

The Center for the Study of Conversion  
and Inter-Religious Encounters (CSoC)  
at the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

# Religion and the Natural Environment – Multiple Perspectives International Conference

Marcus Family Campus, Be'er Sheva

Building 71 (Samuel & Milada Ayrton University Center), Room -136

9-11 January 2023

## Conference Paper Abstracts

January  
 9  
 Monday  
 10:30

**David Shyovitz, Northwestern University**
**Pious Animals in Medieval Jewish Culture:  
 Narrative, Theological, and Polemical Dimensions**

In a range of textual and visual genres, medieval Jewish authors, artists, and narrators considered what it might mean for non-human animals to observe Jewish law. This talk will survey a sampling of sources devoted to this issue, and will argue that beliefs about pious, halakhically-observant animals were deployed for overlapping theological and polemical purposes--and that they attest to the surprising fluidity of medieval conceptions of both species distinctions and religious identities.

 January  
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 10:30

**Yotam Tsal, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem**
**When God was no Longer Natural:  
 Contesting Visions for the Natural Environment in the Age of Enlightenment**

Biologists today are preoccupied with the extinction of species. By contrast, in the second half of the eighteenth century, European naturalists were more concerned about nature's plentitude. With God no longer serving as the sole explanation and organizing principle for the natural environment, naturalists were grappling with how expansive was nature, and how was it organized. They explored the vastness of the "empire of nature" and were preoccupied with estimating the number of plants, mammals, birds, and insects in nature. They also carefully amassed animal specimens in growing collections of natural history. More broadly, Enlightenment naturalists asked whether any human could ever encompass the entirety of nature. They tried to answer this question by debating the naming of new species, and constructing contesting classification systems to expose nature's order.

 January  
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 Monday  
 12:30

**Jan Szemiński, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem**
**The Inca Religion, Ecology and Politics before Spanish Conquest**

The Inca image of the world considered all the cosmos as a living thing full of living things. Inside the world the Inca and the Inca empire had the function of intermediaries between the humans and gods. The intermediaries should take care to keep the humans fulfilling their obligations to gods, and to convince the gods to fulfill their obligations to the humans and the world. With everybody fulfilling his duties the cataclysms would be prevented.

Because of the ecological complexity of the Andes between the sea on the west and the jungle on the east Andean food producers had to use multiple agricultural cycles on different altitudes ranging from Pacific beaches to the glaciers (more or less 4500 over the sea level) and descending to the Amazon jungle. Such ecology imposed the necessity to produce food in every place possible, to gain some produce, but in each ecological zone insufficient to produce enough for a family to survive. A complicated system of collaboration created a possibility to produce not only enough for peasants to survive but also a surplus for the empire and maintaining ecological equilibrium, the most important function of the Inca empire, so that the local population would not be bigger than the productivity of local agriculture husbandry, and wild vegetation and animals. To maintain such equilibrium the authorities needed exact knowledge about terrain and population. They also developed a system of population transfers from overpopulated regions to underpopulated regions.

January  
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12:30

## Jonathan Brack, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

### Sacred kingship and the Environment Between the Mongols and the Mughals

In the Mongol Empire (13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries), kingship was informed by an immanentist religious worldview. Immanentism here refers to a mode of religiosity defined not by individual salvation, universal ethics, and scriptural canon as we find in transcendentalist religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but by an interest in harnessing the supernatural forces for the here and the now: from victory on the battlefield to fertility, abundance, communal well-being, and dynastic longevity. Immanentist societies (also referred to as tribal, archaic, cosmic) are, therefore, defined by immersion in the world, rather than preaching its negation, and thus also lack the division between the divine and mundane, nature and the supernatural, or society and the cosmos. In this system, kings are sacralized through their affinity with the divine, and their exceptionality must be demonstrated empirically (rather than ethically). One way in which kings seek to demonstrate their sacralized status by empirically demonstrating their control over the natural world: ordering the “chaos” and creating new sublime environments. What happens, however, when immanentist kings convert to a transcendentalist religion like Islam as was the case in Mongol-ruled, Ilkhanid Iran in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century? This paper will explore several examples of royal interactions with the natural environment from the Ilkhanate in greater Iran (1260-1335). The durability of a new Muslim-Mongol synthesis of sacral kingship will furthermore be examined through examples from the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Mughals, the Mongols’ successors in India (1526-1857).

January  
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15:00

## Ariadne Konstantinou, Bar-Ilan University

### Gods and Nature (and the nature of gods) in Early Greek Epic Poetry

The gods in early Greek epic poetry seem to be constantly on the move. Homer’s *Iliad* is particularly rich in descriptions of divine journeys, some of which culminate in divine epiphanies. The language of divine mobility is often formulaic, and a recurring feature is its speed. While epic poetry sometimes assumes that the gods are omnipresent and omnipotent, the journeys of the gods also serve as an illustration to the exact opposite idea. One famous example is the journey of Zeus and the other Olympian gods to the Ethiopians in the first book of the *Iliad*. This absence creates time in the narrative, but what is no less important is that it also suggests the option of divine absence, or, in other words, the impossibility of divine omnipresence.

This paper will discuss a selection of passages from early Greek epic poetry, and especially from Homer’s *Iliad*, in which divine mobility also has a miraculous effect on nature. When Poseidon in *Iliad* 13 (17-31) travels to his underwater palace on a chariot, the sea stands apart and dolphins come to greet him. We find a similar (though not identical) description of the waters drawing back when the goddess Thetis travels from the depths of the sea to the beach in *Iliad* 24 (95-9). In the Homeric *Hymn to Aphrodite* (72-4), Aphrodite’s arrival to the Troad so as to seduce the mortal Anchises also has a miraculous effect on nature: the animals start mating with each other. And in *Iliad* 14 (280-353) just before the seduction of Zeus, the mobility of Hera (with Hypnos) causes the forest trees to rustle.

These descriptions suggest that in early Greek thought some natural phenomena or changes in nature may be perceived as reflective of divine presence and, in this case, divine mobility. While the omnipresence of Greek gods is far from being the norm in these early sources, divine mobility seems to have a transformative power over nature, if only humans were sensitive enough to see it.

January  
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15:00

## Marco Curatola Petrocchi, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú

### The Living Stones: Rocks and Water as Speaking Deities in Inca Ontology and Religion

Inca religion was ontologically rooted in nature. Its pantheon was made up of a few great gods identified with the main celestial bodies, as well as a myriad of extra-human sacred entities related to terrestrial landscape features, generically called *huacas* and closely connected with the everyday and social, political and economic life of individuals and groups. The *huacas* manifested their sacred nature "speaking" to people, thus in some way each of them represented a true oracle.

The Incas transformed the nuclear area of their empire, the valley of Cuzco and the surrounding area, into a sacred mega-land, studded with a series of monumental sanctuaries whose core was one or more partially carved large rocks, associated with springs, channels, streams, torrents or rivers. The paper will analytically explore the basic distinguishing features of these sanctuaries of extra-human entities of stone and water, linked to territory and landscape, where people could have a direct communication with the driving forces of the natural world around them, of which they felt consubstantially part.

January  
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15:00

## Bat-ami Artzi, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

### The Andean Earth Goddess and Her Six Days of Rest

The Andean Earth Goddess, called Pacha Mama (among other names), was and is still worshipped as the mother of all beings; she provides humans and non-humans with food, and she constitutes the origin of agricultural products and fertility. Pacha Mama, as the goddess of vegetation, also contains the other "mamas," such as Zara Mama (mother maize), Coca Mama, Quinoa Mama, and Oca Mama (mother *Oxalis tuberosa*). She is also very important for the pasture due to the fact that she provides food for animals. However, Pacha Mama also has characteristics of a fearsome and vengeful deity, particularly when humans do not respect her.

The cult of Pacha Mama is closely associated with agricultural work; it is manifested in plowing, sowing and harvesting ceremonies. The cycle of the earth's fertility in Andean cultures is conceived as being like the fertility cycle of women. For example, during the first six days of August, many Andean communities do not carry out any agricultural labor. According to some testimonies, it seems that during these days the Earth Goddess is thought to be menstruating.

Using colonial texts and dictionaries, documented ethnographies and visual culture, this paper analyzes the Andean Earth and Fertility Divinity, her names, cults and appearance. In addition, it explores the close relation between flesh-and-blood women and this goddess.

January  
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## Gal Sofer, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

### **“The Natural Forces of the Universe Will Obey This Soul”: The Role of Nature in Ritual Magic**

Scholars of medieval and early modern magic usually distinguish between practices based on astrological theories (Astral Magic) and those that seek to coerce divine or demonic entities or communicate with them (ceremonial / ritual magic). Astral magic texts are typically regarded as having an Islamic ultimate source, while Ritual Magic texts are generally regarded as having a Christian ultimate source, so these categories were used to identify their origins. However, an examination of the medieval and early modern relevant texts reveals a high degree of openness that significantly weakens these categories: a "ritual" magician may refer to astral knowledge, while an "astral" magician may refer to ritualistic knowledge. In my lecture, I will suggest that study of the histories of those texts based on such categorization should be avoided, and that the intersection of "astral" and "ritual" knowledge should be viewed in its historical context: the magical information overload in late medieval Spain. Following my suggestion, we will examine the role of nature in texts considered to represent "ritual magic," not only as a means of challenging the problematic historical assumptions, but also to emphasize the need for a deconstruction of the categories.

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## Samuel Glauber-Zimra, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

### **Are Miracles Natural or is Nature Miraculous? A Debate between a Rabbi and an Occultist in 1940's New York City**

Borukh Rivkin (1883–1945) and Mordechai Aryeh Nissenbaum (1870–1951) were unlikely correspondents. Born and raised in the Pale of Settlement, they had taken separate paths to New York City, where they both resided in the early 1940s. One was a radical Yiddishist with anarchist sympathies, the other an ardently traditionalist Orthodox rabbi who published works in three languages on the evils of socialism. Yet for three years in the early 1940s, the pair communicated at length about a shared topic of interest: paranormal phenomena. Each of them had published writings dating back to the 1910s on clairvoyant dreams, miracles, and the occult—Nissenbaum as an Orthodox polemicist and Rivkin as a Yiddish journalist. The two entered into correspondence in the context of Rivkin's weekly psychic dream interpretation column published in the *Der tog* Yiddish newspaper between 1942 and 1945. Rivkin, a naturalist, published accounts of prophetic dreams collected from readers, which he interpreted as stemming from hitherto-unknown psychic powers that might be investigated by scientists. Nissenbaum, by contrast, stuck to a supernaturalist reading of the phenomena in question, arguing for their divine origin beyond the bounds of the natural world. At stake was their conception of the metaphysics of nature. In agreement that the paranormal was real, the two differed over its interpretation—were miracles natural, or, perhaps, was nature miraculous? This paper looks at the Rivkin-Nissenbaum correspondence as an instantiation of early-twentieth-century discourses surrounding dreams, prophecy, and the possibility of miracles in a supposed age of disenchantment.

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## Gideon Bohak, Tel Aviv University

### Jewish Magical Recipes for Quelling a Storm at Sea

Seafaring always was a dangerous business, as a calm sea could easily turn stormy and dangerous at a very short notice. In the past, when ships were small and ill-equipped to handle the storms, there were numerous magical practices to quell a storm at sea, perhaps more numerous than for taming or harnessing any other force of nature. In my presentation, I will examine some of the practices used by Jews from Late Antiquity onwards to quell storms at sea, as attested in rabbinic literature, in the Cairo Genizah, and even in modern times. I will highlight their wide diffusion, sketch their textual history, and examine how the need to use such rituals while on a ship and with access to few ingredients and recipe books shaped the practices they enjoyed.

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## Tzafir Barzilay, Bar Ilan University

### Man-made Holy Nature:

### Fountains and the Religious Culture of Jews and Christians in High-medieval Europe

Water had a central role the religious traditions of Judaism and Christianity since antiquity, as scholars have often observed. Much of the literature have focused on formal rites, and most prominently on baptism and ritual immersion, but water was in common use in lay rituals as well. This talk will highlight Christian and Jewish informal traditions that viewed fountains as a symbol, or even a source, of healing and blessing. The reintroduction of the technology of public fountains into European built environment in the twelfth century allowed for a cultural reframing of this natural source of water. Thus, it allowed it to take an even more significant part in both Christian and Jewish religious imagery (and practice), exemplifying how a change to the physical environment can have implications for religious culture. The talk will apply visual material as well as textual sources in Latin and Hebrew to present a new perspective on the manipulation of nature and its use in religious symbolism in medieval society.

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## Neta Bodner, Open University of Israel

### "Rising up from the Waters":

### Architectural Framing of Baptismal and Immersion Fonts in the Middle Ages

The spectrum of religious associations linked to water is as wide as the variety of its characteristics. Water itself is transparent but it can wash away the darkest stain. It falls from the sky above, and renews life and growth from the earth below. Essential for both hygiene and for the very sustenance of life water attracts symbolic associations that derive of its different practical uses. These complementary aspects of water resound in its use for purification in both Judaism and Christianity. In this talk I will look at the emphases on water in Jewish ritual immersion and Christian baptism. I will argue that the spaces intended for baptism and immersion in the High Middle Ages were designed to accentuate the transformative power of the ceremony by spotlighting the characteristics of the water at its core. I will also argue that the interpretations of the rites influenced the design of their architectural environment.

The talk will focus on a number of monumental baptisteries and Jewish ritual baths from the High Middle Ages in today's Germany, Spain and Italy in the 11th and 12th centuries. The analysis will be grounded in theological writings (Jewish and Christian) that discuss the symbolic meanings attributed to water and water sources. The discussion will then widen to examine how other natural materials were framed in Romanesque architecture and to what ends. Examples include churches built around natural and man-made caves, unpaved earth, rocks and plants, bringing nature into cultured architectural space to enhance religious experience.

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## Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, Arizona State University

### Jewish Environmentalism and the Dialectic of Post-Secularism: Israel vs. Diaspora

We are living through a massive eco-crisis manifested in climate change, severe weather events, persistent droughts, devastating wildfires, rising sea levels, species extinction and loss of biodiversity among other phenomena. All world religions, including Judaism, have responded to the eco-crisis by articulating eco-theology and environmental ethics, creating earth-oriented rituals, and influencing public opinion, legislation, and policies. Since the 1980s Jewish environmentalism has emerged as a distinct strand of contemporary Judaism in the Diaspora as well as in Israel, but with significant differences. This paper interprets contemporary Jewish environmentalism through the lens of post-secularism. The paper argues that in Israel as well as in the United States, Jewish environmentalism illustrates the dialectics, or cross currents, of post-secularism and that in both cases Jewish environmentalism cannot be understood without reference to the messianic impulse of Judaism. However, in Israel the dialectics of post-secularism is manifested in relationship to the physical territory of Eretz Israel, the Holy Land, whereas in the United States, which modern Jews regarded as the “new Promised Land,” Jewish environmentalism focuses on Tikkun Olam, understood in terms of social justice. While Tikkun Olam has been employed as the slogan of Jewish environmental activism, Jewish environmentalism in the United States focuses more on eco-social justice and climate justice than on restructuring Jewish attitudes toward nature. Recognizing the differences between Jewish environmentalism in Israel and in the United States can help us understand not only what post-secularism means for Jews in different places, but also some of the strains between American Jewry and the state of Israel.

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## David Krantz, Arizona State University

### Green Galut: The Jewish-Environmental Movement in the United States

When it comes to addressing the environmental crisis, whither America’s Jews? While the environmental ethics and values of Judaism are well (but far from) explicated (Benstein, 2006; Bernstein, 1998; Schwartz, 1984; D. M. Seidenberg, 2015; Tirosh-Samuelson, 2002; Waskow, 2000; Yaffe, 2001) and inspire Jewish-environmental action (Krantz, 2016), empirical description of those actions remains largely absent from the academic canon. Building on David Seidenberg’s work (D. Seidenberg, 2008), this work uses the tools of history and phenomenology to offer a previously undocumented history of the birth and growth of the Jewish-environmental movement in the United States.



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 13:30

**Ophir Weinshall Shachar, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, and  
 Itay Greenspan, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem**

**Jewish Environmentalism in Israel:  
 Organizational Characteristics, Practices and Entrepreneurs**

Faith-based organizations promoting an environmental agenda emerged in Israel in the late 1990s. The emergence of these new organizations coincided with two parallel processes: the professionalization of the environmental field in Israel as part of the development of contemporary civil society and the growth of new currents of Jewish renewal. Initially, the growing interest in environmentalism was attributed to several key figures and NGOs among the national-religious and ultra-Orthodox populations. However, the presence of Jewish environmental organizations has expanded into diverse communities, ultra-Orthodox local authorities, synagogues, educational institutions, and more. This involvement is manifested not only in cleaning activities in the public domain, health, and community gardens but also in environmental activism.

In this talk, we will present the results of an empirical research conducted among Jewish environmental groups and entrepreneurs in Israel. We systematically documented their activities, rationales, and course of action. Our analysis reveals that while Jewish religious environmental groups share certain unique features, they differ in theological worldview. This fragmentation is expressed, among other things, in the language; unique values; vision; content, and patterns of action; that the various groups take with environmental issues. As part of our talk, we will introduce the differences that characterize these groups. We argue that these fragmented allow the expansion of environmental ideas among religious groups but constitute a barrier to the transfer of knowledge and collaborations, which made it difficult to create a subfield of Jewish environmental movement.

January  
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 15:45

**Einat Kramer, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem**

**The Development of a Stewardship Eco-Theology Discourse Around the  
 Commandment (*mitzvah*) of *Shemithah* in the Face of Climate Change**

The biblical *mitzvah* of *Shemithah* (Exodus 23, 10-11, Leviticus 25, 1-6) requires all who till the soil in the land of Israel to cease work once in seven years for an entire year, in order to allow the soil to rest, or "keep the Sabbath". During this year all the inhabitants of the land, including landowners, servants, converts, and even wildlife, can freely enjoy the crops of the earth.

Contemporary Israeli society, as a post-agricultural society, has found "*Shemithah* bypass" solutions to the challenges posed by the commandment, and most Jewish farmers choose halakhic (Jewish legal) solutions that enable "business as usual", both for the farmers and for the consumers. At the same time, social and environmental initiatives and alternatives for the realization of the *Shemithah* have emerged in recent years, accompanied by a public discourse on *Shemithah* that is based on environmental values and eco-theological ideas. The discourse and initiatives can offer a practical-environmental translation to the ancient *mitzvah*, as well as connect the religious population to environmental values and practice, which until now has been perceived as out of bounds for large sections of this public.

This research examines the public discourse that takes place in Israel around the *Shemithah* as it is reflected in the written press, in order to answer the question: *Is Israel developing a unique model of stewardship discourse and practice in light of the Shemithah year and in response to the climate crisis?* As part of the research, I reviewed eco-theological ideas that appeared in the press in the context of *Shemithah* and examined whether these ideas have developed or changed over time and whether there are differences in the discourse between different segments of the population (sectoral comparison). Answers to these questions can testify to the assimilation of eco-theological ideas in the environmental discourse in Israel and the possibility of mobilizing an existing commandment (*Shemithah*) in order to promote assessments in the face of the climate crisis and its challenges.



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## **Oluwabunmi Bernard, University of Cambridge and Obafemi Awolowo University**

### **Sacred Trash: Paradox of Ritual Objectification in Yorùbá Orature**

Yorùbá sacred orature is replete with paradigms for understanding the problem of environmental degradation and in procuring lasting solutions. However, ethnographic research has shed light on the Yorùbá traditional religion's contribution to environmental degradation through its ritual practices. This paper interrogates how Yorùbá traditional religion (also known as the òrìṣà tradition) has contributed to the degradation of the environment. Using an ethnographic lens, this paper engages the concepts of sacred, profanations, dirt and trash as they pertain to the ritual practices and performances of Yorùbá gods. It argues that the disposal of ritual objects and items that were once sacred or that once contained ritual items in the Yorùbá sacred and ritual spaces plays a significant role in entrenching environmental degradation, and that agents within and outside sacred groves in Yorùbá communities in Nigeria are also part of the problem. Finally, this paper demonstrates that indigenous knowledge mined from sacred orature cum ritual performances may help in creating meaningful solutions to the current global environmental crisis, although it also contributes to the problem.

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## **Yiftach Ashkenazi, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev**

### **Religion and Environmental Commitment in Southern Israeli Literature**

As I argued in my Ph.D. research, the southern Israeli literature adopted the global southern literary style (particularly the magical realism) with a unique monotheistic Jewish component. Moreover, the Southern habitat of Israeli literature manifests not only a Jewish spiritual element but also a significant commitment to animals and the natural environment. In many southern Israeli novels, the human community, the spiritual life, and the immediate desert environment are seen as one whole. In a notable book of contemporary Israeli southern literature, *In the Eye of the Cat* by Haviva Pedaya, the responsibility for the environment and animals is so powerful that humankind's misconduct and malfeasance toward nature and the animals is depicted as the original sin.

In this short lecture, I will introduce and exemplify the natural religious aspects in southern Israeli literature based on a new research perspective. I will also argue that this religious commitment to nature could provide a roadmap for environmental activism that involves various communities.