

Vulnerability & Rain: Engaging Environmental Ethics Through Rabbinic Narrative
A Response to Jonathan Wyn Schofer's Confronting Vulnerability

Julia Watts Belser

Visiting Assistant Professor, Harvard Divinity School
Assistant Professor, Missouri State University

In this chapter from *Confronting Vulnerability*, Jonathan Wyn Schofer discusses how rabbinic literature depicts human reliance on rain and vulnerability to drought. Schofer illuminates mythic ideas that underlie rabbinic conceptions of earth and rain, as well as the ideas of covenantal loyalty and divine justice that typify rabbinic understandings of rainfall and drought. While contemporary readers often assume a fundamental opposition between God and nature, these texts do not regard rain as an external force that must be tamed by divine power. Instead, rain is a gift of God, an expression of divine love and compassion. For the rabbis, rainfall reveals God's concern for human life and the life of the land, expressing the intimate connection between human vitality and the fruitfulness of the earth. But rainfall also manifests divine judgment; God often withholds rain in response to human transgressions. In negotiating the poles of divine compassion and judgment, the rabbis emphasize human virtue as a central agent for ending drought. While rabbinic efforts to bring rain also involve prayer, fasting, and other ritual technologies, Schofer demonstrates that these narratives champion human compassion as a central element in the quest for rain.

In his examination of the pedagogical significance of rabbinic rain narratives, Schofer highlights several key insights. He demonstrates that certain texts describe human compassion "as an exemplar for God Himself." (121) He shows the importance these stories place on the "small virtuous act," stressing that minor actions have a profound consequences. (125) Especially in the Palestinian sources, Schofer argues that rain narratives often align virtue with care for the community, concern for tithes, the practice of modesty, and other pious actions accessible to all—not simply the values of Torah study associated with the rabbinic study house. He emphasizes that while these texts figure human virtue as a critical agent for bringing rain, they also show that "true virtue may belie appearances" and that common opinion is often too quick to condemn those who seem to be sinners. (120)

In conceptualizing rabbinic ethics, Schofer primarily focuses on Palestinian texts, arguing that most Babylonian narratives of rain-making "do not emphasize ethical instruction" and that the editors of the Babylonian material "do not assemble these stories into larger discussions of virtues and exemplary action." (130) When he does

turn to Babylonian texts, Schofer focuses primarily on narratives that parallel his Palestinian sources and largely confirm the central ideas of ethical pedagogy. While some Babylonian narratives do promote the idea that good deeds, humility, and piety will bring rain, other narratives articulate a much more ambivalent stance regarding merit and ethical action. Some Babylonian texts express profound skepticism about divine justice or even divine benevolence—raising questions that call into question some of the central assumptions of earlier generations. Schofer’s focus on Palestinian materials is invaluable. As a scholar of rabbinic literature whose work focuses on the Babylonian Talmud, I appreciate Schofer’s attention to the nuances of the ethical virtues expressed in the Palestinian texts. But I resist his suggestion that the Babylonian sources do not also engage in ethical reflection. Instead, the Babylonian Talmud seems to articulate a profoundly different conception of ethical reflecting—an ethics crafted through complex and contested engagement with the classic principles of piety, merit, and virtue.

For Schofer, rabbinic awareness of human vulnerability in the face of drought leads the rabbis to promote human virtue and champion compassion. Schofer stresses that rabbinic narratives do not themselves present an environmental ethic. He counsels modern readers to qualify our use of terms like nature, ecology, and environment when reading rabbinic texts. The rabbinic conception of the world operates according to “cosmologies of divine justice,” quite different from the contemporary perception of nature as operating “according to a scientific notion of causality.” (115) Despite these differences, however, Schofer maintains that rabbinic ethics matter for modern readers, that the rabbinic emphasis on human dependence on the earth and our vulnerability to drought offers valuable insights for contemporary environmental ethics.

Near the conclusion of his chapter, Schofer proposes that “contemporary environmental ethics can learn much from considering these perhaps exotic rituals and stories.” (138) Furthering this call requires a clear articulation of the relevance and limits of rabbinic texts as inspiration for environmental ethics. One critical question is how modern readers should engage the cosmological elements of rabbinic thinking that seem at odds with contemporary sensibilities. I suspect, for example, that Schofer does not mean to advocate an unequivocal return to the principle of drought as punishment for sin. Likewise, prayer, fasting, or other ritual technologies seem unlikely to serve as an effective response to contemporary environmental crisis, though one might make a case for ritual as an important means of navigating environmental change. Turning to Schofer’s own emphasis on ethical pedagogy, we might hold up the ethical ideals of human kindness and compassion as central virtues for life amidst a fragile human and earthly ecology. But even kindness and compassion seem an insufficient response to contemporary crisis.

Instead, Schofer aims to reorient the worldviews that underlie our sense of ourselves in relation to the earth. He maintains that the rabbinic emphasis on human vulnerability to drought can offer modern readers a necessary corrective to assumptions of human control and dominance. The rabbis highlight the profound interconnection between rain, earth, and humanity: the earth depends on rain, the rain requires the earth, and human beings rely upon both. This awareness of human life enmeshed within the cycles of rain and renewal leads the rabbis to stress the importance of humility, compassion, and reverence. While modern religious environmentalists have often championed values of stewardship as critical for countering the premise that humans have a right to dominate the earth, Schofer suggests that the rabbinic paradigm of profound interdependence and mutual vulnerability offers an even more compelling vision for understanding humanity's place within an intricate cosmos.