be soothed by the way water and color flowed onto the paper, one hue of blue mixing into another, clouds, heavens, sea, sky swirled together as one. The movement of brush on paper absorbed my attention, and my thoughts *about* the world began to dissipate as my sense of connection *to* the world began to grow” (184–85).

Discussion questions:

- 1. Why do you think so many of our rituals and holidays center around the elements? What can we learn from experiencing the elements in our rituals?
- 2. What is the difference between thinking *about* the world and feeling connected *to* the world? Art is the catalyst for Rabbi Allen to shift her perspective; what experience might be a catalyst for you?

3. When was a time you experienced the natural world as a catalyst for awe? How can we use this power of awe to create change?

Sustainability

Sustainability refers to the ability to meet our current needs without jeopardizing the ability of future generations to meet theirs. A sustainable process minimizes waste and damage, relying on recycling and rejuvenation. An unsustainable process cannot be long-lasting, because it depletes resources or generates harmful waste. These chapters explore sustainability and how it can relate to Jewish environmentalism.

Chapters:

3. *B'midbar: A Contemporary Midrash* by Rabbi Iah Pillsbury
9. *Yishuv HaOlam: The Jewish Imperative of Sustainability* by Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin and Rabbi Avram Israel Reisner
25. *Creating a Local Lulav* by Rabbi Shoshana Meira Friedman

Key quotes:

3. “Instead of sleeping soundly at night, Addy would lie awake [and] . . . remind herself of task after task left to perform in the coming days. And with every . . . task she thought of, her chest constricted a little bit tighter, one small stone lying upon her chest and then another and another—until she felt each of them piled upon her like a funeral pyre, leaving her paralyzed and afraid. She never knew when exactly she managed to finally fall asleep each night, but she woke more and more exhausted with each passing day” (24).
9. “In reading ‘Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and tame it’ (Genesis 1:28), we have too often taken our commandment to conquer the world as an unlimited right, not taking into consideration the obligations implicit in Genesis 2 that humankind’s mission is to ‘work it and keep it’ (2:15). It is ultimately this latter requirement that is most consistent with the current demands of the mitzvah of *yishuv haolam*” (78).
25. “When I wave a local four species, I am enacting my connection to and longing for the land on which I live. In this age of climate change and ecological collapse, I am called to root myself passionately and proactively on the actual land upon whom I live, day after day” (229).

Discussion questions:

1. How does “*B'midbar: A Contemporary Midrash*” relate to sustainability? What can it teach us about our own efforts to live sustainably?
2. What is the mitzvah of *yishuv haolam*? What are some ways we have fulfilled this mitzvah, and ways we have failed? How can we actively pursue *yishuv haolam* as individuals or as a community?
3. Rabbi Friedman transforms a Jewish ritual into a model of sustainable Jewish living. What are some ways you can live more locally and sustainably? What might be the downsides of those practices?

Activism

While much of *The Sacred Earth* discusses what could be considered activism, these chapters highlight specific tactics as critical components in our efforts to address the climate crisis. Each chapter finds a different way to relate environmental activism to Jewish tradition. For many, activism may appear to be the sole goal. In reality, we cannot engage in activism 100% of our time. While activism is crucial, it is only one out of many paths forward.

Chapters:

- 31. Healing the Environment through Global Interfaith Activism by Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz
- 32. *Beit Atid*: Synagogues as Laboratories for the Future by Rabbi Dean Shapiro
- 33. Achieving Zero Waste: A Synagogue Case Study by Rabbi Jonathan E. Blake, Ron Schulhof, and Michelle Sterling
- 35. Indigenous Land Acknowledgments: A Jewish Perspective by Rabbi Jessica Rosenberg

Key quotes:

- 31. “As I reflected on the issue at hand, I thought about the need for people of faith to speak out and foment a new spiritual revolution. . . . Only together can we repair a world brought to the brink by exploitation and plundering of its beauty. Modern societies as a whole have, in many ways, often belittled and outright rejected the call of religion to heal the global problems, yet there is much wisdom to be found within religious traditions—wisdom that can help us to assess, acknowledge, and heal” (286).
- 32. “Synagogues often understand themselves through a tripartite division—*beit k’neset*, *beit midrash*, *beit t’filah*—places of gathering, study, and prayer. As human society enters a substantial, all-systems transformation, congregations should add a fourth leg to that tripod: *beit atid*—a place for the future” (293–94).
- 33. “In translating our values into action, we adhered to one Jewish precept, the phrase known as *naaseh v’nishma*, which is translated to mean ‘we will do, and only then will we hear’ (Exodus 24:7). . . . *Naaseh v’nishma* provided us with the ‘push’ we needed to begin the work of zero waste at WRT, convinced, as we were (and remain), that our congregation and community would best learn about zero waste—the reasons for these practices, the benefits of adopting them—by *doing* them” (304).
- 35. “Colonization is a process that has taken centuries and is ongoing. Decolonization must also be an ongoing process. We must make moves toward decolonization in ways that repair the immense harm caused by settlers, restore human and ecological balance, and move us toward a livable future for all who are on and in relationship with this living earth” (326–27).

Discussion questions:

- 1. What is the relationship between religion and activism? How could our community become a *beit atid*?

2. What are the benefits and detriments of learning through doing? How could we utilize the benefits and prevent the detriments?
3. The activism in these chapters is either done through communal or individual action. What are the similarities and differences between communal and individual activism? How could you as an individual mobilize your community to action?

Halachah

Often translated as “Jewish law,” halachah refers to complex systems directing us to live our lives in accordance with the commandments in the Torah. Rather than following the letter of the law, the early Reformers offered a new perspective on halachah that favored practices they viewed as ethical or leading to ethical behavior. Modern Reformers continue to reframe halachah as an ever-evolving system that can refer to a variety of different practices and observances. The following chapters explore possible ways of modifying halachah to address environmental concerns.

Chapters:

8. *What if the Earth Is Alive?: A Post-halachic Theology* by Shaul Magid, PhD
28. *Beyond Bal Tashchit: Developing an Environmental Halachah* by Rabbi Mark Washofsky, PhD

Key quotes:

8. “Sometimes that which made traditional halachah easier now becomes prohibited. For example, disposable dishes and utensils and Styrofoam make traditional kashrut more convenient because one can more readily prevent mixing meat and milk dishes. But in an eco-kashrut, post-halachah register, they become damaging to the planet and thus prohibited as part of conscious acts of consumption that include environment waste” (71).
28. “What existing halachic rules and principles might we draw together to construct ‘Laws of Environmental Quality’? The most obvious starting point is the mitzvah known as *bal tashchit*, ‘do not destroy,’ based upon Deuteronomy 20:19, ‘When in your war against a city you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy [*lo tashchit*] its fruit-bearing trees.’ The tradition reads this mitzvah expansively as forbidding destructive behavior in general” (263).

Discussion questions:

1. These chapters mainly focus on preventing waste and destruction, which is often seen as a harm-reduction model. What are some possible benefits and detriments of a harm-reduction approach?
2. In what ways is our society guilty of *bal tashchit*? In what ways are you guilty?
3. Both of these chapters address the expansion of halachah to include environmental concerns. How could you follow your own eco-kashrut or environmental halachah?

Prophecy

Prophecy has always played an important role in Reform Jewish ideology, as the early Reformers looked to the prophets for guidance on how to live ethically and increase justice in our world. This influence has remained strong to this day, with many modern Reform Jews looking to the prophets for guidance. These two chapters each focus on a prophet and what that prophet's story can teach us about our own efforts in environmental justice.

Chapters:

12. What Can Jeremiah Teach Us about Climate Change? by Rabbi Elizabeth Bahar
13. How to Change Minds: Lessons from Jonah by Mirele B. Goldsmith, PhD

Key quotes:

12. “How do we respond to ongoing change beyond our control—change that will impact not simply us, but life and the planet itself? The beginning of human response is grief. Jeremiah is called the weeping prophet because throughout the Book of Jeremiah we read that he wept. The weeping was not done by Jeremiah alone, for even God wept for the disasters that were wrought. Grieving is a moral act, as it involves living here in the present while acknowledging what was lost” (105–6).
13. “Repentance is not a change of feeling or mind; it requires changes in outward behavior. According to Maimonides, we need to ask forgiveness, express remorse, and right the wrong we did. The real test of repentance is to act differently if the same situation happens again. Similarly, to achieve change on a systemic scale, a vision of the future and positive motivations are not enough. People need to move from feelings to action” (113–14).

Discussion questions:

1. Three tools Jeremiah uses are metaphor, grief, and hope. How does Jeremiah use these tools? How might we use these tools in our fight for climate justice?
2. Keeping in mind Maimonides's requirements for repentance, how might we be like the people of Nineveh and repent to save our earth?
3. What other prophets (Biblical or modern) speak out against injustice and are agents of change? How can we use these prophets in our own efforts to repair the world?

Ritual

Ritual is the embodied practice of our values and our beliefs—a way to express gratitude and praise, as well as a way to mark changes in time and significant events. Our rituals reflect our theologies, ideologies, and relationships with each other and the natural world. The following chapters focus on ritual as an expression of our values and beliefs regarding the climate crisis.

Chapters:

14. The Song of Songs: A Ritual Journey of Connection with Creation by Rabbi Shefa Gold

- 15. *The Rivers Will Clap Their Hands: Shabbat Rituals for Connecting to the Earth* by Rabbi Laura Rumpf
- 23. *Yizal Mayim: Water Rituals and Meditations* by Kohenet Shamirah Bechirah (Sarah Chandler)
- 27. *Yom Kippur: A Jewish Earth Day* by Rabbi Gila Caine

Key quotes:

- 14. “As I chant these words, I am rising toward the sunlight of glory and redemption, and at the same time, I am connecting myself to the deepest places in the world and in myself. The word for ‘valleys’ (*amakim*) also means ‘the depths.’ When we blossom from those depths, our beauty, however transient, is grounded in the fullness and power of our earthly existence” (121–22).
- 15. “[First step of the ritual:] Guide participants in a creative ‘round of applause’ for the natural world. Pour cups of wine or *Kiddush* grape juice for all who are gathered. Before reciting the Hebrew blessing, invite each person present to share one experience of wonder or gratitude connected with their experience of the earth and her resources” (132).
- 23. “Ritual Grounding as the Sap Flows. This outdoor or indoor ritual is meant to bring you into a balanced relationship with the earth and to connect with the season of the rising sap. Visualize, standing or sitting with your feet planted on the floor/ground, that you are a tree whose sap just began to flow again. . . .” (209).
- 27. “. . . Yom Kippur’s *Vidui* [confessional prayer] involves the whole community speaking our sins together. . . . In our days of climate crisis, mass extinction, and social upheaval, we must reconnect the ‘I’ and the ‘we.’ To bring a deep confession to our lips on Yom Kippur, we must first be able to imagine the terrible outcome of not recognizing our sins and offer a *Vidui* for our collective guilt” (242).

Discussion questions:

- 1. According to the readings, why is ritual important? Why do *you* think ritual is important?
- 2. In some of these rituals we imagine ourselves as plants; in others we give gratitude or confess. What are the purposes of these rituals, and how are they pathways forward?
- 3. How could you incorporate rituals for the earth in your own life? How could we incorporate them into our community? How could we use these rituals to change our behaviors?