

## Introduction

### *Jewish ecological thought and the challenge for scriptural theology*

One planet, one experiment.

E. O. Wilson

We live in a wondrous place, this Earth, filled with beauty and surprise. A world where the merest sparkle on the surface of the water can suggest in its variation the infinitude of the universe, the “*ru’ach Elohim m’rachefet*” – the spirit of God hovering, fluttering on the face of the waters; a world where all our senses can be filled and overflow; a world in which we share so much with even the wildest and least known creatures. As human beings we have the potential to be enchanted by all those creatures, to act in love and in faith toward them, and toward the greater mystery and unity that is all Being and that transcends all Being. As human beings, we have the potential to feel compassion for all people and all creatures we meet, and yet we have such passions and dispassions as to make us forget compassion.

Compassion does arise, naturally and spontaneously, from the moment we encounter an Other. Moral reflection can extend the reach of that compassion, even beyond the neighbor, and beyond the span of a single lifetime. But our moral vision is too easily limited to what we can imagine in our mind’s eye. Religion at its best serves to magnify the power of compassion and moral vision beyond the naked eye and the “naked mind”, to extend it over hundreds or thousands of years. Religion can teach us how to act to preserve life far beyond the horizon of what any of us can calculate or plan for. Religion, ritual, faith, tradition, all of them exist as guides, not just for one lifetime or for one generation, but for the proverbial seven generations, that is, for as long as any civilization will last, potentially for tens of thousands of years.

This truth is embedded in the Torah’s plea to each person she addresses: “Choose life, so that you and your seed will live!” [Dt 30:19] If this is the anthropological, psychological, and metaphysical truth of religion – one of the



purposes of religion, as I believe – then aside from a handful of indigenous traditions that are threatened with extinction, religion is failing. One could say that religion has already failed.

Yet we have not entirely lost our compass. Even as religion is struggling to catch up with its purpose, science can help us reclaim the inner truth of that purpose. The first way this happens is that we are becoming ever more awake to the profound miracles and intricate processes that constitute what we call life. Science has been developing the capacity to recognize, model, and study the extraordinary complexity, diversity, munificence, and wondrousness of living creatures and systems, in ways that were unimagined (to all but mystics) as recently as a few decades ago.<sup>3</sup> New insights into the deep nature and structure of life, at the microscopic, macroscopic, and astronomical levels, are enabling us to perceive and receive the more-than-human world we call Nature on its own terms, beyond human projections and human needs.<sup>4</sup> It takes only a slight shift into the language of the sacred to recognize that this knowledge practically commands us to stand in awe of Creation.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, science also brings us technology, and it is our technology that is bringing us to what may be the brink of a collapse. And yet, even as science teaches us how to leverage our power to move mountains, and to destroy them, science also enables us to study how human action impacts the world, and to understand how systems as enormous as the climate of the entire planet can change.<sup>6</sup> That is another way that science can help us recover the purpose of religion: it is enabling us to see and measure how the fabric of life can be torn apart by human profligacy and greed.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> This is a consequence of many factors, including development of new technologies, especially in computing and the study of genetics, and application of the mathematics of complexity and chaos.

<sup>4</sup> David Abram coined the phrase “more-than-human world” in *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996) to replace the term “Nature”. Abram’s terminology uproots the culture/Nature dichotomy – “more-than-human” includes the human – conceptualizing the environment that surrounds us as inclusive of humanity. It not only embraces a world that is both immanent and intimately related to us, but also acknowledges that this world transcends our needs, purposes, and knowledge. See pp.34 (esp. n.102), 54, 207, and n.19 on the concept of “more-than-human”. I capitalize “Nature” (except when the term is within quotes) whenever it refers to the whole natural world.

<sup>5</sup> Throughout, I capitalize “Creation” to refer to the universe, while “creation” refers to God’s process of creating. Some quoted passages have been altered to reflect this usage.

<sup>6</sup> How can it be that the science of climate change incites such consternation in some fundamentalist believers of the Bible when the Torah is so insistent that climate change, and climate disaster, are the consequence for a society living out of balance, the consequence of a society that does not respect “God’s preference” (to borrow the term used by Liberation theologians) for the poor and for the land? The rationalist tendency to redline those parts of the Torah that describe climate disaster as a divine consequence of sin is also problematic – for example, after much debate, the final version of the Reform movement’s newest prayerbook, *Mishkan Tefila: A Reform Siddur* (New York: CCAR, 2007) once again omitted the second paragraph of the *Sh’m’a* prayer, Dt 11:13–21, (discussed n.412).

<sup>7</sup> The way science can gift us with wonder, foreboding, and tragedy was neatly exemplified over a three-day period in March 2014. On the 16th, an extraordinary announcement came that



From the Gulf oil catastrophe of 2010 to melting glaciers, to extreme weather events like 2013's Hurricane Sandy,<sup>8</sup> to poisoned and depleted aquifers, to acidification of the oceans (which are more acidic than they have been in 300 million years<sup>9</sup>), the human impact is planetary in scale.<sup>10</sup> So too is it pervasive at the cellular level, where disruptions of fertility and growth due to petrochemicals, ozone depletion, carcinogens, and mutagens have the potential to affect any birth any place on Earth.<sup>11</sup> And on the level that we register most easily with our senses, the human scale of animals and plants, of valleys and rivers, species in every nation and ecosystem are imminently endangered. One does not need complex computer models to know that we are degrading Earth's carrying capacity.<sup>12</sup> Even without global climate change, simply by taking more and more land and habitat out of natural ecosystems and putting it into our service, we are disfiguring the face of our planet. It is at best a kind of gallows

scientists had detected the polarization of "gravitational waves" in the cosmic microwave background – evidence for cosmic inflation close to the beginning of time. (Whether these results will hold up is uncertain.) On the 17th, a team announced that even the most northern ice sheet in Greenland was rapidly deteriorating due to climate change (Shfaqat A. Khan et al., "Sustained Mass Loss of the Northeast Greenland Ice Sheet Triggered by Regional Warming", *Nature: Climate Change* 4 [2014]: 292–9, doi:10.1038/nclimate2161). The next day, a study of the genetic diversity of the last moas in New Zealand confirmed that 600 years ago, humans were the cause of their extinction (Morten Erik Allentoft et al., "Extinct New Zealand Megafauna Were Not in Decline before Human Colonization", *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science* 111:13 [2014]: 4922–7).

<sup>8</sup> One cannot know that a particular storm is "caused" by climate change, but the probability that climate change played a factor in it can be estimated. More broadly, one cannot determine what the weather would have been in the absence of climate change, because the weather itself is the change, and cause and effect are indistinguishable. This quality, related to nonlinearity, is reflected in the mathematics of chaos, which is one tool science uses to model weather.

<sup>9</sup> The acidity of the oceans, driven by the concentration of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere, is also estimated to be increasing even more quickly than at the time of the mass extinction at the end of the Permian period. See Bärbel Hönlisch et al., "The Geological Record of Ocean Acidification", *Science* 335:6072 (Mar. 2, 2012): 1058–63.

<sup>10</sup> Not to mention the Great Pacific Garbage Patch – and the astonishing choice we have made to base our way of life on things that are intended to be used once and thrown away, and to manufacture those things out of material that will last for thousands of years.

<sup>11</sup> "Earth" is capitalized when I am specifically referring to the whole planet as such. Otherwise, "earth" is used, including in cases where the meaning is "the entire earthly realm", and in translations. See n.61.

<sup>12</sup> If we take a moment to think outside our anthropocentric frame, which equates carrying capacity with "maximum number of human beings that the planet can sustain", the simple fact that so many species are at risk tells us that the Earth's capacity to nourish Life is being diminished. Calculating a numerical upper limit on Earth's "carrying capacity" is in any case naïve, because in a world that nurtures abundance, diversity, and symbiosis, the maximum sustainable human population will increase – life augments the conditions for more life. But with the resilience of Earth's systems decreasing while (and because) the human population is increasing, the limits to growth could come crashing down upon us precipitously. It may not be possible for us to know the point at which catastrophic change will occur until we have already passed it. See Marten Scheffer et al., "Catastrophic Shifts in Ecosystems", *Nature* 413 (Oct. 11, 2001): 591–6.



humor that even as so many wondrous creatures are becoming endangered or extinct, corporations are creating and patenting new sub-species.

Many scientists estimate the current rate of extinction to be preceded only by the five mass extinctions in Earth's history.<sup>13</sup> Add in climate disruption, and we may witness the loss, over the next 100 years, of well more than half the species that have existed on Earth for the past 20 to 55 million years.<sup>14</sup> And so, during the next century, we will witness the irrevocable consequences of the past century and a half of technological development. E. O. Wilson writes, "[I]f enough species are extinguished, will the ecosystems collapse, and will the extinction of most other species follow soon afterward? The only answer one can give is: possibly. By the time we find out, however, it might be too late. One planet, one experiment."<sup>15</sup>

Within the most industrialized societies, environmental movements have responded by calling for a transformation of culture and technology. In the less developed nations, environmentalists have called for resistance to Western technologies and to the Western path of development. In many places, the Transition Town movement, started in England and inspired by the principles of permaculture, seeks to create alternative systems of living that are resilient and sustainable. But our ability to care about what is happening arises not just from science and politics, but also from love, which, along with awe, is one of the roots of religion. And religion in turn is one of the strongest vessels for husbanding love toward social transformation.

The transformation we need to carry out will affect every aspect of human culture.<sup>16</sup> It has already had a profound impact on religious thought, leading to the re-evaluation of older theologies and the creation of "ecotheologies". Often

<sup>13</sup> Many consider our epoch to be the sixth mass extinction. See Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Henry Holt, 2014) for a popular exposition of the science behind this conclusion. If this is so, the beginning of this mass extinction event dates to well before industrialization. There have already been widespread losses, for example, of all the megafauna (including elephants, saber-toothed cats, giant beavers, etc.) in the Americas and in Europe, the many species of giant bird in New Zealand (see n.7), and many of the marsupials of Australia. These losses occurred tens of thousands of years ago – even before the spread of agriculture. It is perhaps vital to notice that many of the indigenous cultures that grew in the ecological shadow of these catastrophes are profoundly sensitive to living in harmony with the Earth and the land. On this pattern applied to Hebrew thought, see p.8. This phenomenon may bear witness to the capacity of human culture to undergo exactly the kind of profound change we need today.

<sup>14</sup> M. C. Cadotte, B. J. Cardinale, and T. H. Oakley, "Evolutionary History Predicts the Ecological Impacts of Species Extinction", *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, 105 (2008): 17012–17. Paleontologists identify 55 million years ago as the time when mammals and birds began to radiate into all the species we see. Other branches of the Tree of Life are quite a bit older.

<sup>15</sup> *The Diversity of Life* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), 182.

<sup>16</sup> This is true not just because we must "retool" our society to become sustainable; it is also rightly argued that the roots of environmental ruin are in the bedrock of Western culture. See esp. Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy*



this creativity gets channeled toward the utilitarian purpose of making theology “relevant” to contemporary political and spiritual concerns. It is religion catching up to the present. What is at stake is far greater than that, however. Unless we can find a balance with the more-than-human world that can sustain the lives of the multitude of species, we will be awakening to a present that has no future.<sup>17</sup> The work of theology therefore must be directed toward the future.

It is the coming generations who will bear witness to the answer to Wilson’s question. We who can only anticipate the answer are left with two fundamental questions: How can we begin turning the course of human civilization toward sustainability? And, can we begin to create the spiritual resources necessary for those generations to come who will face the problems we are creating – resources that will help them keep intact their humanity and sympathy, for all people and all life, and ultimately to thrive?

I have chosen as the focus of this book the fundament of Biblically based theology that is often the greatest source of disconnection from the natural world: the image of God. Modern and traditional theology have interpreted God’s image as something that not only elevates us above Creation, but also separates and isolates us from the rest of Creation. Can we revalue the divine image, and envision Creation and all creatures as participating in this image?<sup>18</sup> This question is connected to many other ecological issues – animal rights, intrinsic value, stewardship, biodiversity, etc. – all of which have political implications.

But the challenge to culture and religion goes far beyond any of the explicitly political issues and ecological dangers mentioned so far. This challenge is also an opportunity to become closer, as it were, to God, to Creation, and to ourselves.

There is another reason why the question of God’s image ought to be foremost in our minds. The meaning of “human”, as sign, being, and species, has

(Oakland CA: AK Press, 2005) and “Death of a Small Planet”, *The Progressive* (Aug. 1989): 19–23.

<sup>17</sup> While humanity might decimate the planet’s biosphere, life will continue in other forms and will eventually thrive again, as it has done after every mass extinction event. We are neither able to destroy nor to “save” the Earth. However, Stephen Jay Gould (“The Golden Rule: A Proper Scale for Our Environmental Crisis”, in *Eight Little Piggies* [New York: W. W. Norton, 1993], ch.2) talks about a “golden rule”, a time-scale that relates to our lifespan as a species. We are only some 200,000 years into our lifespan, and yet we are facing (and causing) the end of the conditions on Earth that favor us to be here. But, as the Midrash teaches, God made and destroyed worlds before this one (n.779).

<sup>18</sup> The concept of “participating in God’s image” is broader than the idea of “being in God’s image”. The term “participate” allows room for different kinds of relationship to *tselem*; different orders of Being such as rocks or animals may participate in God’s image in different ways (see p.59ff.). I am drawing especially on Yosef Ashkenazi for this concept (see p.254; see also Aquinas, nn.54, 84). “Orders of Being” is a secular terminology corresponding to “orders of Creation / *sidrey v’rei’shit*”, which is one comprehensive way of talking about Nature within rabbinic tradition (see n.936). (On space before or after a forward slash, see Notes on Transliteration.)



already been transformed by the ecological and physical sciences. The concepts of ecosystem and biodiversity, as well as ecophilosophy's critique of the cultural idea of wilderness and of Nature in general,<sup>19</sup> compel us to recognize that there is a more intimate relationship between culture and multifarious Nature than the Western intellectual tradition has assumed. The development of ideas of non-human agency and the recognition of emotion and of forms of language in non-human animals have led many scientists to reject Cartesian notions of the animal. Moral philosophy has begun to encompass an ecological ethos in which non-human lives and communities can be seen as ends-in-themselves. Evolutionary and genetic sciences have given us greater and greater comprehension of the relations between all life forms, while complexity and chaos theory have given us tools to quantify and affirm intuitions about the aesthetic unity of life and the more-than-mechanical coherence of the physical world.<sup>20</sup> The idea that humanity stands apart from Nature, and that the more-than-human world exists to serve our needs in whatever we desire, is as untenable as it is demeaning to "what the Creator has wrought".

In every dimension, we need to overcome the disconnect between our real relation to and dependence on this physical living world, and our tendency to value only those needs and ends that are strictly human. Ecological insights have altered the way we think about everything from economics to salvation. Even if there were no ecological crisis, we would still need to ask anew, in the face of deeper knowledge of who and what we are: What is God's relation to the cosmos? How does Creation, if indeed it be created, teach us about the nature of the Creator? What responsibility for the well-being of other species comes with the ever-expanding knowledge of our connection to them? As our understanding of humanity evolves, so must our theology.

<sup>19</sup> Ecophilosophers mostly reject the romantic idea of wilderness as a place empty of human presence or impact. See Max Oelschläger, *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1993) and Peter Van Wyck, *Primitives in the Wilderness: Deep Ecology and the Missing Human Subject* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1997). Culture, society, and Nature are always in dialogue, and there is no place on Earth empty of human traces. The fact that scientists detect levels of human-generated pollution in the most remote icefields and oceans underscores the reality that no phenomenon is completely isolated. Even biomes at the bottom of the ocean can be impacted by humanity, not just because of deep-sea drilling, but even because as the ocean warms, there is less mixing of layers, which means less oxygen is available.

The idea that Nature and culture are separable is difficult to defend. But much of the ecophilosophy on this question critiques the dualism between culture and Nature from a cultural-linguistic perspective; that is, "Nature" as a concept is never more than a cultural construct. The deeper (and, I would say, spiritual) implications of overcoming this dualism are explored by authors who focus on the living continuity of mind, body, and earth, such as Abram in *The Spell of the Sensuous* (the source of the term "more-than-human world"). See n.102.

<sup>20</sup> Scientific information related to these themes can be found in sources on the Web, so specific citations are only occasionally given, mostly where the information is new, not easily accessed, available only from a few sources, or disputed.

This work of evolving new ways of thinking about God, human, and cosmos is what we call constructive or creative theology. It differs from what is sometimes labeled theology in academia in that it is ultimately not about what Jewish theologians said in the past, but rather about what Jewish tradition can and should speak to the future. This may sound inimical to a clear-eyed appraisal of the history of Jewish thought. What I hope will become clear in the course of this work, however, is that all these new perspectives and questions not only push us to evolve theology, but also illuminate for us, in critical ways, the meaning of ancient texts and ideas, and the history of those texts and ideas.

## JEWISH ECOLOGICAL THOUGHT

In the past thirty years of Jewish environmentalism, great leaps have been made in Jewish thought, awareness, and practice. One purpose of *Kabbalah and Ecology* is to push that work forward in a significant way. The central question of this book is: “Can we, on the basis of traditional Jewish sources, say that creatures other than human beings are in God’s image?”<sup>21</sup> Asking this question lets us break down the wall that separates our humanity from our connection to other species, to life in general, and to the Earth itself. An ancillary question to consider is: Can we expand the meaning of God’s image in a way that has integrity with the past, with tradition, and with the deepest insights of religion before modernity?

I want to acknowledge several authors who have already taken important steps toward an ecological vision of Judaism. In particular, Arthur Green, Eilon Schwartz, and Arthur Waskow have each extended Jewish ecology in new directions.<sup>22</sup> Arthur Waskow’s work probably reached the widest audience up

<sup>21</sup> There are several significant figures for Jewish ecology whose theology will not be dealt with herein because their work does not address this central question – in particular, Bachya ibn Paquda (eleventh century, Spain) and Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–92, Poland, United States), both of whom show extraordinary sensitivity to the natural world. On Bachya, see n.60. On Heschel, see p.96 herein, and Mike Comins, *A Wild Faith: Jewish Ways Into Wilderness, Wilderness Ways Into Judaism* (Woodstock VT: Jewish Lights, 2007), ch.4, 20–25. There are also areas of Jewish thought valuable for ecotheology that do not bear on this question, such as non-Hasidic *Musar* (ethical) literature, which is a rich resource for thinking about how to develop appreciation of and transcend consumerist attitudes toward Nature.

<sup>22</sup> On the contributions of all three, see Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, “Judaism”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 52–3. Others whose work has significantly advanced the field include Everett Gendler and Hans Jonas. On Gendler, see Eilon Schwartz, “Judaism and Nature: Theological and Moral Issues” in *Torah of the Earth*, 2 vols., ed. Arthur Waskow (Woodstock VT: Jewish Lights, 2000), vol.2, 159–73; 163 (see n.25 for other editions of this article). On Jonas, see Lawrence Troster, “Caretaker or Citizen: Hans Jonas, Aldo Leopold, and the Development of Jewish Environmental Ethics” in *The Legacy of Hans Jonas: Judaism and the Phenomenon of Life*, eds. Hava Tirosh-Samuelson and Christian Wiese (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 373–96, as well as Tirosh-Samuelson, “Judaism”, 55–6.





until the millenium,<sup>23</sup> though Arthur Green may have outpaced him since the publication of *Seek My Face, Speak My Name*.<sup>24</sup> I will return to their work in Chapter 13. Eilon Schwartz, in his article “Judaism and Nature: Theological and Moral Issues to Consider While Renegotiating a Jewish Relationship to the Natural World”, questions the validity of the rigid boundary between Judaism and “paganism”.<sup>25</sup> Evan Eisenberg’s book *The Ecology of Eden* also broke new ground.<sup>26</sup> One of its central ideas, that the Biblical tradition may have emerged from the response of pre-Biblical Hebrews to the ecological collapse of Mesopotamian civilization, has become an important element in Waskow’s teaching and in my own.<sup>27</sup> On a broader cultural level, the project to create a gender-liberating Judaism in the United States dating from the 1970s raised the issue of embodiment, which is an essential ingredient of a more eco-centric Judaism.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Besides *Seasons of Our Joy* (Boston MA: Beacon Press, 1982), his early and influential work on the Jewish holidays and cycles of Nature, Waskow’s publications include two edited collections: *Torah of the Earth* and (with Ari Elon and Naomi Hyman), *Trees, Earth, and Torah* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1999). On Waskow, see n.58, pp.238, 240, 332ff.

<sup>24</sup> *Seek My Face* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1994); “A Kabbalah for the Environmental Age”, *Tikkun* 14:5 (1999): 33–40; *Ehyeh: A Kabbalah for Tomorrow* (Woodstock VT: Jewish Lights, 2002), esp. 106–19; and *Radical Judaism: Rethinking God and Tradition* (New Haven CT, 2010). Green’s work is discussed on pp.231, 238, 333–4.

<sup>25</sup> First published in *Judaism* 44:4 (1985): 437–47, “Judaism and Nature” was reprinted in both Waskow, *Torah of the Earth*, vol.2 (see n.22) and *Judaism and Environmental Ethics*, ed. Martin Yaffe (Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2001), 297–308 (hereafter cited as “Yaffe”). All subsequent page references to “Judaism and Nature” refer to *Torah of the Earth*.

The nexus between Judaism and “paganism” deserves a book-length treatment. Further discussion is found at nn.34, 52, 403, and pp.9 (esp. n.29), 23, 122–3, 232, 272, and in *Methods*. Schwartz’s work parallels a class I have taught since 1993 on what I sometimes call, tongue-in-cheek, “pagan monotheism”. Jill Hammer’s more recent article, “An Altar of Earth: Reflections on Jews, Goddesses and the Zohar” (*Zeek* [July 2004], [www.zeek.net/spirit\\_0407.shtml](http://www.zeek.net/spirit_0407.shtml) [Mar. 2012]), touches on the same theme. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz’s *The Savage in Judaism: An Anthropology of Israelite Religion and Ancient Judaism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) opened up space for this kind of discussion.

<sup>26</sup> (New York: Knopf, 1998). Eisenberg’s brilliant work has not had the impact on Jewish Studies or ecotheology that it deserves. A briefer statement of Eisenberg’s thesis, “The Mountain and the Tower: Wilderness and City in the Symbols of Babylon and Israel”, can be found in Waskow, *Torah of the Earth*, vol.1, 18–54.

<sup>27</sup> See nn.13, 551. J. Richard Middleton also reads the Bible as a critique of Mesopotamian culture in *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids MI: Brazos Press, 2005), 195–234, esp. 204–12.

<sup>28</sup> See Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 153–4. Some of the most important work in this area has been in Biblical studies. See esp. Tikva Frymer-Kensky’s work *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: Fawcett Books, 1993). Jewish feminism has however largely focused on an anthropocentric egalitarian approach (cf. *Standing Again*, 231, where Plaskow’s brief mention of environmental issues is the exception that proves the rule). Nevertheless, the need to account for the sensual, embodied dimensions of Jewish ritual leads to work that supports ecological reconstruction. See *Bridges*, ed. Clare Kinberg, esp. 5:2 (Fall 1995) and the article I





While some authors like Eilon Schwartz have started unearthing (or “re-earthing”) a Judaism freed of the prejudices of the nineteenth century, the outdated dichotomies of that time continue to be repeated by others, particularly those who see themselves strictly as academics. Even one of the best scholars on the subject, Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, writes that, “From a Jewish perspective, ‘biocentrism’ is just another form of paganism that must result in idolatrous worship of nature.”<sup>29</sup> Now, biocentrism simply means the belief that all living things have some intrinsic moral standing; there is hardly an idea that could be more compatible with ancient Jewish tradition.<sup>30</sup> In fact, the “Jewish perspective” that Tirosh-Samuelson refers to is not a traditional perspective at all. It is rooted in the *Haskalah* and *Wissenschaft* movements, which recast Judaism in terms of an imagined opposition between rationality and history on the one hand, and myth and Nature on the other.<sup>31</sup> But, as Ismar Schorsch wrote, “The celebration of ‘historical monotheism’ is a legacy of nineteenth century Christian-Jewish polemics, a fierce attempt by [modern] Jewish thinkers to

co-authored with Irene Diamond, “Sensuous Minds and the Possibility of a Jewish Ecofeminist Practice” in *Ethics and the Environment* 4:2 (2000): 185–95 (repr. in Roger Gottlieb, ed., *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*, 2nd edn. [New York: Routledge], 391–400 and in Waskow, *Torah of the Earth*, vol.2, 245–60). Frymer-Kensky’s work also has deeply ecofeminist underpinnings, as can be seen in her article “Ecology in a Biblical Perspective” in Waskow, *Torah of the Earth*, vol.1, 55–69, which does for ecology and the Bible what *In the Wake of the Goddesses* does for feminism: show that the Biblical transformation of earlier myths was broadly speaking a move toward liberation and respect, rather than a move toward oppression. See also Jeanne Kay, “Concepts of Nature in the Hebrew Bible”, *Environmental Ethics* 10:4 (1988): 309–27; repr. in Yaffe, 86–104.

<sup>29</sup> “Nature in the Sources of Judaism”, *Daedalus* (Fall 2001): 99–124; 116. Tirosh-Samuelson’s example is all the more important because she provides in this same article one of the finest summaries of the subject that has been written. Tirosh-Samuelson prefaces these words with:

[I]f Jews wish to ground their approach to ecology in Jewish sources, they must come to terms with the fact that certain assumptions . . . conflict with Jewish tradition. For example, a Jewish environmental philosophy and ethics cannot be based on a simplistic version of pantheism that acknowledges only the world and nothing beyond the world.

Up to this point, what she says is accurate. But when Tirosh-Samuelson polemicizes against “paganism”, she incorrectly interprets aspects of ecology and of Jewish tradition. For example, in comments on Nazism, paganism, and Nature (in “Judaism”, in *The Oxford Handbook*, 54), she writes, “nature is also violent, competitive, ruthless . . . Nature does not care about the sick . . . Nature does not establish moral values that can create a just society.” Here Tirosh-Samuelson is working from an outmoded view of both evolutionary theory (see n.75 and p.29) and moral theory (n.67). The polemic against paganism, endemic to modern Jewish thought, can lead to extreme positions, as in Manfred Gerstenfeld’s “Neo-Paganism in the Public Square and Its Relevance to Judaism” (*Jerusalem Letter/Viewpoints* 392 [1998], at [www.jcpa.org/jpst/gersten-s99.htm](http://www.jcpa.org/jpst/gersten-s99.htm) [Oct. 2012], see esp. beginning of the section “Nature’s Image”).

<sup>30</sup> Some people draw a distinction between biocentrism, which may emphasize the moral value of individual lives, and ecocentrism, which places moral value on living systems; others use “biocentrism” to indicate both. For our purposes here, the latter usage is intended. On animal rights, see Chapter 5.

<sup>31</sup> For further discussion, see pp.23–4, n.81, and *Methods*.



distance Judaism from the world of paganism.”<sup>32</sup> Tirosh-Samuelson’s labeling of biocentrism as “idoltrous worship” has its roots in these polemics.

The Jewish environmental movement began among quirky outsiders searching for resonance with their ideas in the mainstream community.<sup>33</sup> The movement has rarely questioned the dichotomy between history and Nature, which plays such a major role in the modern self-understanding of Judaism, or the dichotomy between Judaism and paganism,<sup>34</sup> though neither dichotomy is historically accurate. While Jewish environmentalism has moved far beyond the first stage of collecting what I sometimes call “pretty sayings about trees”,<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Schorsch adds, “But the disclaimer has its downside by casting Judaism into an adversarial relationship with the natural world.” (“Tending to Our Cosmic Oasis”, *The Melton Journal* 24 [Spring 1991]: 3, available at [www.neohasid.org/pdf/Schorsch\\_OurCosmicOasis.pdf](http://www.neohasid.org/pdf/Schorsch_OurCosmicOasis.pdf) [Sep. 4, 2014].) For further discussion, see n.72 and *Methods*. In Chapter 3, I analyze an example of this depiction of Judaism. See n.363.

<sup>33</sup> The 1982 Jewish Environmental Conference organized by David Ehrenfeld at Rutgers University, which I attended as the youngest participant, may be seen as one of the starting points of Jewish environmentalism as a movement. The first draft of *Kabbalah and Ecology* was finished almost exactly 30 years after that conference. On this history, see Seidenberg, “Jewish Environmentalism in North America” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (hereafter *ERN*), eds. Bron Taylor et al. (New York: Thoemmes Continuum, 2005), 909–13, rev. [www.neohasid.org/ecohasid/jewish\\_enviro\\_history/](http://www.neohasid.org/ecohasid/jewish_enviro_history/) (Mar. 2011). The earliest groups that formed were largely supplanted or absorbed by Shomrei Adamah (founded 1988), which was itself supplanted by the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL, founded 1993).

<sup>34</sup> Among notable exceptions are Jill Hammer and Taya Shere’s organization The Kohenet Institute, founded in 2007; Hammer’s work very much parallels my own. “Paganism” is an ill-defined term that has no reality or relationship to the lifeworld of the ancient Hebrews. According to one definition of “pagan” by a scholar of the ancient world, it simply meant “‘people of the place,’ town or country who preserved their local customs” in the face of Christianity (Pierre Chuvin, *A Chronicle of the Last Pagans* [Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1990], 9). If we are going to apply “pagan” anachronistically, it certainly includes ancient Judaism. Long-held local customs are in fact almost always related to local ecosystems. On this point, see Seidenberg, “Kashroots: An Eco-History of the Kosher Laws”, [www.jcarrot.org/kashroots-an-eco-history-of-the-kosher-laws](http://www.jcarrot.org/kashroots-an-eco-history-of-the-kosher-laws) (Nov. 2008); rev. [www.neohasid.org/torah/kashroots](http://www.neohasid.org/torah/kashroots) (Sep. 2009), §§2, 4–6. I discuss there the rules that determine a kosher land animal: cloven hooves mean an animal can graze on rocky land unsuited for farming; chewing cud means it can thrive eating food that is not edible to people and that grows without cultivation. These rules are precisely tuned to the agriculture of hilly Canaan. Cf. Aloys Hfttermann, *The Ecological Message of the Torah: Knowledge, Concepts and Laws which Made Survival in a land of Milk and Honey Possible* (Gainesville FL: University Press of Florida, 1999), 72. Hfttermann describes ancient Hebrew society as “the first society which ever lived on this globe to establish a sustained yield form of agriculture” (201).

One curious aspect of ancient Hebrew culture is that even though it is so clearly indigenous and attuned to the land where it evolved, it insists on describing itself as not indigenous – Abraham came from Mesopotamia, the tribes invaded from Egypt, and just as “you were strangers in Egypt”, so “you are strangers and sojourners” [Lv 25:23] even in the land of Israel. This subject merits in-depth treatment.

<sup>35</sup> See Lawrence Troster, “From Apologetics to New Spirituality: Trends in Jewish Environmental Theology” ([www.greenwisdomrabbi.com/from-apologetics-to-new-spirituality-trends-in-jewish-environmental-theology/](http://www.greenwisdomrabbi.com/from-apologetics-to-new-spirituality-trends-in-jewish-environmental-theology/) [Oct 2014]). The first stage may be thought of as a kind of



many mainstream Jewish organizations that care about environmentalism remain uncomfortable with any challenge to these dichotomies. On the one hand, environmentalism is primarily seen as a tool for drawing stray Jews back into the fold, for strengthening “Jewish continuity”.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, there is so much proto-ecological material within the tradition, from the obvious topic of *bal tashchit* (not wasting or destroying) to the rhythms of the Jewish calendar,<sup>37</sup> Tu Bish’vat,<sup>38</sup> and the revolutionary ideas of *Sh’mītah* and *Yovel*, the sabbatical and Jubilee years,<sup>39</sup> that Jewish environmental educators have plenty to teach without stepping outside the normative framework.<sup>40</sup>

The newer generation of Jewish environmental organizations, including especially the farming and food movement, has nevertheless become adept at integrating alternative spiritualities and perspectives into its work.<sup>41</sup> The Teva Learning Center, founded in 1994 to offer outdoor education experiences to Jewish day schools, was the flagship of this movement, which now embraces numerous organizations and activities.<sup>42</sup> Within the Jewish Renewal

resource extraction. See Bradley Shavit Artson’s trenchant critique of this stage (“[t]he pillaged loot gathers dust in the storehouse of ecology”) in “Our Covenant with Stones: A Jewish Ecology of the Earth”, *Conservative Judaism* 44:1 (Fall 1991): 14–24; 14–15.

<sup>36</sup> Though such considerations have their place, taking continuity to be the primary goal overlooks two essential things: first, the Jewish people, according to its own story, survives for a reason greater than self-perpetuation; and second, there is no Jewish continuity without continuity of humanity, ecosystem, and planet.

<sup>37</sup> On the calendar, see esp. Waskow, *Seasons*, and Jill Hammer’s *The Jewish Book of Days* (Philadelphia: JPS, 2006).

<sup>38</sup> Copious resources for Tu Bish’vat can be found on my website, [neohasid.org](http://neohasid.org), and on [jewecology.com](http://jewecology.com), among many other sites.

<sup>39</sup> *Sh’mītah* and Jubilee, along with Shabbat, are fundamentally Earth-centered, and many would affirm that more than humanity is in God’s image – cf. the lyrics of Shir Yaakov Feinstein-Feit and Eden “Ephryme” Pearlstein’s rap “To Zion”: “We need a breakthrough, poetry for president / Every person has their own potential that they represent / Peace is possible but only if we first believe / Everything created is *b’tselem Elohim!*” (Darshan, 2011, [www.darshan.bandcamp.com/track/to-zion](http://www.darshan.bandcamp.com/track/to-zion) [Jan. 2012]).

<sup>40</sup> For a good survey of all this material, see Jeremy Benstein, *The Way Into Judaism and the Environment* (Woodstock VT: Jewish Lights, 2006).

<sup>41</sup> Within the Jewish enviro/farming movement (especially among the younger people) it is almost taken for granted that Judaism is fundamentally Earth-centered, and many would affirm that more than humanity is in God’s image – cf. the lyrics of Shir Yaakov Feinstein-Feit and Eden “Ephryme” Pearlstein’s rap “To Zion”: “We need a breakthrough, poetry for president / Every person has their own potential that they represent / Peace is possible but only if we first believe / Everything created is *b’tselem Elohim!*” (Darshan, 2011, [www.darshan.bandcamp.com/track/to-zion](http://www.darshan.bandcamp.com/track/to-zion) [Jan. 2012]).

<sup>42</sup> Now called the Teva Learning Alliance, Teva was founded at Camp Isabella Freedman (now Isabella Freedman Retreat Center). The Adamah Farming Fellowship was also founded there, in 2003. In the past few years, Jewish environmental consciousness has poured itself into the farming movement, sparked by Adamah, and the food movement, focalized by Hazon (founded 2000). Other efforts include Wilderness Torah (founded 2007) and Eden Village Camp (opened in 2010). Most importantly for the advance of Jewish ecological thought, Kayam Farm at Pearlstone (founded 2006) has organized an annual conference on Jewish agricultural law. In 2013, Hazon, already the largest Jewish environmental organization in North America, merged with Isabella Freedman. Along with the proliferation of farming programs in the United States and Canada, and a network of Jewish-community-based CSA’s



movement, there has also been an openness to real theological transformation,<sup>43</sup> while in Israel, a spiritually based environmentalism has been taking root.<sup>44</sup> In essence, the theology I am advocating in this book has already come into being as a way of practicing and feeling about Judaism within this network of organizations, especially among the younger generations (many of whom are now in their thirties). Bringing this approach fully into the way we understand and *think* about Judaism, and more importantly into the way we read the fullness of the Jewish tradition, is one of the next big steps.

How far have we already come in Jewish ecotheology? *Bal tashchit*, the prohibition against wasting, is a good litmus test. This principle, derived from the Torah's commandment against destroying fruit trees even during a wartime siege (Dt 20:19), is both far-reaching (in that the rabbis applied it to destroying anything needlessly, which they compared to committing idolatry) and extremely limited (in that the rabbis did not allow it to stand in the way of economic profit).<sup>45</sup> Mainstream Jewish environmentalism in the early days

organized by Hazon, there has also been a movement to bring *shechitah*, kosher slaughter, back to the small farm, using humanely and sustainably raised animals. Grow and Behold Foods (founded 2010) is the largest commercial purveyor of such meat. There is also wide interest in a kosher certification that would guarantee food is produced in an ethical manner. More recently, after a long hiatus COEJL spearheaded the effort to create a "Green Hevra" network in 2011. See Seidenberg, "Jewish Environmentalism" for a partial history. For a more comprehensive list of North American organizations, see [www.jewcology.org/map-of-initiatives/](http://www.jewcology.org/map-of-initiatives/) (Aug. 2014).

<sup>43</sup> R' Zalman Schachter-Shalomi's leadership, both as the founder of Jewish Renewal and as a revered wisdom teacher, has been instrumental. Decades ago, he coined the term "eco-kosher", taught about Gaia spirituality, and promulgated the idea that Judaism was in the process of a "paradigm shift" (*Paradigm Shift*, ed. Ellen Singer [Northvale NJ: Jason Aronson, 1993]). He also loved computer analogies and talked about "reformatting" the tradition (*Paradigm Shift*, ch. 14), "updating the system files", and maintaining "backwards compatibility" (lectures). One could view *Kabbalah and Ecology* as a project to maintain backwards compatibility.

<sup>44</sup> The Heschel Center for Environmental Learning and Leadership and the Reform movement's Kibbutz Lotan, both founded in 1983, have had a long and lasting impact. The desert-commune experiment Hamakom (2000–05), and Tel Aviv's Bayit Chadash (2000–06), which can be categorized as Israeli Jewish Renewal, integrated Judaism and a somewhat new-age form of ecospirituality. The activist group Bustan L'Shalom (now "Bustan") organized the renegade building of a medical clinic in 2003 in Wadi al-Naam, an "unrecognized" Bedouin village near which a toxic waste dump was sited, utilizing the cob building expertise of Kibbutz Lotan. The village was receiving no medical (or other) services because officially it did not exist. See Seidenberg, "Human Rights and Ecology", *Tikkun* 23:4 (July/Aug. 2008): 48–52; 51–2, rev. 2010 at [www.neohasid.org/pdf/Human.Rights.and.Ecology.pdf](http://www.neohasid.org/pdf/Human.Rights.and.Ecology.pdf) [Sep. 2011], and [www.savethenegev.org](http://www.savethenegev.org). More recently, Yeshivat Simchat Shlomo hosted an "Eco-activist Beit Midrash" in 2005. This list represents only a fraction of what is going on in Israeli environmentalism as a whole, which is largely secular. The Jewish National Fund should also be included for its educational work, though it has often been seen as deleterious by Israeli environmentalists (see pp. 305–6).

<sup>45</sup> If the value of a tree's wood is greater than the value of its fruit, it can be cut down (*Talmud Bavli* [Vilna: Wittwe & Gebrüder Romm, 1880; repr. Jerusalem: Tal-Man, 1981], hereafter *TB*, *Bava Qama* 91b). Maimonides codifies this law in *Mishneh Torah* (Jerusalem: Mechon-Mamre, n.d.), [www.mechon-mamre.org/i/e506.htm](http://www.mechon-mamre.org/i/e506.htm) (Feb. 2014), *Hilkhot M'lakhim* 6:12–13 (8–9); he also states that an *ilan s'raq*, non-food-bearing tree, may be cut down for any reason. On waste as idolatry, see *TB Shabbat* 67b, 105b. See Seidenberg, "Environment, Ecology, and

began and ended as a paean to *bal tashchit*. The spiritual importance of *bal tashchit* is not insignificant – idolatry is regarded as one of the chief sins – but the legal framework around *bal tashchit* makes it ineffective for preventing environmental abuses. Any Jewish environmental curriculum or theology that is serious will acknowledge these limitations. Eilon Schwartz’s “*Bal Tashchit: A Jewish Environmental Precept*” is the finest exposition of the issue to date.<sup>46</sup>

Another litmus test is whether a curriculum or theology integrates the Sabbatical year /*Sh’mītah* and Jubilee/*Yovel*. Every seventh year in Biblical Israel was to be a *Sh’mītah*, a release, when the land was not actively farmed, and all debts were canceled. In the *Yovel* or fiftieth year, after seven *Sh’mītah* cycles, the land was redistributed, and any slave who chose not to be freed in his or her own seventh year of service was required to go free. This system of rest and renewal fulfilled on a grand social scale the ideal of Shabbat. (One might even say that the purpose of Shabbat is to practice for *Sh’mītah*.) *Sh’mītah*-Jubilee was directed equally toward creating a right relationship with the land and toward creating a right relationship between human beings.<sup>47</sup> There is no more radical teaching in the Torah.

the Bible” II, in *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception* (EBR) (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), vol.7, cols.974–81; 977.

<sup>46</sup> *Environmental Ethics* 18 (Winter 1997): 355–74 (repr. in *Trees, Earth, and Torah*, 83–106). See also Neal Loevinger, “Judaism, the Bible and Environmental Awareness” (York University, MA thesis, 1993), 36–7, 47–8 and Eric Katz, “Faith, God, and Nature: Judaism and Deep Ecology” in *Deep Ecology and World Religions: New Essays on Sacred Grounds*, eds. David Landis Barnhill, Roger S. Gottlieb (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 2001), 155–61, esp. 161. Much discussion of *bal tashchit* in Jewish environmentalism does not engage with the complexity of the issue, whether because it is apologetic toward Judaism or because it is limited in its understanding of ecology. See for example articles by Norman Lamm, Jonathan Helfand, and David Ehrenfeld and Philip J. Bentley, found in Waskow, *Torah of the Earth*, vol.1, 103–56 (esp. 109–15, 133–4, and 150–53), and Jeremy Cohen’s “On Classical Judaism and Environmental Crisis” in Yaffe, 77–9. (Ehrenfeld and Bentley is also found in Yaffe, 125–35.) The *bal tashchit* section of Lamm’s article was also printed separately in *Trees, Earth, and Torah*, 106–11. Leaving aside Lamm’s theological remarks, his article works well as a summary of Jewish law. David Vogel (“How Green Is Judaism? Exploring Jewish Environmental Ethics”, *Judaism* 50:1 [Winter 2001]: 66–81, [www.faculty.haas.berkeley.edu/vogel/judaism.pdf](http://www.faculty.haas.berkeley.edu/vogel/judaism.pdf) [Apr. 2012]), also gives a more nuanced treatment of *bal tashchit*, though without reflecting critically on it.

<sup>47</sup> In this respect, *Sh’mītah* very much conforms to the ideals of social ecology (see n.51), and it is a profound mechanism for creating social justice. See Ellen Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 92–4 and Eric Rosenblum, “Is Gaia Jewish? Finding a Framework for Radical Ecology in Traditional Judaism” in Yaffe, 183–205; 185–91. A society based on *Sh’mītah* would also not incidentally eschew the excesses and failures of both capitalism and communism. An important link can be made between *Sh’mītah* and permaculture, since the practice of *Sh’mītah* would lead people to plant perennial crops and fruit trees, which would still produce in the seventh year, instead of annual crops. The *Sh’mītah*-Jubilee system has been a centerpiece of my own teaching since 1993 (and I wrote a curriculum on “Jubilee as a Jewish Response to Hunger” in 1982), but it is only in the past two years that discussion of *Sh’mītah* has taken hold, thanks to the tireless efforts of Yigal Deutscher and Hazon. See [www.hazon.org/shmita-project/educational-resources/resource-library/](http://www.hazon.org/shmita-project/educational-resources/resource-library/) for writings and curricula

Generally, Jewish environmental ethics is an area in which both traditional and academic scholars have been content to describe what Judaism already says.<sup>48</sup> But Jewish theology needs to catch up with the urgency of the times, the “*et la’asot*”. One purpose of theology is to ask, What *should* Judaism say? or, How should we revise what Judaism says in light of what we now know?

Other religious traditions are at various stages of developing a sustainable worldview.<sup>49</sup> By way of contrast, Christian scholars have been long involved in developing an ecotheology based on the history and texts of Christianity.<sup>50</sup> Their work has integrated insights from deep ecology, ecofeminism, social ecology, and even neopaganism,<sup>51</sup> as well as the field of ecopsychology.

Yet for Christians as much as for Jews, the central question of this book remains an open one: “Can we say that other creatures are in God’s image?” This is, I think, not only the most momentous theological challenge we face, but also a challenge that is uniquely well suited to the kind of textual reasoning that characterizes Jewish thought. At the same time, the prejudices we have inherited from the past few centuries have practically made this question

from Deutscher, myself, Waskow, and others. See pp.126–7, 152, 166–7, 272, esp. n.888 In popular writing, see also Seidenberg, “Shmita: The Purpose of Sinai”, *The Huffington Post* (May 2, 2013), also available at [www.neohasid.org/pdf/shmitah-etzel-sinai.pdf](http://www.neohasid.org/pdf/shmitah-etzel-sinai.pdf). The first “Shmittah Summit” took place in March 2012 at Pearlstone Retreat Center. (Though there is consensus about focusing on *Sh’mithah*, there is no consensus about how to spell it!) On Shabbat, see n.369 and pp.125–6, 321–3 (esp. n.1039).

<sup>48</sup> See, e.g., Vogel. For a summary of normative Jewish environmental ethics, see also David Golinkin, “A Responsum Regarding the Environment and Air Pollution”, *Responsa in a Moment* 3:2 (October 2008), online at [www.schechter.edu/responsa.aspx?ID=37](http://www.schechter.edu/responsa.aspx?ID=37) (Nov. 2011). In contrast, Schwartz in “*Bal Tashchit*”, Gendler in “*A Sentient Universe*” (*Ecology and the Jewish Spirit: Where Nature and the Sacred Meet*, ed. Ellen Bernstein [Woodstock VT: Jewish Lights, 1998], 58–68; hereafter “Bernstein”), and Eric Rosenblum in “Is Gaia Jewish?” go beyond what is normative, as do the first citations in n.46.

<sup>49</sup> The Harvard Divinity School conferences on religion and ecology have had a big impact on this process. The conference on Judaism, titled “Judaism and the Natural World”, and the volume that issued from it, *Judaism and Ecology: Created World and Revealed Word*, ed. Hava Tirosh-Samuelson (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), suffered some limitations in comparison with the other conferences because the organizers, for fear of being seen as “too radical”, asked presenters to discuss Nature, rather than ecology.

<sup>50</sup> See nn.82, 113, and p.274. I hope *Kabbalah and Ecology* will be a significant resource for Christian ecotheology. To this end, points of contact with Christianity are noted throughout.

<sup>51</sup> Deep ecology rejects human exceptionalism and speciesism (the idea that there is a hierarchy in the values of different species). Social ecology says that the oppression of human beings and the destruction of Nature are concomitant; see n.360. On deep ecology, including its relationship to and tension with social ecology and ecofeminism, see *Beneath the Surface: Critical Essays in the Philosophy of Deep Ecology*, eds. Eric Katz, Andrew Light, David Rothenberg (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2000). Ecofeminism spans a broad range of philosophies, from the social ecology interpretation that connects the oppression of women and the destruction of Nature, to the essentialist idea that women are closer to Nature and more able to build a society at peace with Nature. See *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*, eds. Irene Diamond and Gloria Orenstein (San Francisco CA: Sierra Club, 1990). Neopaganism most often personifies Nature or Earth as the Goddess. See Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006). On ecopsychology, see Andy Fisher, *Radical Ecopsychology: Psychology in the Service of Life* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 2013).



unaskable. Instead, contemporary Jewish thought has limited itself to a particular understanding of the meaning of God's image, rooted in modernist and humanist ideologies, walled in by assumptions that stand in direct contradiction to deep ecology and most ecotheology.<sup>52</sup> We – Jews, Christians, and all for whom the Hebrew Bible is a touchstone – need to be able to peer beyond this wall, to pass beyond it, in order to create a sustainable world. There are no other significant obstacles to a free discussion within Judaism about what is our rightful place on the Earth as a people, as human beings, and as creatures.

## FUNDAMENTAL ECOLOGICAL ISSUES IN JEWISH PERSPECTIVE

### The very good Creation

There are a number of ecological issues that Judaism has a deeply grounded response to. One Biblical concept that every Bible reader and every Jewish denomination can affirm without controversy is the idea that Creation, in its totality, is inherently good. The idea is embedded in the Creation narrative: "Elohim saw all that He made, and here/behold: it is very good" [Gn 1:31]. Maimonides (1135–1204, Spain, Morocco, Egypt), arguably the most important Jewish philosopher of all time, explains in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (in Hebrew, *Moreh N'vukhim*) that the phrase "very good" intimates the intrinsic value and purpose of all of Creation, which is independent of humanity:

[A]ll the other beings too have been intended for their own sakes and not for the sake of something else... If you consider the Torah, the notion that we have in view will

<sup>52</sup> This does *not* mean that Judaism should suddenly or eventually conform to deep ecology or any particular ecotheology (the Torah is already in alignment with social ecology). Jewish culture has much both to teach and to learn from these other ways of seeing the more-than-human world. A Jewish engagement with these ideas, as with biocentrism in general, will require the kind of application of textual reasoning and fine distinctions that characterizes all Jewish ethics. As Neal Loevinger writes in "Deep Ecology and Biocentrism: (Mis)reading Genesis" in Bernstein, 32–40, "From a Jewish perspective, the biggest problem with this [biocentric] approach is that it obscures the real, everyday choices that people must make... Rather than being superfluous, the role of ethics is to make power differences explicit and to make past experience relevant to new situations." (38).

Any revision of Jewish theology in light of ecology must also grapple with the right relationship to the land of Israel, both because Israel is seen as more holy than other lands, and because it provides the paradigm of how to relate to land. See Artson, "Is There Only One Holy Land?" in Bernstein, 41–9. It is here that Loevinger's concerns become profoundly disquieting, given the sometimes atavistic attachment to the historical "promised land". But the Torah teaches that it is a privilege to live in the "holy land", not a right – a privilege that can be revoked when people abuse either the land or other human beings. It is that very fact – that everyone's tenure is tenuous – that makes Canaan/Israel a holy land. As "a land of mountains and valleys", only "by the rain of the heavens will she drink water" [Dt 11:11] – and so she will be subject to drought. "Always the eyes of YHVH your God are on her" [Dt 11:12] – that is, it is as if God is always assessing whether the people merit rain, "not like the land of Egypt, which... you gave drink with your foot (by pumping), like a garden of greens" [Dt 11:10], because it is not a place where people can control irrigation and disregard rainfall.



become manifest... For with reference to none of the things created is the statement made in any way that it exists for the sake of some other things. He only says that He brought every part of the world into existence and that it conformed to its purpose. This is the meaning of the saying: “And God saw that it [is] good.” About the whole, it says: “And God saw everything that He had made, and, behold, it [is] very good.”<sup>53</sup>

Maimonides’ articulation of this idea was foundational for Jewish thought, as well as for Christian thought. Aquinas (1225–1274, Italy) was heavily dependent on Maimonides when he wrote that the highest good among created things “is the good of the order of the whole universe”,

[for it is said:] “God saw all the things He had made, and they were very good,” while He simply said of the individual works, that “they were good” [...] Thus, among created things, what God cares for most is the order of creation.<sup>54</sup>

Ovadia Sforno (1470–1550, Italy) similarly comments: “The purpose of existence in its entirety is very good, more so than the specific purposes intended.”<sup>55</sup> The affirmation found in Genesis 1:31 was incredibly important. Then, as now, it provided an imprimatur for a holistic and optimistic view of Creation. Now,

<sup>53</sup> *The Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 3:13, selected from 452–3; *Moreh N’vukhim*, trans. Yosef Kafich (Hebr.) (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1977), 300–301. Elsewhere in this passage Maimonides rejects the idea of “a final end of all species of beings” (see p.27). Cf. 3:25, 506. Though *Kabbalah and Ecology* focuses on Kabbalah, Maimonides could be seen as this book’s most important protagonist. See esp. pp.20, 23, 71–2, 148, 160, 268ff. On Maimonides’ limitations, see n.202 and p.62. For a summary of issues connecting Maimonides and ecotheology, see Seidenberg, “Maimonides” (ERN, 1026–7, online at [www.neohasid.org/torah/rambam](http://www.neohasid.org/torah/rambam) [Jan. 2014]). Note that in one place, Maimonides defines the meaning of “good” in the Creation story differently: “Whenever [the Torah] mentions a thing among those that exist, having been produced in time and subsisting in durable, perpetual, and permanent fashion, it says with respect to that thing that it was good” (2:30, 353). This, however, is really a lemma of the first principle, that “good” means having intrinsic value.

In this work, I generally quote from Pines’s edition, which is widely accepted among scholars. However, Moses Friedländer’s translation (New York: Dover Books, 1980) is often worth reading for comparison, as are the Hebrew translations of both Kafich and Michael Schwartz (Tel Aviv University Press, 2002, [www.press.tau.ac.il/perplexed/](http://www.press.tau.ac.il/perplexed/) [Sep. 2014]). Maimonides’ *Guide* will be cited below as: MN [book: chapter], [page in Pines, unless otherwise specified].

<sup>54</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. Vernon Bourke, 3:64, paras.9–10, [www.dhsprory.org/thomas/ContraGentiles3a.htm](http://www.dhsprory.org/thomas/ContraGentiles3a.htm) (Nov 2014), cf. 3:70, para.4. See William French, “Catholicism and the Common Good of the Biosphere”, in *An Ecology of the Spirit: Religious Reflection and Environmental Consciousness*, ed. Michael Barnes (Lanham MD: University Press of America, 1990), 192. Aquinas also wrote: “For goodness, which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifold and divided; and hence the whole universe together participates in the divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better, than any single creature whatever” (*Summa Theologica*, 2nd edn., trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province [1920] pt.1, q.47, art.1, 1:246, [www.newadvent.org/summa/1047.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1047.htm) [Sep. 2008]; in French, “Catholicism”, 193; see also pt.1, q.15, art.2, 1:87).

<sup>55</sup> ad Gn 1:31 in *Miqra’ot G’dolot*. Throughout this work, Sforno, Rashi, ibn Ezra, and Ramban, are quoted from *Miqra’ot G’dolot* (repr., New York: Shulzinger Bros, n.d.), occasionally in comparison with online editions of their commentaries at [daat.co.il](http://daat.co.il).



it opens the door to look at Creation in all its diversity, with new scientific tools and renewed awe, and to understand perhaps for the first time what it really means to say “behold, it is very good / *v’hineh tov m’od*” [Gn 1:31].<sup>56</sup>

The next three issues of biodiversity, subjecthood (or moral agency), and evolution are not native to Jewish categories of thought, but rather arise from the theological challenges presented by a study of ecology. In each area, aspects of the Western agenda of mastery over natural forces and dominance of humans over other species have been called into question. They are keys that open the door to the inquiry about extending God’s image. I will outline these issues here, along with their significance in and for Jewish tradition.

## Biodiversity

The term “biodiversity” was developed by E. O. Wilson<sup>57</sup> almost 30 years ago to point to both the diversity of individual species and the diversity of their relationships and inter-dependencies, as well as to describe one of the chief qualities of life and living systems. More recently, Wilson coined the term “biophilia” to describe both the intimate kinship most human beings feel toward the diversity of living creatures and the human drive to know and understand life in all its forms (see p.171). If Wilson is right, and our ability to recognize and celebrate biodiversity is a fundamental part of our human makeup, then it should naturally find expression in religion.

The motif of diversity is in fact emphasized in many texts of piety and philosophy from ancient times and the Middle Ages. In one early example, *Sifra* (“The Book”, on Leviticus) interprets the verse “How manifold/diverse are Your works YHVH”<sup>58</sup> / *Mah rabu ma`asekha YHVH*” [Ps 104:24] to allude to the diversity of ecotypes (using the term in a broad sense):

<sup>56</sup> We know enough to think about the entelechy of Creation as a whole in a way that was never before possible. Entelechy, defined by Aristotle as the form each life takes when seen as a purposeful whole, differs from *telos*. The first term seeks meaning in the “gestalt” of a thing, whereas the second finds meaning in the final state of a thing. We can talk about the entelechy of Creation as we know it without violating the premises of ecology or evolutionary science, but we cannot talk about its *telos*. (On the spacing before and after the forward slash above, see Notes on Transliteration.)

<sup>57</sup> See Marjorie Reaka-Kudla, Don Wilson, and Edward O. Wilson, *Biodiversity II: Understanding and Protecting Our Biological Resources* (Washington DC: Joseph Henry, 1996), 1. Wilson dates the term to the National Forum on BioDiversity Conference that took place in 1986.

<sup>58</sup> In the present work, the tetragrammaton, traditionally pronounced “*Adonai*” and often translated as “Lord”, is left untranslated. In this quote, the printed Talmud substitutes *H'* (standing for *Hashem*, the name) for YHVH. Various substitutions for the name (including *H' ה*, *YY י*, *D' ד*, *HVYH הויה*, *YQV"Q* יקו"ק) are used in later works to avoid writing out the letters of God’s name. As with *YQV"Q*, where *Quf* takes the place of *Heh*, other divine names are “de-sanctified” with *Quf*, e.g., *Eloqim* (*Elokim*) for *Elohim*, which appears in some quotes below. The breath letter, *Heh*, is “stopped up”, so to speak; conversely, the breath itself is often seen as the signature of the divine. See Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 245–53. Waskow also interprets the name YHVH (YHWH) as the sound of breath, denoting God as



When R' Akiva would reach this verse he would say: . . . You have creatures growing in the sea and creatures growing on the dry land. The ones in the sea, were they to come up on the dry land they would die; the ones on the dry land, were they to go down to the sea they would die. You have creatures growing in the fire/*ur*, and creatures growing in the air/*avir*. The ones in the fire, were they to extend to the air they would die, and the ones in the air, were they to extend to the fire they would die. The place of life for this one is the death of the other, and the place of death for this one is the life of the other.<sup>59</sup>

Diversity is seen as one of God's praises. However, here, as in many other texts, the diversity of Creation may signify little more than evidence of God's power or wisdom,<sup>60</sup> with the world serving a nothing more than a palimpsest whose faint tracings serve to lead us to God. One learns, as it were, only a single

"YyyyHhhhWwwwHhhh, the Interbreathing of all life", so that the divine breath includes the breath of all creatures. See "The Breath of Life/Prayer", [www.theshalomcenter.org/node/222](http://www.theshalomcenter.org/node/222) and "Nishmat: The Breath of All Life", [www.theshalomcenter.org/node/229](http://www.theshalomcenter.org/node/229) (Philadelphia: The Shalom Center, Sep. 8, 2001).

<sup>59</sup> *Sifra d'Vei Rav (Torat Kohanim)*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1959), *Sh'mini* 5:7, 80b || *TB Chulin* 127a. What R' Akiva had in mind when he imagined creatures that live in fire is hard to know, but there are thermophilic species that could be described this way that have only been discovered in the past 50 years, first in 1966, in Yellowstone's hot springs, then in 1977, in hydrothermal vents at the bottom of the oceans – truly describable as habitats of fire. These vents were proposed as the place where life originated in 1988. Such life would be dependent on the abundant sulfur, rather than on dissolved oxygen, which would not have been present. (Interestingly, the parallel *TB* passage describes going down to the habitat of fire from the air and coming up to the air from the fire.) Free oxygen in both atmosphere and ocean came a half billion or more years after photosynthesis, which itself did not begin until as many as a billion or more years after the advent of the first life (scientific estimates for the beginning of photosynthesis range from 3.6 to 2.8 billion years ago). See n.873 on the Gaia hypothesis. See also nn.1013, 1081 on versions of a "universe story" that incorporate this information.

<sup>60</sup> Bachya ibn Paquda, in his *Torat Chovot Hal'avot (Duties of the Heart)*, ed. Moses Hyamson (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1970), provides many instances of this. See, for example, ch.4 of *Sha'ar Hab'kbinah* (vol.1). Two typical passages read:

How astonishing too is the growth of foods from seeds . . . Praised be the Wise and Gracious One who causes there to be such vast effects from the [most] small and weak of causes . . . The wise man, when he reflects on them and understands their causes, will recognize the wisdom of the Creator's plan in them. (vol.1, 170–71, translation adapted)

And it is true, YY God, that You have not created any existing creature formless/*tohu*, nor formed it for nothing. For in it is the purpose of the universe / *takhlit ha'olam*, and it also testifies to Your wisdom and discernment and demonstrates that everything which You have made is complete without flaw, and whole without extra. It is as it says: "I know that whatever God does, it will be forever; nothing can be added to it nor anything subtracted" [Ec 3:14].

(vol.2, 396–7)

Where Bachya hints that diversity has some meaning beyond praise, as when he writes, "For in [each creature] is the purpose of the universe", he does not explore this more deeply. He may have simply meant that the purpose of the universe is the provisioning of humanity, as when he describes the world as "a house built which is set up with everything necessary to it [for] humanity, like the master of a house, who makes use of everything in it" (vol.1, 75). Similarly, he writes:



lesson from the multitude of relationships that make up the world, instead of a multitude of lessons. For this reason, the commonplace appreciation of Life's diversity as a praise of the Creator can end up being theologically sterile.

From the perspective of constructive theology, we would want to find teachings that recognize diversity to be something fundamentally desired by God, something that expresses God's love and that characterizes God's "vision" of Creation, as it were. This indeed would be a fair reading of the verse "Elohim saw everything . . . and behold, it is very good". One teaching from *Avot d'Rabi Natan* that leads in this direction asks, "Why is the earth<sup>61</sup> called *teivel*?" and answers, "Because she is enriched/seasoned/relished with everything / *m'tubelet bakol*."<sup>62</sup> Diversity is not just a praise of God but also a praise of the Earth and one of her essences.

When you observe the signs of wisdom in created things, you will find that, along with testifying to the divinity and unity of the Creator, they all without exception have in them ways of being useful to humanity and intending [their] improvement / *ofaney to'elet v'kavanat taqanah*.

(vol. I, 164–7)

Because Bachya is so eloquent about the wisdom in Nature, he is used uncritically as a resource in Jewish environmental education. Only rarely is any distinction made between what might be called Nature-positive texts, which abound in medieval Jewish thought, and ecologically significant texts, which could call on us to re-evaluate the relationship between humanity and the more-than-human world.

<sup>61</sup> The term used, *arets*, is translated as "land" or "earth", while *adamah* is translated as "earth" or "ground". *Arets* can refer to all land in general or to a specific land, while *adamah* refers to earth as a substance, that is, soil. Here *Chazal* are speaking about *arets*. While in some cases *arets* may in fact mean the equivalent of the whole planet, as in the phrase *shamayim va'arets*, I will translate *arets* as "earth" or "land" rather than "Earth" when it appears in rabbinic or Biblical texts, in order to preserve these ambiguities. The name for the element of earth in the four elements is *'afar* (dirt, usually translated as "dust").

<sup>62</sup> *Avot d'Rabi Natan*, ed. Salomon (Solomon) Schechter (Vienna, 1887), version A, ch.37, 110, cited hereafter as ARNA (version B is cited as ARNB). *Teivel* and *m'tubelet* share the letters TBL, suggesting a folk etymology for *teivel*. The parallel text in ARNB gives a less coherent answer to the question: "Because she is enriched with words of Torah, but the land of Israel doesn't lack anything" (ch.43, 119), while a parallel in *SifreyD* (*pisqa* 37; 70, cited by Schechter *ad loc.*) reads, "Why is [the land of Israel] called *teivel*? For she is *m'tubelet bakol*. For all the lands, there is something in this one that isn't in this one, but the land of Israel doesn't lack anything." From an ecological standpoint, this is more true of Israel/Canaan than most lands. Israel, sitting at the meeting place of three continents, includes an extraordinary variety of habitats and species relative to its size. See Eisenberg, *The Ecology of Eden*, 76 and Davis, *Scripture*, 49–50. It is noteworthy that while the earth as a whole is highly personified in Midrash (e.g., ARNB ch.43, quoted p.272), the land of Israel generally is not.

In Jewish liturgy, *teivel* is usually understood to mean the inhabited world. According to *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (eds. Brown, Driver and Briggs [Oxford: Clarendon, 1951], cited hereafter as BDB), *teivel* is derived from *y'vul*, produce (s.v. *y'vul*, 385). The emphasis on diversity and richness in ARNA is resonant with this derivation, even though the root of *m'tubelet* may be BLL (to mix/confuse) rather than YBL (to bear). As such, *teivel* could be an equivalent to "biosphere". In any case, for the rabbis, *teivel* and *m'tubelet* are essentially related.



Rabbinic texts such as this one still represent a primitive reading of Nature, aware of the diversity of species, but not aware of the complexity of relationships between species. But they provide a starting point for ecotheology, because they focus on the world in-itself and not only in reference to God.

Maimonides is one of the earliest and most cogent thinkers to place tremendous value on what we would define as biodiversity. He explains that “the entire purpose [of creation] consists in bringing into existence the way you see it everything whose existence is possible”.<sup>63</sup> As discussed already, this diversity is good in itself, and each unique species is also good in itself, existing not for the sake of humanity, and not even only for its own sake, but for the sake of its participation in the whole of Creation. Even the highest revelation God gave to Moshe, the revelation of “all My goodness” [Ex. 33:19], was a revelation about the diversity of Creation, namely, that Moshe would “apprehend [the] nature [of all existing things] *and the way they are mutually connected*”.<sup>64</sup> For Maimonides, understanding the diversity of Creation meant understanding the relationships between all the creatures, which went hand in hand with understanding God.

Nachman of Breslov (or “Bratslav”, great-grandson of the Ba’al Shem Tov, 1772–1810, Ukraine) says that one task of the *tsadiq*, righteous person or saint, is to understand the nature and diversity of the creatures:

[I]n every thing there is the will of *Hashem* (the Blessed Name): so it is in the whole of Creation / *k’lal hab’riyah* . . . and so in the details of Creation / *p’ratey hab’riyah*, in each and every individual thing . . . since the Blessed Name desired that this thing would be thus, with this appearance/*t’munah*, with this power, and with this nature . . . And the righteous person searches out and seeks continually . . . to attain and to know the will of God in every thing – for example, why was it God’s will that the lion should have this

<sup>63</sup> MN 3:25, 504. Maimonides is explaining that no creature is frivolous (see n.87).

<sup>64</sup> MN 1:54, 124. See pp.71–2 for discussion of this important passage. Cf. Aquinas, who relates the diversity of the creatures to both the goodness of the whole universe (n.54) and to God’s goodness:

He brought things into being in order that His goodness might be communicated to creatures, and be represented by them; and because His goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, He produced many and diverse creatures, that what was wanting to one in the representation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another.

(*Summa Theologica*, pt.1, q.47, art.1, 1:246)

While Aquinas closely follows Maimonides, he adds an emphasis not present in Maimonides: the idea that each creature represents a specific element of God’s goodness. Aquinas also shifts the ontological focus from the creatures back to God, and does not mention the relationships between creatures. Hence Aquinas’s teaching does not lend itself as readily to an eco-centric interpretation. This may be congruent with Aquinas rejecting the high value Maimonides placed on animals’ subjectivity (see *Summa Theologica*, pt.2b, q.61, art.1, esp. 10.2, 3:1460).

Where Maimonides asserts that Creation manifestly reveals God’s goodness, this appears to me to run contrary to a strict understanding of apophatic theology (the principle that we can only know what God is not, not what God is), since knowledge of God’s goodness is here attained directly through the knowledge of God’s creatures. On this issue, see nn.202, 876.





strength and might . . . and the behavior [it] has, and a little mosquito [should be] the opposite . . . And so with details of details / *p'ratey p'ratiyot*, as in the lion, why is this limb formed thus in it . . . So it is with all the creatures in the world, silent/*domem* (mineral, rock), growing/*tsomei'ach* (vegetable, plant), living/moving/*chai* (animal), speaking/*m'daber* (human) – for in all of them there are a great many differences without number, between each one and its companion. And so it is with every single individual within itself . . ., with the plants and trees and the rest of the particulars of Creation . . . and all was because of the will of the Creator. And the righteous person searches continually for these wills *r'tsonot*.<sup>65</sup>

For Nachman, every species and being, even every limb, reveals God's will in a unique way that demands individual understanding. Furthermore, the pursuit of understanding is a trait of righteousness. This passage provides a firm foundation on which to build a theology of diversity, which is an essential element of any theology of Nature.

## Subjecthood

In addition to understanding “God's will” as it is expressed in each creature, we now have the scientific capacity to talk about the will and subjecthood of each creature itself, particularly with respect to mammals and birds. The ability

<sup>65</sup> *Liqutey Moharan* 1:17 (New York: R' Eli'ezer Shlomo Breslover, 1965), 48–9; hereafter cited as *LM*. Nachman further states that these differences correspond to the differences and kinds of beauty within the Jewish people, since the world was created for the people Israel. Could this mean that for Nachman, the only diversity and beauty that has real significance is found within the particular human group of Israel, and that we can ignore the actual beauty of Creation? On the contrary, I would claim that beauty in Creation is a primary concern for Nachman, and the midrashic twists he uses to tie this to rabbinic textuality are his way of deepening and anchoring that experience (as we also see in Nachman's interpretation of his own experience of Nature, discussed pp. 331–2). This pattern of interpreting textually what was a lived experience is also found in Nachman's description of the theurgy of dance. See *LM* 1:10, 1:169 and Michael Fishbane, “To Jump for Joy”, *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 6:2 (Dec. 1977): 371–87; repr. as “The Mystery of Dance According to Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav” in *The Exegetical Imagination*, 173–87.

Nachman's praise of Nature here may seem to contradict what Shaul Magid has noted as Nachman's antipathy to the concept of Nature (“Nature, Exile, and Disability in R. Nahman of Bratslav's ‘The Seven Beggars’”, *Judaism and Ecology*, 333–68, esp. 336–7, 347–50, 360). However, this antipathy is simply a result of Nachman rejecting determinism and the idea of natural law, because he insisted that every detail of the natural world was miraculous. Thus, his rejection of the concept of Nature was based on his appreciation of the more-than-human world.

For further examples of texts on diversity, see quotes from Gikatilla and Yehudah Hechasiid, n.934, and Shneur Zalman, n.838, as well as curricula by this author for COEJL, “Cosmology and Biodiversity: The Divine Purpose in Creating Many Species” ([www.neohasid.org/pdf/Cosmology-biodiversity.pdf](http://www.neohasid.org/pdf/Cosmology-biodiversity.pdf) [Feb. 2, 2012]), and “The Story of Noah and the Flood: Midrash Texts on the Preservation of Species and Human Responsibility” ([www.neohasid.org/pdf/MidrashNoah.pdf](http://www.neohasid.org/pdf/MidrashNoah.pdf) [Sep. 2011]), both written for *Operation Noah*, ed. Mark X. Jacobs (New York: COEJL, 1996).

of scientists to measure different species' sentience, emotional intelligence, and reasoning stands in direct contrast to the behaviorism of earlier decades. Much of the work in ethology and ecology calls into question widespread assumptions that limit subjectivity and all aspects of moral agency to human beings.<sup>66</sup> More and more, practical and tangible studies of animal behavior have taught us that human qualities like learning, language, empathy, and altruism exist on a continuum with all the animals.<sup>67</sup> It has also become clear that there is no hard distinction between what we call emotion and instinct.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>66</sup> On the continuity between human and animal cognition, see Marc Bekoff et al. (eds.), *The Cognitive Animal: Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives on Animal Cognition* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2002). On the moral front, see, for example, Inbal Ben-Ami Bartal et al., "Empathy and Pro-Social Behavior in Rats", *Science* 334:6061 (Dec. 9 2011): 1427–30. Such studies make clear that human moral judgment sits at one end of a continuum that includes other social animals. See [next note](#).

<sup>67</sup> See for example Donald R. Griffin, *Animal Thinking* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1985) and *Animal Minds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), Marc D. Hauser, *Wild Minds: What Animals Really Think* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2001), or the more controversial work of Susan McCarthy and Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, *When Elephants Weep* (New York: Delacorte, 1995). *The Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness* ([www.fcconference.org/img/CambridgeDeclarationOnConsciousness.pdf](http://www.fcconference.org/img/CambridgeDeclarationOnConsciousness.pdf), July 7, 2012), signed at the 2012 "Consciousness in Human and Non-Human Animals" Conference, states that the presence of consciousness in other animals is "unequivocal". For a biological interpretation of how the functioning of the mind relates to physical laws and principles that is *not* reductionist, see J. A. Scott Kelso, *Dynamic Patterns: The Self Organization of Brain and Behavior* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1997).

The continuity of language with other animal behaviors and its categorization as a kind of "instinctual" human behavior has been long accepted. See Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995) and Harvey B. Sarles, *Language and Human Nature: Toward a Grammar of Interaction and Discourse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985). On the debates about animal language, see C. N. Slobodchikoff, *Chasing Doctor Dolittle: Learning the Language of Animals* (New York: St. Martin's, 2012) and Stephen R. Anderson, *Doctor Dolittle's Delusion: Animals and the Uniqueness of Human Language* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press 2004). Irene Pepperberg's famous work with Alex the African Grey parrot, and similar work by other animal researchers, has also deeply impacted the way we think about animals and language. (Noam Chomsky's vast work on grammar as a "hard-wired" function of the brain is also fundamental, though for Chomsky this distinguishes human brains from the brains of other animals.) It is equally clear that a number of other species, not just chimpanzees but crows, etc., use tools (Robert W. Shumaker et al., *Animal Tool Behavior: The Use and Manufacture of Tools by Animals* [Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011]).

<sup>68</sup> Even from a strictly materialist perspective, lab studies that use fMRI to image activity in the parallel structures of the brains of humans and other species provide a strong basis for attributing feeling states to animals. Strict behaviorism is no longer a tenable basis for differentiating human experience from other species. On every level, presuming that animals' emotional systems are more similar to ours than dissimilar is the most parsimonious interpretation. See Mary Midgley, "Descartes' Prisoners", *New Stateman* (May 2, 1999) and *The Cambridge Declaration*, as well as Temple Grandin and Catherine Johnson, *Animals Make Us Human: Creating the Best Life for Animals* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009).



Theologically, this resonates strongly with rabbinic texts and stories, which assumed (as did the Torah) that animals have souls (see [Chapter 4](#)). It also resonates with beliefs espoused by Maimonides. In the medieval period, Maimonides wrote,

If you are of those who know the soul and its powers . . . you already know that imagination exists in most living beings. As for the perfect animal, I mean the one endowed with a heart, the existence of imagination is clear. Accordingly, humanity<sup>69</sup> is not distinguished by having imagination<sup>70</sup>

In fact, there is a preponderance of pre-modern teachings in *Tanakh* (Hebrew Bible), Midrash, and (to a lesser degree) medieval thought that ascribe subjecthood and standing to the creatures. Despite this, modern Judaism has tended to label any attribution of subjectivity or moral standing to the natural world as “pagan”.<sup>71</sup> This misconception is a direct result of the revision of Judaism according to Hegelian ideas of the evolution of Spirit. This revision posited that Judaism was about the triumph of history over Nature.<sup>72</sup> This extraordinary distortion of the tradition is only beginning to be overcome as people reread the teachings of *Chazal* (the early rabbinic sages<sup>73</sup>) and integrate realities

<sup>69</sup> The Pines translation consistently uses “man” to mean “humanity”. This has been altered here and in some quotations below.

<sup>70</sup> MN 1:75, 209; cf. Aristotle, *On the Soul*, 433b (3:10). See also Maimonides’ discussion of animals’ feelings, p.148. While the question of subjecthood is not my primary focus, many texts discussed further on address this issue, especially in Chapters 5 and 12.

<sup>71</sup> To give a personal rather than scholarly example, I used to invite fellow rabbinical students to participate in *kiddush l’vanah*, the ritual sanctification of the waxing moon that addresses the moon as “you” (see the liturgy at [www.opensiddur.org/moon-cycle/new-moon/kiddush-levanah](http://www.opensiddur.org/moon-cycle/new-moon/kiddush-levanah) [July 2, 2014]). Sometimes people would refuse, calling the ritual “pagan”.

<sup>72</sup> See pp.8ff, 68. Though this perspective is non-traditional, it has been most strongly advocated by Orthodox thinkers like Michael Wyschograd and Irving Greenberg. See Moshe Sokol, “Ethical Implications of Jewish Conceptions of the Natural World”, *Judaism and Ecology*, 261–82, esp. 262ff. and 265. Sokol, himself a modern Orthodox thinker, strongly critiques Wyschograd’s perspective, emphasizing that such a worldview cannot be coherent (see n.403). See also nn.91, 363. Another factor influencing this development was that early twentieth-century Christian scholars, anxious to prove the uniqueness of Biblical Israel, interpreted Judaism as anti-pagan and anti-Nature in the face of secularist scholarship that saw the *Tanakh* as derivative of Nature-based Near East traditions. See Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 187–8, esp. n.5. In this vein, note Steven Schwarzschild’s “The Unnatural Jew”, a Woody Allen-esque polemic declaiming the enmity between Judaism and Nature (*Environmental Ethics* 6:4 [1984]: 347–62, anthologized in Yaffe, 267–82 and elsewhere). Schwarzschild is sometimes used as a foil in Jewish environmental education; it would be better consigned to the dustbin.

<sup>73</sup> *Chazal* stands for “*Chakhamim zikbronam livrakbah*”, meaning “the sages, [may] their memory be for a blessing”. This acronym, along with the generic phrase “the rabbis”, refers to the classical period of rabbinic Judaism (through the publication of the Talmud). Other traditional acronyms used in this book include names of specific rabbis like Ramban (R’ Moshe ben Nachman, a.k.a. Nachmanides) or Rashi (R’ Shlomo Yits’chaqi), with the exception of Rambam or Maimonides (R’ Moshe ben Maimun), who I refer to using his Latinized name.

that science and ecology explore. Becoming more aware of these realities is an important step toward restoring Judaism to its senses, literally.

## Evolution

For a Judaism in touch with its roots and its senses, evolutionary science can lead to a grand synthesis of theology and science, and also, interestingly, to a synthesis of Maimonides and Kabbalah. Among scientists themselves, evolution has many different interpretations, ranging from an expansive vision of the unity of all Being and all Life, to a reductionist interpretation of life as the so-called struggle of genes to reproduce themselves.<sup>74</sup> Many ecologists and ecophilosophers share some version of the expansive interpretation, while the reductionist interpretation is more common among evolutionary biologists.<sup>75</sup> One reason that ecology is such a fruitful interlocutor with theology, and that it dovetails so well with Jewish thought, is that it includes within itself a hermenutic that unravels scientific reductionism.

<sup>74</sup> Connie Barlow's anthology *From Gaia to Selfish Genes: Selected Writings in the Life Sciences* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1991) explores the range of opinions. On the "struggle" of genes, see, e.g., Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 19. Dawkins is the most well-known and ideological of the reductionist camp, who are by and large Neo-Darwinians. (Neo-Darwinism is characterized by the theory that evolutionary change is mostly driven by random genetic mutation. The reductionists see natural selection as a process acting on genes, rather than on organisms, populations, or species.) For a critique of Dawkins, see Joan Roughgarden, *The Genial Gene: Deconstructing Darwinian Selfishness* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), Niles Eldredge, *Why We Do it: Rethinking Sex and the Selfish Gene* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), and Mary Midgley's more controversial *The Solitary Self: Darwin and the Selfish Gene* (London: Acumen, 2010). See also Stephen Jay Gould, "The Evolutionary Definition of Selective Agency, Validation of the Theory of Hierarchical Selection, and Fallacy of the Selfish Gene" in *Thinking about Evolution*, ed. Rama S. Singh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 208–34. Lynn Margulis (see next note) famously called Neo-Darwinism "a minor twentieth-century religious sect within the sprawling religious persuasion of Anglo-Saxon biology" (Charles Mann, "Lynn Margulis: Science's Unruly Earth Mother", *Science* 252 [2004]: 378–81; 380).

<sup>75</sup> A more intellectual and less polemical argument for a gene-level perspective on evolution can be found in Ernst Mayr's "Teleological and Teleonomic: A New Analysis", in *Evolution and the Diversity of Life* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 383–403. Mayr is concerned with methodology, and his argument is appropriately limited in scope.

There is still a tendency to regard reductionist interpretations as "harder" (that is, better) science. One biologist who bucked this trend was Lynn Margulis, who developed the theory of endosymbiosis (which states that mitochondria and chloroplasts in eukaryotic cells are descendants of symbiotic bacteria that took up residence inside other ancestor cells), as well as Gaia theory (n.873). She saw evolution as driven more by symbiosis than by competition, which implies that selection can happen on the level of systems of organisms, and not just species, individuals, or at the lowest level, genes. Margulis's ideas can be accessed in her popular work *Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1998). Another biologist who takes an integrative view of evolution is James A. Shapiro; see *Evolution: A View from the 21st Century* (Upper Saddle River NJ: FT Press, 2011).



The reductive approach to science is a hallmark of modernity. In ancient and medieval times, most of what we call Western civilization was grounded in two beliefs: the first, that there is a higher level of being that is more perfect and a lower that is more corrupt or corruptible; and the second, that the whole of Creation is an organic and purposeful unity. The project of modernity may be characterized as giving up belief in organic unity while holding on to the hierarchy of Being. The meaning of this hierarchy, however, changed radically, with humanity migrating from somewhere in the middle of the chain of Being to the top, either in the place of God or right beneath God, depending on one's degree of secularism (see "The Chain of Being", [Chapter 1](#)). A post-modern ecotheology, grounded in evolutionary theory, would do the opposite: affirm the organicism of the whole, even as it rejects (or mitigates) ontological hierarchy.

In general, Jewish understandings of the purpose of creation and the role of humanity can be correlated with the question of how to interpret evolution.<sup>76</sup> Three perspectives can be discerned: (1) Humanity is the pinnacle and *telos* of Creation (and hence of evolution). This perspective correlates with what Bryan G. Norton calls "strong anthropocentrism", which he contrasts with "weak anthropocentrism"; here I call this "anthropo-archism".<sup>77</sup> (2) Humanity is part of an evolving whole and humanity's purpose is to move the whole toward greater perfection. Since perfecting Creation happens through human action, this perspective may be termed weak anthropocentrism, because it accepts the idea that humanity has a unique place in Creation while giving absolute priority only to the needs of the whole.<sup>78</sup> This perspective fits with spiritual interpretations of evolutionary "progress" and lends itself to a deeper reflection on stewardship. (3) Creation is inherently whole or moving toward perfection, with every species (past, present, and future) being an essential part of that wholeness or movement. This position may admit a *telos* for Creation that is not connected to any overtly human purpose, and it is closest to a biocentric perspective.

<sup>76</sup> See Michael Shai Cherry, "Creation, Evolution and Jewish Thought" (Brandeis University, PhD dissertation, 2001). His examination of evolution in Kook (205–24) and other twentieth-century theologians was the first significant study of this question. For Modern Orthodox perspectives on evolution, see Natan Slifkin, *The Challenge of Creation: Judaism's Encounter with Science, Cosmology, and Evolution* (Jerusalem: Zoo Torah, 2006).

<sup>77</sup> *Why Preserve Natural Variety?* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 12–14. Norton's distinction is here only an approximation, since Norton is not concerned with the theological place of humanity but rather with the hierarchy of human needs over other species. For Norton, strong anthropocentrism means that humans have the right to use Nature in any way, essentially to treat the natural world as a resource, while weak anthropocentrism admits of value in the other creatures on the basis of their aesthetic and moral significance to human beings, rather than just their "demand value" or capacity to meet consumptive needs.

<sup>78</sup> More than this, if the human purpose is to act for the sake of the whole then the hierarchy of anthropocentrism is turned upside down. This anthropocentrism is even "weaker" than what Norton describes as weak anthropocentrism.



Anthropo-archism, the perspective that all of Creation exists only for the sake of humanity, was expounded most emphatically by Saadyah Gaon (882–942, Egypt, Baghdad), who wrote, “When we see the many created beings, we should not be perplexed/*n’vukhim* about what among them is the goal... for the goal is humanity/*ha’adam*.”<sup>79</sup> Saadyah went further than anyone in this respect when he asserted that even the angels and heavens exist to serve humanity.<sup>80</sup> Anthropo-archism is strongly represented in medieval philosophy and in modern Jewish thought, especially in the Orthodox camp.<sup>81</sup> It is, however, not representative of rabbinic Judaism as a whole. Though an “anthropo-archic” interpretation of Creation is reflected in individual statements found in the Midrash (see [Chapter 3](#)), wherever the perspective that Creation exists to serve humanity was expressed, it was always tempered by alternative interpretations.

In both the second and third perspectives, humanity is not the *telos* of Creation. Rather, humanity serves the *telos* of Creation.<sup>82</sup> Humanity receives its value from its relation to the whole of Creation, rather than being the source of value.<sup>83</sup> In other words, even though humanity may occupy a central and

<sup>79</sup> *Haniḡḡar b’Emunot v’Dei’ot* (*Emunot v’Dei’ot*), trans. Yosef Kafich (Jerusalem: Makhon Sura’, 1970), art.4, introduction ([www.daat.ac.il/daat/mahshevt/kapah/4-2.htm](http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/mahshevt/kapah/4-2.htm) [Sep. 2012]). Maimonides’ *Moreh N’vukhim*, or *Guide for the Perplexed*, may be read as a direct refutation of Saadyah’s proposition. (Note that the Judeo-Arabic root for “perplexed” is also the same in both texts.) See esp. MN 3:13, quoted presently and discussed in [n.84](#). On Saadyah, see also [pp.30, 93–4](#).

<sup>80</sup> Norman Lamm, “Man’s Position in the Universe: A Comparative Study of the Views of Saadia Gaon and Maimonides”, *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, New Series, 55:3 (Jan. 1965): 208–234; 216–9. See [n.300](#). This position is strongly contradicted not only by Maimonides but also by the *midrashim* discussed on [p.47ff](#).

<sup>81</sup> See Schwartz, “Judaism and Nature”, 161ff., esp. on Aharon Lichtenstein. Schwartz also cites the secular Yehezkel Kaufmann, [n.9](#). Generally, this camp rejects any idea of intrinsic value in other creatures, or even in Creation as a whole, as being akin to “idolatry”. Not only is that patently false – recognizing intrinsic value is not an act of worship – but it entails rejecting vital aspects of the rabbinic tradition and much of the history of Biblical and Jewish thought. See [pp.9ff., 23, 232, 272](#), as well as *Methods for Jewish Constructive Theology*, [www.kabbalahandecology.com](http://www.kabbalahandecology.com).

<sup>82</sup> For a Christian take on this perspective, see Andrew Linzey, *Animal Theology* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994) ch.3, esp. 56–8. The quality of serving is what constitutes God’s image in his view: “The uniqueness of humanity comes in its ability to become the servant species. To exercise its full humanity as co-participants and co-workers with God in the redemption of the world” (56). He roots this idea in the “passibility” of God; that is, that God suffers not just along with every human suffering but also along with every animal capable of suffering. On this idea in Jewish tradition, see, e.g., *Mishnah Sanhedrin* 6:5 (Philip Blackman, ed., *Mishnayoth* [New York: Judaica, 1963]). There have also been attempts to incorporate this concept into Holocaust theology, e.g., Melissa Raphael’s *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz: A Jewish Feminist Theology of the Holocaust* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 125.

<sup>83</sup> Reformulating intrinsic value in terms of a thing’s relation to the whole could still imply that humans have greater value, since they can become more connected to the whole in all its dimensions. But this value would no longer be intrinsic in an ontological sense. This is analogous to the shift that occurs when the image of God – the guarantor of intrinsic value – is





exalted place in the cosmos, the ultimate determination of value and right is not human needs but cosmic needs. The second perspective, that humanity serves a greater purpose that benefits the whole of Creation, is arguably the position of the Torah and most of Kabbalah, and both perspectives are validated in the history of Jewish thought alongside the anthro-po-archic interpretation. I will presently examine Maimonides as a model for the third perspective, and then Avraham Yitshak (Abraham Isaac) Kook (1865–1935, Latvia, Palestine) representing a particular reading of Kabbalah, as a model for the second.

Maimonides is the most important Jewish source for a non-teleological interpretation of Being. He carefully explores the argument for a *telos* for Creation, explaining that this concept would only be possible if there were a beginning and end to time. While admitting that such a concept is conceivable within Judaism, he rejects this possibility:

It should not be believed that all the beings exist for the sake of the existence of man. On the contrary, all the other beings too have been intended for their own sakes and not for the sake of something else. Thus even according to our view holding that the world has been produced in time, the quest for the final end of all the species of beings collapses. . . . In respect to every being He intended that being itself; and whenever the existence of some thing was impossible unless it was preceded by some other thing, He first brought that thing into existence.<sup>84</sup>

Humanity is not the final end of Creation, or of any other species.<sup>85</sup>

no longer seen as limited to human beings, even if the divine image is still present in humans in a unique way.

<sup>84</sup> MN 3:13, 452; see p.15–6. This chapter is an essential foundation for any Jewish ecotheology, and one of the central chapters in *The Guide*. (The significance of this chapter is also underlined by the fact that it begins by referencing the book's title: "many are perplexed . . . over the final end of existence" [Kafich, 298].) The other essential chapter is 1:72, where Maimonides describes the cosmos as a single living being (see p.268ff.). See Lenn Goodman's discussion of MN 3:13 in "Respect for Nature in the Jewish Tradition", *Judaism and Ecology*, 243–5; Sokol, "Ethical Implications", 267; and George Gittelman, "Maimonides and *The Guide to the Perplexed*: An Environmental Ethic for Our Time", *CCAR Journal* (Fall 2010): 42–53; 47–8, 51. Compare Maimonides with French's analysis of Aquinas: "The vastness of God's goodness cannot be participated in, nor adequately represented by, any one creature or type of creature, even humanity" ("Catholicism", 193). See nn.54, 64.

<sup>85</sup> Maimonides' position here contradicts his early work. In his introduction to the Mishnah, for example, he wrote, "All existences under the sphere of the moon (= *tachtonim*, "the lower ones", see p.49) exist solely for the sake of humanity" (*Mishnah 'Im Peyrush Harambam*, vol.1 [Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1963], *Haqdamah*, 21–2). One traditional scholar, Menachem Slae, tried to harmonize this contradiction by suggesting that in *The Guide*, Maimonides was only referring to the angels and heavenly bodies (Akiva Wolff, "Bal Tashchit: The Jewish Prohibition Against Needless Destruction" [Leiden University, PhD dissertation, 2009], 56). One could easily be led to this conclusion, since Maimonides states in *The Guide* that the human being is "the most perfect thing" that can be generated from the compounding of (sublunar) matter and that "it would be true from this point of view" to say that "all sublunar beings" – but not the heavenly bodies – "exist for his sake" (MN 3:13, 449–50; also 3:12, 444). But Maimonides is also quite clear that "this point of view" is neither his nor the ultimate



Evolutionary theorists who reject the idea of “progress” in evolution (e.g., Stephen Jay Gould) would affirm Maimonides’ rejection of final ends as a hermeneutic for interpreting biological phenomena. We can only guess how Maimonides would have responded to evolutionary theory. The medievals did not conceive that Life could undergo changes on the level of species. Nevertheless, Maimonides’ formulation that “the quest for the final end of all the species collapses” would fit this understanding of evolution.<sup>86</sup>

While Maimonides rejected final ends, he also underlined the goodness of Creation as a whole, which would ally him with most ecologists. He assiduously avoided a hierarchical interpretation of the story of creation, emphasizing that the ultimate goodness is found not in any particular creature but only in the whole. Speaking against the idea that other creatures were brought into being for the pleasure of humanity, he wrote,

What led to all this was ignorance of the nature of coming-to-be and passing-away and neglect of the fundamental principle: namely, that the entire purpose [of creation] consists in bringing into existence the way you see it everything whose existence is possible<sup>87</sup>

perspective and that Creation has no *telos*, no final end, human or otherwise. The correct interpretation of these passages is that Maimonides changed his mind (cf. his interpretation of the phrase “*ki tov*” in Gn 1, quoted p.16). See Lamm, “Man’s Position”, 223–5. For a perspective in between Slae’s and Lamm’s or my own, see Dov Shvarts, who understands Maimonides’ position in *The Guide* to be that the other creatures aspire/conspire/desire toward the creation of the human being not because they were created to serve humanity, but because they aspire to achieve the greatest perfection of form possible for gross matter (*Central Problems in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* [Leiden: Brill, 2005], ch.2, esp. 41–5).

<sup>86</sup> For comparison’s sake, I am bracketing out the theonomic principles that stand at the head of Maimonides’ thought. Cherry (65–70) does not take note of Maimonides’ rejection of teleology here, which is significant for the interpretation of evolutionary theory. He also affirms the conclusion of some *Wissenschaft* scholars that Maimonides accepted the eternity of Creation but only hinted at this position esoterically (notes, 68). While the rejection of teleology could be consistent with that position, a preponderance of evidence, including material I cite throughout, would seem to militate against this conclusion. The thesis that the world is created in time is central to Maimonides’ entire project and to the structure of *The Guide*. For a survey of scholarship on this issue, see Tamar Rudavsky, *Time Matters: Time, Creation, and Cosmology in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 2000), 30–34. For an extended argument against the esotericists’ claim, see Daniel Davies, *Method and Metaphysics in Maimonides’ Guide for the Perplexed* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) ch.2 and Kenneth Seeskin, *Maimonides on the Origin of the World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>87</sup> MN 3:25, 504; Kafich, 333. Maimonides illustrates this way of thinking as follows: “That anything among His actions, may He be exalted, should be frivolous is impossible... No attention should be paid to the ravings of those who deem that the ape was created in order that man should laugh at it.” Maimonides did not imagine the possibility of the extinction of species, believing that divine providence watched over each species and preserved it. (MN 3:17). See also Natan Slifkin, “From the Eggs of Dodos to the Horns of Aurochs: The Extinction of Species in Jewish Thought” in *Siach Sadeh* (Summer 2011): 64–82, esp. 66–7, 72–3 ([www.old.lifshiz.macam.ac.il/siach/slifkin.pdf](http://www.old.lifshiz.macam.ac.il/siach/slifkin.pdf) [Sep. 2013]). However, we might wonder about Maimonides’ response to those who believe that the creatures of earlier eras, such as



If the purpose of creation is to bring into existence “everything whose existence is possible”, then Maimonides shares remarkable parallels with both a Spinozistic conception of the world and with contemporary scientists like E. O. Wilson, who understands the trend of evolution to be increasing diversity, or Lynn Margulis, who sees the trend of evolution as one toward greater and greater levels of symbiosis.<sup>88</sup> For all of them, the whole is inherently good in a way that transcends the human species.

Another important interpretation of the purpose of Life, and evolution, is found in Avraham Yitshak Kook, the chief rabbi in Palestine during the Mandate period, who draws connections between science and Kabbalistic thought. Rav Kook, as he is known, writes:

Evolution sheds light on all the ways of God. All existence evolves and ascends . . . Its ascent is general as it is in particulars. It ascends toward the height of the absolute good. Obviously the good and the comprehensive (whole) all go together. Existence is destined to reach a point when the whole will assimilate the good in all its constituted particulars . . . No particularity will remain outside, not a spark will be lost from the ensemble.<sup>89</sup>

Kook underlines that evolutionary progress is a matter of perfecting the whole of Creation. Evolution toward the good entails evolution of the whole, rather than the evolution of a more perfect being that stands separate from or over against the whole.

Kook adds that “[t]he doctrine of evolution . . . has a greater affinity with the secret teachings of the Cabbalah [*sic*] than all other philosophies.” Kook believed that Kabbalah was the aspect of Judaism best prepared to embrace the inner mystery of evolution.<sup>90</sup> His use of Kabbalah to interpret the science of his time resonates with a long line of post-Renaissance, Enlightenment, and modern Jewish thinkers who grounded science and humanism in Kabbalah.<sup>91</sup>

dinosaurs or Ediacaran fauna, only came into being to serve as steps leading to the evolution of humanity, rather than as ends-in-themselves. Would he not say that they too are “raving and ignorant”?

<sup>88</sup> This discussion draws on Barlow, *Evolution Extended: Biological Debates on the Meaning of Life* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1995); for Wilson, see 24–9. On Margulis, see n.75 herein and *Symbiotic Planet*, 100ff.

<sup>89</sup> Abraham Isaac Kook, trans. Ben Zion Bokser (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 221, from *Orot Haqodesh*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Ha’agudah L’hotsa’at Sifrey Hara’ya”h Kook, 1937), vol.2, 555 (hereafter OHQ). Kook thought atomic science (as it was then called) revealed a similar mystery (*The Essential Writings of Abraham Isaac Kook*, trans. Ben Zion Bokser [Warwick NY: Amity Press, 1988], 166, from OHQ 2, 426–7).

<sup>90</sup> Bokser (1978), 194–5 (OHQ 1, 910). See also OHQ 2, 537, in *The Essential Kabbalah*, trans. Daniel Matt (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), 31.

<sup>91</sup> Some examples are Immanuel Chai Ricci (1688–1743, Italy), *Mishnat Chasidim* (Lemberg [Lvov, Galicia]: M. F. Poremba, 1858); Pinchas Eliyahu Hurwitz (1765–1821, Poland), *Sefer Hab’rit Hashalem* (Jerusalem: Y’rid Has’farim, 1990); and Elijah Benamozegh (1823–1900, Italy), *Israel and Humanity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994). A contemporary example would



Rav Kook's thought corresponds to the ideas of a different cadre of evolutionary biologists than Maimonides, namely, those who believe there is an arrow of progress that defines evolution. Within this cadre, Kook is less anthropocentric than someone like Julian Huxley, who sees sentience and power over the environment as the two "directions" of evolution, but more anthropocentric than Francisco Ayala, who reads a kind of generalized purposefulness into the trend toward complexity.<sup>92</sup> I suspect that even Ayala's interpretation would have been too teleological for Maimonides.

Despite their strong differences, both Maimonides and Kook may be contrasted with the majority of Jewish thinkers, including Saadyah Gaon and (less emphatically) Bachya ibn Paquda, who understand the ultimate good of Creation and its final end to be humanity.<sup>93</sup> The corollary of this belief is that Creation is a mere tool and resource for humanity. This approach to the more-than-human world became one of the cornerstones of what I call "modernist-humanism". While Kook absorbed and promulgated ideas associated with modernity and humanism, both Kook and Maimonides rejected a baldly utilitarian and anthro-po-archic view of Creation. Fortunately for Jewish ecotheology, some of the greatest thinkers in Jewish history have given us broad shoulders to stand on.

#### ANTHROPOCENTRISM AS A CENTRAL QUESTION FOR POLITICS AND THEOLOGY

Ecotheology in the monotheistic traditions has revolved around several themes, which can be grouped according to whether they are primarily theological or ethical. The ethical issues raised by ecology, which are perhaps more familiar to people, include limiting the human exercise of power through exercising responsibility, morally accounting for animal suffering and animal consciousness, internalizing the fact of our dependence on Nature and on other creatures, and defining ethical norms based on these issues. In general, these are questions

be Daniel Matt's *God & the Big Bang: Discovering Harmony Between Science & Spirituality* (Woodstock VT: Jewish Lights, 1998).

<sup>92</sup> Barlow, *Evolution Extended*, 4–20 on Huxley, 20–24 on Ayala. The emphasis on complexity found in Ayala can be interpreted to favor the human brain as the ultimate expression of evolution, even while rejecting the idea that a particular species is the climax or goal of evolution. Huxley's frame of reference, on the other hand, privileges the human gestalt, rather than an aspect of human biology. A deeper comparison can be made between Kook and Henri Bergson's view of evolution and *élan vital* (see *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell [New York: Henry Holt, 1911]). One reason why Kook may be less anthropocentric than Huxley is that his theocentrism affirms the inherent moral value of all Creation. See, e.g., Bokser (1978), 230 (*OHQ* 2, 537–8); Bokser (1988), 165 and 178 (*OHQ* 2, 323 and 591). Humanity for Kook is still at the center of Creation, being the one species able to lead the whole to perfection. See Bokser (1978), 231 (*OHQ* 2, 561); Bokser (1988), 174 and 175–6 (*OHQ* 2, 565–6, 586–7).

<sup>93</sup> Bachya was discussed in n.60 and Saadyah on p.26.



about human responsibility and the right way to balance human needs and the well-being of other species.

The theological issues include anthropocentrism (along with the metaphysical hierarchy of humans over other species), the devaluing of the physical world in relation to what is deemed spiritual or what comes after death, and the meaning of God's transcendence (*qua* absence) in relation to the physical Creation. Ecotheologians readily emphasize the immanence of God, the sacredness of all life, and the ethical importance of humility as a response to these issues, often by focusing on the mystical threads of their tradition. More generally, the focus of ecotheology is on lifting up the value of Creation in relation to two traditional axes of value: God and humanity. Of course, the theological has a profound impact on the ethical, and vice versa.

As mentioned, certain assumptions fundamental to both Christian and Jewish tradition appear to run counter to the creation of a sustainable human society. These assumptions about the human relationship to God, to other creatures, and to the Earth can be characterized by three ideas: (1) human beings alone are "created in God's image", (2) this divine image is an essence or soul that elevates human value immeasurably or "infinitely" above other creatures,<sup>94</sup> and (3) the true home or destiny of this soul is not found on Earth. These assumptions are also congruent with Islam's understanding of humanity's place in Creation and the soul's course.<sup>95</sup>

These three assumptions form the bedrock of radical anthropocentrism in our culture and within the Jewish and Christian traditions generally. They may even seem like second nature to many people. Nevertheless, the latter two assumptions are easily critiqued from within the sources of the Jewish tradition. However, the idea that humans are in God's image is firmly grounded in the Torah, the foundation of all three Abrahamic religions. The trope of God's

<sup>94</sup> However, there is no contradiction between the theology being worked out in *Kabbalah and Ecology* and the idea that there is a hierarchy that differentiates human life from the lives of other animals. The purpose here is not to overturn the value of human life, but rather to reconceptualize it in relation to other important values, such as the lives of whole species and the sustaining of life in all its complexity and diversity.

<sup>95</sup> Islam does not emphasize the idea of God's image, perhaps because Islam's aversion to comparing God with anything physical or metaphysical is even stronger than Judaism's. However, there is a recurring motif in the Qur'an about the angels being required to worship Adam; this motif corresponds to humans being created in God's image (see n.192). The theme of God's image does appear in the *hadith*, though the traditions in question were not regarded as authentic by all commentators. See Yahya Michot, "The Image of God in Humanity from a Muslim Perspective", in *Abraham's Children: Jews, Christians and Muslims in Conversation*, eds. Norman Solomon et al. (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 163–74. See also Alexander Altmann's discussion of al-Ghazali and Ibn al-Arabi in "The Delphic Maxim in Medieval Islam and Judaism" (*Biblical and Other Studies* [Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1963], 201–6), as well as Muhammad Suheyl Umar, "Image of God: A Note on the Scriptural Anthropology" (*The Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* 4:2 [Oct. 2004] [jsr.lib.virginia.edu/vol-4-no-2-october-2004-the-image-of-god/image-of-god-a-note-on-the-scriptural-anthropology/](http://jsr.lib.virginia.edu/vol-4-no-2-october-2004-the-image-of-god/image-of-god-a-note-on-the-scriptural-anthropology/) [Dec. 2013]), esp. n.1.



image is one of the most familiar narrative elements of Genesis, perhaps as familiar as anything else in the entire Biblical tradition. The anthropo-archic interpretation of this image has been a touchstone for ethics, political and social theory, and secular and religious ideology in the medieval and modern periods. This trope has been used to justify the division between humanity and Nature and the hierarchy of human beings over other creatures on the one hand, and universal human rights on the other. It is part of what Zalman Schachter-Shalomi might call the “system files” of Western religion.<sup>96</sup>

Working from a traditional framework, I will explore the variety of rabbinic anthropologies, focusing on alternative interpretations of God’s image. These interpretations provide a foundation for a different anthropology, and they support a wide range of intermediate positions between a strong affirmation of the hierarchy of humans over Nature on the one hand and a rejection of this hierarchy on the other.

The elevation of individual human beings in modern civilization, grounded in the theology of God’s image, has vitally positive implications as well. Many modern theologians judge the belief that humanity was created in God’s image to be one of the most revolutionary and libertory insights of Biblical monotheism.<sup>97</sup> Moreover, the belief in humanity’s divine image has been credited with laying the foundation for some of the most important and positive developments within Western civilization, including the very idea of a universal humanity, along with ethics, moral philosophy, and human rights. Without delving into the historicity of this claim, the idea of God’s image in the modern period has certainly served as the ground for both secular and religious conceptions of human value (e.g., “All men are created equal”). As an imperative to create a society based on human equality, universal values, and individual uniqueness, its impact is unquestionably positive.

At the same time, one could also claim that the idea of God’s image in humanity creates an absolute hierarchy of humanity over other creatures. This leads directly to human domination over the rest of the natural world. One aspect of this domination is that if we understand humans to be the only creatures in God’s image, then we isolate those qualities that set human beings apart, and we similarly ignore or subjugate the qualities that we hold in common with other creatures. Thus, the idea of God’s image not only justifies the subjugation of other species, it also becomes an instrument for repressing those aspects of our own being that unite us with all life.<sup>98</sup> In many circumstances, it can also be used to justify hierarchies of gender, race, religion, and culture.

<sup>96</sup> “The Spirituality of the Future”, [www.theshalomcenter.org/node/1395](http://www.theshalomcenter.org/node/1395) (Feb. 2014).

<sup>97</sup> Whether this claim accurately describes the uniqueness of early Biblical religion is not critical to this discussion.

<sup>98</sup> From a religious perspective, this alienation from ourselves also means alienation from the divine. See next section.





In various cultures, and most certainly (perhaps most extremely) in the culture of Western capitalism, people see themselves as radically separate from Nature, and readily treat other creatures as instruments to serve their own ends. Lynn White, Jr. famously claimed that this perspective has its origins in Genesis, which taught that “God planned all this explicitly for man’s benefit and rule: no item in the physical Creation had any purpose save to serve man’s purposes.”<sup>99</sup> It is easy enough to critique White’s claim: Genesis 1 is hardly the Torah’s final statement on humanity’s role in Creation, and, as Jeremy Cohen carefully documents, White’s reading does not represent the historical span of Christian and Jewish interpretation.<sup>100</sup> However, the interpretation supposed by White is certainly part of that history, and it clearly resonates with the trajectory of Western civilization. It is not easy to know whether this trajectory was guided by theology, or whether theology is a post-facto justification of technological power and economic interests.

While many contemporary ecological thinkers are quick to blame the Bible’s presumed anthropocentrism for ecological sin, there are also those who argue that the roots of environmental tragedy are not found in the human-centeredness of traditional theology, but rather in the loss of centeredness in the wake of the revolution of modern, mechanistic science. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a contemporary Muslim philosopher, writes,

In medieval cosmology man had been placed at the center of the Universe, not as a purely terrestrial man but as “the image of God” . . . By removing him from the center of things, [science] did not bestow upon man the transcendent dimension of his nature; rather it affirmed the loss of the theomorphic nature . . . Therefore, although on the surface it belittled the position of man in the scheme of things, on a deeper level it assisted . . . the Promethean revolt against the voice of heaven.<sup>101</sup>

Nasr outlines a dialectic in the human soul between domination and diminishment. By losing our “theomorphic” nature, he says, we lose connection also to the universe. This loss goes hand-in-hand with a willingness to act without responsibility in the world. And yet that same theomorphic image is used as an imprimatur for such actions.

<sup>99</sup> “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis”, *Science*, 155 (Mar. 10, 1967): 1202–7; 1205.

<sup>100</sup> “Be Fertile and Increase, Fill the Earth and Master It”: *The Ancient and Medieval Career of a Biblical Text* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1989). He also lays out the very different trajectory of Christian and Jewish interpretation. See also critiques of White by J. Baird Callicott, “Genesis Revisited: Murian Musings on the Lynn White, Jr. Debate” (*Environmental History Review* 14:1–2 [1990]: 65–92) and Elspeth Whitney, “Lynn White, Ecotheology and History” (*Environmental Ethics* 15 [Summer 1993]: 151–69), as well as Whitney’s summary of the literature in “White, Lynn (1907–1987) – Thesis of”, *ERN* 1735–6 and Timothy Weiskel’s bibliography, “The Environmental Crisis and Western Civilization: The Lynn White Controversy”, [www.ecoethics.net/bib/1997/enca-001.htm](http://www.ecoethics.net/bib/1997/enca-001.htm) (Feb. 19, 1997).

<sup>101</sup> *Man and Nature* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1976), 68. Nasr also writes, “With the help of the new science the only role left to man was to conquer and dominate nature and to serve his needs as an animal endowed somehow with analytical reason and thought” (72).



Moral, political, and practical questions may be impelling us to revise our theological assumptions about “what is human”, but these questions should not generate our answers. Theology must respond to the “need of eternity” and not just the political needs of the moment. It may seem paradoxical that it is in the phenomenological dimension – the dimension of lived experience in which we seek, in the present, a living relationship with the divine – that one finds the firmest ground in which to root such theology.

That relationship unfolds in the more-than-human world, that is, in Nature. One reason why I use the terminology “more-than-human world” is that it reminds us that the human realm is a part of Nature, rather than standing in opposition to it. It is Nature that forms and informs human nature, teaching us what it means to be embodied and to become human.<sup>102</sup> Every dissonance between religion and the natural world therefore prevents us from understanding ourselves. But more-than-human also includes what is of God, and a fuller understanding of God must also embrace the diversity of Creation, which is an aspect of God’s infinity.

Modern Jews, however, tend to follow the lead of medieval philosophy and focus our theological imagination on God’s unity. And we focus on God’s image in ourselves, thereby severing humanity from the natural world, dislocating the bone from its socket. In an anthropocentric universe, divinity is quickly reduced to a narrow set of human-centered images.

This book, behind all its talk about ancient texts, proposes that we most fully experience the meaning of the divine image not by limiting it to ourselves, but by finding it within the other creatures and dimensions of this world that embraces us. That is one way we can connect to the limitless, inexhaustible diversity inhering in what we call God. In the process, we may discover that the human/more-than-human sign of “the image of God” can become the ground for an eco-centric understanding of the human role in Creation.

<sup>102</sup> David Abram explores these issues with acuity in “Merleau-Ponty and the Voice of the Earth” (*Minding Nature: Philosophers of Ecology*, ed. David Macauley [New York: Guilford, 1996], 82–101) and in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, where he writes:

[T]he boundaries of the body are open and indeterminate; more like membranes than barriers, they define a surface of metamorphosis and exchange. The breathing, sensing body draws its sustenance and its very substance from the soils, plants, and elements that surround it; it continually contributes itself, in turn, to the air, to the composting earth, to the nourishment of insects and oak trees and squirrels, ceaselessly spreading out of itself as well as breathing the world into itself, so that it is very difficult to discern, at any moment precisely where this living body begins and ends. (46)

I explore some implications of these ideas for Jewish thought in “Sensuous Minds”. See also Seidenberg, “The Human, the Tree, and the Image of God” in *Trees, Earth, and Torah*, 263–75, esp. 269–70 and 273–4, and “Confessions of a Jewish Post-Postmodernist” (in the section “Earth”), *Response* (Summer 1995); rev. 2011, [www.neohasid.org/culture/confessions](http://www.neohasid.org/culture/confessions) (Dec. 2011).

## METHODOLOGY

One of the goals of this book is to use ancient and medieval texts to challenge long-held ideas (or recently held, depending on one's time-scale) about the place of humanity in Creation. It is not surprising that ecotheologians and philosophers who reject anthropocentrism might sooner reject traditional or Biblically based religion, or appeal to some "perennial philosophy" that stands outside of so-called revealed religion, than they would appeal to such ancient voices. But my default assumption is that the deepest fixing may be found within the source and substance of what seems broken, if that source is tapped at its root. Rather than rejecting contemporary cultural norms in favor of more "advanced" ones, this work will deconstruct the religious discourse that supports those norms. Since anthropocentrism is their bedrock, its transformation would also transform every dimension of the human-more-than-human relationship. Such a process could liberate the energy and spiritual power of the Biblical traditions to help create a civilization that chooses life.

## Constructive theology

To get there, it is not enough to simply deconstruct anthropocentrism. This book also constructs a "theological lens", or standpoint, rooted strictly in pre-modern sources, that can free us to embrace ecocentrism. To do this, I use textual moments – texts that are in some cases outliers or that represent what may be a non-normative point of view – to construct an alternative picture of what is possible within Jewish thought. Most importantly, I generally do not make claims about what is "normative" in Jewish thought. I also focus primarily not on concepts but rather on more concrete units of meaning, like a Biblical phrase or rabbinic term, which can be traced diachronically and used to tie together ideologically disparate texts.<sup>103</sup>

I discuss scholarly precedents for these methods in *Methods for Jewish Constructive Theology* (published online at [www.kabbalahandecology.com](http://www.kabbalahandecology.com)). I will give a brief overview here.

Fundamentally, constructing theology is an act of rereading. This can be done in a way that conflicts with academic analysis and ignores contrary evidence in order to make the texts and practices of a religious tradition fit one's understanding of truth. Or, one can subject oneself to stumbling on uneven ground, examining each stone and rock, whether or not it fits one's ideology, reading and interpreting both the texts that fit one's perspective and the texts that contradict it. I anticipate that some people who think of themselves as

<sup>103</sup> The implicit theory of semiotics behind this procedure is explored in *Methods*. Though I thematize texts that lead to a new understanding of God's image (see p.208), I also try to integrate those texts that fit a modernist or strongly anthropocentric interpretation of God's image.

pure scholars will believe I have taken the former path. However, even though I can only assume that I have overlooked some important texts, it has been my goal to stay faithful to the texture, topography, and “canonized dissensus”<sup>104</sup> of the sources examined here.

In all cases, I have taken pains to use historical and philological methods to first analyze the texts, before using the texts themselves theologically. By completing this level of analysis first, it is possible to “do” theology in a deliberate way, to not distort the texts or override their historical meaning.<sup>105</sup> I focus on pre-modern texts because they can be thought of as “objective”, since they are not inflected by ecological concerns. (This is similar to the way *poskim*, halakhic decisors, use precedent.) Even though my ultimate goal is theological, I also use this methodology to reach insights that may be significant for Jewish intellectual history.

Those precedents that lead to an expanded interpretation of God’s image can then be used, after academic analysis, to construct a lens through which to read Judaism in ecological terms, and to revalue the significance of God’s image and the sacredness of human life. This book therefore aims to open up new ways of interpreting the tradition that may affect both the way we understand the past and the way we live in the present.

The following metaphor guides my own sense of purpose: Just as biodiversity is a wellspring of richness and meaning in our lives on multiple levels, so too is human diversity, the diversity of cultures, a wellspring for humanity.<sup>106</sup> We need to draw on the deepest sources of this spring in order to meet challenges and adapt to changes that will come upon us in this century. Though the image of God may be problematic now because of the way it buttresses anthroparchism, it is also a vital source of meaning in our relations to others. By using the lens of God’s image to comprehend the more-than-human aspects of the world, we may come to treat the world around us not as a toolbox or resource,

<sup>104</sup> Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 28. In more recent work, Boyarin seems to reject this idea. Regardless, here it serves a useful purpose.

<sup>105</sup> I have also found ideas about counter history and redemptive texts helpful in formulating how such texts can be used theologically. See Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, 230, and see n.945. Boyarin described a methodology of reading countertexts “redemptively” to reconstruct gender in rabbinic culture. I have modified his methodology for this book (most importantly, by using it to reconstruct intellectual history rather than cultural history – see *Methods*). David Biale’s description of “counter history” is well suited to describing the methodology used here:

Counter history is a type of revisionist historiography, but where the revisionist proposes a new theory or finds new facts, the counter-historian transvalues old ones. He does not deny that his predecessors’ interpretation of history is correct, as does the revisionist, but he rejects the completeness of that interpretation. (*Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter History* [Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1982], 7)

<sup>106</sup> Zalman Schachter-Shalomi talked about different religious civilizations being like different organs of the body of humanity, each one fulfilling a vital function.

*per* Heschel (p.96), but rather as a realm invested with the dignity of the divine that demands our respect, awe, and love.

## KABBALAH

This work draws heavily on Midrash, Maimonides, and Kabbalah. Midrash will open the door to a diversity of thinking about God's image, breaking down what may seem like a monolithic concept. Kabbalah will be the primary vessel for developing a new theological framework (with a strong assist from Maimonides). I will use Kabbalistic precedents to establish the following ideas: (1) that specific earthly non-human creatures are in God's image, (2) that the whole of Creation is the image of God, (3) that the earth itself can powerfully manifest that image, (4) that within each creature lives a potential to express God's image, and (5) that humanity can, through right intent and consciousness, help reveal that image.

These elements of Kabbalah do not exist in a vacuum, and only some Kabbalists share all of them. But there is a greater reason why Kabbalah can be used as a vessel for so many ecologically important ideas. The Kabbalistic tradition is already aligned with a holistic sense of human purpose, because from its very origins in *Sefer Bahir*, it held that the Jewish covenant and human action serve to bring blessing to all of Creation, not just to the Jewish people, and not just to humanity.<sup>107</sup> That this stance can easily generate an environmental ethic can be seen in Moshe Cordovero (1522–70, Palestine), who expressed this idea most eloquently:

Being involved in this wisdom, a person sustains the world and its life and its sustenance. And this is what the Rashbi (R Shimon bar Yochai) explained, and he said that “the world is blessed because of us”<sup>108</sup> . . . for involvement with Divinity causes cleaving, and when the human cleaves to the One who flows/guides *lhamashpi`a* (God), he causes the flow [of divine energy] necessarily, and therefore by the effect of this wisdom, he causes to flow upon the world a great flow / *shefa`rav*.<sup>109</sup>

In another work, Cordovero states simply of the human task, “This is the principle: [a person] should make life stream forth to all / *yihyeh novei`a chayyim lakol*.”<sup>110</sup> As Seth Brody wrote, “The Kabbalist's goal is to become a living bridge, uniting heaven and earth, so that God may become equally

<sup>107</sup> This theme first appears in *Sefer Habahir* (eleventh century or earlier), and it appears to originate with this work. See, e.g., §§22 and 119, and see n.560 in this volume. Note that here and further on, section numbers follow the Margalioth edition (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1994).

<sup>108</sup> See p.335.

<sup>109</sup> *Or Ne'erau* (Jerusalem: Qol Y'hudah, 1965), 32, quoting the *Zohar* 3:144b.

<sup>110</sup> *Tomer D'vorah* (Jerusalem: Or Yiqar, 1969) ch.3, 20. Louis Jacobs translates: “To sum up, he should cause life to flow to all” (*The Palm Tree of Deborah* [New York: Sepher Hermon, 1974], 82).



manifest above and below, for the healing and redemption of all.”<sup>111</sup> Kabbalah thus provides a powerful framework for rooting biocentrism and ecotheology in the ancient covenant.<sup>112</sup>

## THE PURPOSE OF THEOLOGY

This book takes seriously the Christian call for something more than a theology about Nature, the call to formulate “a theology of Nature”,<sup>113</sup> and it carves out building blocks that may be useable for such a theology. In a subsequent work, I hope to unite these elements in a theology of Nature. However, even the best theology is an intellectual construct that can create a static worldview, that can become an obstacle to covenantal relationship, to “thou-saying”, or to an encounter with the noumenal. Theology practiced well must become a method for clearing away whatever interrupts listening, feeling, and contemplation. Rav Kook captures this goal in his extraordinary style:

Contemplate the wonders of Creation, the divine dimension of their being, not as a dim configuration that is presented to you from the distance but as the reality in which you live. Know yourself and your world . . . [F]ind the source of your own life, and of the life beyond you, around you, the glorious splendor of the life in which you have your being. The love that is astir in you—raise it to its basic potency and its noblest beauty, extend it to all its dimensions, toward every manifestation of the soul that sustains the universe<sup>114</sup>

<sup>111</sup> “Human Hands Dwell in Heavenly Heights” in *Mystics of the Book: Themes Topics and Typologies*, ed. Robert A. Herrera (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 153.

<sup>112</sup> For a summary of ecologically important themes in Kabbalah, see Seidenberg, “Kabbalah and Ecotheology”, *ERN* 945–50; rev. [www.neohasid.org/kabbalah/kabbalah\\_and\\_ecotheology](http://www.neohasid.org/kabbalah/kabbalah_and_ecotheology) (June 2009). My approach sidesteps Elliot R. Wolfson’s critique of the contemporary use of Kabbalistic ideas about Nature in “The Mirror of Nature in Medieval Jewish Mysticism” (*Judaism and Ecology*, 305–31). Wolfson says there that Kabbalah cannot generate “a more positive view of nature” (321). However, he assumes that the only aspect of Kabbalah relevant to ecology is the idea of Nature as divine feminine. As will become obvious, other aspects of Kabbalah are far more important. For more on Wolfson, see nn.602, 624 and *Methods*. Wolfson’s perspective is frequently reflected in Hava Tirosh-Samuels’ work: see “Judaism”, *ERN* 932–3; “Nature in the Sources of Judaism”, 113–14; “Religion, Ecology, and Gender: A Jewish Perspective”, *Feminist Theology* 13 (Sep. 2005): 373–97, but also note her very different evaluation quoted on p.240.

<sup>113</sup> See esp. John R. Cobb, Jr., “The Role of Theology of Nature in the Church” in *Liberating Life*, eds. Charles Birch et al. (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1990) and Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress, 1993), ch.3, esp. 65–6, 78–9, and 83. See also Jurgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (New York: HarperCollins, 1985), George S. Hendry, *Theology of Nature* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), and Claude Stewart, *Nature in Grace: A Study of the Theology of Nature* (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1983), among others. Matthew Fox’s *Original Blessing* (Sante Fe NM: Bear & Company, 1983) is also rightly understood as a theology of Nature, rather than just an ecotheology.

<sup>114</sup> Bokser (1978), 207 (*OHQ* 1, 83).





Kook here offers a substantive religious phenomenology of Nature and its role in moral development.<sup>115</sup> Theological exploration – if it “extends love to all its dimensions” – can bring us to the threshold of a radically different order of religious experience.

### A theological map

The theological conclusion of this book can be stated homiletically, using a teaching attributed to R' Akiva: “He would say: Beloved is humanity/*adam*, that was created ‘in the image *l/b'tselem*'. Extra love [in that] it was made known to [*adam*] that he was created ‘in the image’, for it was said [to him]: ‘for in Elohim’s image He made him’ [Gn 9:6].”<sup>116</sup>

This teaching tells us something extraordinarily important: being created in the image and being taught that one is created in the image are two separate divine acts. A parallel teaching from *Avot d'Rabi Natan* strengthens this interpretation. The text reads: “If they were created [in God’s image] and it were not said (told) to them, they would [still] be beloved.”<sup>117</sup> A corollary of this is that the Torah’s revelation that we are created in God’s image was not a necessary outcome of being created in God’s image. It is a special act of divine grace, superadded to Creation.

One can derive two interpretations from this aspect of R' Akiva’s teaching, which I offer here not as *p'shat*, the literal or contextual meaning, but as midrashic-style eisegesis. The first is that other creatures could have been created in God’s image without that fact being recorded for us or told to us. The second is that the capacity to know ourselves as beloved of God flows from our ability to tell the story of God’s creation of humanity.

In other words, humans have language that allows us to receive, create, and pass on a tradition that teaches us that we are in God’s image. Furthermore, it is an expression of God’s love to reveal, to whichever creatures it can be revealed, that they are created in God’s image. If this is true, then we may emulate God, as beings created in God’s image, by “telling” the other creatures that they too are in God’s image. This leads to the lovely and somewhat paradoxical idea that one expression of our being in God’s image is that we are able to see other creatures as beings in God’s image.

Whether these others are primarily other humans, other sentient beings, or other species or even ecosystems, is a crucial question to explore. Most theologians and religious ethicists understand God’s image to be concretely

<sup>115</sup> See also “A Fourfold Song”, Bokser (1978), 228–9 (*OHQ* 2, 458–9).

<sup>116</sup> *Mishnah Avot*, variously numbered 3:13, 3:14 or 3:17. In the numbering followed by Blackman, it is 3:14. The Mechon Mamre edition (Jerusalem, 2002; [www.mechon-mamre.org/b/h/ho.htm](http://www.mechon-mamre.org/b/h/ho.htm)), which I also consulted throughout, numbers it 3:17.

<sup>117</sup> Ch.44, 124. I have emended ARNB, leaving out the word *lo'*, “not”, after *ilu*, which otherwise makes the passage incomprehensible. Schechter *ad loc.* interprets it the same way without actually emending the text. *Lo'* is likely a result of ditigraphy.



manifest in the ethical space between human beings. They might say that we can only know the image of God in ourselves when we understand other human beings to be created in God's image. One of the wisdoms one can learn from ecology is that this is also true in some way of the relationship between humanity and other species. In other words, we cannot know ourselves fully as human beings in God's image without seeing the image of God in the world around us. That is the fundamental message of this book.

