

Judaism, Bugs, and the Web of Life

By Ellen Rosenthal

Ever since I was little, I have picked up rocks, bricks, and rotten logs to look for bugs. I am fascinated with bugs.

I try to stop people from squashing them. I've always wanted to teach people not to be afraid of bugs.

Humans have often been afraid of things they don't understand, like lightning, eclipses, or snakes. I think the same is true for bugs; we kill them because they are different from us.

I interviewed an insect scientist—or entomologist—from the University of Illinois named Dr. May Berenbaum, and we discussed this subject.

I learned about Dr. Berenbaum from one of my mom's friends, who is also an entomologist. That friend knew all about Dr. Berenbaum's awesome Insect Fear Film Festival. I'll talk about that later.

Dr. Berenbaum's parents were both Jewish chemists who had many Jewish friends who were also scientists. She grew up in the suburbs of Philadelphia and went to the only Reform temple there back in the 60s.

For her bat mitzvah, she read the first verse of her Torah reading in Hebrew, and the rest in English.

Dr. Berenbaum told me, "Knowledge is power. People are afraid of what they don't understand."

That's the exact reason that I want to teach people not to be afraid of bugs, and other things that are different from us. As Dr. Berenbaum once said, "Mosquitoes don't discriminate and neither should we."

Dr. Berenbaum is also interested in the connections between Judaism and bugs—and I think that there's a big connection between an interest in bugs and the values of Secular Humanistic Judaism.

Secular Humanistic Jews believe that Jewish history is a testament to the significance of human power and human responsibility. We believe that humans possess the power and responsibility to shape our own lives independent of supernatural authority.

That is why we believe that humans must understand and accept the natural world. Our survival depends on all of us being responsible stewards of the Earth. Helping nature is helping ourselves.

Thanks to Dr. Berenbaum, I saw that the Jews of the Bible show us how an interest in bugs and these values are connected.

The Jews in the Bible were very aware of their natural surroundings.

Their herding and farming led them to understand the natural world—which, in turn, helped them to develop a lot of ways to farm and use domesticated animals, as recorded in the Bible.

For example, they let a field lie fallow every seven years. The Bible also teaches a lot of good, sound animal care.

Many secular humanists become scientists today to learn about the natural world—using science because they don't believe in the supernatural.

They learn about science and use it to do the same things the Jews of the Bible were trying to do—to live in harmony with nature and develop more productive—and hopefully environmentally friendly—farming practices, and many other things as well.

Of course, how we live in harmony with nature needs to be balanced with the needs of people.

Secular Humanistic Jews believe that humans—instead of a god—must take action to solve human problems and problems in the natural world. Science is a great way to do that. Science includes entomology, which is the scientific study of insects.

Just think about how important insects were to the Jews in the Bible.

In the book of Exodus, God inflicted 10 plagues upon the Egyptians. Half of those plagues—directly or indirectly—related to insects.

The eighth plague was locusts, and the ninth plague—darkness—might have been caused by the swarms of locusts blocking out the sun. There were the plagues of lice and flies, and the cattle disease might have been spread by insects.

According to the Bible's exodus story, manna sustained the Jews in the desert. Some scientists think that manna is really a sort of "natural honeydew" which is actually produced by certain insects feeding on the tamarisk tree. These bugs excrete sugar that they don't digest, making an edible product.

The Jews also crossed the River Jordan to get to what the Bible calls “the land of milk and honey.” Of course, honey is produced by honeybees.

In the book of Leviticus, Jews are told that locusts, crickets, and grasshoppers are, in fact, considered to be “kosher” — foods that are approved of in Jewish dietary law. Chapter 11, verse 22 says, “Even these of them ye may eat; the locust after his kind, and the bald locust after his kind, and the beetle after his kind, and the grasshopper after his kind.”

On the other hand, Deuteronomy, chapter 14, verse 19 says, “And every creeping thing that flieth is unclean unto you: they shall not be eaten.” Yes, that’s a contradiction. But don’t ask me for an explanation—that’s why I’m a Secular Humanistic Jew!

Yes, ancient Jewish herders and farmers lived close to nature and learned that insects are important to pay attention to because they play so many roles in our human lives.

Some insects fertilize or protect the crops that human beings depend on, while others can devastate those crops. Some insects can spread diseases, while others eat the ones that threaten human health.

Some insects are used by humans as sources of food—like bees, locusts, and grasshoppers—while others are poisonous. Some are used to make dyes for clothes, while others—such as moths—eat those clothes.

By better understanding and appreciating nature—including insects—people can get closer to nature, accept nature, feel a part of it, and maybe even get past some of their fears based on ignorance.

Humanistic Jews value people and the natural world, instead of a god and the supernatural. And bugs are a major part of the natural world.

But there's just one roadblock to valuing and accepting bugs: A lot of people are *really* scared of bugs.

Yes, from the perspective of humans, there are good bugs such as honeybees and bugs that kill pests, and there are bad bugs such as mosquitoes and ticks.

But many people are scared of all kinds of bugs. And that keeps them from understanding—and appreciating—one of the most important parts of the natural world. After all, as Dr. Berenbaum said, there are more species of insects than any other kind of animal on the planet.

That's why I think it is important to teach the world—starting with my mom—that bugs aren't scary. And that's also why I respect Dr. Berenbaum's work to do just that with her Insect Fear Film Festival, which has been scaring the general public with horrifying—and often horrifically made—films since 1984.

She began the film festival at the University of Illinois, and it has grown into a nationally recognized event open to students and the general public.

Before the festival begins—and between films—the audience is invited to see, handle, and learn about a variety of live specimens—a kind of a "meet the stars" opportunity. Stars include tarantulas, hissing cockroaches, tobacco horn-worms, and many others.

Dr. Berenbaum says that as long as Hollywood keeps spreading disinformation about the most misunderstood animals on the

planet—we have an obligation to counter with the truth about insects.

I think that what this film festival teaches relates to my core beliefs and values.

One of them is that all living things are worthy of consideration. We should give all living beings the same consideration we would hope to receive from them.

It's kind of like an interspecies Golden Rule. We should not treat them with hatred or violence—although we may sometimes need to defend ourselves from their harms.

All animals have a role to play in Earth's ecosystem. But it's true that sometimes they can cause problems for humans, and we have no choice but to try to stop them.

For example, humans can defend themselves from other species of animals—plants, fungi, bacteria, and viruses—that can harm us or the plants and animals that we care about. But wherever we can, we should live and let live.

Another one of my core values is helping the environment. We're already frying ourselves with global warming. I don't think going around thoughtlessly squashing other species is helping the environment—or following the interspecies Golden Rule.

But we can change and stop squashing them out of ignorance and fear. And if there really is reincarnation, I wouldn't be surprised if bugs came back as humans and we came back as bugs. Then they would squash us for revenge—unless they came back more enlightened!

Also, I believe that what goes around comes around. If you leave potentially hurtful bugs alone—such as stinging wasps and bees—then they will usually leave you alone.

They are just as afraid of you as you are of them. It helps to stand still because bees don't attack unmoving objects, and they don't feel the need to defend themselves with their stingers.

I believe that all living things are connected. This is called the “Web of Life.”

For example, although no one likes mosquitoes, without them bats would starve, and the plants that some bats pollinate wouldn't get pollinated. You may not like spiders, but let non-poisonous spiders live in your house if you don't want fruit flies.

And remember—one reason that bugs are invading our habitats is that we have been destroying theirs for centuries. So it's only fair to let them stay in our backyards. If there is good food there, maybe not as many will come inside.

Here's a final thought: If people are more accepting of bugs, then maybe they'll even be more accepting of other people who are different from them. That could help people live peacefully together.

Now that's really a value of Secular Humanistic Judaism. Secular Humanistic Jews believe that the freedom and dignity of the Jewish people must go hand in hand with the freedom and dignity of every human being.

And I believe that this ideal should extend to all living beings as well.

In closing, I'd like to thank Machar for giving me a way to be Jewish that does not involve the supernatural.

Thank you.

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