

Toward a Holy Ecology: Reading the Song of Songs in the Age of Climate Crisis

Ellen Bernstein

Bill McKibben, Contributor

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Rabbi Ellen Bernstein's *Toward a Holy Ecology* is a meditative, captivating interpretation of Song of Songs that emphasizes the natural world, women's strength, and wholeness.

The Song of Songs, an enigmatic poem that celebrates a passionate exchange between lovers, is the book of the Hebrew Bible most concerned with nature, Bernstein argues. Her reflective, insightful interpretation explores this dreamlike story in its historical, geographical, and ecological context. Noting that the work is often interpreted as an allegory of the relationship between God and the Israelites, Bernstein focuses instead on the lush, poetic language about flora, fauna, fragrances, and the natural features of the garden where the lovers meet. Metaphorical and shifting, such images abound; the lovers compare each other to the figs, pomegranates, honey, doves, and gazelles, delighting in the beauty that surrounds them. Bernstein suggests that this intimate connection to nature delineates a contemporary path toward healing and wholeness too: "The first step toward ecological repair is to love and identify with the natural world."

Introductory chapters set the context, including an enlightening discussion about the work's authorship and the geographical features of the landscape in Israel where the biblical story was set. This is followed by Bernstein's sparkling translation of the poem and her thoughtful insights on each passage. She notes, for instance, that the Hebrew word for beauty, *yafah*, is rarely used elsewhere in the Bible, though it repeats in this book and is central to its meaning. Similarly, she emphasizes the strength, independence, and restraint of the dark-skinned woman, the *ra'yah*, who is the central voice in the poem.

Toward a Holy Ecology is a quiet, contemplative book about the love between a man and a woman and their bond to the natural world.

KRISTEN RABE (January / February 2024)

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