

On the Seven-fold Rainbow Covenant

by Rabbi Everett Gendler

By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects. ~ Lynn White, Jr.

The proliferation of writings on the environmental crisis has been more than simply quantitative. There has been, as well, a deepening of the discussion, with basic questions about the nature of our surroundings coming into focus. In this realm the commonly accepted formulations take for granted that the choices are either pagan animism or a feelingless nature that invites egotistical exploitation by humans intent solely on the realization of our narrow purposes, at best restrained by imposed Divine constraints. Is this in fact the full range of possibilities? Does the monotheistic biblical Creation account of necessity reduce nature to an inanimate state devoid of any degree of sentience? Here again a fresh look at biblical sources, assisted by informed commentary, may clarify the issue.

A serious challenge to this usual interpretation is found in the employment of the term *brit*, covenant, in early Genesis. This central biblical term, used almost 300 times in Scripture, understandably has for us primarily Jewish associations: both historically and ceremonially our lives, individual and communal, have been directed by this term and its attendant meanings. How surprising, then, to discover that its first uses in Genesis are directed not only to Noah and all pre-Judaic humans, but to all living creatures. Implicit in the first use of the term in Genesis 6:18-20, it is explicit in the sevenfold repetition of *covenant* in Genesis 9:8-17.

And God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "I now establish My **covenant** with you and your offspring to come, and with every living thing that is with you---birds, cattle and every wild beast as well ---all that have come out of the ark, every living thing on earth. I will maintain my **covenant** with you: never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth."

God further said, "This is the **sign** that I set for the **covenant** between Me and you, and every living creature with you, for all ages to come, I have set My bow in the clouds, and it shall serve as a **sign** of the **covenant** between Me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth, and the bow appears in the clouds, I will remember My **covenant** between Me and you and every living creature among all flesh, so that the waters shall never again become a flood and destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting **covenant** between God and all living creatures, all flesh that is on earth. That," God said to Noah, "shall be the **sign** of the **covenant** that I have established between Me and all flesh that is on earth."

Upon first consideration the rationalist reader is likely to dismiss the wording as merely a figure of speech, a stylistic conceit, perhaps. Yet the sevenfold repetition of *brit*, covenant, and the threefold employment of *ot*, sign, in this passage forbid such easy dismissal of the

implications. Seven and three, after all, are both sacred and efficacious numbers for the biblical outlook.¹ Both repetitions and their specifics fairly insist that the notion of Divine covenant in relation to earth and its life be taken with utmost seriousness. While the covenantal references do in four instances specify human beings, in those same four instances the other living creatures are included as well. Two others refer generally to all living creatures, while the seventh speaks only of God's covenant with the earth.

To take seriously God's covenant with other living creatures as well as with the earth itself raises a question at once disconcerting and exciting. Insofar as covenant is a term of reciprocity, involving an exchange of responsibilities and duties, what does this imply about the ontological status of earth and its living creatures? Is earth itself in some significant sense a living being? One of the greatest biblical scholars of the twentieth century, the late Johannes Pedersen, so argued in his magisterial work, Israel: Its Life and Culture:

The Israelite does not distinguish between a living and a lifeless nature. All is living which has its peculiarity and so also its faculties. A stone is not merely a lump of material substance. It is, like all living things, an organism with peculiar forces of a certain mysterious capacity, only known to him who is familiar with it. Thus, like all other beings of the earth, the stone has the quality of a soul, and so also can be made familiar with other psychical forces and filled with soul-substance. The earth is a living thing. It has its nature, with which man must make himself familiar when he wants to use it; he must respect its soul as it is, and not do violence to it while appropriating it. (p. 155)

Earth itself is alive. We know that the Israelites do not acknowledge the distinction between the psychic and the corporeal. Earth and stones are alive, imbued with a soul, and therefore able to receive mental subject-matter and bear the impress of it. The relation between the earth and its owner...is a covenant-relation, a psychic community, and the owner does not solely prevail in the relation. The earth has its nature, which makes itself felt, and demands respect. The important thing is to deal with it accordingly and not to ill-treat it...to deal kindly with the earth, to uphold its blessing and then take what it yields on its own accord." (p. 479)

In light of Pedersen's important assertion, I think it fair to say that biblically speaking, there is an important intermediate point between "pagan animism" on the one hand and "indifference to the feelings of natural objects" or even the total denial of any such feelings on the other. This covenantal midpoint surely offers an important contribution to a planet-respecting attitudinal basis for our relation to our surroundings.

Excerpted from "A Reflection on Environment, Sentience, and Jewish Liturgy" by Everett Gendler, in Worlds of Jewish Prayer, edited by Shohama Harris Wiener and Jonathan Omer-Man. Thanks to Magid David Arfa for suggesting this text.

¹ Shabbat, Sabbatical year, Jubilee and Shavuot all attest to the profound importance of seven as the number of creation. Three signifies endurance and strength: "A threefold cord is not quickly broken" (Ecclesiastes 4:12).