

IS THERE A MORAL CASE AGAINST ENVIRONMENTALISM?

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Some time ago in the *Washington Post* and in the Autumn 1996 issue of *City Journal*, David Gelernter argued for a moral case against the "tyranny of environmentalism."

Gelernter asserted that the Judeo-Christian tradition provides support for moral opposition to environmentalism. Here, we reanalyze the arguments that he used to conclude that there is an anti-environmentalist position with "moral claims that are at least as compelling as the other side's." We show that the Judeo-Christian tradition does not support a position of anti-environmentalism.

Gelernter's argument is based on two key notions. First, that anti-environmentalists "hold to the Judeo-Christian view that man is emphatically *not* part of nature" (italics in the original). That is, people somehow sit outside or above nature. The second notion is that human beings are not part of nature "protecting and preserving human life is a moral duty that sweeps away all 'duties' to nature, and the very idea of 'duty to nature.'"

If the reference to Judeo-Christian tradition were removed, one clearly could challenge wither of these assertions as philosophical starting points. However, we will show here that neither of these notions has support within

the Judeo-Christian tradition. There is an interesting and ironic historical twist to Gelernter's claim because he implicitly allies himself with authors such as Lynn White, who take the environmental crisis very seriously (i.e. they do not view it as a farce) and who blame the environmental crisis

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"...JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN SCHOLARS HAVE AFFIRMED THE MORAL AND INTELLECTUAL TENSION CREATED BECAUSE PEOPLE ARE SIMULTANEOUSLY PART OF AND OUTSIDE OF NATURE..."

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tion. Contrary to Gelernter's assertion, the brilliance of the Judeo-Christian tradition is the duality in which people are both part of nature and outside of nature. Evidence for the duality begins with the creation story itself: people were created on the same day as all other land animals, not apart from them in time or space. The commandment "to be fruitful and multiply" refers to all of the species of creation, not just humans. Indeed, the creation story is itself concerned with relationships, rather than origins, although most readers tend to miss this. For example, "Rabbi Isaac Luria taught that even the most mute objects, such as dust and water, possess nefesh, soul, and spiritual vitality" (Lamm, N. *Faith and Doubt. Studies in Traditional Jewish Thought..* New York: Ktav Publishing House. 1986. p. 174). The

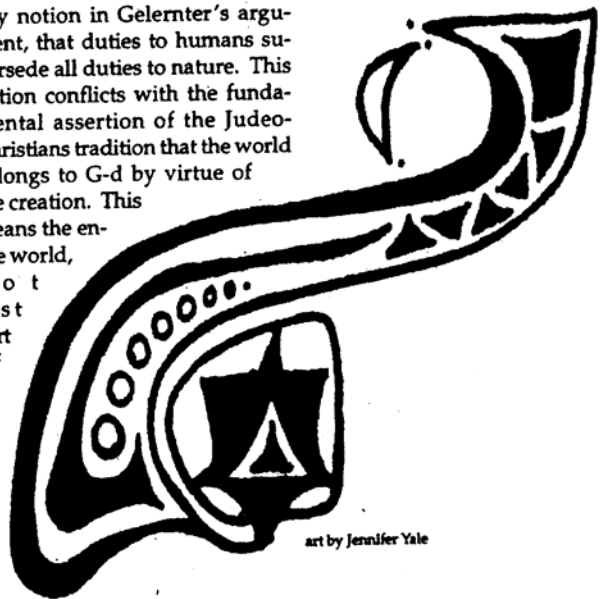
Shabbat, as a day of rest, is given to animals, just as it is given to humans. Numerous other occurrences in the first five books of the Bible and the Prophets emphasize this human duality, which is one of the essential tensions of the tradition. Through the centuries, Jewish and Christian scholars have affirmed the moral and intellectual tension created because people are simultaneously part of and outside of nature. It may appear that because humans have the additional gift of consciousness, that we are somehow above the flora and fauna or the world. The Judeo-Christian tradition makes it especially clear that even if humans are somehow above other species, it is this additional gift that allows us to make decisions, to have foresight, and to allow us to plan for those that come after us. As humans, we have the extra gift of being able to act in a way that is most beneficial to future generations.

We now turn to the second key notion in Gelernter's argument, that duties to humans supersede all duties to nature. This notion conflicts with the fundamental assertion of the Judeo-Christians tradition that the world belongs to G-d by virtue of the creation. This means the entire world, not just part of

the world which is valued by people for some kind of use. This theme runs throughout the Judeo-Christian tradition, beginning with the Garden of Eden, where people are told to tend and care, but never destroy. Noah was commanded to bring every species onto the ark with him, not just those that had a use for humans. In war time, we are commanded not to destroy a city's trees: "When in your war against a city, you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy its trees, wielding the ax against them. You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down. Are the trees of the field human to withdraw before you into the besieged city?" (Deuteronomy 20:19).

Blessings (ranging from before we eat to encounters with natural wonders) remind us that the world is not ours. Examples include blessings upon smelling

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the fragrance of herbs or plants ("Blessed are You, Lord our G-d, Ruler of the Universe, who created fragrant plants") or upon seeing creatures of striking beauty ("...who has such beauty in G-d's world"). We say a blessing over the bread, rather than the wheat, in order to acknowledge our part in completing the world. Norman Lamm, referring to the Talmud tractate Shabbat 77b, writes, "The Talmudic and midrashic traditions continue this implicit assumption of man's obligation to, and responsibility for, nature's integrity: Nothing that the Lord creates in the world was superfluous or in vain; hence, all must be sustained," (Lamm. p. 166). Our different status from other organisms does not give us permission to destroy them.

Stewardship plays a key role on the Judeo-Christian tradition, and is misinterpreted by Gelemter, who describes it as "saving everything." Stewardship is not ownership of, but rather a partnership with nature. Humans are supposed to interact with nature, and care for it as they would other humans. "When the Almighty created Adam, G-d toured with him the Garden of Eden, showing him all of its trees. 'Look how beautiful and perfect my works are,' the Almighty said to Adam. 'I have created everything for you; make sure that you do not spoil and destroy my world; for if you do there is no one to repair the damage,'" (Midrash Rabbah, Kohelet 7). The mutuality of this relationship becomes especially clear when discussing the emphasis placed upon future generations within the Judeo-Christian tradition. Nature's voice has not yet been uncovered; the Judeo-Christian tradition is a voice for nature in which people play a positive moral role. The notion of dominion "was made in the context of men and women 'made in G-d's image' (Genesis 1:26-27) which

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tual community," says Litvack, pointing out that those characteristics apply to, "all of the various rivulets in Santa Cruz," and not just his congregation.

One aspect of the Jewish Community that Rabbi Litvack is most proud of is the social action in which it is continually involved. Litvack believes that, "of the 613 mitzvot (good deeds) in the Torah, many of the most compelling ones deal with social justice." In accordance with this, his congregation, Temple Beth-El, takes part in a number of community activities. For almost 8 years now members have gone to Watsonville around the time of Sukkot, the Jewish holiday celebrating the harvest, and gleaned the last parts of the lettuce fields, donating their pickings to the poor. Some of their other yearly activities include sending food and art supplies every Hanukah to a congrega-

Petersburg, Russia.

However, the project that the Rabbi seems most proud of is something members do on a weekly basis. Every Sunday night the congregation cooks meals for the residents of the River Street Shelter in the Beach Flats. They have been doing this for nearly a decade. There are many beneficiaries of their work in the community. Aside from the River St. Shelter, Beth-El also helps out the Santa Cruz AIDS project and the Women's shelter, giving them thousands of pounds of food each High-Holiday season.

Acts such as these are what Litvack describes as "Tikun Olam," improving the world. He sees this as one of the duties that Jews in Santa Cruz must perform, "We must practice the ethical teachings of the Torah in a way that not only enriches the Jewish community, but the whole community." He also believes it is the Jewish community's place in Santa Cruz to "contribute positively to the diversity of the community... while educating non-Jews so they can better understand and appreciate the beauty and values of our tradition."

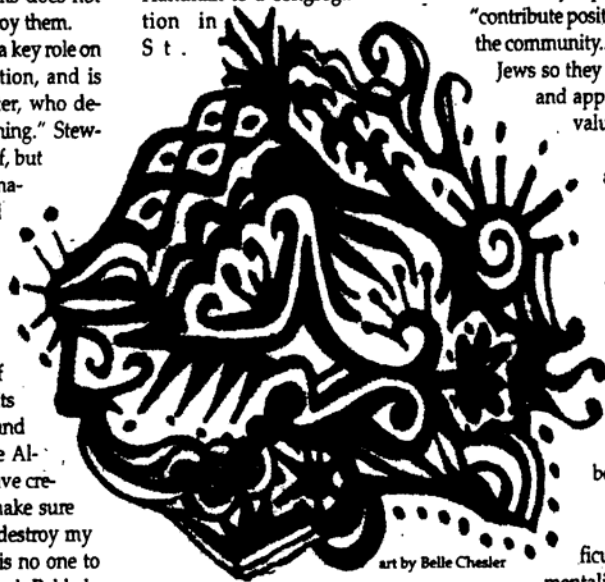
Rabbi Naftali agrees that Jews must be active in the local community, saying, "We must create a light unto other nations, so people say, 'I would like to be a part of that.'" But Naftali also feels that there are certain steps that remain to be taken before that can happen.

He characterizes the Santa Cruz Jewish community as having, "external elements of beauty." This, he says, can be quickly seen in the fact that "the amount of activities done together by all the spectrum of the community is unparalleled." However, he points out that while this accomplishment shows the promise of the community here "it does not take the place of real community, which is people touching other people on a very deep level."

In this area Rabbi Litvack firmly disagrees saying, "We have a very tight community. They support each other, they care about each other, they give comfort to each other."

One other person who is quite impressed with the Jewish Community of Santa Cruz is Sharon Rappaport, the president of Congregation Kol Tefillah. "The fact that you can come to such a small town and find such a diverse and growing community really says something about the people here." Although Kol Tefillah, a conservative congregation, does not have its own sacuary, they hold services every Saturday morning. Rapaport feels very strongly that it is important to have a conservative presense in town to go along with the reformed and orthodox movements already established.

This pluralist attitude, perhaps more than anything else, speaks volumes about the Jewish community here, furthering the point that a healthy community is one that has a variety of opinions. And that is something this particular community is certainly not lacking. ✧



art by Belle Chesler

must involve a strong element of reliability and responsibility," (Lamm. p. 174).

The relationship between humans and nature is one based on equality and responsibility. This does not mean that no changes can ever be made, which is Gelemter's implicit assertion about environmental protection. The reality is that constant trade-offs occur and decisions will almost always be dif-

ficult. Very often environmentalists are sanctimonious and exhibit the same hubris in personal behavior that they accuse others of in business activity. However, an appeal to a vague assertion that the Judeo-Christian tradition allows one to value income (even if it is a small businessman's whole income, as in Gelemter's example) above creation is not only incorrect, but specious.

Gelemter divides the world into environmentalists and anti-environment-

talists and notes that anti-environmentalists are desperate in their attempts to elevate all human activity as superior to nature. This debate can be framed, but not in the context of the Judeo-Christian tradition, which asserts that a moral relationship with the creator but no moral relationship with the created self-contradictory. What is needed is a dialogue, not a debate, on how to make sensible trade-offs, while recognizing that the Judeo-Christian tradition squarely supports the protection of creation. ✧