

Julie E. Cooper, Response to “Drought” by Jonathan Schofer

In “Drought,” Jonathan Schofer offers a detailed and fascinating reconstruction of rabbinic rain-making rituals. On rabbinic narratives, drought is a punishment for sin, and, conversely, virtuous action can bring rain. In the stories that Schofer relates, the presence of virtuous individuals in a community provides rabbis with grounds to challenge God’s withholding of water, and virtuous non-rabbis who pray for rain find their prayers answered. On Schofer’s interpretation, rabbinic narratives surrounding these rituals serve as vehicles for ethical instruction in character formation. Given that, on Schofer’s reading, these texts impart lessons to late-antique readers, it is no surprise that Schofer takes up the question of whether these texts contain environmental lessons for readers today. Although Schofer acknowledges that “these narratives do not present an environmental ethic, or even a proto-environmental ethic,” he nevertheless concludes that they have pedagogical value for contemporary environmentalists (109). “I believe that contemporary environmental ethics can learn much from considering these perhaps exotic rituals and stories” (138). Specifically, Schofer highlights humans’ shared vulnerability to the natural world, consciousness of which should elicit an ethical disposition akin to that of the rabbis, and conducive to environmental care. On my reading, however, these texts’ intricate negotiation between ritual and ethics – which Schofer carefully details – diminish their relevance for contemporary environmental politics.

In the stories that Schofer relates, ritual acts bring rain in times of drought, and ethical traits determine who can best perform the requisite rituals. Not just anyone who says the correct prayers can bring rain – in a time of drought, ethical rectitude is a precondition for ritual efficacy. In PT Taanit, individuals who behave with generosity and compassion to others are “worthy to pray and be answered” (123). A donkey driver who sells his donkey, raising money to help a woman in need, is “worthy to pray and be answered,” even though he lacks the social standing of a rabbi. Thus, while the stories celebrate ethical behavior, they do not suggest that ethics alone can bring rain. Absent the proper liturgical formulas, generosity and compassion towards one’s fellows cannot bring an end to drought. Once we focus on the centrality of ritual in these stories, I would suggest, they appear less pertinent, and less attractive, as environmental touchstones for readers who do not subscribe to a rabbinic cosmology.

Admittedly, these texts could heighten environmental consciousness in readers who uphold something akin to a rabbinic cosmology – that is, readers who believe that prayer and ritual can bring rain. But what does their expressly *ethical* message contribute to contemporary debates about, say, global warming? The virtues that these texts espouse are fairly generic: “humility, compassion, solidarity, receptiveness, and generosity” (137). In Schofer’s language, the stories celebrate “small virtuous acts” and “everyday values” (125). Significantly, these acts and values are largely *interpersonal* – they surround the ways that humans treat one another, rather than the ways that humans treat the *earth*. In the Babylonian Talmud, providing wine for Kiddush and teaching the poor are acts that qualify one to bring rain through prayer. On Schofer’s reading, these narratives “reveal a profound connection with the environment” (135). From a strictly ethical perspective, however, one could argue that they betray a profound disconnect

from the environment. The stories exhort humans to show compassion for one another – they do not exhort humans to care for non-human animals, or for the earth. Nor do they instruct individuals to care for one another in ways that address their shared dependence on natural resources – say, by helping a neighbor dig a well or harvest crops. (Indeed, the only “good deed” that responds directly to human dependence on nature is that of Nakdimon ben Gurion.) It is ritual practice, rather than an ethical disposition, that orients characters in these stories toward the environment, as we understand it today.

To put it another way, the ethical outlook that these stories endorse is only oriented to environmental concerns because the rabbis believe that ethical individuals are uniquely suited to secure divine intervention in times of drought. The rabbis don’t teach individuals to care for the earth – they teach them to care for other humans, with the result that ritual practice will avert environmental catastrophe. For readers who do not believe in divine intervention, however, it is harder to see how cultivating interpersonal compassion commits an individual to, say, combat global warming. There is no guarantee that the individual who provides Kiddush wine for the poor will advocate for environmental change. There is no necessary connection between performing good deeds for other humans and performing good deeds for the planet. Indeed, the focus on interpersonal compassion could yield a (from an environmentalist perspective) problematically anthropocentric ethic. Of course, generosity and compassion are important traits. They may even be traits that environmental activists should cultivate. In and of themselves, however, compassion and generosity do not express “a basic relation between humans and the earth” (139). More work must be done to explain how, in a post-rabbinic world, these virtues orient us toward the environment, and motivate us to act on its behalf. Schofer extends a passionate and compelling invitation for readers to take up this project. For many contemporary readers, however, the rabbis will not be the ones who can best help us meet these challenges.