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Reflections on the Matriarchs' Orchard: An Alternative Understanding of Jewish Women and Environmentalism

Arielle Aronoff

Judaism is a religion based on agricultural values of caring for the earth in a symbiotic relationship. It is a theocentric religion, placing God as the source of all creation, which necessarily takes on the view that all of creation is sacred. From the beginning of the Genesis creation myth to modern day Jews, the text and its interpretations hold people to a standard above all other creations, yet they are inextricably bound to the earth for they are made of the same dust and out of the same will of the Holy Creator. Today there are people who take these teachings and apply them to a modern day lifestyle. Kayam Farm is a Jewish educational farm in Reisterstown Maryland devoted to the study and teaching of Judaism and Jewish values within an agricultural framework based on the sacredness of the natural world. There are many tools that Kayam uses to accomplish this task. My focus will be on one in particular: The Matriarchs' Orchard. The Matriarchs' Orchard is a project that seeks to maintain harmony between people, culture, and the Earth as well as an integration of mind body and spirit in order to maintain a healthy garden and healthy selves. This project has developed from the desire to connect contemporary people with the tradition of their ancestors in a symbolic gesture towards the agrarian lifestyle that was once the basis of the Hebrew culture.

In the Beginning... The Biblical Roots of Environmental Judaism

The Hebrew creation myth takes place in the Garden of Eden, which is thought to be located in the Fertile Crescent within the Tigris- Euphrates river basin. This is where the Jewish religion began and spread throughout the Middle East. Those who practice Judaism now live in almost every country in the world. The story goes, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth... and God said let there be light: and there was light..." (Genesis 1:1). God went on to create the oceans and the land and all that dwell in and upon it, lastly God created man, Adam (pronounced Ah-Dahm in Hebrew). The word *Adam* shares the Hebrew root, *Adamah* meaning Earth as well as *Dam*, blood. This is no accident; many interpretations of the Genesis Creation myth focus on the inherent

interconnectedness humans have with the earth. In Genesis chapter two it is written, "the Lord God formed man (*Adam*) from the dust of the earth (*Adamah*)" (Benstein, 2006). God saw that Adam needed a companion and so he created Eve, in Hebrew *Chava*. The etymological meaning of *Chava* comes from the root "*chai*," meaning life. Thus Adam named her "because she was the mother of all living" (Hoffman, 2010).

Judaism is based on a theocentric point of view; God created the world and placed humans on it with the command *le'ovda u'leshomra* (to till it and to tend to it) (Genesis 2:15). Here lies the basis of Jewish agricultural tradition: to till and to tend, also translated as to work and to guard or to serve and preserve. Humans are not owners of the world but Stewards of it. They are honored with the ability to utilize the earth's natural resources to plant and reap the harvests, yet they must also tend to the Earth as God's creation, as a sacred entity. Humans are *shomrei Adamah* (guardians of the Earth) who have the responsibility to maintain God's creation. "God said to Adam, 'See my works how good and praiseworthy they are? And all that I have created I made for you. Be mindful then that you do not spoil and destroy My world — for if you do spoil it, there is no one after you to repair it'" (Troster, 2007).

With the tasks set forth to work and to guard the earth come responsibilities written down as a set of laws in the Torah and other religious texts of Judaism. There are laws regarding the human relationship to one another, to the land to plants, to animals, as well as to God. *Tzedakah* (commonly translated as charity) comes from the root of *tzedeq* (righteousness). It is a means of distributing wealth amongst all members of society. All people are obligated to give to those in need in an amount dependant on what one can afford (Isaacs, 2008). The Jewish people began as semisedentary shepherds living in tent villages across the Middle East. As the populations grew and warfare erupted, cities were established and a Kingdom was formed in modern day Israel. In this Kingdom laws were set in place to govern behavior. These laws were built up from a shared belief in God's commandments. The Torah is a composition of these laws as well as a written history of the Jewish

people. My focus will be on a particular set of laws regarding the distribution of agricultural yield to orphans, widows and those who do not own land.

Hebrew Law

One method of distribution to the poor is through *Pe'ah*, leaving the corners of your field for the poor to harvest. There are also two other practices of leaving food for the poor, *Leket* and *Shichecha*. This is the act of leaving any dropped produce or forgotten harvests, respectively, in the field for the poor to come gather. In addition, every third year the first fruits of the harvest, which would normally be paid as a tithe to the high priests, are commanded to go to the poor. This tithe of the first fruits is known as *Bikkurim*. On the years that were not designated as tithe to the poor, *Bikkurim* was brought to the holy temple in Jerusalem. It took place as a momentous gathering of farmers on their pilgrimage to Jerusalem where they were greeted with an elaborate ceremonial procession to the temple gates. The farmers entered into the temple and placed their offerings on an altar. This altar was the farthest point that anyone could go in the temple besides the high priests. The *Bikkurim* is thus interpreted by *Ishbitzer Rebbe, Mordechai Yosef Leiner* as symbolic of the holiness agricultural work possesses despite its classification as a devalued and disrespected position at that time (Vick, 2010).

There are as well laws to protect the land itself from human destruction. *Shmittah* (release), also known as *Shabbat Ha'aretz* (Sabbath of the Land), is the release of land from cultivation every seventh year. It is an important yet difficult law to keep, because the cultivation of land year after year leaves the soil barren of all nutrients and will continue to decrease in yield. However, a farmer must be sure to preserve an adequate amount of food from the previous year to live on in the sabbatical year. *Orlah* is a law that forbids the harvesting of fruits for the first three years from the time of planting the tree. The fourth year is a ritual celebration of offering the first harvests to God and not until the fifth year is the fruit available for the farmer to consume (Hoenig, 1969).

These instructions along with many other laws and regulations, address the notion of *Tikkun Olam* (Repairing the World), a concept based on the aforementioned notion of *Shomrei Adamah* (guardians of the Earth). We are the ones who must protect and tend to the earth because there is no one after us who can. It is our responsibility to leave the

world for future generations better than how we found it. This is the premise of Kayam Farm, a Jewish educational farm in Reisterstown Maryland. They are devoted to the study and teaching of environmentalism, farming and nature education within a Jewish framework.

When Traditional Meets Contemporary

The Torah is a book centuries old, and many practices are outdated. This leaves contemporary Jews with questions that cannot always be answered as we move through our daily lives. How is one to connect to ancient traditions when we can barely keep up with the world at hand? At Kayam Farm I felt grounded in a community devoted to merging the two worlds, ancient and contemporary. I am not the most knowledgeable person of Jewish theology and was never interested in exploring the ancient texts, however at Kayam I was. There I found a space where the texts were relevant. The laws became a foundation for a working organic, ethical, educational and spiritual farm where people are able to come for a day visit, a weekend retreat, a month long study and farming program, or for an entire seasonal internship.

Kayam is a community that is in a constant state of flux. There are full time workers who devote themselves entirely to programming, organizing, and maintaining the farm for others who come for a day, a week, a month, or a full growing season. Even those who come only for a day are just as much a part of the community as anyone. Each intern, volunteer, fellow, employee, and friend bring their own ideas and skills that aid in the evolution of Kayam. Jakir Manela, the founding director of Kayam holds a vision of an intentional Jewish farming community based on a shared sense of social and ecological responsibility.

Environmental Judaism uses Biblical texts as the basis for understanding the connection between humans and nature. The bible is not a set doctrine of beliefs, but a tool to be used to consider the complexities of the world in which we live. It can be seen as a multivocal figurative theoretical framework, which must be interpreted and put into practice. For example, laws such as *Bikkurim* and *Pe'ah* are brought into contemporary practice by donating a portion of the harvest to the Hannah More Family House, a local family shelter in the Baltimore community. In addition to social and ecological responsibility, Kayam is a place of religious practice. Distinctive spaces have been set as symbolic representations of Jewish traditions and

those devoted to learning and the growth of the individual. One such space is the Matriarchs' Orchard.

A Forest Garden

The Matriarchs' Orchard is a fledgling Permaculture Forest Garden, a sacred space for women to find a spiritual connection within themselves and to the earth through agricultural production as well as reconnecting with the past history and traditions of Jewish women. A Forest Garden is a food producing system that mimics the natural ecosystem of a forest. Most gardens as Americans commonly understand them are primarily composed of annual plants, each year an annual garden requires a large amount of manual labor including tilling, fertilizing, pruning, watering and so on throughout the season. A Forest Garden minimizes these inputs and increases the outputs of the plants by focusing on the production of primarily perennial and self-seeding plants. The basic premise of Forest Gardening is plant symbiosis, all plants work together in a beneficial community. Within the system a wide variety of trees, shrubs, vines and herbs exist, each one for a multitude of purposes both for human utilization and ecological health and stability.

A Woman's Sacred Space

The first task of this project is to clarify what determines a sacred space. Mircea Eliade speaks of the sacred and the profane as "two modes of being in the world" (Morris, 1987). He holds the position that every religious act and cult object is taken out of the world of the profane and placed into that of the sacred: "When a tree becomes a cult object, it is not as a tree that it is venerated, but as a *hierophany*, that is, a manifestation of the sacred... every religious act, by the simple fact that it is *religious*, is endowed with a meaning which... is 'symbolic' since it refers to supernatural values or beings" (Morris, 1987). In this context we must therefore refer to the symbolism of the Matriarchs' Orchard as an embodiment of Jewish values and the rich history of the Women who gave birth to the Hebrew people.

According to the *Kabbalah*, Jewish Mysticism, the *Shekhina* is the divine presence and imminence in the world. Many sects of Judaism interpret this as the feminine element of God who, in their interpretations, does not embody any specific gender. The *Shekhina* embodies the holy *sefirot*

(attributes of God), such as Wisdom and Understanding and Loving Kindness and, similar to the relationship between the moon and the sun, reflects these attributes to the earth. This representation of the *Shekhina* gives women a spiritual voice: it shows that they are not secondary characters that were composed as an afterthought from the rib of a man but complete spiritual beings made as well in the image of God (Prell, 2007).

The Matriarchs' Orchard is thus a symbol of the embodiment of the *Shekhina* in the natural world. It is a space for women to celebrate the cycles of life through traditional and modern rituals. The Mothers of Judaism, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah are a source of inspiration and strength to contemporary Jews. In traditional Patriarchal Israelite society, men were the rulers of the household and women were expected to be subordinate to their desires however throughout the text women are described with valor. They are described with *sefirot* (attributes of God) that raise them to a holy stature:

According to the *Midrash* [Biblical Interpretation]... when Sarah lit *Shabbat* candles, they lasted through the entire following week; when she baked the *challah*, it too would remain fresh and warm for an entire week, from one Shabbat all the way to the next; and, for as long as she lived, a special cloud enveloped her and Abraham's tent. In this she provided spiritual and physical sustenance and protection to her home. When she dies, the candle goes out and the space she held in her home was changed – only when Rebecca filled that void was this space made complete and sacred again (Kayam Farm, 2011).

My role at Kayam was to establish meaningful connections between Sarah and the other Matriarchs to specific life cycle phases, such as birth, coming of age, pregnancy, and menopause. Through traditional Biblical translations, the stories of the Matriarchs are told and through various means of interpretation, myself and various other men and women at Kayam collaborated to assign each matriarch to a specific lifecycle. These were based on the highlighted events of their personal stories in the Torah. The dynamic nature of these events correlates with intense emotion and ritual celebration to mark the occurrence of each. The Matriarch's Orchard will provide a sacred space to mark such occasions as well as provide a source of nourishment for women during a time when the body is in need. Herbal medicine has been used for

centuries and is still the basis of many pharmaceuticals today. In this project I have researched complementary herbs to help women during times of physical stress.

Stories of the Matriarchs

Sarah, the first matriarch is honored as the mother of all Israelites, wife to Abraham and mother to Isaac. As described in the aforementioned *Midrash* she was a woman with a blessing of compassion and warmth. She welcomed all who appeared at her tent to rest and refresh themselves before continuing on their journeys. Despite her innate character to care for others, she was not able to conceive a child of her own. It was not until the age of 90 that an angel came to bring a blessing of a child. Sarah laughed at the thought of conceiving at such an old age (Genesis 18: 12-14). The angel's blessing came to fruition and Sarah gave birth to a son and named him Isaac.

By the age of 90 women have already gone through menopause and can no longer biologically conceive children. Sarah's mystical conception of Isaac will remain in mystery for it is under much scrutiny of Biblical scholars and is not the premise of this paper. It is said that Sarah lived to be the age of 127, and for this reason Sarah stands as the symbolic figure for the menopausal stage in a woman's life. Black Cohosh (*Cimicifuga racemosa* L) is a native to the eastern woodlands of America and Canada. The roots/rhizomes of the plant have been utilized to reduce the frequency and intensity of hot flashes associated with menopause and other symptoms connected to this change in a woman's reproductive cycle (Burdette et al., 2002).

The day of Sarah's death is marked as the day of Rebecca's birth. When Rebecca had come of age, Abraham's most trusted servant Eliezer was sent to find a wife for Isaac. On his journey, Eliezer devised a plan to find the right girl to bring to Isaac- one who showed compassion and selflessness. Immediately upon arriving at Rebecca's village he saw her bringing water from the well. Without hesitation, Rebecca offered the traveler water and brought plenty for his ten camels as well. Legend goes, when she went to fetch the water, it rose up to meet her as though she were the moon controlling the tides of the ocean. This is how Eliezer knew she was the right woman for Isaac. When Rebecca entered Sarah's tent she brought back the three miracles that were present while Sarah occupied it but which disappeared upon her death and thus brought joy and light once again in

to Abraham's village (Hammer, 2006).

Rebecca had to endure a long arduous journey from her home to that of Isaac's. As representative of this I have chosen the "walking onion" to symbolize her journey. *A. cepa proliferum* is a perennial which produces small bulbs on top of their stalks. When they mature, these stalks fall over planting new bulbs for the following year. This unique propagation causes the plant to "walk" around the garden. Rebecca embodies strength most notable among the four matriarchs. She endured a difficult pregnancy carrying twins, Esau and Jacob, who tradition tells have been fighting since their days in the womb. We therefore find it most helpful to relate Rebecca to pregnancy as a symbol of strength during this emotionally and physically charged period.

There are many herbs that help strengthen the body and work to relieve the pains associated with pregnancy. Red raspberry leaf contains fragrine, an alkaloid that gives strength to the muscles of the pelvic region including the uterus itself. This helps in reducing labor pains by toning and relaxing the uterus (McFarlin, 1999). Though nettles have a bad reputation for stinging and irritating the skin, the herb is quite beneficial. Nettle is a rich source of iron, calcium and vitamin A. It is used to enrich and increase the flow of mother's milk and to help relieve water retention. The sting from nettles only occurs in the plants' fresh state, cooking or drying the nettles will eliminate the stinging.

Rebecca's courage throughout her life journey is most marked in Genesis 27, when she uses trickery to deceive her blind husband Isaac into giving Jacob his blessing for the birthright of the eldest son even though it was actually Esau who came out of the womb first. This decision marks Rebecca's empowerment, though it may not be an outward rebellion against the patriarchy, in this way she establishes her position as a competent decision maker with the knowledge between right and wrong. To protect Jacob from Esau's rage Rebecca sent him away to her brother Laban's village to seek a wife from his daughters Leah and Rachel (Newsome, 1998).

Rachel, the younger of the two sisters, was set to marry Jacob, however Laban deceptively switched his daughters on the wedding day and married Leah to him first. The two sisters became co-wives and much rivalry was between them. Rachel in her youthfulness could not conceive, she was distraught at the site of her fecund sister Leah who gave birth to seven children. After much prayer and anticipation, Rachel gives birth to

Joseph and later dies while giving birth to Benjamin. The portrayal of Rachel as a young bride corresponds to our representation of her as illustrative of coming of age.

There are many herbal remedies to relieve the symptoms of menstruation. Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*) is an herb used to reduce excessive menstruation and bleeding. It eases menstrual cramps and can help stimulate delayed or absent menstrual cycles. Cramp Bark (*Viburnum opulus*) is a uterine tonic and sedative with strong antispasmodic properties to relieve muscle aches and tension. Ginseng (*Panax quinquefolius*) is a plant noted for its ability to increase vitality and energy by acting on the pituitary and adrenal glands and stimulates the nervous system to decrease fatigue (Zak, 1999). These plants are symbolic of the youthful stamina and grace Rachel possessed and they are an aid to the current women of the Matriarchs' Orchard in order to maintain such stamina throughout their lives.

Leah, elder sister of Rachel and first wife of Jacob, symbolizes wisdom and wholeness. She is blessed with many sons and finds joy and gratitude in her good fortune despite her loveless wedlock to Jacob. Leah finds solace in her seven children six sons and one daughter. Her life giving presence is exemplified in her name. In *Gematria*, Jewish numerology, "Leah" adds up to 36. This number symbolizes double *chai*, or double life: *Chai*, life, being represented by the number 18 (Hammer, 2006). Leah's fecundity is symbolic of the modern day women at Kayam farm who are preparing to give birth. Partridgeberry (*Mitchella repens*) is used as an herb to prepare women for labor and soothe nervous irritability. It improves the tone and functional ability of a woman's uterus. Black Haw (*Viburnum prunifolium*) is another beneficial herb used during the latter stages of pregnancy to relieve false labor pains and after pains (Belew, 1999).

Conclusion

The Matriarchs' Orchard is currently in the beginning stages of development. The first tree was planted in 2007 and it has since grown into a productive orchard of peaches, apricots, persimmons, and many other fruit bearing trees and shrubs. It has notably been a place of ritual celebration for one woman in particular. Netsitsah Manela on two occasions held special tree planting ceremonies upon the birth of her two sons, Lev Yodea and Shama Nissim. Each tree was planted with the child's placenta underneath, which

contains abundant nutrients that add to the fertility of the soil and aid in the tree's growth. While Shama's apricot tree is less than two years old, Lev's peach tree has shown exceptional growth among the others. The peach tree was also the site of the ritual *upshirn* (a boy's first hair cut) when Lev turned three years old. Along with much dancing and celebration, Lev's hair was buried underneath his placenta tree and then the tree itself received its first pruning.

Today, many people are seeking to find a new sense of spirituality grounded in the natural ecology around them. We are seeing traditional text being transformed by new interpretations and given new meaning relevant to today's paradigm. Unique opportunities are emerging at places such as Kayam farm that acknowledge traditional Jewish values as a means to live in harmony with the environment. Women are placed in this context and celebrated for their unique spiritual connection to the *Shekhinah* and are accredited as powerful figures in a traditionally male-centric Biblical text. Humans have been set on the earth to till and to tend to God's creations, reaping the benefits of nature's bounty while ensuring the sacred nature of the earth is not squandered.

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