

# Discovering EcoJudaism

*Hersh Mendyl Shatzka*

God's hand is always extended to receive those who return, as it says, *Shuvu banim shovavim/ Return wayward children* (Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer). Today I hear this as meaning that the *bat kol* [heavenly voice] comes from the belly of the center of the Earth and it's saying, "Heal me, my children, heal me! And you must do it differently."

— *Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Rabbi Daniel Siegel, Integral Halachah: Transcending and Including*

SIR ALEXANDER FLEMING "DISCOVERED" PENICILLIN "by accident." We know the story well. He was experimenting to find a cure for deep infections in the human body. As luck would have it, his experiment was "contaminated" by some bluish "furry stuff" which killed disease-causing bacteria. Penicillin wasn't really "discovered;" rather, it was suddenly noticed. Fleming would later say, "When I woke up just after dawn on September 28, 1928, I certainly didn't plan to revolutionise all medicine by discovering the world's first antibiotic, or bacteria killer. But I guess that was exactly what I did."

The *penicillium notatum* fungus has always been around. It isn't something hiding far from view. Rather, it was, and still is, ubiquitous. Literally, it is everywhere you look, walk, swim. It is on the floor, in your closet, garden, refrigerator, in your mouth, nose, and ears, on your loaf of bread, your onions, potatoes, and gorgonzola. The stuff is absolutely everywhere in our natural world; there is no place devoid of it. On your two-day-old washcloth or dish rag, in that pile of leaves, on that tree and on the back of that cockroach — penicillin is found. All you have to do is to notice its footprint and suddenly you can "discover" penicillin too. Quoting one of my favorite Torah verses from the book of Deuteronomy: *It isn't far away, it's not over the sea...it is in your mouth!*

When and why did Sir Alexander suddenly discover the presence of something which had always been there? It was after the trench warfare of World War I where Sir Alexander worked as a medic. He saw many young soldiers and civilians perish from bullets and other metallic fragments. If they didn't die as a direct result of being pierced through a vital organ or blood vessel, they died more slowly from vicious bacterial infections. Incidentally, the bacteria that led to the death of these victims were, and still are, found absolutely everywhere, just like penicillin.

Fleming's search for the cure was born out of his war experience. His life as a medic on the killing fields of the Great War left a lasting impression. But Fleming also had a process for systematic observation and behavior. That process came from the laws, imprecations, and warnings from the discipline called scientific inquiry. One could say his process of observing, contemplating what he saw, and then acting came from the "torah of scientific experimentation" with all its stories, laws, and warnings.

Fleming's training as a scientist and his experiences during the war pushed him to notice something important that was always present but that had never captured people's attention. I like to think that our engagement with Jewish ethics helps us, too, to notice important things. In the spring of 2008 I found a disturbing set of articles in the *The Jerusalem Post*. It had to do with the manner in which cattle were handled after *shechitah*/kosher slaughter in Uruguay. Uruguay is a major producer of beef cattle for world consumption and it was not surprising to find a kosher certified and supervised plant operating there. Meat from that plant was shipped worldwide including to communities in Israel where a *hekhsher*/kosher certification was an absolute necessity for anyone eating that meat. Journalists reported that the animals were being flayed by automatic machinery which was set into motion before the cattle were actually dead. I had to repeat that to myself because I couldn't wrap my mind around the concept.

I spent my earliest years in Brooklyn, the son of immigrants. My family attended Congregation Young Israel on 20th Avenue. Poppy Sammie was a meat cutter and deli owner who laid tefillin every single morning. Everything was kosher in our home. Outside the home the neighborhood was kosher. It was a kosher world. To me that meant that all food was

specially taken care of to see it was pure and filled with holiness — truly “soul food” to the highest degree. It was blessed and done according to the laws, imprecations and warnings in Torah. *K’doshim tihyu ki ani Kadosh / You will be holy because I am Holy!* [Lev. 19:2]

Following almost on the heels of that incredible revelation regarding animal handling in Uruguay, another news item came to me. It had to do with the Agriprocessors kosher meat processing plant in Iowa where undocumented workers, some as young as 14 years old, were working on the killing floor in extraordinarily dangerous conditions. Additionally, animals were seen to be staggering around “slaughtered,” with their windpipes torn loose from the site of the neck cut. Again, I was dumbfounded. How could anyone who was dedicated to holiness treat workers or animals in this fashion? In my world that meat was not kosher regardless of the hekhsher. I felt ashamed, defrauded, angry, and motivated to do something.

In researching a response to this one-two punch from Uruguay and Iowa, I came across the work of Dr. Temple Grandin, professor at Colorado University, Greeley. Her specialty is humane animal handling. Her work is known far and wide and is quoted extensively in every aspect of animal handling science. Two pieces of information from Dr. Grandin’s work have stuck with me till now. First, when she went to the Iowa Agriprocessors plant, she could hear the animals’ screams a mile away. Second, unnecessarily stressing animals before slaughter causes chemical changes in their meat which are not healthy for humans. The same can be said of feedlot conditions before slaughter which sicken the animals in direct opposition to the Torah of animal stewardship (*tzaar ba’alei hayim*).

My wife Elisheva and I decided it was possible to raise, slaughter, and process our own animals according to the highest Torah values and modern scientific principles. That called for grass-fed, grass-finished animals, tended with care and respect, slaughtered according to the most stringent kosher law, inspected, soaked, salted, and then rinsed. It led us to purchase land in Colorado with water and plenty of pasture land. After two years of preparation, I received my *kabbalah*/certification as a *shochet*/kosher slaughterer.

Out of the city on clear cool nights I noticed the waxing and waning of the moon. So bright on the fifteen of each month, one could barely sleep due to the illumination. Strange, I had never really noticed the moon that way before.

And yet, the moon cycle had guided our people through their seasons long before the solar calendar. Even our festivals are on the full moon. Yet I had been unconscious of the moon's light, presence, and power.

As caretaker of livestock I had to care for animals even on Shabbos. Who would think of such a thing? Animals being born in the middle of Shabbos at 5 degrees and a wind-chill of minus 20! Matilda the cow getting out of the corral with her twin calves...Worrying all night Erev Shabbos about the cold temperatures and the tender young animals, about the frozen water troughs; carrying tools and food, even breaking ice with a hammer...all on Shabbos! I discovered a connection to my ancestors who also cared for their animals on the Sabbath. Why, they even named their children Rebecca (cow) and Rachel (ewe) after the animals they bred, raised, slaughtered, and consumed.

*And it shall come to pass, if you shall give heed diligently to my commandments which I command you this day, to love the Lord your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul, That I will give you the rain of your land in its due season, the first rain and the latter rain, that you may gather in your grain, and your wine, and your oil. And I will send grass in your fields for your cattle, that you may eat and be full. Take heed to yourselves, that your heart be not deceived, and you turn aside, and serve other gods, and worship them; And then the Lord's anger be kindled against you, and he close the skies that there should be no rain, and that the land yield not her fruit; and lest you perish quickly from off the good land which the Lord gives you. Therefore shall you lay up these my words in your heart and in your soul, and bind them for a sign upon your hand, that they may be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall teach them to your children, speaking of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. And you shall write them upon the door posts of your house, and upon your gates; That your days may be multiplied, and the days of your children, in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers to give them, as the days of heaven upon the earth.*

— Deuteronomy 11:13-21

Seasons came and went, as did holidays. One Shabbos while davening, looking out on our pastures through a window, I “discovered” the second chapter of the Shma (above, in box). How many times had I sped through it?

Walked by it? *Passed over it* unconsciously? All my life, was the answer. I was stunned. For the first time I actually got the words of the Shma in my kishkes. I repeated the Shma slowly and discovered how it connected me to *ha-aretz*, the land I stood on with the footprint of Torah everywhere. What I found had been there all the time but I had not been aware. Like our ancestor Jacob, *God was in this place and I didn't know.*

That Sukkot I went to where the cottonwoods grow by the ancient river bed — a place of tranquility and power where trilobite and clam fossils abound next to fresh bear droppings. Downed trees of all sizes were strewn about, for when the river flash-floods, even great trees can be uprooted and swept away with a power beyond imagination. I collected fifteen-foot-long trees some six to eight inches in diameter for our first sukkah; I covered it with corn stalks and sunflowers grown on our land. We harvested our *bikkurim*/first fruits, slaughtered a yearling lamb, invited friends, and had a *s'eudat hoda'a*/ a thanksgiving celebration for seven days plus one.

After Sukkot, I stood by a fence looking southwards to the bluffs over the river which flows through the ranch. I recited the second paragraph of the Shma and set out to prepare for the rainy season.



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