

Judaism and the Environment

Discussion Questions

- * Prof. Steven Schwartzschild claims Jews are “unnatural persons” (p. 26). Do you agree or disagree, and why? How have the ways we have conceptualized Jewish identity and practiced our Judaism been alienated from nature and the environment, and what can we do to change that?
- * Do the Creation stories discussed in chapter 2 still shape our worldviews today? In what ways are these ancient “unscientific” texts relevant to contemporary challenges? How do you see the human role in the world: Crowning glory of Creation? Plain citizen in the community of life? Captain of spaceship Earth? Global gardener?
- * The beginning of chapter 3 deals with the challenges in connecting the spiritual and the material sides of our lives. What personal issues have you faced in this area? What aspects of our lives make this difficult?
- * Some of the topics of chapter 4 (consumerism, protecting the commons, land use policy) suggest a critique of an unregulated free-market economy, and contemporary consumer lifestyle. In what ways do you agree or disagree with this critique? How, if at all, can we affect these aspects of our lives and societies? What would you like to do in this regard?
- * There are many deep ethical dilemmas in the ways we treat animals, from the way we raise animals for food, to the extent we experiment on them to improve human welfare (pp. 101–107; pp. 149–159). Where should we draw the line between legitimate use and abuse?
- * Chapter 5 talks about holidays, Shabbat, and prayer. What could change in our communal and personal observances and celebrations to make them more environmentally friendly? What can you do in your community and synagogue to promote Jewish environmental consciousness in your practices?
- * In what ways does the idea of a Jewish sense of place resonate with you? What risks of assimilation do we face by “feeling at home” in the various environments of the Diaspora? How, if it all, is a deep connection to place, and to Israel as the Jewish place, obsolete or dangerous?