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Judaism and Ecology Example

How does thinking about sacred time help create a Jewish approach to the ecological crisis?

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There are many advances in civilization evident today, but in terms of natural environmental development, society faces ecological problems in that natural resources are being continually depleted at an astonishing rate, pollutions in the form of gasses overtaking the atmosphere, plastics polluting oceans, global warming impacting safe temperatures, and more. This technical civilization may be beneficial for a utilitarian approach, but from an ecological perspective, these issues must be addressed. Implementing Judaism's practice of sacred time using the Sabbath is one way to approach this.

The idea is to set apart time in which people focus on the present time and take in the atmosphere and nature, completely focusing on the spiritual state of being. Relationships with others is also a key priority. It is important

to refrain from actions that alter or remake space and actions that could cause earth harm. This also means to respect and treat the earth with care. For the Jewish people, the Sabbath is their sacred time. Heschel mentions, things created in six days he considered good, the seventh day he made holy (Heschel, 75). To the Jews given through the Torah, God created the earth in six days, then rested on the seventh. This rest is regarded highly because God the creator Himself made the decision to rest. The decision to rest is a symbol and instruction for His people to meditate and connect with their spiritual being. A time to calm down from working hard the whole week to recuperate back to full health. Instead of driving to school, walk and get some exercise in. Allow the body to keep up with the week and focus on strengthening the spirit. Keeping the Sabbath in society today may prove difficult as one whole day must be devoted to rest, but this change in lifestyle can very well impact earth's ecological issues for the better, while also allowing people to connect with their spirit to relax and continue the coming week in a more productive manner after being well rested. Billions of people around the world keeping the Sabbath would prove dramatic results in terms of a more sustainable and healthy planet, especially reducing gas emissions from automobiles, lowering electricity usage and more.

Heschel mentions the danger of the utilitarian ethic to nature in, Man has indeed become primarily a tool-making animal, and the world is now a gigantic tool-box for the satisfaction of his needs. (Swetlitz, 244) Although extreme, Heschel's point is that as people continue basing their ethics on utilitarianism, the earth will only be used for its' usefulness. Not for its' beauty as God's creation. If the world is nothing but resources to be extracted and used, then value in people will only be usable as things. Therefore, to combat this, the Sabbath provides that opportunity to set usefulness to the side and focus on the beauty and splendor of nature. Take time to see what God has created and respect it, while also resting from any actions that stress or burden. In a God-centered universe, all life becomes a source of wonder. (Swetlitz, 245) This wonder is seen only after first putting down usefulness. Abrams mentions one specific way to be with nature in, Tending the crop between Sukkot and Shavuot deepened my involvement with Jewish living and my connection to the natural world in ways I never would have expected. (Abrams, 157) Here Abrams is able to deepen his spiritual being by tending crops, but this was only possible through a time of rest in planting crops and connecting with nature.

Another issue regarding dangers to the earth is over-consumption. The earth is limited in resources so limiting consumption is key for finding solutions. Diamond states, We pursue our dreams of wealth and comfort only to discover that they are a chimera, and we are unable to find a viable vision to replace our shattered dreams. We feel like cogs in a machine, unable to change the course of our own lives, much less the complexion of society, (Diamond, 81) that people have this thirst for more things that we want, but don't have. This thirst that can never be fulfilled leads people to over consume products that are not necessarily needed. Diamond then introduces the Jewish way of consuming it, The Jewish view of consumption begins with the belief that the earth belongs to God. (Diamond, 81) This way gives thanks to God for using the land and resources while also respecting them. Especially on the Sabbath when we have time to give thanks and cannot spend money which limits consumption to only six days a week. There is also the fact that over-consumption can cause major life issues which are clearly described in Excessive consumption can wreak havoc in one's personal life and rob on of the life of the spirit. The attempt to satisfy every fleeting impulse, a common phenomenon in our world of ubiquitous advertising and malls, begins with our thoughts. (Diamond, 84) By respecting resources as if they were God's, then people can control their desires of over-consumption and limit consumption to only what is necessary for a sustainable life which also leads to a total sustainable economy. The many ecological issues society faces today are difficult to overcome and require future sacrifices and changes. Through the Sabbath, society can approach ethics in a new direction of respecting and thanking nature and connecting with inner being away from the utilitarianism aspect of things valued only by usefulness. And because of this, people can learn to connect with nature and find value in things spiritually and in nature itself. Changing the way, we approach resources can also bring about change in over-consumption one day of the week at a time. By respecting resources as God's, then we can focus on taking only what is necessary for life.

Victor Kimarud

Time is an exciting concept. We all probably have heard the saying that time waits for no one. We are all running out of time and so is the planet with the way we humans keep on treating it. What are ways that we can help save the planet from the ecological crisis that is ahead of us and also at the same time enriching our lives? We can do

this by adopting the idea of the Sabbath and sacred time from the Jewish religion. This is the idea that we need to slow down and start thinking of the decisions that we make and how it impacts our lives and the environment around us. Heschel describes the Sabbath in a fascinating way The Sabbath is not for the sake of the weekdays; the weekdays are for the sake of Sabbath. It is not an interlude but the climax of living. (Pg 14, Heschel) This brings us to the idea that we should live our lives in a way that we look towards the Sabbath, a day of rest where we can focus on ourselves and reflect on the week. When we rest on the Sabbath, we should also allow nature to take a rest too. In order for us to value nature more, we need to experience sacred time. In Sirinsky, The Land of Your Soul comes up with the idea of river time as sacred time. When I 'found' Judaism, I discovered that my tradition - to my surprise - integrated 'river time' into its weekly calendar. The Jews I knew fondly referred to this particular time, this sense of timelessness, as Shabbat time. (Pg 121, Sirinsky) River time is a moment when the time changes entirely. Its when you stop keeping track of time and let nature take over. Judaism has river time built into the calendar as the Sabbath this is a time when we unplug from the technical civilization and tap into our souls and nature. Sabbath is like river time because before we get there, we must spend time preparing for our journey. In river time you get ready for your trip by planning the map out, checking all the gear and packing up. In Sabbath, we make sure we have all our work done in 6 days then on the 6th day we prepare for the Sabbath on the 7th day. This is the day that we allow ourselves to become one with nature. This brings us to the idea of technical civilization. We are living at the age of time where we covet material objects. This is not good for the environment since all we do is take, take, take without taking a moment and thinking about the consequences of our actions. Man has indeed become primarily a tool-making animal, and the world is now a gigantic tool-box for the satisfaction of his needs. (Swetlitz, 244). If we continue treating the world as a giant tool-box, we are going to end up running out of tools and ultimately leading to destroying our planet. This is why we need to let the planet rest from the toil and abuse we put it through. Fink's talks about in his article This, the fourth commandment, recognizes that not only human beings need a weekly day of rest. Shabbat provides all nature with a much-needed respite and an opportunity to recover from the heavy strain imposed by humanity's labors.(Pg 114, Fink). If the world decided to adopt this idea of Shabbat the planet would be able to be saved since humans are going to allow the world a day of rest. Where we do not take anything from the world and let the planet have a day where it can recover from the constant toil that we put it through. The Jewish religion looks at

the Sabbath as a day where all of God's creation rest from the toil of the other six days. In Heschel's book, he says The Sabbath, thus, is more than an armistice, more than an interlude; it is a profound conscious harmony of man and the world, sympathy for all things and participation in the spirit that unites what is below and what is above. (Pg 31-32, Heschel) This brings us back to the main idea of using the Sabbath as one of the keys to solving the ecological crisis going on in our world today. When we take a step back and reconnect with both our spirit this allows us to create harmony with the world and unite us. When we allow this to happen, we can open our eyes to what's going on around us and how we are affecting nature and what we can do to stop the ecological crisis going on. I agree with Daniel that we can learn from the Jewish religion that we should value the planet and our souls. In Ellen Cohn, *Rain and the Calendar* she explains to us that the world was a gift from God and that we should treat it with respect, kindness, and dignity. She states God created the world, taught us to care for it, and demanded that we comply. We would be rewarded with bounty or famine depending on how we lived how we treated each other, and how we treated nature. (Pg 128, Ellen Cohn) When we treat the world how God taught us, so we will be able to save it from an ecological crisis.

Kevin Jansen

The urgency that surrounds saving the environment can often feel like a modern effort in response to a modern problem. The post industrial revolution world is a fast moving one and the consequent damage to nature can feel overwhelming when compared to the rest of human history. What becomes interesting is how the answer to this seemingly modern problem may lie in the text of an ancient religion. Human exploitation of the environment is arguably at unprecedented levels in the modern age, but Judaism proves that this is not an entirely new dilemma. Judaism introduces the important concept of sacred time and in this sacred time much can be learned about the dynamic between humans and nature, and more importantly, the divine significance in preserving this dynamic. Sacred time reveals the human relationship with God and preserving the Earth is a crucial step in maintaining that relationship. Sacred time has to be explained as a concept before learning how it relates to saving the environment. In order to understand this concept of sacred time, one should look no further than Abraham Joshua Heschel's *The Sabbath*. When describing the seventh day of the week, he describes it as being ...a day of

detachment from things, instruments, and practical affairs as well as of attachment to the spirit (Heschel 29). Sacred time is a sort of elevation from the earthly realm and Heschel illustrates it as a time in which people are at their closest to God spiritually, because they do not concern themselves with worldly matters that occupy their mind on other days of the week. Sacred time is embodied by other quotes, like when he describes the Sabbath as The vision of a window in eternity that opens into time (Heschel 16) along with numerous other instances. The point in all of Heschel's romantic language is that humans can attain something during sacred time that can't be experienced in the ordinary world. Sabbath is a chance to escape the shackles of Earth and become something more than human. The divine connectivity of sacred time described by Heschel can also be found explained elsewhere. This can be demonstrated in Lawrence Troster's *In Your Goodness You Renew Creation: Creation Cycles in Jewish Liturgy*. Troster explains the creation and historical prayers Sh'ma and Amidah, and specifically how they relate to sacred time. He writes The Sh'ma and Amidah represent a journey in which we first accept the covenant and then are admitted" with praise and thanksgiving" into the metaphorical temple, the microcosm of Creation. We start with history and move to eternity (Troster 110) Through this quote a cycle begins to emerge. Humans live their lives through the six days of the week and on the seventh day they experience a moment of renewal. This cycle will repeat over and over. Unlike many other religions, where any equivalent to sacred time might only exist in the afterlife, Judaism presents an opportunity to feel a deep connection with God every Sabbath. With the idea of sacred time roughly understood, Judaism's ecological relevance can now be explored.

Daniel brings ecology into the equation by viewing the Sabbath in a literal sense. He points out that the Earth is given an opportunity to rest as a consequence of human rest and I agree with this assessment. I will argue however that the tenets of Judaism and sacred time ensure the earth is given rest on more than just the Sabbath. In Eliezer Diamond's piece *Jewish Perspectives on Limiting Consumption*, he calls attention to a verse from Deuteronomy, You shall eat from the tree, but not cut it down (85). You might take from the tree and enjoy its fruits, but to permanently strip it from the environment is not permitted. He adds his own words stating that This directive could be applied today to limit consumption to what is necessary for a sustainable economy (Diamond 86). Despite not being on the Sabbath, there are significant rules in Judaism that allow for the Earth to rest. This idea of limited consumption is one of the answers to the ecological question of how humans should exist in

nature. The principles of ecology emerge once more in Ellen Bernstein's *The Tu B'sh'vat Seder*. The human and nature relationship is illustrated during a Seder in the quote, ...when people eat the fruit of a plant, they are eating of the plant's divine energy. When they recite a blessing, they offer up divine energy that the angel can direct back toward the fruit (Bernstein 143). The kind of behavior being encouraged in this quote is one of gratitude. Bernstein also mentions that those who do not give a blessing after taking fruit prevent the angel from having the energy needed to restore the tree. This can be applied in a non spiritual context in how the ungrateful human that does not give a blessing for the fruit can easily be the ungrateful human that will take more than they need or even cut down the tree. The relationship described here can also be tied back to Diamond's ideas about limited consumption in how it promotes respect for the trees and indirectly discourages humans from exploiting this source of pleasure. Jewish ecological practices are similarly explored in the My Jewish Learning article *Traditional Jewish Teachings on Nature and the Environment*. The author explains Rabbinic law also innovated environmental legislation of other sorts. Civic concerns alone, without wider ecological considerations, were sufficient, to make the rabbis of the Mishnah and Talmud promulgate laws requiring safe waste disposal, the location of what today would be called industrial zones at a distance from settled areas (No Author Given). This might not relate to limited consumption, but it is undoubtedly proof that Judaism aimed to protect the environment beyond just the Sabbath. The level of conscientiousness towards nature remains impressive, but with all of these rules established, how might ecology relate to sacred time?

Heschel's description of sacred time on the Sabbath and the ecological aspects of Judaism can now be brought together. Victor mentions that when humans treat the world as God intended, the environment can be saved from an ecological disaster. I agree with this idea and where Victor explored what it means to follow God's intention, I will explore the role of humans in this dynamic. In *Living as if God Mattered: Heschel's View of Nature and Humanity*, Marc Swetlitz paints a picture of the relationship between humans, God, and the environment. He displays this in the quote, Aware that God created the world. Aware that we are permitted by God to subdue the earth for six days a week, we labor to transform nature to satisfy our needs while maintaining a constant awareness of God's presence (Swetlitz 249). An idea of modesty is being pushed forward where humans are supposed to know their place. Earth was given to humans by God and they may be in a position to use it, but they

are not in a position to destroy it. As a creation of God, it is to be respected and preserved. The quote also ties into Heschel's ideas about the Sabbath. The sacred time of the seventh day can only be experienced if humans allow the Earth to rest, but they must also follow the other ecological rules. Even though the Sabbath is a day for rest, that does not mean humans are given free reign to exploit the environment as much as they want on the other six days. The aforementioned ecological rules and practices explained by Diamond and Bernstein are there to keep people permanently conscientious, because there can not be a sacred time unless humans respect the creations of God on all days.

Sacred time may not specifically be about protecting nature, but environmental conscientiousness is definitely a product of it. Judaism is very much concerned with what lies beyond the earthly realm. In an effort to understand it and become closer with the divine, the religion encourages individuals to look after the planet given to them by God. Whether it be during the modern era with its impressive relevancy, or when the religion was only in its infancy, the ecological truths embedded in Judaism are integral to comprehending a human's role in the environment.