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## Environmentalism and Creation

by Nancy Sohn Swartz

When searching for the connection between environmentalism and Judaism, we can look to the words of *Torah* -- to the commandments and to the countless Talmudic interpretations of text. We can especially look back to the beginning of the text, to the very beginning.

*In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth ... and the light and the darkness ... and the waters and the land ... and the trees and the plants ... and the fish in the waters ... and the birds in the sky ... and all the wild creatures upon the earth...  
And God saw that this was good.  
And God said, "Let **Us** make humans in **Our** Image, after **Our** likeness."*

To whom was God speaking?

According to the book *The Legends of the Jews*,<sup>1</sup> which combines hundreds of legends and parables from a lifetime of midrash research by author Louis Ginzberg, one of the outstanding Talmudists of the twentieth century, the use of the words "Us" and "Our" can be seen as God asking counsel of all around Him. This interpretation sees God as calling upon heaven and earth, then upon all other things He had created, and last upon the angels, in His resolve to create man.

Though I had never read that interpretation at the time I was inspired to write my own *midrash* about Creation,<sup>2</sup> I too interpret these words as God speaking to all He had created, to ask advice for how to make humans. Seen in this way, God can be "seen" as expressing a wish to create a being that would be in the image, in the likeness, in harmony with, all of Creation.

Interpreting the "Us" and the "Our" in this way, as God working with nature to make humankind, we can see ourselves as not only the "culmination" of creation, but also as the reflection of everything that came before us. And understood in this light, we can also see our interconnectedness with nature, and our responsibility to take care of the earth.

### A Miniature World

According to *Kabbalah*, each one of us is an *Olam Katan* -- a miniature world. We have within ourselves and within our lives a "likeness" to the essence of all of Creation. We have within ourselves the world. Everything that is within the world is within us. And everything that is within us is in the world.

For example, the word for man (used in *Genesis* in the sense of “human being”) is Adam, derived from *adamah* (earth), to signify that a human is earth-born. In fact, the most common elements found in the human body are also some of the most common elements found on the earth -- oxygen, hydrogen, calcium, sodium, iron, carbon.

Water, which is one of the most abundant and essential substances on the surface of the earth, is also one of the most abundant and essential substances in our bodies. In fact, the ratio is almost identical. The oceans cover about 70% of the earth's surface. Water makes up almost 70 % of the human body, with an almost identical percentage of salt as in the oceans.

We have a connection -- a likeness -- to the “essence” of all of nature, a likeness not only to the earth and to the waters, but also to the animals that were formed from the dust of the earth, just as we were. We also have a “likeness” to the trees that grow in the earth.

In fact, we even have family trees. It is the term we use to connect ourselves from one generation to the next. As we teach our children and grandchildren, with care and nurturing, our family's past closely resembles the strong roots of a tree, firmly planted. And as the fruit tree bears its seeds within its fruit, so, too, do we have within us the seeds for future life.

In chapter 2 of *Genesis*, we read that God told *Adam* to name the animals. How did *Adam* decide what to name them? According to *Rashi*, *Adam* named the animals based on their “essence.” In order to do this, *Adam* would have to understand their “essence.” He would have had an intuitive feeling, a connection, to the animals. And since we are all “*Adam*,” we, too, are capable of having that connection with the animal kingdom.

In likeness to God's animals, we can move on the land with speed and grace, or swim in the waters, or hop or creep or crawl. And as our dreams and hopes move us to acts of bravery and courage, we can feel as though we soar on the wings of an eagle.

## Using our Gifts

Of course we are more than the total of all of nature and earth and water combined. For God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, after Our likeness." And so we are, above all else, made in the image and the likeness of God. Our character is potentially divine.

Humankind alone among all living creatures is gifted with moral freedom and will. We are capable of knowing and loving God. We are endowed with reason, and the capacity to love; we are blessed with Divine qualities of goodness and mercy, justice and compassion.

It is therefore up to each one of us to use these gifts with which we are blessed, and to choose wisely, as we pass this world to the next generation.

From the very beginning of time, before we were even created, there was a plan set in motion, that we would be connected to all living things; that we would be the ones to be partners with God to take care of our world. In the image of God, and in the image all of nature, we were created to take on this responsibility. The concept of environmentalism is not new. It goes back to the beginning; to the very beginning.

Endnotes:

1. Ginzberg, Louis. *Legends of the Jews*. Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1911, reprinted 1942.
2. Swartz, Nancy Sohn. *In Our Image: God's First Creatures*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1998.

*Nancy Sohn Swartz is the author of In Our Image: God's First Creatures (Jewish Lights, 1998) and How Did the Animals Help God? (Skylight Paths, 2004).*