

“Why must we be concerned about protecting our environment?”

Sara Cohen

A little more than a year ago, a few kilometers south of my home in the Southern Arava, thousands of liters of crude oil leaked from a burst pipe into the delicate ecological environment of the desert. Environmental authorities called the oil spill one of the worst environmental disasters in Israel's history. During the cleanup, it was recalled that a similar spill had occurred there in the 1970s. This time, in contrast to the previous spill, the incident hit the headlines, generating anger and concern amongst the public.

Various organizations and government agencies cooperated to mitigate the damage and to clean up the polluted area, which contains a nature reserve. It seems that the last 40 years has seen an increase in environmental awareness in Israel. Sadly, it seems that that awareness has not increased enough to prevent the same environmental damage from occurring twice in the same place.

During those 40 years, in many communities, Tu BiShvat has become “the environmental festival” when we contemplate and articulate through rituals our individual, communal, and social connections to nature. In some communities, the entire month of Shvat is devoted to environmental activities, and is labeled Environmental Awareness Month. During those 40 years, communities have also revived the tradition of the Tu BiShvat seder, whose origins lie in kabbalah. The kabbalists' Tu BiShvat seder is comprised of four realms or “worlds”, which are linked to four glasses of wine, four types of fruit, and to the four seasons. At contemporary Tu BiShvat seders, other foursomes are often added to the original divisions to render the seder relevant in today's world, and as a way of incorporating the values of the community that is holding the seder.

As a result of the petroleum leak in the Ein Evrona reserve, yet another foursome can be added to the seder's traditional division. This foursome is based on the world of environmental ethics, and provides four answers to the question: “Why must we be concerned about protecting our environment?”

The first world of the kabbalists' seder is the world of *asiyah*, or the world of action. Embedded in our everyday work as humans is ideological meaning and substance. To the world of *asiya* we can attach anthropocentrism-- the environmental approach that prioritizes human needs above all. Why should we worry about the environment? Because not all natural resources are unlimited. Because if we continue along our current path, our grandchildren will not be left with those natural resources from which we can take all that we need to sustain human life on this planet. In environmental circles, anthropocentric thinking is the target of criticism, as it does not value nature for itself, but rather only for how we humans can benefit from it.



Nevertheless, just as the Divine spirit is hidden in the physical world, so is a broad understanding of the future contained within the anthropocentric approach: out of the anthropocentric approach was born the theory of sustainability, the foundation of the modern environmental movement.

The second world of the kabbalists' seder is the world of yetzira, or composition, connecting the material and spiritual worlds. To the world of yetzira we can attach biocentrism, which demands that we preserve nature for the sake of nature itself. This approach places nature in the center, rather than humans. In the world of yetzirah, we humans see the natural world surrounding us as an entity separate from us, yet dear to us. We are tied to it not just because it provides our existential needs, but because we believe that it has inherent value, unconnected to our needs; we appreciate it for its own sake.

The third world of the kabbalists' seder is the world of briyah, or creation, which represents our ability to feel at one with the universe. To the world of briyah we can connect the environmental doctrine of theocentrism, which places God at the center, as the world was created by God and belongs to God. Our task therein is to preserve God's creation, and in doing so we become closer to God.

The fourth world of the kabbalists' seder is the world of atzilut, or nobility. According to kabbalist tradition, atzilut is a state of pure spirituality, devoid of materialism. Nothing is hidden, and nothing is hiding. To the world of atzilut we can connect the doctrine of unity: the universe is a single entity encompassing us, nature, and Creation together. Just as we love ourselves, we love the world, and we love God who created it.

The world of atzilut, though, cannot exist without the other worlds: it comes into existence in their midst, and expresses the significance of the worlds of asiya, yetzirah, and briyah. Similarly, although the environmental ethics philosophies were born as a reaction to one another, they in fact exist side by side, and do not necessarily contradict each other. They all lead us to the same conclusion: It is incumbent upon us humans to think carefully about our behavior toward nature.

May it be granted that our thinking in the month of Shvat will lead to deeds; that we learn during Shvat to exist in the world without causing irreparable damage to nature and its resources. May it be granted that through the worlds of asiya, yetzira, briyah, and atzilut that we celebrate at the Tu BiShvat seder, we will also learn to preserve the world that lies at our doorstep.

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The descriptions of the worlds of the kabbalists' Tu BiShvat seder are taken from the haggadat seder Tu Bishvat of Ketura, written and edited by Ketura members Ayelet Eshchar, Dr. Avigail Morris, and Sara Cohen.

