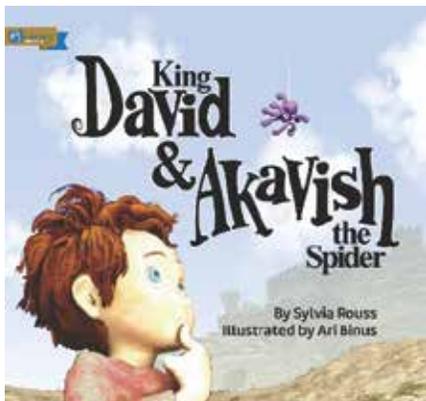




Global Day of Jewish Learning

Curriculum — Under the Same Sky: “The Earth is Full of Your Creations”



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A Project of the Aleph Society



Written by: **Danny Drachsler, with Sergey Mitrofanov**

Introduction (3 minutes)

Welcome to the Global Day of Jewish Learning.

➤ **Introduce the session with this quote and ask participants the opening questions.**

Ivan Turgenev, a 19th century Russian novelist, wrote in *Fathers and Sons*:

Nature is not a temple but a workshop, and the man the workman within it.

This is a provocative statement.

➤ **Ask:**

1. What does this statement mean?
2. Do you agree or disagree with this? Why?

We humans have long struggled to understand our place within the diversity of life on earth. In the Bible, and in rabbinic literature as well, our ancestors have posed essential questions: Was the world created for our sake? Are we masters over the other animals and plants, or are we stewards of them? If we are masters, what does “mastery” look like? If we are stewards, what does stewardship mean? In sum, how should we conceive of the relationship between humanity and nature?

In this session we will examine texts that address these questions. We will consider how different responses to these questions might influence the way we choose to live, and we will discuss the implications of those choices for ourselves and for our world.

Part One: Biblical Sources (20 minutes)

Let's begin our discussion by exploring foundational Biblical texts more deeply. The first two chapters of Genesis present different accounts of God's creation of the world, and characterize the relationship between human and nonhuman life in seemingly very different ways.

➤ **Ask participants to read Texts #1 and #2 in *chavruta* and discuss the questions that follow.** Chavruta is partnered learning. Learning with a friend or two allows you to share ideas and insights with one another as you learn together.

Ruler, Steward, Servant: Humanity's Relationship with Nature

The context of Text #1 is the seven days of Creation; this excerpt describes God's acts on the sixth day.

Text #1: Genesis 1:26–28.

כו וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים, נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדִמוֹתֵנוּ; וַיְרַדּוּ בְדִגְתַּי הַיָּם וּבַעֲוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם, וּבַבְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל-הָאָרֶץ, וּבְכָל-הַרְמֵשׁ, הַרְמֵשׁ עַל-הָאָרֶץ.
כז וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ, בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ: זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה, בָּרָא אֹתָם.
כח וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם אֱלֹהִים, וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ, וּכְבִּשְׁתֶּהּ; וַיְרַדּוּ בְדִגְתַּי הַיָּם, וּבַעֲוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם, וּבְכָל-חַיָּה, הַרְמֵשׂוֹת עַל-הָאָרֶץ.

26 And God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth.” **27** And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. **28** God blessed them and God said to them, “Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth.”

Text #2, from the next chapter in Genesis, narrates an alternative account of the creation of human beings.

Text #2: Genesis 2:5–15.

ה וְכָל-שִׁיחַ הַשָּׂדֶה, טָרֵם יִהְיֶה בְּאָרֶץ, וְכָל-עֵשֶׂב הַשָּׂדֶה, טָרֵם יִצְמָח: כִּי לֹא הִמְטִיר ה' אֱלֹהִים, עַל-הָאָרֶץ, וְאָדָם אִינוֹ, לַעֲבֹד אֶת-הָאֲדָמָה...
ז וַיִּצְרָה ה' אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם, עָפָר מִן-הָאֲדָמָה, וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו, נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים; וַיְהִי הָאָדָם, לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה.
ח וַיִּטַּע ה' אֱלֹהִים, גֶּן-בְּעֵדֶן — מִקְדָּם; וַיִּשֶׂם שָׁם, אֶת-הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר יָצָר...
טו וַיִּקַּח ה' אֱלֹהִים, אֶת-הָאָדָם; וַיַּנְחֵהוּ בְּגֶן-עֵדֶן, לְעִבְדָּהּ וּלְשָׁמְרָהּ.

5 When no shrub of the field was yet on earth and no grasses of the field had yet sprouted, because the LORD God had not sent rain upon the earth and there was no man to till the soil...**7** the LORD God formed man from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being. **8** The LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the man whom He had formed...**15** The LORD God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden, to till it and tend it.

► Questions for *chavruta* discussion:

1. How would you characterize the relationship between humans and the plants and creatures of the earth as presented by each text?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of conceiving of mankind as the ruler of life on earth?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of conceiving of mankind as the one who tends the garden of life?

► Reconvene the group.

Genesis 1 describes the creation of human beings with a divine mandate to “rule” and “master” the entirety of life on earth. In this conception, the relationship between humans and the plants and animals is akin to that between a monarch and his subjects.

Genesis 2 imagines God forming mankind from the “dust” of the earth itself. Appropriately, God charges man “to till and tend” the garden in which he lives. In this arrangement humans are resident gardeners, tasked with the care and cultivation of the other inhabitants of the garden.

- Invite participants to share their responses to *chavruta* discussion questions #2 and #3 with the full group. Facilitate a short discussion.

Part Two: Classical Rabbinic Commentary (18 minutes)

Let's reflect on these texts further by considering some of Rashi's comments — he addresses a specific issue in each text. Rashi lived in France in the 11th century. He is the most important commentator on the Bible and Talmud, and one of the most famous scholars in Jewish history.

Commenting on Genesis 1:26, Rashi warns man that his “rule” over “every living thing” is not unqualified.

Text #3: Rashi. Commentary on Genesis 1:26. Translation by Rabbi Avrohom Davis in *Metsudah Chumash/Rashi*.

וירדו בדגת הים: יש בלשון הזה לשון רידוי ולשון ירידה זכה רודה בחיות ובבהמות, לא זכה נעשה ירוד לפניהם והחיה מושלת בו

And rule the fish of the sea. This expression (וירדו) [*v'yirdu*, i.e., “rule”] has [the meaning of] ruling (רידוי) and descending (ירידה). [If he is] meritorious, [then] he has dominion over the beasts and cattle. [If he is] not meritorious, [then] he becomes subjugated to them and the beast has dominion over him.

► Ask:

1. Is Rashi's explanation of the phrase “rule them” (וירדו) satisfying to you? Why or why not?
2. In his comment, Rashi puts “ruling over” and being “subjugated to” the animals opposite each other. Are these the only possible options for the relationship between humans and animals, or can you articulate a more subtle description, perhaps one that takes into account both Genesis 1 and 2?

In Text #2, man's purpose is explicit: “To till it [the garden of Eden] and tend it.” Thus he would seem to be a steward, managing God's property for Him. A steward does not protect property for his own benefit; rather, he does it for the benefit of the property itself or for the benefit of the property owner. However, more than being merely the steward, man seems to be the central figure in this arrangement. After all, in Genesis 1 God created all the plants and animals first, and only created Man at the end, whereas in Genesis 2 God refrains from creating plant life (and animal life) until man has been created. How should we understand the relationship between human and nonhuman life as presented in Genesis 2?

Consider Rashi's comment on Genesis 2:5, in which he proposes a solution to an apparent problem in the Biblical narrative: We learned in Genesis 1 that plant life was created on the third day of creation (1:11–12); how is it possible, then, for it to be stated in Genesis 2 that “no shrub of the field was yet on earth and no grasses of the field had yet sprouted”? In his response to this question, Rashi addresses the relationship between human life and plant life.

Text #4: Rashi. Commentary on Genesis 2:5. Translation by Rabbi Avrohom Davis in *Metsudah Chumash/Rashi*.

וכל עשב השדה טרם יצמח: עדיין לא צמח, ובשלישי שכתוב ותוצא הארץ, על פתח הקרקע עמדו עד יום ששי: **כי לא המטיר:** ומה טעם לא המטיר, לפי שאדם אין לעבוד את האדמה ואין מכיר בטובתם של גשמים, וכשבא אדם וידע שהם צורך לעולם התפלל עליהם וירדו, וצמחו האילנות והדשאים:

Ruler, Steward, Servant: Humanity's Relationship with Nature

No shrub of the field was yet on earth and no grasses of the field had yet sprouted. [And all vegetation] did not yet sprout. [The fact that] on the third day it is written [Genesis 1:11]: “Let the earth sprout forth” [should be interpreted:] they did not protrude but they remained at the surface of the ground until the sixth day [when man was created]. Why? **Because the Lord God had not sent rain upon the earth.** And what was the reason that He did not cause it to rain? Because “There was [yet] no man to work the soil”, and there was no one to appreciate the rain. When man appeared and recognized their need for the world he prayed for it and it descended and the trees and vegetation sprouted.

➤ Ask:

1. Is Rashi saying that the plants were created for humanity's sake, or *vice versa*? Find proof for your response in the text.
2. How would you characterize the interrelationship between plants, rain, man and God as expressed in Rashi's description?

Rashi's comment here (on Genesis 2:5) presents a nuanced dynamic between man and the other creations (specifically, in this case, plants and rain). In Rashi's view God does not create the plants outright; rather, He creates them as sprouts, hidden under the soil, waiting for rain to make them grow and appear above the ground. It is only when man recognizes that the world needs the rain, and prays for it, that the rain falls.

“Need” (צורך) is a key word in Rashi's comment. Consider the interdependent loop of need going on here. The plants need the rain to grow up out of the ground. God needs man to work the soil and appreciate the rain. Man needs the rain so plants can grow and he can eat them. According to Rashi, man's prayers are necessary to trigger the water cycle. In this light, Genesis 2:5 seems to be a meditation on the interdependent web of life. God, humans, and the nonhuman creations each have their own role and their own needs, yet none of their needs alone is sufficient to get them what they want — the others' needs are essential to the functioning of the system.

This idea, that human and nonhuman life are interdependent, is different than conceiving of man in black-or-white terms, as either “ruler” or “steward”. Thus far in our discussion of the relationship between man and the world, however, we have been discussing human and nonhuman life as if they were, in essence, two different things. Is it possible to consider them as still more subtly intertwined?

Part Three: A Modern Rabbinic Commentary (12 minutes)

Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz offers us a more nuanced view of how different forms of life are interconnected. One of the leading scholars of this century, Rabbi Steinsaltz is best known for his commentary on the entire Talmud and for his work on Jewish mysticism.

Text #5: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. “Nature”. *Simple Words*.

Often, either for valid reasons or because we are arrogant and egocentric, we view ourselves as separate and distinct from the rest of creation. We speak about “humanity” and “nature” as if we exist in one way, and the rest of the world exists in a different way. This dichotomy between man and nature is neither simple nor accurate. Granted, nature without the presence of man would be very different; yet humanity, although unique and distinct, is still part of nature. Whether we define nature as the totality of existence, or as the set of laws that govern it — we are included in it...

Ruler, Steward, Servant: Humanity's Relationship with Nature

In a way, all of this can be summarized by a very old legend. When God created man, God said (Genesis 1:26), "Let us make man in our image, after our own likeness." Traditionally, it is understood that God was speaking to the angels. If so, the plan was not very successful; we are not like angels. According to another interpretation, God was speaking to the whole of creation, to all of nature. In that case, "Let us make man in our image" means, "Let each of you contribute something." The fox and the dove, the tiger and the sheep, the spider and the bee each contributed a small part — as did the angels and the devils.

We humans contain all the parts. Some of us are foxier than others, or more sheepish than others, but altogether, we contain all the traits found in nature. In that way, we are the sum total of nature, containing the macrocosm in our own microcosm. Somehow, we have to learn from all our partners, and perhaps pray that the extra part — that "Divine spark" contributed by God — will help us make the right choices.

➤ Ask:

1. In your own words, how would you summarize Rabbi Steinsaltz's main idea?
2. What does Rabbi Steinsaltz mean when he says, "We have to learn from all our partners"? How do we do that?
3. How might people's personal, social, and political actions change if we were to think of humanity as "the sum total of nature"?

Conclusion (7 minutes)

Valentin Rasputin was a Russian author (1937–2015) and this quote is from his work *Farwell to Matyora*.

➤ Read aloud this piece of literature.

Does this land belong to you alone? We're all here today and gone tomorrow. We're like migratory birds. This land belongs to everyone — those who were here before us and those who will come after. We're only on it for a tiny time... And what have you done with it? Your elders entrusted you with it so that you would spend your life on it and pass it on to the younger ones...
"Man is king of nature," Andrei prompted.
"Yes, yes, king. Just reign a bit and you'll be sorry."

➤ Ask:

1. In the view of this text, is humanity's relationship to nature best described as master, steward or servant? Or does this text present an alternative characterization — if so, what is it?
2. With the perspective of which of the texts we've discussed is this text the closest? Why?
3. In your opinion, which approach — master, steward or servant — is the most useful? The most dangerous? The most inspiring? Why?

We have discussed different perceptions of the relationship between human and nonhuman. We have considered mankind as a ruler, gardener, and servant. We have viewed human and nonhuman life as interdependent, and in doing so, have included humanity in our understanding of nature as a whole.

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Perhaps it is proper for humanity to dominate the plants and animals. Perhaps the role we are meant to play is that of steward, acting on behalf of, and advocating for, nonhuman life. Perhaps the only reason we are here at all is to serve the plants and animals, which are the true purpose of Creation. Perhaps the very distinction between humanity and nature is in fact an illusion, since humans are in and of nature.

However we view the relationship between human beings and the variety of nonhuman life on earth, it is certain that our fates are inextricably linked.

Part One: Biblical Sources

Text #1: Genesis 1:26–28.

כו וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים, נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדֹמוֹתֵינוּ; וַיְרַדּוּ בְדִגְתַּי הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם, וּבַבְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל-הָאָרֶץ, וּבְכָל-הַרְמִשׁ, הַרְמִשׁ עַל-הָאָרֶץ.
כז וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ, בְּצַלְם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ: זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה, בָּרָא אֹתָם.
כח וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם אֱלֹהִים, וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ, וּכְבַשְׁתֶּהּ; וַרְדּוּ בְּדִגְתַּי הַיָּם, וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם, וּבְכָל-חַיָּה, הַרְמִשָּׁת עַל-הָאָרֶץ.

26 And God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth.” **27** And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. **28** God blessed them and God said to them, “Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth.”

Text #2: Genesis 2:5–15.

ה וְכָל-שִׁיחַ הַשָּׂדֶה, טָרֵם יִהְיֶה בָאָרֶץ, וְכָל-עֵשֶׂב הַשָּׂדֶה, טָרֵם יִצְמַח: כִּי לֹא הִמְטִיר ה' אֱלֹהִים, עַל-הָאָרֶץ, וְאָדָם אִינוּ, לַעֲבֹד אֶת-הָאֲדָמָה...
ז וַיִּצְרָה ה' אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם, עָפָר מִן-הָאֲדָמָה, וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו, נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים; וַיְהִי הָאָדָם, לְנִפְשׁ חַיָּה.
ח וַיִּטַּע ה' אֱלֹהִים, גֶּן-בְּעֵדֶן — מִקְדָּשׁ; וַיִּשָּׂם אֶת-הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר יָצָר...
טו וַיִּקַּח ה' אֱלֹהִים, אֶת-הָאָדָם; וַיְנַחֲהוּ בְּגֶן-עֵדֶן, לְעֹבְדָהּ וּלְשִׁמְרָהּ.

5 When no shrub of the field was yet on earth and no grasses of the field had yet sprouted, because the LORD God had not sent rain upon the earth and there was no man to till the soil... **7** the LORD God formed man from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being. **8** The LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the man whom He had formed... **15** The LORD God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden, to till it and tend it.

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And rule the fish of the sea. This expression (וירדו) [*v'yirdu*, i.e., “rule”] has [the meaning of] ruling (רידוי) and descending (ירידה). [If he is] meritorious, [then] he has dominion over the beasts and cattle. [If he is] not meritorious, [then] he becomes subjugated to them and the beast has dominion over him.



Ruler, Steward, Servant: Humanity's Relationship with Nature

Text #4: Rashi. Commentary on Genesis 2:5. Translation by Rabbi Avrohom Davis in *Metsudah Chumash/Rashi*.

וכל עשב השדה טרם יצמח, ובשלישי שכתוב ותוצא הארץ, על פתח הקרקע עמדו עד יום ששי:
כי לא המטיר, ומה טעם לא המטיר, לפי שאדם אין לעבוד את האדמה ואין מכיר בטובתם של גשמים, וכשבא אדם וידע שהם צורך לעולם
התפלל עליהם וירדו, וצמחו האילנות והדשאים:

No shrub of the field was yet on earth and no grasses of the field had yet sprouted. [And all vegetation] did not yet sprout. [The fact that] on the third day it is written [Genesis 1:11]: “Let the earth sprout forth” [should be interpreted:] they did not protrude but they remained at the surface of the ground until the sixth day [when man was created]. Why? **Because the Lord God had not sent rain upon the earth.** And what was the reason that He did not cause it to rain? Because “There was [yet] no man to work the soil,” and there was no one to appreciate the rain. When man appeared and recognized their need for the world he prayed for it and it descended and the trees and vegetation sprouted.

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In a way, all of this can be summarized by a very old legend. When God created man, God said (Genesis 1:26), “Let us make man in our image, after our own likeness.” Traditionally, it is understood that God was speaking to the angels. If so, the plan was not very successful; we are not like angels. According to another interpretation, God was speaking to the whole of creation, to all of nature. In that case, “Let us make man in our image” means, “Let each of you contribute something.” The fox and the dove, the tiger and the sheep, the spider and the bee each contributed a small part - as did the angels and the devils.

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