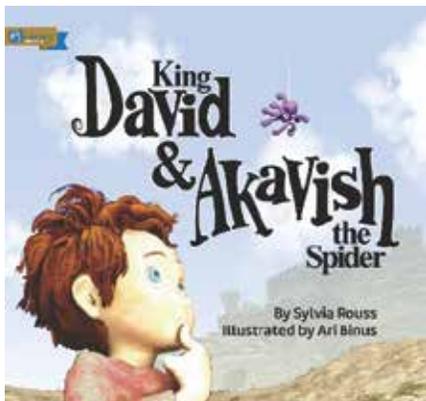




Global Day of Jewish Learning

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



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Nature — An excerpt from *Simple Words* by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz

The word “nature” is one of the fuzzy words that are used — and abused — to express many diverse concepts and meanings. It may be used to describe the existing order, but there are other common usages in which Nature is spelled with a capital N. Due to atheistic (or agnostic) coyness, it sometimes means almost the same thing as God. The ever popular “Mother Nature” is only one of the ways in which the term is personalized and idealized.

Two of the more formal definitions are closely linked. Nature is the totality of existence. Anything and everything, from the mightiest galaxies to the smallest sub-atomic particles, the whales and the lice, all are parts of nature. Nature also comprises all the laws of existence, the rules by which all the parts operate, and the relationships among them. In a slightly broader sense, nature is the usual order of things, which keeps on going as long as nothing interferes with it.

Naturalists, the people engaged in studying natural sciences, are probably the people who use the word “nature” most rarely. They are busy with their studies and are frequently too immersed in detail to have the time and inclination to use this all-encompassing (and rather vague) term. However, nature and natural laws are far more important to other human beings. The questions we pose are not about nature per se, but rather about our relationship with nature. Humanity can be in harmony with nature, in conflict with nature, or indifferent to nature — these are some of our choices. Such choice is not an abstract problem; we face it whenever we build a city or weed a garden, when we light a cigarette or educate a child.

The first thing that has to be remembered is that we humans are part of the natural world. 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.

The obvious notion that humanity is a part of nature has some startling ramifications. We say that nature is silent; nature follows its course; nature does not care about people; nature does not have intentions; nature does not have purpose; nature does not have thought. However, we are part of nature, and we have all these traits. Nature, as it manifests in a storm, does not think and does not feel, but nature as it manifests in animals feels pain, attraction, hunger. Nature as it manifests in humanity thinks, writes poetry, and prays. Could we say that man is not a thinking creature because his hands and feet do not think? One part of the whole is a thinking part, and therefore we say that man is a thinking creature, a feeling creature. In the same way, we have to say that nature feels, thinks, is purposeful, and does right and wrong, insofar as we humans do those things.

On the other hand, it is also clear that there is a difference between humans and the rest of nature. Even without discussing the theological question of whether we have souls while other creatures do not (or, if animals do have souls, whether human souls are superior), and while setting aside the question of whether other creatures can think about their actions, still, humans are distinct from other creatures.

The primary distinction is that, from our very creation, we have free will, which we exercise through the many choices we make. While the rest of nature seems to be bound by rigid laws (of physics and chemistry), or by instincts and reflexes, we are not bound by our innate nature in the same way as other creatures in the world. A sheep cannot decide to begin hunting and eating other animals, and even a well-behaved tiger cannot decide to become vegetarian because of humane (or tigerish) considerations. We, as people, can choose whether to prey on others or to graze.

Furthermore, according to an anthropological definition, man is a creator of tools. Since we have tools, which enormously enhance our power, we change nature considerably, and at will; consequently, we have the freedom to move around, to live underground or above ground, to build and to destroy, to create bizarre things that never existed



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before. Man is also the creator of words; since we have words and language, we can conceive elaborate plans, transmit them to other people and other generations, and thereby change nature.

Our distinction from other parts of nature is apparent in our behavior as well. We do many things that no other animal does; for instance, we dress. Also, we are the only creatures that kill our own species en masse; that is also unnatural. Ever since the beginning of our existence, we have exercised our ability — whose boundaries are expanding daily — to change things at will. Our free will is sometimes frivolous, often foolish, but in any case, it pushes us to try, and sometimes to do, many new things. We have managed to form and destroy a great number of things, and we are still creating and innovating.

We have even succeeded in turning our basic weakness into strength. Biologically, we are not specialized; other creatures far surpass us in almost every capacity. They are better at running, jumping, swimming, climbing, and so many other skills. All our senses are inferior to those of other creatures. Even our brain lacks many special capacities. We cannot find our homes like dogs; we cannot navigate like birds; we cannot move in the dark like bats. Yet we have created, with our rather clumsy fingers, tools and machines that enable us to outrun the cheetah, to outfly the eagle, to outspin the spider.

The natural world can be seen as a vast orchestra in which each of the creatures has a distinct voice and sound. A drum and a flute are not interchangeable. The spider can produce threads; the bee cannot. We humans made ourselves, somehow, into a combination of all the creatures, and we can do everything. We can make honey and we can sting; we can plant and we can destroy; we can kill and we can resuscitate. All these abilities are part of our strange, diverse nature.

Our power of choice enables us to do things for our good and our benefit, and also things that are against our best interests. A baby goat will not jump down from a high rock unless it can do so without being hurt. It has an instinct for self-preservation. A baby human cannot be trusted in the same way: a child might jump or creep down and be injured. We can rely on an apple tree not to produce oranges, but we cannot rely on a human to be consistent. According to the ancient explanation, this is because humans have both good and evil inclinations. Nowadays we would say it is because we humans have cut ourselves loose from the total rule of instinct, and instead, we have the ability to make both good and bad choices.

Of course, we may say that the question “What is natural?” is of no importance. Why should we bother about it? We change things, but so does every other creature, from a microbe or a virus, to a plant, to a complex animal. The bee makes pollen into honey; the simplest plants take air, water, soil, and sunshine and make them into fruit; locusts can devastate a country, and beavers can flood valleys. Why is all that considered natural, while some of our actions are not?

The difference is quantitative. In the course of many generations, our abilities have grown to surpass those of almost any creature. The quantity of changes can become qualitative, and cause irreversible results. Creating a vast new lake, or destroying species, are not intrinsically different from what other creatures do, but the dimensions of the event have many more implications. What is more important, however, is that our flexibility and our free choice — even in the narrow limits within which our physical existence can be sustained — make it possible for us to do amazing things, some of which no other creature can do. We can create permanent radioactivity, we can genetically engineer. Our emotional and spiritual capacity is even broader than our physical existence, and therefore we can do even more in those realms. We do not know the full extent of what we can do, nor all of the sometimes frightening, sometimes uplifting, always surprising consequences of our actions.

Our freedom compels us to be more, rather than less, careful about what we do, because we have the power to do so much. The need for deliberation about our deeds goes further than general caution. If we make changes which are too abrupt, or go against the grain, or exceed a certain limit, we damage the fabric of existence. For even if we believe that



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nature does not care about good and evil, it seems that nature does care about sustaining basic forms of life. Certain things that we have created go against nature — not because they are impossible, but because they go against this sustaining flow. We have to keep within certain boundaries; if we do not, we may kill ourselves, both physically and psychologically.

Our bad luck is that our excesses may not kill us immediately. We know, from our experience as a species as well as from personal experience, that nature does not always react immediately. Leaning over an abyss may not immediately result in a fall; a child playing with matches may have some time to enjoy the fire before he gets burned. In a similar way, we do not have the same reaction that animals have to poison, or, for that matter, to wrong; we can digest both. Therefore, we can harm ourselves physically and morally without knowing that we are doing so — until the inevitable results.

This is the reason we need to figure out what the natural laws and regulations are and by which ones we humans must abide. In the realm of our physical deeds, we now have a whole body of knowledge — although still far from perfect, and sometimes quite inconclusive — about ecology. This subject is developing, and becoming increasingly popular, because of the fear that we may step out of the boundaries, and eventually destroy ourselves. The same problem exists also in regard to our behavior and way of life. Some of the many things that we can do mentally are still within the boundaries of nature, or at least of our part of it; others may go against the general flow, and eventually destroy us.

The fundamental question, then, is, should we move “back to nature,” should we stay where we are, or should we develop even more? Should we correct nature, change nature, destroy nature? Should we do all those artificial things that are humanly possible?

This question, which was never a theoretical one, has become even more critical in our time, when artifacts — those things that we build which are not “natural” — are becoming increasingly powerful. We have to decide how “natural” we should be. It begins with as simple a question as whether a woman should wear makeup, but it goes much further. Should someone have plastic surgery? If I want to kick somebody, I usually do not do it; a dog or a donkey cannot be trusted to behave so well. So should we return to “natural” manners, or is that not proper behavior? Is “natural food” — a big fad today — actually superior to other food? Is it unjust to pay double for organically grown produce? Things are not necessarily better just because they are natural; a loaf of bread is better to eat than raw grain. We can eat and digest sugar, though it may not be healthy for us; we can eat paper, but we cannot digest it. We may say that artificial sweetening is not good because it is not natural, but we can actually create artificial sweeteners out of a variety of materials; we can create cloth from oil; we can do the most bizarre things. Should we go “back to nature”? How far should we go? And if we do, why should we be vegetarians, like cows, and not carnivores, like tigers? Tigers, too, are a part of nature. Since we have choice, we have confusion.

These are questions not just for each individual human being, but for all of humanity. Some people have very clear-cut answers: everything natural — which means that which has not been changed or interfered with by man — is basically good, and those things that are not natural are evils that we humans have created. If we take a little philosophical jump back to the views of Rousseau, we see that idealizing nature is not a new idea. A number of educational systems were built according to these ideas. Even more so, some of the biggest political movements of our times were influenced by them.¹ Most of these attempts ended badly, even disastrously² — basically, because it seems that “nature” and “good” are not synonymous. Even if we decide that we do want to return to nature, we cannot do it. Being both a part of nature and apart from nature, it is very difficult to determine what is natural for us, and what is unnatural. To complicate the problem further, humankind is distinct in not having any “natural” group to compare it with.

There are wild rats and domesticated ones, wild bulls and domesticated cows, but here are no “wild” human beings existing in a “natural state.” Even the most primitive individuals and cultures are not a part of raw nature. Being human means that a great part of our existence is artificial, man-made.



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With all that, we still have to be careful about our “mental ecology.” We can draw some models and broad guidelines from nature about what can and should be done. However, we must remember that it is we who make those guidelines, that they are not written explicitly in red letters in nature. Furthermore, sometimes they can be abandoned, ignored, or changed. We should honor the patterns by which nature generally seems to function, but at the same time, we should take these rules with more than one grain of salt. Moreover, using the general “laws of nature” as guidelines can be quite dangerous. Take, for instance, the Darwinian view of the world as “the survival of the fittest”: it has been used in very ugly, vicious ways to justify killing (and even genocide), because “the fittest survive.” That was not only morally very wrong, but it also showed how people can misunderstand a notion, turn it into a slogan — and then misuse it.

Furthermore, even if we decide to follow the “law of the jungle”, it is not that simple. The jungle is complex; it has a myriad of different creatures that do not all behave alike. The mouse and the elephant both live in the wild, but behave differently. The amoebas and the cockroaches are very fit; they have existed longer than many other species. Should they be our models? The tyrannosaurus and the saber-toothed tiger have long been extinct, while squids and even earthworms have survived. Being able to chop off somebody’s head is not a mark of superiority — not even in nature at its rawest.

What are the right models for our social life and our family life? This, too, is not an abstract question. What are our standards for deciding what is best? Nature provides so many models that the answer depends on who is defining the standards. Nature is too diverse, too strange, and offers too many choices to provide specific directives for human behavior. Given these caveats, we can look to nature for general guidelines, at least to determine when we are doing something that is very wrong.

The Talmud states, “Even if we were not given the Law, we could learn how to behave from the animals.” We would learn family life from the doves — they seem to be devoted to each other, they form permanent couples, and there are fewer divorces among them than among humans. They sometimes fight, they do not always behave like doves, but at least they do form permanent couples. We can learn sanitary behavior from the cats. They behave so very nicely — they cover everything neatly. However, even the models of the dove and the cat do not have labels saying that they are the right way for humans to behave. Maybe we should behave sexually like cats, and sanitarily like doves. That would be a different picture, but it would also be imitating nature.

Nature, then, is like a gigantic book. In that book there are many pages, each with different pictures, some of which are contradictory. We can always quote examples to prove whatever point we want to make, as people do from anthologies or books of quotations. Our freedom of choice gives us the ability to do everything, and our bond to nature compels us to use nature as a guideline, but also to make constant adaptations. When we read the pages of the book of nature, we need a commentary, because without one we get mixed up, we get lost in all the information that can be found there.

Yet, there are some advantages in consulting the book of nature. We may want to find out about our behavior, our emotions, our customs: are they just artifacts, temporary man-made structures that will topple naturally if not held together by our willpower? When we find certain things that exist and flourish all around us, then we know that we are working with nature, and not against the general flow of nature. Of course we can, and do, express ourselves and behave in “unnatural” ways, but we know that they are bound to fall. A better understanding of the natural laws does not compel us to obey them, but we cannot ignore them. Watching nature can give us some notion about what is permanent and what is ephemeral, what is a promising path and what is a blind alley.

In this way, we will perceive that many grand moral and philosophical ideas are verbal restatements of things that exist all around us in nature. We cannot expect to hear nature express them in words, but they are there in other forms. It is as if we, who are endowed with the gift of speech, have to listen to others who can only use sign language. One should not look for the Ten Commandments on a fossil; yet they can be found enacted in animate and inanimate

entities. This is true not only about very broad subjects, such as the importance of life, mutual aid, and the like; the idea of progress, for example, may sound very modern, but every seed growing into a tree proclaims it.

Watching nature may also help solve some problems and contemporary dilemmas. We can rely on book knowledge and journal ideology, but we can also derive some lessons about education from a cat teaching a kitten how to hunt; we can learn from birds about taking care of the young; from some animals, about sexual life; and from any social creature, about proper behavior during war-time. We may also learn about how precious life is, as well as about self-sacrifice. We can therefore learn many important lessons from nature. We can see how certain noble and gracious things are done naturally — namely, without the interference of the special human ability to distort and change instincts. For example, when a maternal instinct is diverted toward a pet, when the instinct of self-preservation is subject to an ideology, or so many sensual deviations (e.g., bestiality). This does not mean, however, that we cannot search and find parallels also to the most atrocious things; in fact, it would be strange if there were none. If some deed or form of behavior has no natural counterpart, it may be just an abstract idea that can exist only in the mind but is impossible to realize because of inherent inconsistencies. If people do have the material and psychological ability to do something, there must somehow be a parallel to it in nonhuman nature.

However, finding some bizarre case does not turn such a behavior into a model for general conduct. There is a consensus, and there are general rules, and some even more general ones. These general rules that are found all around us should serve as guidance. Moving too far away from “raw” nature is not impossible, but should be taken as a warning. When we seek a path and find ourselves in a deserted place, this may be an indication that we have lost our way. Of course, this does not mean that the knowledgeable naturalist is always a better human being; a person may know what is right, and still decide not to act accordingly.

In a way, all of this can be summarized through a very old legend. When God created man, God said (Genesis 1:26), “Let us make man in our image, after our 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.

Steinsaltz, Rabbi Adin Even-Israel. Simple Words. New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1999.

¹ *Strangely enough, both Communism and Nazism, different as they may be, are linked to the same source idea of returning to the primeval order; obviously, not with the same understanding of what that order is.*

² *If one prefers fiction, see for instance Lord of the Flies by William Golding, or the film based on it.*



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➤ Discussion questions:

1. Rabbi Steinsaltz asserts that people and nature are not “separate and distinct” — that “humans are part of the natural world”. What issues does this raise?
2. Humanity can be in harmony, in conflict, or indifferent to nature. How might humanity be harming itself physically and morally? What are ways we are doing this without realizing it?
3. What do you think of as natural and how “natural” should we be as individuals? As communities or societies?
4. Rabbi Steinsaltz asks: “Should we move ‘back to nature,’ should we stay where we are, or should we develop even more?” What is the role of our free will and personal choice?
5. How can a more thoughtful approach to nature help us solve local or global problems?



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