

## **Kabbalah and Ecotheology**

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Jewish mysticism is fundamentally concerned with cosmology and cosmogony, the origins and the process of creation, and the holism of creation in all its aspects, as well as the processes within divinity that sustain the world. Jewish mysticism has taken many forms throughout history, but the tradition we call Kabbalah became fully crystallized in the thirteenth century with the publication of the Zohar (“The Book of Radiance”). Kabbalistic literature spans many centuries and is incredibly diverse and complex; here the focus will be on themes within Kabbalah relevant to ecotheology.

While the literature of Kabbalah is vast, certain themes are persistent. Kabbalah is founded on the idea that the commandments of the Torah are given for the sake of restoring or healing the whole cosmos and reuniting it with the Infinite. As such, Kabbalah is the primary thread within Jewish tradition that imagines a purpose for the Jewish covenant, and hence, an intention within the divine will, that embraces the more-than-human world, beyond both Israel and humanity. As Seth Brody wrote, “The kabbalist’s goal is to become a living bridge, uniting heaven and earth, so that God may become equally manifest above and below, for the healing and redemption of all” (1993: 153).

Two fundamental kabbalistic principles provide a strong foundation for Jewish ecotheology. One is that “there is no place empty of God” (*leyt atar panui miney*), that is, the presence of God can be found in every single creature and being. The other is that “the whole world is blessed because of us” (*kol alma mit’barekh b’ginan*) that is, the actions of the righteous bring blessing to the whole of creation, to the earth and all its creatures, as well as to God. Moshe Cordovero (1522-1570, Palestine) elucidated the meaning of this principle in his work Or Ne’erav (“Sweet Light”):

Being involved in this wisdom, a person sustains the world and its life and its sustenance. And this is what Rabbi Shimon bar

Yochai [the main protagonist of the Zohar] explained in saying that “the whole world is blessed because of us” . . . for involvement with divinity causes cleaving, and when the human cleaves to the One who flows/guides the world, he causes the flow [of divine energy] necessarily, and . . . causes to flow upon the world a great flow (1965: 32).

One of Cordovero’s most popular works, Tomer D’vorah (“The Palm Tree of Deborah”), sums up the human task as follows: “This is the principle: he should cause life to stream forth to all” (from the Hebrew, 1969: 21; see also 1974: 82). While there are many approaches to understanding Kabbalah, if one focuses on this principle, one finds a fertile ground in which to root contemporary Jewish ecotheology.

In addition to this foundation, there are also several areas in Kabbalah which may be drawn upon for developing an ecological ethics, including views regarding the ethical treatment and moral standing of other animals and other species, the contemplation of the natural world as a revelation of divine presence, and the extension of the idea of God’s image from humanity to creation itself.

On the cosmological level, a number of characteristics of Kabbalah are equally significant for contemporary ecological thought. The holographic complexity that characterizes most kabbalistic texts is resonant for any theology of Nature that attempts to account for contemporary science. For ecofeminism, the Kabbalistic emphasis on balancing or uniting male and female at all levels, and the acknowledgement of the feminine aspect of the divine, are also intriguing, even though these texts generally maintain gender hierarchy. Finally, the sensuous way that Kabbalah understands cosmogony is echoed in the significance attributed to playfulness in contemporary ecopsychology.

### Sefirotic Play

The Sefer Bahir (“Book of Brightness,” ca. 12th century), the earliest articulation of what later came to be called Kabbalah, declares in a parable that when the king began building his palace (that is, when God began creating the world), a spring gushed forth. When he saw the spring, he said,

“I will plant a garden, then I will delight (or “play”) in it, I and the whole world” (§5, Kaplan 1989: 3). Creation is seemingly both God’s act of delight or play, and a gift of delight to all the creatures.

The playful garden that the king planted is described later in the Bahir as the Tree of Life. This Cosmic Tree is defined in later Kabbalah as a particular pattern called the *Sefirot* (singular: *Sefirah*), which are together the image of God, or what Gershom Scholem (1991) called “the mystical shape of the Godhead.” The *Sefirot* are regarded alternatively as divine attributes, essence, emanations, instruments or vessels; different perspectives are emphasized by different kabbalists. The kabbalists in general found God by tracing back the pattern of God’s unfoldment (to borrow David Bohm’s term) through the levels of emanation, from one *Sefirah* to the next, and from one world to the next. These levels represent the way in which divine energies such as love and judgment, male and female, hidden and manifest, and so on, are balanced and made manifest. Everything has within it the essence and image of those supernal levels. The unifying concept in Kabbalah is that the structure of each “holon” manifests the *Sefirot* and so bears witness to the image of God. (“Holon” is Ken Wilber’s term for the way the nature of every being reflects the whole of what he calls “the Kosmos.”) At each level and within each entity, the kabbalists saw the pattern of the *Sefirot* in a manner that we might call fractal or holographic.

## Holism

Kabbalah embraced a holistic view of the universe which called for the expansion of divinity into the physical world. Kabbalah represents the theological science (in the medieval sense of the term) that draws all the worlds, including dimensions of God and Nature, into one realm, one whole. “Implicit [in Kabbalah] is a notion of sacred cosmology. . . . The kabbalists’ faith involves a hierarchy of worlds that are ontologically higher than the material world” (Krassen 1999: 137). The work of the kabbalist is to draw the higher worlds into the lower and to unite the lower with the higher.

This tendency is most pronounced in the radical cosmogony that some texts propose: The universe is regarded as the shards of an original creation that shattered while it was still in the realm of the divine, carrying

“sparks” of divinity into what became the physical realm. Each of these sparks is some part of the divine that has been alienated from its root. Human beings provide the vehicle to repair this brokenness and reunite the sparks with the whole. Equally important, the process that begins creation is understood to be a contraction of God, called *tzimtzum*, which makes space for the world to emerge. Isaac Luria (1534-1572, Palestine) in particular used images of birth to describe this process, suggesting quite literally that the universe or Nature is somehow commensurable with God and birthed by God in the way that a child is with its mother.

These tropes teach that the human purpose in Creation is to unify all realms of being with and within the divine. The *kavanot* or opening incantations that kabbalists added to their prayers expressed this purpose: “for the sake of the unification of the Holy One and the *Shekhinah* (the masculine transcendent aspect of divinity and the indwelling feminine divine presence).” One of the most beautiful expressions of this idea which emphasizes the unification of the physical world with the divine is found in the remarkable opening prayer of the original *Tu biSh’vat seder* (a kabbalistic ritual meal in honor of the Mishnaic New Year for the trees, interpreted as the cosmic Tree), which is found in the book Chemdat Yamim (“Treasure of Days”, 17th cent.):

O God who makes, and shapes, and creates, and emanates the upper worlds, and in their form and pattern you created their model on the earth below; You made them all with wisdom, upper ones above and lower ones below, to join together the tent to become one . . . . And this day is the beginning of your works, to ripen and renew . . . . May it be Your will that the merit of our eating the fruit, and meditating on the secret of their roots above, you will bless them, flowing over them the flow of desire and energy, to make them grow and bloom, for good and for blessing, for good life and for peace . . . . And may the Whole return now to its original strength . . . and may all the sparks that were scattered by our hands, or by the hands of our ancestors, or by the sin of the first human against the fruit of the tree, be returned to sustain in might and majesty the Tree of Life. “Then the trees of the forest will sing out,” and the tree of the field will raise a

branch and make fruit . . . (translated and abridged by the author; for a complete translation see Krassen 1999: 148-151).

The purpose of wisdom, i.e., Kabbalah, is to both recognize and reestablish the pattern of the divine image, called here “joining the tent to become one.” One way to understand the holism of Kabbalah in modern terms is to consider the idea of the “more-than-human world.” This terminology was coined by David Abram to keep reminding us that “Nature” is not “out there” but also within, and that human society is part of the natural world. Conceptually, we can add to this that both God and Nature are more-than-human; in certain moments, the distinction between the two is dissolved in the overwhelming power of being. This happens in Kabbalah through the sanctification of the world around us by holy acts. Every deed is an act of compassion for creation, as well as a fulfillment of *tzorekh gavoha*, the “need on high,” in the divine realm, for unity.

#### The Earth or Cosmos as Divine Body and Image

There are several themes in Kabbalah that relate to the idea that Nature as a whole participates in divinity. *Shekhinah*, the “indwelling presence” which is the feminine dimension of divinity, is also called “the image which includes all images,” that is, the images of all creatures above and below (*Zohar* 1:13a). The *Shekhinah*, as the source of all divine *shefa* or overflow that reaches the lower worlds, is the image of God that is closest to the earth:

R' Eliezer said to him: Father, didn't they learn above that there is no body and no substance? He said to him: My son, about the world-to-come it was said, for that is a supernal [i.e., purely immaterial] mother, but below there is the body of this world, which is the Shekhinah below. (*Tikuney Zohar* §70,131a)

The *Shekhinah* in some sense represents “Nature.” The Kabbalah's conception of Nature, however, is vastly different from both science and Gaia-spirituality. Compared to classical scientific determinism, Nature in Kabbalah is potentially free and self-willing. But, unlike what one finds in the neo-pagan celebration of Nature as Mother-Goddess, Nature as

*Shekhinah* must become united with the worlds above and hence with the transcendent. Hence Nature is creative but it is not self-creating. According to some texts, this unification culminates with the feminine being re-absorbed into the masculine, while others depict the feminine attaining equal stature, “eye-to-eye” with the masculine.

Whatever these images mean on a practical level, they imply an ambivalent relation to the natural world, which is seen as insufficient in itself and needing to be redeemed. For this reason, Elliot Wolfson (2002) doubts whether Kabbalah has value for ecotheology. Seth Brody, Daniel Matt, Arthur Green, among others, however, find these tropes to be powerful grounds for creating an “eco-Kabbalah.”

Kabbalah conceptualized the cosmos as both tree and as *Adam Qadmon* (“primordial human,” sometimes translated “divine *anthropos*”), thereby connecting the divine image, the tree, and the cosmos itself through Adam. While some texts connect *Adam Qadmon* primarily with the upper or originary realms only (especially with the crown *Sefirah*, called *Keter*), others see it as the macrocosm which inscribes the divine image onto the whole of creation. The former dualistic perspective (discussed below) and the latter holistic perspective can sometimes be found in the same text. This complexity suggests that a wholesale adoption of kabbalistic cosmology into a theology of nature cannot work without a rereading of the texts.

Nevertheless, there were particular authors who consistently emphasized the inclusion of the earth and the creatures in the divine image. Yosef ben Shalom Ashkenazi (14th cent. Spain), for example, calls this “the secret of *Adam HaGadol* (the great Adam),” explaining:

The human being should be called a small world, for in his form he is like all [the creatures of the world] – the human, formed of “the dirt of the ground” [Gen 2:8], included in himself the seal and structure and likeness and image of all ten *Sefirot* and all that is created and formed and made from them (1974: 36).

The earth itself includes “the seal and structure and image,” which are the image of God that became part of Adam. God's image in Adam not only unites the whole of creation, but also carries within itself each created species and individual, that is, the entire diversity of creation. Isaiah

Horowitz (1562-1630) similarly taught that God's purpose in creating humanity was to unite the diversity of creation with God's image: "The end of the thing' [Eccl. 12:13] is Adam, who was created last . . . . Adam was created at the end so that he could include everything in his image and likeness" (1996: 216).

### God's Image in the World

If the *Sefirot* are the soul of the world, then the substance of creation is sometimes treated as the body: "The ten *Sefirot* . . . are clothed in ten things that were created on the first day, and these are: skies and land, light and darkness, abyss and chaos, wind and water, the measure of day and the measure of night" (*Tikuney Zohar* §70:120a-b). At the same time, the pattern of the *Sefirot* at the highest level is the guarantor that every subsequent level is also an image of God. For example, the *Sefirot*, the angels, the animals of the Ezekiel's chariot (human, lion, eagle, and ox), and the four elements are seen as manifestations of the same pattern at different levels (Horowitz 1996: 152).

Kabbalah also uses the letters of *Yod Heh Vav Heh* (which spell the holiest name for God, also known as the Tetragrammaton) to represent the structure of the *Sefirot*. Seeing these letters within something expresses the idea that God's image or presence is manifest through that thing. For example, in *Tikuney Zohar* (a series of meditations on the first verses of Genesis, written in style of the *Zohar*) each limb of the human body is an image of this name; each human being as a whole person is understood to be an image; and the diversity of humanity as one species is also an expression of God's image, each one mapped on to *YHVH* (146a).

This trope was not limited to the human realm. The human species as a whole is further seen as one letter in the name formed by the spectrum of animal species represented in the chariot. Similar correspondences were drawn with respect to the bodies of other creatures like birds and fruit trees, and to other dimensions of the physical and supernal worlds like the colors of the rainbow, thereby relating various senses, spectrums and dimensions to *YHVH*. In general, those creatures which were seen as uniting the upper and lower worlds are taken to represent an image of God in the world, along

with those symbols of human culture whose explicit purpose was to create unification, like the Torah and the *Mishkan* or Tabernacle.

On the largest scale, the four letters of the name *YHVH* were seen as corresponding to the multi-level process of emanation, becoming well-defined in the Kabbalah of Moses Cordovero according to four worlds or stages of being: emanating (*Yod*), creating (*Heh*), shaping (*Vav*) and acting or making (*Heh*) (note the use of this structure above in *Chemdat Yamim*). From this perspective, the entirety of creation, embracing all the levels, is conceived to be an image of God. While in general all creation is in some sense part of God, and the higher worlds are seen as divine, some texts emphasize that the lower creatures are also essentially part of God's name. For example, the *Zohar* (in a later strata) explains:

In the secret of the ten *Sefirot*, all is included in this image of *Heh*. In this secret were created and fixed all these lower beings, and for this [reason] it's written, "Elohim said: Let us make/*N'SH* in our image as our likeness" [Gen 1:27] – literally "let us make/*N'S* the letter *Heh*, with all these that are existing below and are united in her, in her image, truly. (*Zohar Chadash*, *Sitrey Otiyot B'reishit*, "Secrets of the Letters of Creation")

When the physical dimension of being is not conjoined with the higher levels, then the final letter of God's name, the *Heh*, is as it were missing, and the image of God is diminished. While Kabbalah most often focused on specific manifestations of the *Sefirot* and God's image, the image of God ultimately embraced the breadth and diversity of creation.

### Rabbinic Roots and Modern Branches

Many elements found in Kabbalah are rooted in classical rabbinic texts. The raw material for kabbalistic cosmology includes the midrashic idea that the upper beings or heavens were created in God's image, as well as the idea that the human body is a complete microcosm of the earth. A second-century esoteric teaching known as *Shi'ur Qomah*, ("The Measure of the Body") described God's body as being similar in structure to the human body but measured in the ancient equivalent of light-years. This tradition provided a

critical element that allowed Kabbalah to make a connection between God's image and the physical cosmos. Even the expression "there is no place empty of God" is Talmudic in origin.

The classical texts, however, never made a connection between the structure of the cosmos, the human microcosm, and the image of God, and they explicitly stated that the lower beings or the creatures of the earth were not created in God's image. Kabbalah, on the other hand, penetrated the boundaries between heaven and earth and between upper and lower realms, projecting the image of God, either directly or through various analogues, onto the "lower beings."

Contemporary scholars such as Green and Brody understand these texts to be the product of imaginations that embraced the diversity of creation; a paradigmatic text from the *Zohar* related to this theme has been translated by Matt (1996: 134). Krassen explains,

Nature is neither a source to be exploited for utilitarian benefits nor a sentimental vestige of the past to be romanticized by poets and naturalists. It is rather an ultimate link in a chain of divine manifestation that directly emerges from the divine source of life (137).

Others scholars like Hava Tirosh-Samuelsan, doubt that the intention of Kabbalah goes beyond the play of textuality and linguistic interpretation. While the author of this essay supports the former view, in either case, Kabbalah provides a powerful model for any contemporary theologian wanting to express the religious meaning of our encounter with the diversity of life. Applying these principles to ecotheology, as Green and Arthur Waskow do, if the image of God is an image of the diversity of life, then God's image is diminished every time human beings cause another extinction.

### Dualism and Repairing the Cosmos

According to some cosmologies, especially within Lurianic Kabbalah, the human of the Genesis story is born into an already shattered universe. This perspective led some kabbalists to a dualistic understanding of creation in

which the connection between the earth and *imago dei* is rejected. For example, in one *Zohar* passage, we read, "*Adam Qadmon*, even though his body is made from dirt, it's not from the dirt here . . . *Adam Qadmon* has nothing from this world at all" (*Zohar* 3:83a).

This cosmology could be characterized as a "dual earth" theory, where the element from which the primordial human is created is entirely derived from an anti-physical (or ante-physical) earth. Nevertheless, even though the image of God is not expressed through the originary physical universe, our human bodies still have the potential to express the divine pattern, and this can only happen in completeness in the physical world. (This affirmation of the physical body radically divided Kabbalah from medieval Jewish philosophy.) In Lurianic doctrine, this is called raising the sparks to their root in divinity and purifying them from their materiality, and is called *berur han'tzotzot*. Through this process, the original brokenness of creation could be repaired; this is seen as the purpose of our existence. Thus, whereas rejection of the natural world is a possible consequence of Gnostic dualism, even within the most dualistic interpretations of Kabbalah, the purpose of humanity is to be engaged with the physical world and to bring redemption to the entirety of creation.

### Ethics

Because Kabbalah saw the redemption of the cosmos as something that could happen through every interaction with the world, some kabbalists developed an acute sensitivity toward other creatures, asserting for example that only one knowledgeable in Torah and engaged in the deepest contemplation of raising the sparks should be allowed to eat meat.

One of the foundations of kabbalistic ethics is that all creatures deserve and require respect. One seminal concept in Kabbalah is the idea of reincarnation; for many kabbalists this included the possibility that human beings could reincarnate as animals. But the seeds for this idea of respect are independent of the concept of reincarnation and can be found already in the classical rabbinic idea that everything has a place and one must despise nothing in the world. Cordovero, who developed this principle further than any other kabbalist, wrote:

One should train himself . . . to honour the creatures entirely, in whom he recognizes the exalted nature of the Creator who in wisdom created man. And so all creatures, the wisdom of the Creator is in them. . . . It is evil, too, in the eyes of the Holy One if any one of His creatures are despised. It is therefore written: “How great/*rabu* [diverse] are your works” [Ps. 104:24] – [this means] very important/*rav*. . . (Cordovero 1974: 78; see also 71, 83-5).

Cordovero stressed that showing mercy and respect and bringing beneficence upon every aspect of creation is what it means to become like the Creator: “One’s mercy should extend to all creatures, neither destroying nor despising any of them. For the Supernal Wisdom is extended to all created things – silent, growing, moving and speaking [i.e., mineral, plant, animal and human]” (Cordovero 1974: 83).

The wisdom of the Creator is found in the pattern of the *Sefirot*. When a person imitates this pattern, they allow the influx of divinity to reach each and every being, according to Cordovero. He wrote that this principle has strong practical implications:

One should not uproot anything which grows, unless it is necessary, nor kill any living thing, unless it is necessary. And he should choose a good death for them, with a knife that has been carefully examined, to have pity on them as far as possible (Cordovero 1974: 84; see also 78).

Differing broadly from normative *halakhab* or Jewish law, Cordovero understood other creatures not in terms of human need, but rather in terms of the need of each living thing to fulfill its divine purpose. Human use must “elevate them higher and higher . . . for [only] then is it permitted to uproot the plant and kill the animal . . .” (Cordovero 1974: 78). More subtly, when Cordovero uses the term “a good death” or *mitah yafah*, he is referencing the Talmud’s use of this same term as an embodiment of the Levitical principle “Love your neighbor as yourself” (*Sanbedrin* 45a and 52b), intentionally applying an intra-human ethical principle to other animals.

This deep understanding of ethics extended even to the interpretation some kabbalists gave to the prohibition against idolatry. Yosef Ashkenazi, who was quoted above, explained that the sin of idolatry is that it separates the worshipped thing from the divinity that comprises the whole:

Since all the existences, from the upper ones and the lower ones, all of them are tied into his great, mighty and awesome name, blessed and holy be, therefore he warned [Israel] to not worship them in separation from his name – only in the name of *YHVH* [as] one . . . (1984: 148, 41b).

Here as elsewhere, the unity of being, which is concomitant with the presence of divinity in all being, is the root of the extraordinary proto-ecological sensibility displayed in Kabbalah.

#### Contemplation and Ritual

Kabbalists reconciled the unity of being with the diversity of creation by seeing every aspect of the world as simultaneously cloaking and revealing the divine. They found the *Sefirot* and the letters of God’s explicit name everywhere, and reached the spiritual dimension of things by engaging with the traces of the divine in the physical world. This engagement happened mostly through the projection of language and text onto the world, and thus focused on ideas at least as much as it focused on phenomena. However, the Lurianic doctrine of raising the sparks also focused the mystic’s consciousness on the depth within real physical things. Elevation of the sparks required direct contact with the physical world, through ritual, and through mystical intentions any physical act. It engendered a deeper respect for the intrinsic value of other creatures and things than one finds in normative Judaism.

The implication of kabbalistic theurgy (ritual or magic which operates on or affects divinity) was that proper intention and consciousness could reveal the divinity underlying all phenomena and unify phenomena with their source. The potential to create a phenomenology of holiness was made manifest by Chasidism in the eighteenth century. These ideas also

inspired many Jewish thinkers, both in the Renaissance and the early modern period, to use Kabbalah to reconcile theology and science.

Some modern kabbalists gave full expression to the power of contemplating and understanding nature that is hinted at in Kabbalah. Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935, Palestine) wrote:

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 . . . find 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 . . . (1978: 207).

For Kook, the meaning of Kabbalah was found within the lived experience of the natural world. He wrote that from the knowledge of God, “there radiates . . . a love for the world, for all worlds, for all creatures, on all levels of their being. A love for all existence fills the hearts of the good and kindly ones among creatures, and among humans” (1978: 226). Kook’s theology may even be called biocentric, in the broadest sense, as further evidenced by his encomiums on the theory of evolution. Kook gave a directive to his students to embrace the natural world in the words quoted above, a directive that may be realized in part by contemporary work that unites Kabbalah with ecology.

## Conclusion

Looked at over the course of its entire history, Kabbalah is a process which has led to an increasing embrace of the more-than-human world as divine in all its aspects. No particular text or moment in the history of Kabbalah completes the manifestation of this potential, but the trajectory of Kabbalah’s evolution points in this direction. The cosmogonic, ethical and spiritual dimensions of Kabbalah are all fundamental to any ecotheology or theology of Nature in Judaism.

## Further Reading

### Further Reading

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See also: Eco-Kabbalah; Judaism; Hassidism and Nature Mysticism; Perennial Philosophy; Vegetarianism and Kabbalah; Vegetarianism and Rav Kook; Judaism and Paganism; Wilber, Ken.

Articles by Rabbi David Seidenberg in ERN: "Kabbalah and Ecotheology," "Maimonides," "Animal Rights in the Jewish Tradition," "Judaism and Paganism" and "Jewish Environmentalism in North America"

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