The Splendor of Creation

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Introduction

At the core of the environmental crisis is a great divide between mind and body, between head and heart, between human and nature. This divide is not new. The world's religions and mythologies have always told stories of humanity's separation from nature. But today the split is so vast that its consequences on the environment are potentially catastrophic.

The Jewish mystics of the seventeenth century said that when Adam and Eve ate the apple from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, they set in motion the rift between humanity and nature. In the beginning, the world was whole and the creatures knew their place. Adam and Eve lived a peaceable life in the Garden of Eden. God had invited Adam to enjoy all of the fruits of the Garden — except for the fruit of the tree of knowledge. "If you eat from it, you will surely die."

Adam and Eve ate the apple from the tree of knowledge. They let themselves be seduced into thinking that the knowledge tree would bring them superior powers: that knowing more would mean being more. They challenged the original order and goodness of the universe by taking something that was not theirs to take. The fruit of the tree of knowledge was God's sacred property. It was not for people to eat or use.

Adam and Eve did not die a bodily death for their transgression (at least not immediately), but they did die a spiritual one. They were expelled from paradise and condemned to a life of suffering. They would be alienated from each other and the land for the rest of their lives. In taking what was not theirs, they upset the balance of nature and ruptured their own interior balance. We choose a path that leads to spiritual death and nature's ruin whenever we take what is not ours, whenever we believe that our portion is not enough, whenever we assume that knowledge is a commodity we can consume.

Yet, just as we have the power to spoil the creation, we also have the power to make it whole. We have the power to mend the earth and to mend ourselves, to sew the pieces back together again. Mending the earth and our selves demands sustenance and vision. It is a lifelong task. It requires lifelong love. I have chosen Judaism as the path I walk and the Bible as the sacred text I contemplate along the path. I offer them up to you in The Splendor of Creation.

As a child in New England in the 1950s and 1960s, playing in nature was my raison d'être. My life revolved around outings of all kinds: canoe trips, mountain climbing, bike adventures and rambles through the woods. I loved the feeling of being all tuckered out from a day well spent in the fresh air.

I was grateful to have an opportunity to pursue my love of nature in high school through an innovative program in environmental science. Each week we would visit various sites along the Ashuelot River in southern New Hampshire to determine the health of the river. Like real
scientists, we waded out in the water to measure dissolved oxygen and various pollution indicators with our new Hach Kits. I was hooked on this emerging field of environmental studies and followed my interests throughout college. My love for nature grew deeper as I watched it disappear before my eyes: forest clear-cut, rivers dammed, farms gobbled up. I feared for nature. In my own life, nothing was more central, but most people seemed unmoved by this destruction. They did not see what I saw.

I was frightened that we were destroying our Earth in vain attempts to aggrandize ourselves and I wanted in some way to transmit to others my sense of the preciousness of nature. When I graduated college, I taught high school biology. But the scientific information I tried to impart was not enough to motivate my students to care. Facts and figures got in the way of love and meaning, of genuine connection.

So I abandoned the traditional textbooks and, instead, introduced my students to the great nature writers. I designed a curriculum to teach various ecological and biological concepts using the stories of Annie Dillard, Loren Eiseley, Aldo Leopold. It worked: my students were captivated. The stories were the flesh and blood experiences that could bring the dry scientific bones to life. Stories and personal experiences, I discovered, find their way into the body and the heart, into the places that "information" alone will never go; and they stick. Learning becomes effortless through stories.

While I was teaching, I was on my own spiritual quest. I understood my relationship with nature as a kind of religion and I wanted to see what wisdom I could find from sacred texts. I had left behind the lackluster Judaism of my youth and had experimented with a variety of eastern practices and paths, but thought that I should revisit the Hebrew Bible to see if perhaps I might have missed something in my childhood. Reading the Bible afresh with ecologist's eyes, I was amazed to find the distinguished place that nature holds in the stories, poetry, celebrations, holidays, law, and prayers.

I realized that ecology and the Bible were using different languages to describe the same thing. The Bible and ecology both teach humility, modesty, kindness to all beings, a reverence for life, and a concern for future generations. They both teach that the earth is sacred and mysterious. They both describe an interconnected universe, bound together through invisible threads. They both speak of life flowing in spirals and cycles and hold that all actions—no matter how small—yield consequences.

I began to see churches and synagogues, which hold the Bible sacred, as natural places to raise ecological consciousness. If you consider the fact that the Bible is still the most widely read book in the world, touching the lives of millions of people every day, and that it has served humanity as a guide for living for the past three thousand years, it becomes clear that religious institutions could take a powerful leadership role in environmental repair. If churches and synagogues could teach people to read the Bible with ecological eyes and see spirituality in ecological terms, then we'd have a built-in infrastructure for expanding environmental awareness and practice. And since religious institutions also strive to teach people to "care," I
dreamed that maybe they could inspire their congregants to care for nature. My passion for nature and religion led me, with much trepidation, to start the first national Jewish environmental organization, Shomrei Adamah, “Keepers of the Earth.” I had never been involved in organizational life before, had little knowledge of Judaism, and knew nothing about the established Jewish community (indeed, I was still pretty ambivalent about my own Judaism).

For ten years I worked with rabbis, scientists, environmentalists, and writers around the country to create educational materials that would bring to life the ecological dimensions of the Bible and Judaism. We developed books and curricula that rabbis and educators could use with their congregants to illuminate the "natural" side of Jewish holidays, stories, ethics, law, and practices.

Even though the work was successful, I felt it was limited in its ability to reach a wide audience. And perhaps more important, I felt I had not fully articulated my own ecological vision. Having long before witnessed the power of stories to transform the attitudes of my students, I imagined that one of the Bible’s most popular stories, Genesis 1, could have the potential to reach a broad audience and open peoples’ hearts to nature.

The Genesis narrative was so familiar that for years I would just breeze through it. But even a surface reading yields ecological significance. Genesis 1 recounts the seven days and seven categories of creation: light on day one, air on the second day, waters and earth on the third day. Once the elemental habitats are created, their inhabitants move in: waters give rise to swimming creatures, air gives rise to flying creatures, and earth gives rise to walking creatures. The story is beautiful. Its lyricism and poetry eloquently express a sense of wholeness and a reverence for nature. I realized that Genesis 1 is indeed the Western world’s first environmental epic.

As I rooted around in the text, I discovered several ecospiritual themes embedded within: the mystery of creation, the goodness of nature, the power of limits, the importance of diversity and sustainability, the ecology of time, the balance of work and rest, the interdependence of everything, and a sense of place, order, and harmony.

I also recognized mystical and mythic dimensions of the creations: soul is created on day one, intellect on the second day, emotions and actions on the third, time on the fourth, movement on the fifth, love and work on the sixth, and rest and eternity on the seventh. Genesis speaks to our inner nature, as well as to our outer nature.

Inspired by the text, I committed myself to the task of illuminating its deep ecological message for others. This book, The Splendor of Creation, is my midrash—a story about a story—on creation. To help me with my task, I have explored the teachings of my own tradition, the writings of the rabbis, as well as the wisdom of scientists, philosophers, and poets through the ages. One of the great rewards of investigating ancient texts is finding what you thought were
your own original ideas, clearly articulated by people who lived hundreds or thousands of
years ago. Two rabbis in particular provided special guidance for me: Nachmanides (Rabbi
Moshe ben Nachman), a thirteenth-century Spanish scholar, philosopher, physician, and poet,
a Renaissance man who brought a kabbalistic or mystical orientation to the text, and Samson
Raphael Hirsch, a nineteenth-century German Orthodox rabbi who expressed an uncanny
ecological perspective.

Today, as I write, the words of Rabbi Bahya ibn Pakuda, an eleventh-century Jewish
philosopher, ring in my ears: "Meditation on creation is obligatory," he said. "You should try to
understand both the smallest and greatest of God's creatures. Examine carefully those which
are hidden from you."

It is the pleasure and the work of each generation to bring the Bible to life. My job is to
breathe new light into the very first chapter. This book considers the mysteries of creation and
offers back a reverence for life and a creation ethic. In the end the earth will become whole as
we become whole, when we see nature as integral to our identities and stewardship as an
extension of our everyday lives.