Response Section

Life/Time

Reflections on Contemporary Scholarship in Jewish Environmentalism

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The historical interface between religion and ecology is frequently sought in the emergence of modernity as a nexus of events and ideas that disenchant nature, identified (white, male) human beings as masters of the cosmos, and established progress, both scientific and moral, as the foundational narrative of enlightenment. As we know all too well, this nexus of ideas, frequently incoherent and paradoxical, has facilitated the emergence of a self-destructive pathology by which human beings are in the midst of unraveling the delicate web of planetary processes that have enabled the flourishing of human life over the past 50,000 years. If there is any enlightenment that is taking place among human civilizations, it is that we are slowly waking up to the fact that we have been asleep at the wheel, to use David Grinspoon's (2016) analogy.

Marge Piercy, in the poem examined by Anat Koplowitz-Brier in this volume, captures this sensibility in our inability to comprehend what our living actually entails.

We live in the midst of clouds of other
lives we brush aside, bulldoze, poison,
eat unmourned.

The “clouds of other lives” that we “brush aside” speaks to a radical indifference to other (non-human, especially non-white and non-male human) life

that enables us to live our modern lives unfazed and unshamed by all the destruction that we create all around us, whether it is the single-use plastics that clog our oceans, the environmentally destructive mining of bitcoins that serve no purpose other than the preserving the secrets of speculators, or the so-called “cloud” that purports to store all our data in an ethereal network with no visible means of material support. In all cases, the destructive waste of our way of life is rendered invisible by the efficient power of technology.

Indeed it is the capacity of technology to conceal its own workings that renders it ever more beguiling, and it is precisely this guile that provides us with a moral imperative to expose technology’s workings and, indeed, its all-too-often invisible waste products. In this volume, Tafat Hacoheh-Bick discusses Haviva Pedaya’s book, *The Eye of the Cat*, set in the modern Israeli city of Beersheba, and exposes the ways in which modernity produces waste above all else. Beersheba lives in a constant state of construction and reconstruction, and rather than relegating all the waste byproducts of this city-building to the background, the novel foregrounds the incessant production of waste and devastation that takes place. All this occurs in the name of building a “holy land.” But the response to the production of waste all around us in our “environment” is not so simple as the despair of a paradise lost and the vain hope of a kingdom to come. Despite its critics and despisers, religion in modernity never quite succumbs to nostalgia. For Pedaya, waste forms the beginning point of a theology of recycling, even a theology of hope: “waste does not just disappear, and is not something that can be repressed; rather, it is something that one should become a part of, dwell in, and fix.”

If the attempt by Jewish writers, intellectuals and activists to address ecological devastation tells us anything, it is that religious life can never be fully captured by a linear historical process of “tradition” slowly succumbing to “modernity.” Religious life, rather, speaks to a continuous prophetic subversion of tenses, moments and historical choices. “And it shall come to pass,” quotes Pedaya approvingly, a mystical sentiment that offends our modern sensibility of individual agents determining the course of history through their free choices.

Yitzhak Lewis, a scholar of Jewish literature not represented in this volume, traces the emergence of Jewish literary modernism through the writings of the Hasidic Rabbi Nachman of Braslav (1772–1810). His study (Lewis 2020) calls into question conventional scholarly understanding of “modernity” or literary modernism as a movement predicated on a rupture with an idealized past or “tradition.” Instead, what we normally understand as modern Jewish literature emerges out of a long tradition of literary innovations, reconceptualizations, and engagements with both “tradition” and thinking about the future. As Nachman himself puts it, “I will take you by a new way—a way that has never before

existed. It is indeed an ancient way. And yet it is completely new" (quoted in Lewis 2020: 8).

One might argue, therefore, that most apt metaphor for thinking through the nexus of religion and ecology is that of recycling. Indeed, perhaps recycling is not so much metaphor as method: a way of engaging with traditions, lands and communities that enables us to dwell in the wastelands of modernity, amid the vestiges of half-forgotten traditions, not solely through lamentation, dust and sackcloth, nor through the nostalgic remembrance of things past, but also, and even, in hope of the things that "will come to pass." Traces of this method and this sensibility can be seen in Adrienne Krone's essay on Jewish environmental farms that have welcomed refugees for over a century, the earlier ones creating self-sufficient agricultural communities for Jews fleeing the Eastern European pogroms, the later ones providing an engagement with the land for those fleeing capitalist alienation. Her essay begins with the weeds, dust and heat of the Coastal Roots Farm in Encinitas, CA and shows how it is precisely those inhospitable elements of nature that provide the ground for humans to find their way.

The question that all religious traditions must face when coming to grips with the contemporary ecological crisis is whether this crisis is so new, so unprecedented, so vast in scale that their traditional teachings have anything meaningful to say. Can the core motifs that emerged in the Axial Age and gave rise to the ethics and rituals that shaped our ancient civilizations, speak to the pressing questions of the contemporary era. As Michael McElroy (2001: 32) famously asked, "Do we have the right to alter the composition of the global atmosphere if we are unable definitively to assess in advance its consequences?" And equally importantly, "If posterity is to serve as jury, to whom do we answer as judge?" As these questions demonstrate, ecological ethics demands a special attention to time that is rarely present in enlightenment thinking. If we cannot know the results of our actions for generations to come, on what basis can we possibly decide what is right?

It is at this point that religious traditions can legitimately enter the discussion, as they provide a speculative window that opens onto the vista not simply of an individual lifetime, but even onto the vast expanse of prehistory, afterlives, eternity, and the fate of the cosmos itself. In so doing religions declare some activities to be completely forbidden, and provide restraints on the Promethean overreach of human exceptionalism. Religions, in this regard, are some of the few remaining cultural forces that tell us that just because we can do something does not mean we should. When collecting eggs, do not take the mother at the same time (Deut 22:6–7) as Beth Berkowitz explains in her essay in this volume, demonstrating that the concern for life and for honoring

parents that runs throughout the Jewish tradition extends into the non-human realm. Berkowitz probes via the Jewish tradition the imagination of a motherhood that transcends species.

Such restraints, injunctions and prohibitions form the foundation of the Rabbinic tradition that drives Judaism to this day and, as the guest editors of this volume note in their essay on rethinking Halakhah in the Anthropocene, provide a “decolonial” alternative to the dominant form of legal and ethical reasoning in the modern West. Halakhah, they note, provides a “system of praxis with communal, affectual, and political implications” that attains a richness and complexity that goes far beyond the ethical limitations of the “individual moral adventure” noted by Amitav Ghosh (2016: 171) and may be better suited as a result for grappling with the temporal horizons longer than any individual’s lifetime that the ethics of climate change demands. Tanhum Yoreh, however, sounds a cautionary note here, in that many Jewish environmental precepts have traditionally fallen under the category of personal virtues rather than legal requirements. Given the overriding Jewish concern for life, however, Yoreh argues that once environmental ethics are framed in terms of the preservation of life, then there is a clear legal argument for mandating them within Halakhic law.

The concern for, and wonder at, life underpin the theological naturalism in the philosophies of Hans Jonas and Arthur Green, examined by Bar Guzi in this special edition. In Bar Guzi’s view the significance of their approach is that it embraces the scientific quest to understand the world we live in, but does not stop within scientific limits, seeking instead a “transcendental integrity” that has the capacity to inspire wonder and hope. This transcendence, however, is not to be sought beyond the world, or by rejecting scientific understanding of our material reality, but rather is to be sought within and through it. Such a paradoxical “immanent transcendence” resonates well with the paradoxes and contradictions that all the authors of these essays have been living through or, in Donna Haraway’s terms, “staying with the trouble”: a motherhood that transcends species; a waste that inspires hope; a past that is also the future; a new story that is also an old story. The power to subvert the fundamental dualisms that have given rise to our ecological catastrophe is richly revealed in these set of essays. Together they inspire hope for life/time.

References

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