

## **A. GOD AND NATURE: JUDAISM & THE NATURAL WORLD**

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**Tuesdays, 9:30 - 11:00 a.m. Norris University Center**

### **Apr. 14 “Fill the Earth and Subdue It”: Biblical Perspectives on Creation, Dominion, and Stewardship**

God’s instructions to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden narrative have launched centuries of debate about the rights and responsibilities man has vis-à-vis the natural world. In this introductory session, we will examine the biblical story in its ancient context and survey the varied way it was subsequently interpreted (and misinterpreted).

### **Apr. 21 Sinful, Saintly, and Suffering Animals: Biblical Creatures and their Theological Meaning**

Must animals rest on the Sabbath day? Were wicked animals punished by God in the primordial flood? How are we to interpret the constant use of animal symbolism in biblical prophecies—or for that matter, the talking animals that pop up from time to time in biblical narratives? This session will examine whether the Bible is a document whose message is addressed to human beings per se, or whether it is one that grants non-human animals spiritual standing.

### **Apr. 28 “For this Purpose You were Created!” Eating Animals in Jewish Ethics**

Is meat murder? Long before PETA and the advent of veganism, Jewish texts debated the theological and ethical legitimacy of carnivorousness. We will trace some of these controversies across the ancient, medieval, and modern periods and explore the historical settings that shaped the contours of the debate.

### **May 5 A Brief History of Teva: Between Revelation and Rationality in Medieval Judaism**

How does one say “nature” in Hebrew? The answer is surprisingly ambiguous. This session will try to identify the moment when “nature” (as a word and abstract concept) was invented, and trace the surprising reception history of this category.

### **May 12 Unnatural Jews (I): Monsters, Real and Metaphorical**

Can “nature” exist without its conceptual opposite—the “unnatural”? Jewish authors and artists, like their Christian and Muslim neighbors, devoted extensive attention to the seemingly aberrant, and wrote prolifically about “monstrous births,” zombies, werewolves, and a host of other creatures that seemed to undermine the natural order. This session will try to situate these ostensibly “superstitious” beliefs in their theological and historical contexts.

### **May 19 Unnatural Jews (II): Demonology and the Boundaries of Creation**

According to the ancient rabbis, the account of the creation of the Earth in the book of Genesis included (if one knows how to properly read the texts) the parallel creation of a demonic realm. As we shall see, these demons played a surprisingly extensive role in the development of Jewish ritual, belief, and narrative.

**May 26      Urban Jews and Rural Romanticism: Zionism and the Natural World**

With the advent of modernity, Jews were increasingly, pejoratively labeled “urban” by their non-Jewish opponents—that is, cut off from the natural world with all its beauty and fecundity. Zionist authors pushed back on this designation and developed a novel romantic account of Jewish attachment to wilderness and agriculture. As we shall see, this set of new ideas profoundly shaped modern Jewish identity and the politics of the nascent State of Israel.

**Jun. 2      The Sabbatical Year: Utopian Theory or Pragmatic Reality?**

The Hebrew Bible’s instruction to leave the land of Israel fallow once every seven years was mostly ignored over the course of Jewish history—but with the growth of the State of Israel this, and other Jewish agricultural laws, experiences a dramatic revival. Exploring this development will serve as a case study of the role ancient Jewish texts continue to play in the realm of modern politics and environmental policy.

**Jun. 9      Revisiting the Tree of Life: Contemporary Jewish Environmentalism and the Debate over Jewish Values**

In recent decades, environmental activists have sometimes deployed and sometimes deplored the religious heritage of the ancient world. This session will explore the uneasy contemporary relationship between the values of ecological stewardship and conservation on the one hand, and religious texts and traditions on the other.