



# Faith and the Land: Conversations about Spirituality and Wilderness

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Jewish Community Center  
Salt Lake City

## Introduction

On May 21, members from three Jewish communities -- Temple Har Shalom, Congregation Kol Ami, and Chavurah B'Yachad – gathered at the Jewish Community Center to share their perspectives about why Utah's wild places are important to them spiritually, and how Jewish teachings and traditions call on us to care take the natural world. The evening was hosted by Steve Trimble of Chavurah B'Yachad, Lee Gerstein of Temple Har Shalom, and Nano Podolsky of Congregation Kol Ami, as well as Deeda Seed of the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance (SUWA).

This evening of dialogue is part of an exciting new effort sponsored by the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance to create an interfaith statement about the importance of wilderness preservation to Utahns of all faith traditions. As a first step in that process, SUWA is convening conversations between members of different faith communities about how their tradition calls for the caretaking of the natural world.

The “Faith and the Land” initiative is based on the belief that Utahns from all religious traditions, as well as Utahns from no particular faith tradition, value Utah's wild lands as places of spiritual inspiration, connection, renewal and solace. It is also based on the belief that coming together to share what is important to us individually and collectively will reveal collective wisdom that can guide out stewardship of the wild lands we love.



Below are highlights of the conversation

### How are Utah's wild places important to you spiritually?

> For me, my identity as a Jew is deeply tied to the deep humility I have felt in wilderness. I grew up in the Northeast where camping was not part of the Jewish experience. But the Jewish heritage – its ancient heritage – is deeply steeped in the wilderness experience to its very core. Moses led people through the desert. Moses was found in a wetland. Personally, I experience my deepest sense of spirituality while in nature.

> I have lived in Utah for 36 years. I came here deliberately because the mountains were so accessible. My husband had no job when we came here, but because of the outdoors, this is where we wanted to live.

> I have lived in Utah for 29 years. I also moved here because I loved the mountains.

> I agree with the renowned scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel who wrote that “to be spiritual is to be amazed” and that “our goal should be to live life in radical amazement.” As Richard Louv writes in “Last Child in the Woods,” Heschel “would encourage his students to get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually.”

> A few weeks ago, I went out to take pictures of white faced ibis in the Cache Valley. The marsh was utterly alive with birds. At the end of the day, while night was falling, I walked back to the vehicles in this symphony of sound. It was almost deafening – like the sound of distant thunder. It is this connection to the earth that is spiritual to me.



> The most strong spiritual experience I have had in my life is in the prairies of Kansas and the Grand Canyon.

> The gift I give myself is to go to the Bear River with Terry Tempest Williams's book, *Refuge*. Last week, I saw this long billed curlew and it was this amazing thing. Spirituality is when talking about a bird makes you cry.

> When I'm walking or hiking or finding my way up a canyon and the noise drops away, my senses change. My sense of time shifts -- time just spreads out around me. My

sense of vision changes – I'm receptive to things I would never see or notice when I'm running around in my day to day life. I experience myself differently. It rejuvenates me. But there's something more than that, something that at its core is a spiritual experience.

> I feel myself open up in wilderness. My orientation is basically scientific, but in that moment that drops away. I hesitate to use the word, but it feels "transcendent" to how I usually live my life. For me, this is a spiritual experience.

> In some ways being in wilderness is the fastest track to spiritual amazement. It's so much bigger than you – and you get it.

> I go pretty regularly to synagogue. But where I really feel Shabbat is when I am walking in nature. I wait on Shabbat for a woman who is a hiker. What is amazing is that we chat a bit, but then she says, "Now we must be quiet." It is the most marvelous Shabbat when we walk in silence together. It is the most marvelous when we see these tiny flowers – they are called trillium – bright yellow, or when we have heard the silence together.

> For me, it is about praise. I sing the songs, or phrases from the songs, and they are praise, praise for the universe and the wonders of the natural world. I am more present, I am in amazement, in praising. Until I moved here and walked in nature, I didn't understand the meanings of the songs.

> I have a child who was in a wilderness-based residential treatment program. I remember going out with him down a bumpy dirt road and out a distance I hadn't ever been before. I just appreciated that wilderness existed. It allowed me to strip away all that I usually do – being analytical, asking what do we need to do next – and to simply be with my son under a tarp, on the ground, in the rain, with the bugs. A transformation began to occur in his life as well as

mine. It began there where there was nothing else to worry about. You just absorb it. Other things in the world began to melt away, and I just experienced nature in a raw form.

> Nature is a source of healing. It is only in the last 100 years that humans are not deeply immersed in nature every day. So when you go back, you have that experience of being human, and that is the difference we are talking about.

> I have Midwestern farm roots and am a lifelong gardener. There are several things that let me know how fragile the world is and yet how predictable. I watch every spring for the budding of the willows. I see them first down in southern Utah where we have a house, and then up here in Salt Lake City. When the willows bud, I am reminded of the cycles of life and how important they are to all of us.

> I watch the eagles come back every year to Southern Utah. They roost in a certain grove of trees on the road from Teasdale to Grover. It's a miracle to me.

> We would camp with our children every summer when they were small. We lived in New York and we came out west. We put up our tent wherever we were – five of us and the dog. And we saw a big difference in our family. We really reveled in it. Life was very simple when we were out. Sometimes it was a bit lonely for me. I would get a little scared. But it was a magical time in our lives. When we would drive back east I would look in the rearview mirror and see the mountains getting smaller and smaller. When we got to the George Washington bridge, I would think to myself, OK, now we are back to the tumult of New York. Those summers were enough that we moved here. So any destruction of this place that we now call home – even of the peace and quiet that you can find here in wild places – is deeply disturbing to me.



> My parents were Russian. I grew up in Israel. I prayed three times a day. When I came to the United States, I would go to the mountains and see the moving trees, and I found God more there than anywhere else. Mother Nature is my God

> Nature is a way to experience what God is.

> The Utah wilderness always reminds me of the story of creation. Every time I'm in it – and

especially the red rock country – I feel like, for all my questions and hesitations about the very idea of God, I'm there with God, right at the beginning, when everything came into being – the quiet, the sounds of echoes and animals and the wind, the wonder, the danger, the majesty, the solidity, the fluidity, the tiny and the enormously grand. The land gives us a literal place for going back in time and for renewal, all at once. And then when we leave it, it takes on the power of metaphor, giving us images of the kind of space, peace, possibility, and relationship we want to and can create in our daily lives.

## How do the teachings and traditions of Judaism call on us to care take the natural world, including our wild land heritage?

> Jewish tradition is steeped in wilderness and the natural world to its very beginning. Moses received the Ten Commandments not in a temple, not in a city, but in the wilderness.

> In another week, we'll begin reading the book of B'Midbar – “In the Desert” – the last book of the Torah. Our tradition was, essentially, born in the wilderness. And, in the interfaith spirit, Jews, Christians, Muslims, and others have always gone to the desert/wilderness to find God, largely because this is where all the other “background” noise is silenced and we can hear what matters most.

> Rabbi Heschel teaches that the path to God is through awe, and that nature is the most reliable gateway. “Awe precedes faith,” writes Herschel. “It is at the root of faith. Awe rather than faith is the cardinal attitude of the religious Jew.” Nature is a source of awe. We spend so much time caught up with all the things we feel we need to do day to day. Being in wilderness re-opens our eyes to the miraculous nature of the world.



> The essential piece for me as a Jew is “Tikkun olam” -- the repair of the world. Why? Judaism is centered in the world. It is wilderness oriented. Eden. The garden. You need a sabbatical year for the fields. You leave something in the garden for others to eat. It’s a mystery to me that the tomatoes ripen. Or that Ellen’s bees are going to make honey. It’s such a joy.

> All the teachings we have speak about the necessity of repairing and caretaking the world. Because this is all we have.

> It is clear that the emphasis in Judaism is on Tikkun olam -- repairing the world, rather than on experiencing a personal ecstasy around God. A huge piece of American Judaism is doing things for people, doing things for the land. And of course, challenging authority. Being dedicated to doing something to protect and restore the world is at the core of Judaism.

> Dominion is not part of Jewish vocabulary. We talk more about “Tikkun Olam” – and that calls on us to be caretakers of the world. Our laws are clear about how to demonstrate care and responsibility for the earth.

> There are a million stories that connect us to the desert and to nature. There is a whole calendar built around nature – about harvest, about a time for rest, about care taking the earth. Shabbat reminds us that we are but one strand in the web of creation.

> Robert Kushner talks about “Bal Tashchit” and why we keep kosher. He talks about it in terms of what we use and don’t use. From a biblical viewpoint, God put all things on the earth.

And there's all this bounty. But the idea is that there are some things we use, and some we do not. For example, why do Jews not eat pork? My father is an engineer and I grew up with him explaining that pork was a possible source of trichinosis, so that's why we don't eat it. But Kushner says that the pig is part of the bounty, and we are not supposed to use up everything God gave us.

> In the creation story, God kept saying "This is good," and each part was deemed "good" before the creation of humans. The earth is here to be used. But it is not here to be exploited.

> Many "mitzvot" or commandments in the Bible and laws found in the Talmud instruct us to protect what the Jewish tradition views as "God's creation" – the totality of the world in which we live.

> There's a lot of wisdom about the idea of stewardship in the Jewish tradition. For example, "The heavens belong to the Lord, but the earth He gave over to humanity." (Psalms 115:16) This does not mean that humans should rule the earth, but that we should act as God's stewards or officers.

> The commandment "Do not destroy" (Deuteronomy) has its roots in the prohibition against destroying fruit trees in time of war. The Torah says acts of destruction with short-term gain and long term consequences are prohibited. This is an injunction against vandalism, waste, acts of destruction. But it also applies to trees, and to animals.

> There is now a movement to reclaim the tie between Judaism and wilderness. Initially it started with the Kabbalists and mystics, but it is moving into the mainstream of Jewish thought and practice. For example, there has been a resurgence in the celebration of Tu B'shvat – a springtime holiday of trees. It has become a kind of ecological vehicle to talk about the importance of conservation, and to call for a custodial relationship to the earth.



> I want to tell you a story about a time when our Jewish tradition and spirituality came together in the most amazing way for my family. It happened when we were floating down the San Juan River in southern Utah. It was Shabbat, and my wife made dough in the morning and set it aside to rise. She sent the kids down to the beach to make candle sticks out of mud curls. It had been cloudy all day and threatening to rain. Nonetheless, we set out the challah under the overcast sky and started to sing our prayers. And just as we started to sing the sun broke through the clouds and lit up the entire landscape with golden light.