



[The other day I suggested](#) that Chanukah might be considered a paradigmatic environmental holiday because God's central miracle essentially entailed energy conservation: The Temple Menorah as Prius.

A teacher of mine (an Orthodox rabbi who [moonlights as a professional photographer](#)), said that he could accept that, but that he sees Chanukah as a demonstration of what we can know and what we cannot know. Some miracles are really miracles: they cannot be explained through the physical laws. Chanukah, on this reading, confronts us with the stark limits of the human capacity for knowledge through science.

So is that environmental or anti-environmental?

The anti-environmental side could well argue that one thing that makes environmentalism powerful is scientific knowledge. We know how the world works because of observation and testing. We don't just sit there and say, "Wow! What a miracle!": we try to understand it and explain it. A holiday that rejects the use of science leads us into bizarre conclusions like [the earth is 6,000 years old](#), or [rejects climate change because God promised never to flood the world again](#). A colleague once explained that she loved doing environmental law because she could work with scientists and discover real, hard-edged facts about the universe.

But the environmental side could counter that the lesson of Chanukah is environmental *precisely because it presents the case that we can never fully understand nature*. The love of nature is compelling precisely because there will always be something unknowable. I would imagine that many scientists become scientists not because they want to figure

everything out, but because they realize that they never can figure everything out. It is exploration, not discovery.

I suppose that most of us go back and forth between these two images of environmentalism. I know that I certainly do. Thus in Chanukah, we see not only these two sides of environmentalism, but two sides of human nature itself.