
Our Covenant With Stones

A Jewish Ecology of Earth¹

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You will have a covenant with the rocks in the field.²

Environmentalism heralds a fresh conception of the individual and society in relation to the natural order, offering a new understanding of what it means to be human.³ Such a general reevaluation of the human condition elicits a Jewish response, in this instance evidenced by articles on Judaism and the environment.⁴ Rabbis and scholars of various perspectives who grapple with this popular movement strain Jewish writings through the standards of the Green perspective to argue the relevance of Jewish tradition. Consciously written to refute charges that Judaism (or the “Judeo-Christian heritage”) is the source of the problem,⁵ many of these essays are insightful, but most are episodic.⁶

The preponderance of these efforts assume that judgment ought to reflect

¹I want to express my gratitude to Rabbi Elic Spitz for his helpful critique, and to Dr. David Kracmer, Associate Professor of Talmud and Rabbinics at the Jewish Theological Seminary, for his generous gifts of time and insight in discussing this issue with me. My debt to Rabbi Max Kadushin, ז”ל, is readily apparent throughout this paper. Any errors are exclusively my own.

²Job 5:23. All Biblical quotations are from *Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures*, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985.

³For a lovely example of this broad approach, see “The Global Environmental Crisis,” by Jeremy Rifkin, in *The Green Lifestyle Handbook*, ed., Jeremy Rifkin, New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1990.

⁴Many are assembled in *Judaism and Ecology, 1970-1986: A Sourcebook of Readings*, Marc Swetlitz, ed., Wyncote: Shomrei Adamah, 1990.

⁵For examples, see Ake Hultkrantz, “Ecology,” *Encyclopedia of Religion*, IV, p. 581 and Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis,” *Science*, (10 March 1967), CLV: 1203-1207.

⁶The lone exceptions to this sporadic quality are Richard Schwartz, *Judaism and Global Survival*, New York: Atara Publishing Co., 1987, and *Judaism and Vegetarianism*, New York: Micah, 1988.

the standards of the environmental movement rather than an internal Jewish assessment of how our tradition and our God would have us relate to the world. In fact, such an evaluation should emerge organically from the categories of Jewish civilization and its writings, rather than from any wholesale adoption of contemporary environmentalism's standards. In practical terms, this apologetic effort has compiled a growing list of Jewish quotations which—removed from their original context or perspective—fit the established categories of environmentalism. Ruptured is the organic, Jewish relationship between Biblical verses and Rabbinic wisdom. The pillaged loot gathers dust in the storehouse of ecology.⁷

Such an approach may have been a necessary first step toward alerting Jews to the questions and criticisms raised by environmentalists. But the price we pay for that endeavor is a contextless collage of Rabbinic and Biblical sayings, avoiding the more comprehensive consideration of how Jewish tradition might respond to the larger question of living responsibly with nature, not to a specific political agenda.⁸ Such a procedure has an additional flaw: it concedes objective truth and universal morality to environmentalism when that movement simply embodies another particular perspective from which to examine the human condition.

We need a second stage, one which explores helpful conceptions of the Earth and humanity from within the context established by Jewish thought and writings. Although our tradition may say little directly about air pollution⁹ or about the polar ice caps, it does dwell at great length on how Jews are to live with the soil, on the sanctity of the Earth and its produce, the holiness of one particular place (*Eretz Yisrael*) and on particular times (*Shabbat*, *Yovel*, and the *Shemitah*). Perhaps if we begin with intrinsically Jewish categories we might construct a Jewish ecology, enriching the traditional structure of Judaism with a consciousness of environmental issues rather than simply tailoring Jewish religion to fit within the procrustean bed of a dismembered ecological Judaism.

⁷This same phenomenon, of framing external categories into which Jewish quotations or discussions are then made to fit, is the subject of heated debate within the study of religion generally. See, for example, the critique offered by E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977, especially the introduction, "The Holistic Comparison of Patterns of Religion." For a related critique, see also "In Comparison A Magic Dwells," in Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982. While both offer mutually exclusive approaches, they agree that removing an idea, term, or value from its context intrinsically distorts.

⁸For a similar critique, applied in another area, see Jakob J. Petuchowski, "The Limits of Self-Sacrifice," in *Modern Jewish Ethics: Theory and Practice*, Marvin Fox, ed., Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1975.

⁹Solitary passages from the Babylonian Talmud, such as *Bava Metzia* 101a restricting which types of wood may be burned on the altar to avoid excessive smoke, and *Tamid* 29b stating that smoke and the odor of a toilet are always undesired intrusions, are not sufficient to establish a Rabbinic ethic of air pollution. For an insightful discussion of this jurisprudential issue from the perspective of Jewish ethics generally, see Daniel H. Gordis, "Significance Through Symbol: Redefining Authority in Jewish Law." *University Papers*, Los Angeles: University of Judaism, 1986.

Territory Without Map: The Sanctity of the Soil

Jewish tradition is especially rich in its attention to the sanctity of the Land of Israel (*kedushat ha-aretz*).¹⁰ Since the topic of human relationships with the Earth is also a central concern of environmental movements, this subject might provide a useful model, allowing us to trace the contours of a central value-concept within Jewish religion while subsequently seeking more practical application.

Attention to the earth as a place of religious meaning pervades the Hebrew Bible (*Tanakh*).¹¹ The Creation narratives focus attention on the importance of the Earth, to the extent that the term itself (*adamah*) lends its name to the ultimate earthling (*Adam*).¹² The theme of creation, emphasizing God's sovereignty over the entire planet, repeats itself in several prophetic passages as well. Isaiah urges his audience to

Lift high your eyes and see:
Who created these?
He who sends out their host by count,
Who calls them each by name.
Because of His great might and vast power,
Not one fails to appear.¹³

Moses, standing before the burning bush on Horeb, receives the command to "remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground."¹⁴ The same ideology which portrays God as Creator of the heavens and the Earth also establishes a link between all lands and God. Perhaps this appreciation of the entire planet as the creation of the loving God also contributes to the venerable Israelite tradition extolling the wilderness as a place of holiness and purity.¹⁵ As the source of all places, God's sanctity must somehow touch every place.

Yet there is a dichotomy at the core of the Biblical understanding of the sanctity of soil. The whole world may be sacred, but one particular part of it boasts a special degree of holiness. While Israelites can observe their laws anywhere,¹⁶ there is an uncleanness which permeates the nations of the world. Thus Hosea speaks of the Israelites who "shall eat unclean food in Assyria"¹⁷ and Amos portrays the "unclean soil" to which Israel will be ban-

¹⁰For an extensive discussion of the importance of place and the sanctity of a specific location in Judaism, see Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987.

¹¹Sec T. H. Gaster, "Earth," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (IDB), Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962, 2:2-3.

¹²*Midrash Ha-Gadol, Bereshit*, and E. A. Speiser, *The Anchor Bible: Genesis*, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1982, n. 5, p. 16.

¹³Isaiah 40:26. See also Amos 5:8; Psalms 19:2; Psalms 24:1; and Psalms 105:44, 45.

¹⁴Exodus 3:5.

¹⁵Sec S. Talmon, "Wilderness," *IDB Supplement*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984, 946-948, and Exodus 4:22f; 33:12; Deuteronomy 27:9; I Kings 19:4-8; Hosca 2:14-15; Jeremiah 2:1; 31:2f.

¹⁶Psalms 105:44,45.

¹⁷Hosca 9:3. See also Ezekiel 4:13.

ished.¹⁸ The Land of Israel is clearly the focus of the Hebrew Bible's passion for land.

Repeatedly, the Torah describes the Land of Israel as "a good land,"¹⁹ one whose bounty reflects God's beneficence, not the result of any merit or labor on Israel's part.²⁰ The sanctity of *Eretz Yisrael* overrides the sanctity of all other places; it is only in ancient, pre-conquest times "that a site outside the Promised Land can be described as holy."²¹ So sacred is the land that Jews may offer sacrifices only there, and only there is food considered ritually clean. Throughout the Tanakh, the Land represents both promise *and* goal; Israel observes the mitzvot in order to merit the Land.

Paradoxically, God's sovereignty over the Land of Israel emerges from the creation story itself. God made everything. Therefore, all lands, Israel included, belong to God.²² In the Book of Leviticus, that reasoning provides the base for God's inalienable ownership of the Land:

The Land must not be sold beyond reclaim, for the land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me. Throughout the land that you hold you must provide for the redemption of the Land.²³

God's ownership of the Earth is total, and the selection of Israel is a Divine prerogative.

The distinction of the Land of Israel is but one consequence of God's role as creator. Obeying or violating God's will entail immediate consequences for continued existence and well-being on the Land. A series of agricultural laws—*peah*,²⁴ *orlah*,²⁵ *kilayim*,²⁶ *terumot*,²⁷ and *bikkurim*²⁸—provides repeated evidence of God's ownership of the Land of Israel. That the human farmer is only a tenant undergirds all of these requirements—of abstention, of Temple donation, or of provision for the poor. The ultimate proprietor is God alone. In the words of the Talmud, "God acquired possession of the world and apportioned it to humanity, but God always remains the master of the world."²⁹

The consequences of violating God's will also link *Eretz Yisrael* to the rest of the Earth. Many passages warn that expulsion from the Land is the price of

¹⁸Amos 7:17. See also Isaiah 52:11.

¹⁹For example, Deuteronomy 8:7-8.

²⁰For example, Joshua 24:13.

²¹Harry Orlinsky, "The Biblical Concept of the Land of Israel," in Lawrence A. Hoffman, ed., *The Land of Israel: Jewish Perspectives*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986, p. 53. This observation was made in the *Mekhilta, Pisha*, 1: "Before the Land had been especially chosen, all lands were suitable for divine revelation; after the Land had been chosen, all other lands were eliminated."

²²Rashi understood this paradox and comments on it. See his first comment to Genesis 1:1, on "בְּרֵאשִׁית" .

²³Leviticus 25:23-24. This reasoning is made explicit in the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 39a): "The Holy Blessed One said to the children of Israel, 'Sow for six years and leave the Land at rest for the seventh year, so that you may know the Land is Mine.'"

²⁴Leviticus 19:9; Deuteronomy 24:19-21, and Mishnah *Peah*.

²⁵Leviticus 19:23-25, and Mishnah *Orlah*.

²⁶Leviticus 19:19; Deuteronomy 22:9-11, and Mishnah *Kilayim*.

²⁷Numbers 18:8,12, 24-26; Deuteronomy 18:4, and Mishnah *Terumot*.

²⁸Exodus 23:19; Deuteronomy 26:1-11, and Mishnah *Bikkurim*.

²⁹*Rosh Ha-Shanah* 31a.

scorning the mitzvot.³⁰ Its soil is no passive piece of property; it is living and responsive, and there is a dynamic between the People Israel and their Land. Acts of hostility toward God result in acts of hostility toward the actors themselves. The Earth is not only a witness to the covenant (*brit*)³¹ but a participant in the unfolding drama of righteousness, chastisement and rebuke. Other nations, as well as the Land of Israel, share that involvement:

The earth is withered, sear;
The world languishes, it is sear;
The most exalted people of the earth languish.
For the earth was defiled under its inhabitants;
Because they transgressed teachings,
Violated laws, broke the ancient covenant.³²

The biblical view of the world is not distant or objective; it demands immediate involvement and consequence.³³ That

observance and non-observance of the commandments have geographic, territorial and cosmic consequences points to the truth that ecology is indissoluble from morality, land and law being mutually dependent, and that a people is ultimately responsible for the maintenance of its "place".³⁴

In short, the Biblical conception of the relationship between the People Israel (*Am Yisrael*) and the Land of Israel (*Eretz Yisrael*) is one of covenant (*brit*).

Rabbinic law and legend also begin with the centrality of *Eretz Yisrael*. In the words of Mishnah *Kelim*: "The Land of Israel is holier than all [other] lands."³⁵ Far more than in Scripture, large sections of the Mishnah are devoted to the agricultural laws of tithing,³⁶ which are obligatory only within the Land (with the exception of *kilayim*, *orlah* and, according to Rabbi Eliezer, eating barley before the *omer*³⁷). Further, the purity system is fully applicable only within the Land.³⁸ Consequently, the impurity of the other lands—a notion which has roots in the Hebrew Bible—continues into Rabbinic thought as well.³⁹

³⁰For a few examples, see Leviticus 18:24-30; 20:22-26; Numbers 25:34; Deuteronomy 4:40; 21:6-9; Psalms 106:38f.

³¹See, for example, Isaiah 1:2; 41:1; 49:1.

³²Isaiah 24:4-5

³³Monford Harris, "Ecology: A Covenantal Approach," *CCAR Journal*, (Summer 1976), XXIII:101-108.

³⁴W.D. Davies, *The Territorial Dimension of Judaism*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982, p. 134. 35.

³⁵Mishnah *Kelim* 1:6.

³⁶Charles Primus, "The Borders of Judaism: The Land of Israel in Early Rabbinic Judaism," in *The Land of Israel: Jewish Perspectives*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986, p. 102.

³⁷Mishnah *Orlah* 3:9; Tosefta *Terumah* 2:13; Tosefta *Orlah* 1:8; Tosefta *Kidushin* 1:9-10,12.

³⁸See Mishnah *Mikva'ot* 8:1.

³⁹Mishnah *Oholot* 2:3; 17:5; 18:6-7; Mishnah *Tohorot* 4:5; 5:1; Mishnah *Nazir* 3:6; 7:3; Tosefta *Mikva'ot* 6:1; Tosefta *Oholot* 17:7-18:11.

Often, the Mishnah postulates the overlap of the People (*Am Yisrael*) and the Land (*Eretz Yisrael*), the two primary concentrations of holiness. Even within the Tannaitic period, however, the existence of significant Jewish populations in Syria, Egypt and Babylonia required some adjustments to the notion of a single holy Land. Although the People Israel in the Land of Israel (*am yisrael b'eretz yisrael*) remains the ideal, a growing number of cases requires distinctions previously unnecessary in Biblical thought. For example, Gentiles living in the Land are exempt from the requirements of *shevi'it*, *hallah* and *terumah*.⁴⁰ This adjustment reflects a new reality, that "Mishnah's Rabbis clearly wish to do justice to both principles—both Holy Land and Holy People—without fully embracing the one over the other."⁴¹

A similar readjustment is reflected in a dispute between two *tannaim* over whether or not produce exported from the Land of Israel requires the taking of *hallah*. Rabbi Eliezer insists that it does, implying a single source of holiness emanating from Zion. Rabbi Akiva, however, postulates a conception of multiple holiness by ruling that such produce is exempt. For Rabbi Akiva,

the entire world potentially is sacred space. Different areas are subject to different standards, different rules. People in the land and outside the land alike have their own special roles to play.

Quite clearly later Rabbinic traditions follow Akiva's lead, enlarging the scope of the investigation of what the individual's roles should be, in different places, but especially outside the Land, and at different times. The goal is perception of everyday life as participation in a sacred realm of ultimate significance.⁴²

Reiterating the sanctity of other lands exercises a profound effect on Rabbinic Judaism, reinforcing the portable holiness which Jews take with them wherever they dwell. That recognition of the sanctity of land beyond *Eretz Yisrael* provides for halakhic accommodation of Jewish settlements in Syria⁴³ as well as one prominent opinion prohibiting *aliyah* from Babylonia to Israel:

Whoever goes up from Babylonia to the Land of Israel transgresses an imperative commandment, for it is said in Scriptures, "They shall be carried to Babylonia, and there they shall be, until the day that I remember them, says the Lord."⁴⁴

Rabbi Yehudah even goes so far as to equate living in Babylonia with living in Israel.⁴⁵

These views reflect a specific Rabbinic agenda: to align Jewish religion to the reality of Jewish settlement beyond the borders of the Land of Israel.

⁴⁰Mishnah *Shevi'it* 5:7; *Tosefta Hallah* 2:6; *Tosefta Terumah* 4:13.

⁴¹Richard S. Sarason, "The Significance of the Land of Israel in the Mishnah," in *The Land of Israel: Jewish Perspectives*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986, p. 123.

⁴²Primus, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

⁴³Mishnah *Hallah* 4:11.

⁴⁴*Ketubbot* 110b-111a.

⁴⁵*Ketubbot* 110b

Without ever abandoning their commitment to the mitzvah of settling the Land (*yishuv ha-aretz*), the Sages transferred their ideal from living on the land to observing the law.⁴⁶ Whereas the Torah esteems living in Israel as the goal of pious observance, the Rabbis invert that estimation; they cherish living on the Land *because* it allows for greater observance. Here the Land does not embody the goal; the Land becomes the means:

Rabbi Simlai expounded, "Why did Moses, our Rabbi, yearn to enter the Land of Israel? Did he want to eat of its fruit or satisfy himself from its bounty? But thus spoke Moses, 'Many commandments were commanded to Israel which can be fulfilled only in the Land of Israel. I wish to enter the Land so they may all be fulfilled by me.'"⁴⁷

The re-estimation of *yishuv* maintains the centrality of the Land (since certain mitzvot can be fulfilled only there), but shifts the weight of Jewish piety to the observance of deeds which can be performed anywhere.⁴⁸ The liturgy of the seasons reflects this alteration, emphasizing the needs of Babylonia and concentrating the attention of other Jewish communities on their rhythm as a distinctly religious concern.⁴⁹ The calendar—long a source of contention between the Sages of Israel and those of Babylonia—presents a similar struggle, with authority ultimately taken by the Ge'onim of Babylonia.⁵⁰ Perhaps as early as the canonization of the Torah in the Second Temple Period, but certainly following the destruction of the Temple and the rise of the Synagogue, Rabbinic Judaism adopted an attitude of provisional portability: a willingness to roam the world until the messianic age restores the nexus between Land and People:

What the Mishnah does by representing this cult, laying out its measurements, describing its rite, and specifying its rules, is to permit Israel, in the words of the Mishnah, to experience anywhere and anytime that cosmic center of the world described by the Mishnah: *cosmic center in words* made utopia.⁵¹

⁴⁶James Sanders argues, in *Torah and Cannon*, that this transformation was engineered long before the Rabbis, during the First Babylonian Exile. That argument has merit, but does not effect the substance of my position, which is that Judaism of the Biblical period reflected a religion that presupposed living in the Land of Israel, and that later Judaism was made portable.

⁴⁷*Sotah* 14a. See also Mishnah *Kelim* 1:6. "There are ten degrees of holiness. The Land of Israel is holier than any other land. Wherein lies its holiness? In that from it they may bring the *omer*, the first fruits, and the two loaves, which they may not bring from any other land." That same exclusive prerogative forms the principal subject of Mishnah *Hallah* 4:1-1 1.

⁴⁸Even prophecy, which is linked in fact to the Land of Israel, was a possibility in other lands as well. The *Mekhilta*, *Pisha*, 1, makes note of this at least three times.

⁴⁹See Arnold A. Lasker and Daniel J. Lasker, "The Strange Case of December 4: A Liturgical Problem," *Conservative Judaism*, XXXVIII:1, (Fall 1985), pp. 91-96, and "The Jewish Prayer for Rain in Babylonia," *The Journal for the Study of Judaism* (June 1984), pp. 123-144.

⁵⁰For the history of the Ben Meir calendar controversy, see Henry Malter, *Life and Works of Saadia Gaon*, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1921.

⁵¹Jacob Neusner, "Map Without Territory: Mishnah's System of Sacrifice and Sanctuary," *History of Religions*, XIX, (November 1979), p. 125.

The Earth is the Lord's: Blessings For Food

This dual geography of holiness becomes clear with the example of the blessings recited before eating different types of food (*birkhot ha-nehenin*).⁵²

Understanding the significance of specific *berakhot* requires a moment's reflection on the social importance of structure and of categorization. Meaning is not intrinsic; it is conferred by the people involved. A ritual, for example, reveals little about the role that ritual plays in the life of those engaged in it, unless the words and intentions of the participants of the rite are also available. While investigating meaning,

the thing to ask is not what their ontological status is. . . . The thing to ask is what their import is: what it is . . . that in their occurrence and through their agency, is getting said.⁵³

One key to ritual, as with other social rites, is what it can reveal about a context of understanding, how the worshipers construe the world around them and their place in it.

Ritual not only reveals structures of perception and purpose. It also helps to shape that purpose: "Ritual did not merely encode ideas that could be expressed otherwise; rather, it *created* the essential categories of human thought."⁵⁴ When a recitation or symbolic action express a value-concept, that performance not only articulates a specific way of seeing the world; it also shapes and reinforces that vision. In our case, an examination of Rabbinic blessings for food reveals the effort to recognize the sanctity of the entire planet, to ground that holiness in God's ownership, and to maintain the special status of the Land of Israel.

The Biblical command to praise God for food specifies that this obligation applies only within the Land of Israel:

For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land...a land where you may eat food without stint. . . . When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to the Lord your God for the good land which He has given you.⁵⁵

There is no reported Biblical implementation, but the clear assumption behind this instruction is that the Land of Israel is uniquely holy, and that the landedness of the Jews rightly elicits a unique gratitude. Food grown in God's land requires a means to transfer ownership from God to humanity. Blessings, in this understanding, represent a delivery system by which food in

⁵²The discussion which follows is based on the work of Lawrence Hoffman, particularly his "Introduction: Land of Blessing and Blessings of Land", *The Land of Israel: Jewish Perspectives*, pp. 1-23. Hoffman's interest is primarily what the structure of blessings reveals about Rabbinic attitudes toward the Land of Israel. Our interest in this case is to examine what that same structure reveals about Rabbinic attitudes toward the Earth in general.

⁵³Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books, 1970, p. 10.

⁵⁴Wayne Meeke, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983, p. 141.

⁵⁵Deuteronomy 8:7-10.

its naturally sanctified state of nature is removed from that natural habitat not only physically but conceptually, so that it may be transformed for use by ordinary human beings.⁵⁶

To eat without blessing, according to the Rabbis, is not only theft. It represents a desecration of the Temple-based system of purity and holiness:

Our Rabbis taught: It is forbidden to enjoy anything of this world without a *berakhah*, and whoever enjoys anything of this world without a *berakhah* commits sacrilege (*ma'al*). Rav Judah said in the name of Samuel: To enjoy anything of this world without a *berakhah* is like making personal use of things consecrated to heaven.⁵⁷

The Rabbis' assumption that blessings are appropriate both in and out of the Land should be noted from the outset. They place no limitation on the location of the meal or the source of the produce to be consumed. The Torah prescribes gratitude to God as Sovereign of Israel; the Rabbis extend that response to the world:

It is written: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" (Psalms 24:1), [yet] "He has given the earth to human beings" (Psalms 115:16). There is no contradiction. The first verse reflects the situation before we say a blessing, whereas the second verse applies after the blessing has been said.⁵⁸

Characteristic of their ability to mediate a complex agenda, the Rabbis also reinforce the notion of the Land's sanctity (*kedushat ha-aretz*) through the insertion of specific *berakhot* in the blessings after meals, including *birkat hamazon* and *berakhah ahat mei-ein shalosh*, both of which distinguish between produce characteristic of the Land and all other produce. Yet the actual source of the grains, fruit, or vegetables is now irrelevant. What counts is that their species grows in *Eretz Yisrael*.

In at least one other significant way, the series of blessings over food sanctifies the entire Earth. The central organizing category which distinguishes which type of *berakhah* to recite is whether (and, if so, how) food emerges from the soil. Once the produce is identified as a type of fruit (*p'ri*), further distinctions arise: Does the food emerge from the Earth directly or does it grow on a vine or a tree? Other possible categorizations seem not to matter. "Over something which does not grow from the Earth, one says *sheh-hakol*."⁵⁹

There is no necessary or intrinsic reason to worry about the nuances of distinct agricultural products while lumping together fish, meat and poultry. By establishing the categories of *berakhot* the way they did, the Rabbis lent significance to the soil, to what emerges from the ground, and to the sanctity of

⁵⁶Hoffman, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

⁵⁷*Berakhot* 35a. A series of such quotations continues on the following side (35b), calling such a practice "robbery" against God and the Jewish People. See also *Tosafot Berakhot* 4:1.

⁵⁸*Berakhot* 35a.

⁵⁹*Mishnah Berakhot* 6:3.

all ground everywhere. The categories of the *berakhot* themselves valorize the Earth as a sacred and sustaining presence. “[B]lessings achieve the primal function of freeing that produce from its sacred state.”⁶⁰ They also enforce the insight that a sacred place is anywhere that life can thrive, that a sacred time is anytime Jews gather to eat and to pray.

Application and Conclusion

Only after such consideration are we in a position to utilize one Jewish category to address the issues raised by the environmental movement. Starting from within Judaism, a religious path becomes both possibility and pathway.

First, the Hebrew Bible asserts that a place is intrinsically holy, constituting the prime reward for good living (in this case, for mitzvah observance). The Rabbis presume that a place is made holy by the righteousness and piety of its inhabitants. The land, in their view, is a necessary prerequisite for observance. People can soil the Earth.

Second, humanity relates to soil in relationship. Our planet is not a mute “fact”, suitable only for measurement, testing and objectification. Rather, a full human relationship to the world is one in which the Earth is loved and cultivated, a partner with Jews and all other people in the service of God, creation and human life. There is a dynamism to human-planetary interactions: our behavior allows the Earth to fulfill its covenantal relationship, and our planet, in turn, provides humanity with further grounds for gratitude to God. The Earth is both witness and participant in our sacred covenant (*brit*).

Third, the early Rabbis, perhaps building on the precedent established in Second Temple times, strive to articulate a notion of holiness which includes not only *Eretz Yisrael* but the rest of the world as well. Through focusing the *berakhot* for food on *peiros* and their sub-categories, by adding liturgical petitions on behalf of the weather outside the Land of Israel, by providing for multiple models of land-sanctity, the Mishnah and the Talmud maintain a claim for the holiness of the whole earth, without relinquishing a special Jewish estimation for Israel itself. “Israel living in its Land has consequences for the entire world. When Israel lives in its Land, the entire earth can become sacred space.”⁶¹

As Jews, our loyalty begins with *Eretz Yisrael*. But we are not only Jews. As human beings, we also owe fealty and love to the entire planet, as well as to that corner of it which is home. The path of the Bible and early Rabbinic tradition is one of expanding concentric circles, broadening the notion of holiness into a provisional portability that permits a relationship with the sacred anywhere and anytime. That same schema sanctifies all the earth, summoning us, as Jews and as humans, to a relationship of love and piety with our beleaguered planet.

⁶⁰Hoffman, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

⁶¹Primus, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

The Earth can either be our partner in the service of God, or our prosecutor, testifying before the Holy One about our pettiness, self-interest and shortsightedness. We can make of this planet a place where God's presence can comfortably dwell, so that the whole world becomes a sanctuary. Or we can render life on the earth impossible, sundering our relationship with the soil and our covenant with God. As always, we face a choice.