

Eco-Kabbalah:

Holism and Mysticism in Earth-Centered Judaism

published in *Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Religion and Ecology* (2017), pp. 20–36

This version uploaded to academia.edu should be considered authoritative where any differences exist between this and the published version.

David Mevorach Seidenberg

Abstract: Starting from Judaism’s inherently Creation-centered perspective, one can build a robust ecotheology by incorporating medieval ideas of holism found in Maimonides and in Kabbalah or Jewish mysticism. Details of Maimonidean cosmology, epistemology, and ethical theory that emerge from Maimonides’ holism are discussed, along with several Kabbalists whose work, though differing substantially from Maimonides with respect to cosmogony and the role of the imagination, touches on similar themes. Over the course of its history, Kabbalah has increasingly embraced the more-than-human world as divine in all its aspects. Equally importantly, Maimonides rejected anthropocentrism and embraced the whole of Creation. Both teach us to see ourselves in relationship to the whole, and to regard the whole as the ultimate ethical end.

Keywords: Maimonides, Kabbalah, anthropocentrism, ecotheology, holism, Cordovero, *Zohar*, Genesis, redemption, *Sefirot*

Judaism has always viewed the world from a “Creation-centered” perspective, beginning with God’s declaration that the entire Creation is “very good” at the end of Genesis 1. Even its very notion of time, both in Biblical and in rabbinic Judaism, is structured around the weekly celebration of Creation on the Sabbath. The Torah, and the rabbis afterward, lifted up the idea of original blessing, found the purpose of our human existence in what happens here in this life-world, and honored both God as Creator and God’s Creation as good and holy. For modern ecotheology, especially as it has emerged in Christian circles, this notion of original blessing is an important foundation. It is moreover true that finding redemption and salvation within this world can be a basis for right action and right living.

These ideas fit with a holistic view of the Earth and all life where redemption, the human good, and moral value are grounded in the redemption and good of Creation itself. Yet Jewish and other theistic communities have often honored Creation not as a good in itself, but only as the “Creator’s handiwork” that shows God’s wisdom. A theistic holism, which as we will see may be rooted in concepts from Maimonides and Kabbalah, can go beyond this, envisioning Creation as a moral end-in-itself, imbued not only with the holiness and presence of the divine, but also with the potential to fully become a

revelation of divinity. Two dimensions may be discerned in this description: seeing the whole of Creation as the greatest moral good imaginable (which goes along with true gratitude toward the Creator), and seeing in the diversity of Creation the fullest revelation of God's infinity.

Creation-centered theologies must also touch the foundations of our ethics. Most importantly, this may entail seeing the value of each human being as a reflection of the value of Creation itself. Though this conclusion may seem to go directly against the anthropocentrism of Biblically-based traditions, it is already hinted at in the rabbinic statement that "one who destroys a single human life destroys a full world" (Mishnah *Sanhedrin* 4:5; Seidenberg 2015, 114–16). Moreover, much of the anthropocentrism we read into Biblical tradition is a product of medieval and modern thought, native neither to Torah nor to the rabbis (Seidenberg 2015, Part 1).

Challenging anthropocentrism may seem radically new, but once we bracket the modernist and humanist assumptions we bring to the texts, the seeds for transfiguring our experience of this "more-than-human" world we call Nature can be readily found, most importantly, within those streams of Jewish thought that questioned the strictly human focus of most ethics. Here I will examine the two most important streams, the thought of Moses Maimonides, and the images within Kabbalah. In many ways these two visions pull in opposite directions: Maimonides rejected the anthropocentric universe while Kabbalah projected the *anthropos* onto every aspect of the universe. Yet both Maimonides and various Kabbalists envisioned a reality in which the highest moral good transcended human needs and was measured by diversity, abundance, and wholeness in the cosmos itself.

Maimonides

Moses Maimonides (Rabbi Moshe ben Maimun, 1135-1204, also called the Rambam) is arguably the premier philosopher and theologian of Jewish history, and one of the most influential thinkers, Jewish, Christian, or Muslim, of the medieval period. The ecological profundity of his work is only beginning to be understood. Maimonides, uniquely in all of Jewish thought, challenged the primacy of humanity within the order of Creation, asserted that there is complete equivalence between human and animal emotions, and believed that Creation as a whole is the only dimension of being which has intrinsic value.

In his most important work, *The Guide for the Perplexed* or *Moreh N'vukhim*, which reflects his mature thought, Maimonides espoused a model of the cosmos that parallels Gaia theory, which posits that the Earth is most accurately understood to be a living and self-regulating organism. Maimonides admonished his reader, "Know that this whole of being is one individual and nothing else," adding that the whole of Creation "has the same status as Zayid or Omar"—a person, endowed with a heart and a soul (1963a, 1:72, 184). For Maimonides, the idea that the universe is an organic whole was a fundamental scientific fact that led to a direct understanding of God's relation to the world, for "the One has created one being" (1:72, 187; see also 2:1, 251).

The ethical and metaphysical implications of this model were tremendous. Fundamentally, Maimonides rejected the idea that humanity was the final end of Creation, and equally rejected the idea that other creatures exist to serve human pleasure:

“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 . . .” (3:13, 452). Maimonides held that this view was delineated within Genesis itself, explaining the word “good” used in chapter 1 of Genesis to mean that each creature has something akin to what modern philosophers call intrinsic value (3:13, 453). He also wrote in this same passage that “the individuals of the human species, and all the more so the other species, are things of no value at all in comparison with the whole [of Creation] that exists and endures” (452). Scripture’s use of the phrase “very good” (Gen. 1:31) to describe Creation indicates this overwhelming value of “the whole,” which surpasses all individuals and species.

Maimonides arrived at this interpretation after concluding that there can be no *telos* for Creation: “[E]ven 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” (452). In a later chapter, he derived a remarkable conclusion from this idea: “[T]he entire purpose [of God’s actions] consists in bringing into existence the way you see it everything whose existence is possible . . .” (3:25, 504). This formulation is fundamentally congruent with Spinoza’s cosmology as well as with biocentrism; it is also compatible with those who understand evolution to be “directed” towards diversity.

Maimonides believed that the highest revelation of God came from understanding the diversity of Creation itself, all its creatures and all their interrelations. Even God’s revelation to Moses after the golden calf was of this nature:

When [Moses] asked for knowledge of the attributes . . . he was told: “I will make all My goodness / *kol tuvi* pass before you” [Exod. 33:19]. . . All My goodness – alludes to the display to him of all existing things (creatures) of which it is said: “And God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it [is] very good / *tov m’od*.” [Gen. 1:31] By their display, I mean that he will apprehend their nature and the way they are mutually connected so that he will know how [God] governs them in general and in detail (1:54, 124).

While here the subject of revelation, Maimonides also believed that one could develop an understanding of the truth intellectually by studying the more-than-human world in its wholeness.

I have already let you know that there exists nothing except God, may He be exalted, and this existent world, and that there is no possible inference proving his existence, may He be exalted, except those deriving from this existent taken as a whole and from its details (1:71, 183).

Maimonides’ approach to natural theology in *The Guide* laid the foundation for the development of scientific method in the West. In contrast with the Kalam and with most theology of his time, Maimonides asserted that “demonstrations . . . can only be taken from the permanent nature of what exists, a nature that can be seen and apprehended by the senses and the intellect” (1:76, 231; see also 1:71, 179). But for Maimonides, as we find today among some of the spiritual interpreters of Gaia theory, the living, organic

whole of being was more than a scientific truth. It was the supreme source of value and measure of all meaning, and it was our path to knowing God (Seidenberg 2015, 71–2, 268–71).

Maimonides' ideas about the wholeness of Creation profoundly influenced the Church, especially Thomas Aquinas, as can be seen in *Summa Theologica* (1920, 1:47, 246) and *Summa Contra Gentiles* (1955, 3:64). His rejection of anthropocentrism contrasted sharply with nearly every other medieval Jewish thinker, including those before him like Saadyah Gaon or Bachya ibn Pakuda and those after him. In fact, the entire *Guide* can be interpreted as a polemic against the extreme anthropocentrism of Saadyah Gaon, who wrote in *Emunot v'Dei'ot*, “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” (1970, art.4, introduction).¹ Just the opposite, Maimonides teaches: we should be perplexed if we think the goal is humanity, and this should lead us toward the right, non-anthropocentric understanding of Creation and the human place within Creation.

This overarching principle also transformed the way that Maimonides understood ethics and the significance of animals' lives.² In general, Maimonides minimized differences between humanity and other animals, and in fact in the *Guide* he always refers to humanity in contrast with “the other animals.” He taught that the instruction to “dominate” in Genesis 1 was neither a commandment nor an imperative, but merely a description of human nature (3:13, 454). Maimonides also explained that instrumental reason, what gives us the power to dominate other creatures with our tools and machinations, is not a mark of human excellence or divine blessing, but merely makes human beings into very dangerous animals (1:7, 33). Moreover, he held that animals and humans could have equal capacity to feel and imagine. This understanding was integral to his interpretation of the prohibitions concerning slaughtering or taking animals and their young (Lev. 22:27, Deut. 22:6–7):

It is forbidden to slaughter [an animal] and its young on the same day, this being a precautionary measure to avoid slaughtering the young animal in front of its mother. For in these cases animals feel very great pain, there being no difference regarding this pain between [humanity] and the other animals. For the love and the tenderness of a mother for her child is not consequent upon reason, but upon the activity of the imaginative faculty, which is found in most animals just as it is found in [humanity]... (3:48, 599; see also 1:75, 209 and 2:1, 245).

Some modern interpreters incorrectly downplay this passage by emphasizing Maimonides' statement elsewhere that the prohibition against causing pain to animals has as its purpose the object of perfecting people (3:17, 473). However, Maimonides is clear there, just as he is here, that compassion is enjoined for individual animals; rather, his concern in the latter passage is to show that divine providence does not operate in the lives of individual animals.

For Maimonides, the uniqueness of human nature is found in the capacity to apprehend the divine. This is humanity's perfection. Its attainment, which only a few individuals reach, is what constitutes being in God's image (1:1-2, 23-4). Yet even this quality, along with the “hylic intellect” (1:72, 190-1), makes human beings “merely the

most noble among the things that are subject to generation,” since he believed along with other Aristotelians that the spheres and the heavens far surpassed humanity in their capacity to contemplate the divine (3:12, 443).

Maimonides’ rejection of anthropocentrism and espousal of a holistic cosmology are starting points for any ecotheology rooted in Biblical traditions. Much in Maimonides may also be problematic for contemporary ecological thinkers. As an Aristotelian, Maimonides had a strongly negative attitude towards the sense of touch (2:56, 371; 3:8, 432-3), which is incompatible with the phenomenological approach to the Earth taken by many ecophilosophers. His writings also made dualism between the intellect or soul and the body a fundamental part of Jewish thought. In the same vein, he emphasized that imagination is inferior to reason and espoused an intellectual elitism that remains controversial. In contrast with Maimonides’ explicit philosophy, so much of our encounter with Nature is based on feeling, empathy, and imagination. In order to locate an ecotheology that embraces the imagination, we must turn to the masters of imagination, the Kabbalists.

Kabbalah and Ecotheology

If Maimonides rejected the sensuousness of physical being, many Kabbalists embraced it with a passion barely restrained by rabbinic norms. Kabbalistic literature spans many centuries and is incredibly diverse and complex; in my examination of themes within Kabbalah I will focus on only a few dimensions of that complexity.

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”). While the literature of Kabbalah is vast, certain themes are persistent. Jewish mysticism is fundamentally concerned with cosmology and cosmogony, the origins and the process through which God created the world, the holism of Creation in all its aspects, and the processes within divinity that sustain the world.

The mystical traditions most associated with the term Kabbalah started with *Sefer Bahir*, which goes back at least to the eleventh century. The *Bahir*, and all subsequent Kabbalah, is characterized by several motifs that are relevant to ecotheology. These include the idea that the human body in its physical details, and not just the soul, is in the image of God – which was a direct rejection of the dualism of Jewish philosophy. They also include the idea that the commandments of the Torah were given to us for the sake of restoring or healing the whole cosmos and reuniting it with the Infinite.

In fact, Kabbalah is the primary thread within Jewish tradition that imagines that a purpose of the Jewish covenant, and hence an intention of the divine will, is to redeem the more-than-human world, beyond both Israel and humanity. In a word, God’s abundance appears as cosmic blessing, and it is the human task to increase the flow of cosmic blessing into the world. 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).

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, and he said that “the 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; 1974, 82). The fundamental principle that “the whole world is blessed because of us” (*kol alma mit’barekh b’ginan*) means that the actions of the righteous bring blessing to the whole of Creation and to Earth and all its creatures, as well as to God. This is fertile ground in which to root contemporary Jewish ecotheology.

Another fundamental kabbalistic principle, 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, also provides a foundation for ecotheology. In addition, several areas in Kabbalah may be drawn upon for developing an ecological ethics, including the holism of Creation, 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.

One way to understand the holism of Kabbalah in modern terms is through the concept of the “more-than-human world.” This terminology was coined by David Abram (1996) to remind us that human society is part of the natural world – “Nature” is not only “out there” but also within – and at the same time to caution us that the world is far beyond our needs and our understanding. But conceptually, 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 is effected in Kabbalah through the sanctification of the world around us by holy actions. 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.

On the cosmological level, other characteristics of Kabbalah are also significant for contemporary ecological thought. The holographic complexity that characterizes Creation according to Kabbalah is resonant for any theology of Nature that attempts to incorporate 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 many texts on this theme maintain a gender hierarchy. Finally, the sensuous way that Kabbalah understands cosmogony, and the significance of playfulness in God’s relation to Creation, are echoed in contemporary ecopsychology.

Sefirotic Play

The *Sefer Bahir* (“Book of Brightness”), the earliest articulation of what we now think of as Kabbalah, is the first book to begin to delineate the characteristics of the *Sefirot*. The *Bahir* describes the parable of a king who began building his palace (that is, when God began creating the world), and a spring gushed forth. When he saw the spring, he said, “I will plant a garden, then I will delight (or “play”) in it, and so will all the

world” (Margaliot 1994a, §5; Kaplan 1989, 3). Creation is here 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 to emanate and create this reality. Everything that exists has within it the essence and image of those supernal levels. Thus 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, like most mysticisms, embraced a holistic view of the universe where the more visible and physical levels of reality depend upon the spiritual and invisible. “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). Kabbalah called for the expansion of divinity into the physical world, and the work of the kabbalist was to draw the higher worlds into the lower and to unite the lower with the higher, uniting all the worlds, including dimensions of God and Nature, into one realm or one whole.

This tendency is most pronounced in the radical cosmogony some texts propose: The universe is composed of 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 a part of the divine that has been alienated from its root. Human beings are 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 that the universe or Nature is somehow commensurable with God in the way that a child is with its mother (Seidenberg 2015, 276–7).

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.” One of its most beautiful expressions can be found in the opening prayer of the original Tu Bish’vat seder (the kabbalistic ritual meal in honor of the Mishnaic New Year for the trees, interpreted by the Kabbalists as the New Year for the Cosmic Tree). This prayer, from the *P’ri Eitz Hadar*, was first published in *Chemdat Yamim* (“Delight of Days,” 17th cent.):

O God who makes, and forms, and creates, and emanates the upper/supernal 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 the tent [together] to become one” (Exod. 36:18) (Seidenberg 2015, 357).

The purpose of wisdom, i.e., Kabbalah, is to recognize and reestablish the pattern of the divine image, here denoted by “joining the tent to become one.” This phrase itself is taken from the verse describing how Moses put together the desert sanctuary called the *Mishkan* or Tabernacle. In other words, God created upper and lower realms as reflections of each other in order to make out of Creation a holy Temple. It is the Kabbalist’s work to serve as priest in that Temple, as the *P’ri Eitz Hadar* goes on to describe:

May it be Your will, through the strength of the merit of eating the fruit which we will eat [on Tu Bish’vat], and our blessing over them now, and our meditating on the secret of their roots above upon which they depend, to cause the flow of desire and blessing and free gift to flow over them, to return again 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,” (Ps. 96:11) and the tree of the field will raise a branch and make fruit... (357–8)³

That priestly function includes bringing blessing to the physical fruit that will be set by the trees in the spring months leading up to the Shavuot festival of the first fruits. But this same process is a physical model of what must happen cosmologically, which is the restoration of those sparks from the Tree of Life that we and our human ancestors have scattered. There is also a profound resonance between this mystical Tree of Life, and the evolutionary Tree of Life that unites all living things, whose sparks we have also scattered and extinguished.

The Earth or Cosmos as Divine Body and Image

There are several themes in Kabbalah that relate to Nature as a whole participating 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*, Margalio 1984, 1:13a). As the source of all divine *shefa* or overflow that reaches the lower worlds, *Shekhinah* is the image of God that is closest to the earth:

R’ Eliezer said to him: Father, is it so above, as they learned, 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 (*Tikunei Zohar* §70, Margaliot 1994a, 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, and it corresponds to the name *Elohim*, usually translated as God. But, unlike the simpler understanding of Nature as Mother-Goddess, in Kabbalah 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.

Whatever these images mean on a practical level, they also imply that the natural world needs to be redeemed along with the divine feminine. According to some texts, this unification ends with the feminine being re-absorbed into the masculine, while others depict the feminine attaining equal stature, “eye-to-eye” with the masculine. Because of the former motif, Elliot Wolfson (2002) doubts whether Kabbalah has value for ecotheology. However, Seth Brody, Daniel Matt, Arthur Green, Arthur Waskow, and myself, among others, find these tropes to be powerful grounds for creating an “eco-Kabbalah.”

Kabbalah also conceptualized Creation not only as a Cosmic Tree and as *Shekhinah*, but also as *Adam Kadmon* (the “primordial human,” sometimes translated “divine anthropos”), thereby connecting the divine image, the Tree of Life, and the cosmos itself through the mediation of Adam. While some texts connect *Adam Kadmon* primarily with the upper or originary realms only, others see it as the macrocosm that represents the divine image in 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 means that before we can carry out a wholesale adoption of kabbalistic cosmology for a theology of Nature, we must first reread these texts.

Nevertheless, some Kabbalists consistently emphasized the inclusion of the Earth and its creatures in the divine image. Yosef ben Shalom Ashkenazi (13th century 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 from 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 dirt of the Earth itself includes the seal and structure and image of God that became part of Adam. Shneur Zalman of Liady (founder of Lubavitcher Hasidism, 1745– 1813), one of the few Hasidic rebbes to systematically treat Kabbalah, even more pointedly asserted that the very substance of Earth manifested the greatest revelation of divinity. In the very last letter he wrote, published as *Igeret Hakodesh* 20, he described the growth from year to year of plants from the soil as the completion of *Adam Kadmon* and as the most visible expression of the pure *Chesed*, that is, the originary love, that gave birth to Creation (1972, 512; Seidenberg, 2015, 255–60).

Ashkenazi also wrote in his commentary on *Sefer Yetzirah* (the “Book of Formation”, an early mystical tract where the term *Sefirot* first appears) that the heavens and the Earth together, i.e. the cosmos itself, was God’s image:

All the existences...whether silent or growing or moving or speaking (rock, plant, animal, human)...every one of them, all of which are His, is in the structure of His seal – understand this for it hints at the truth, as it is said “Let us make a human being (adam) in our image as our likeness”, and it says “the heavens rejoice and the earth sings out / *yism’chu hashamayim v’tagel ha’aretz*” (Ps. 96:11) – the first letters [of these four words] spell out *YHVH* and the last letters (read backwards) spell out “His image / *tzalmo*” (Ashkenazi 1961, *ad* 1:12, 67–8)

The universe is God’s image, and not just the image of *Elohim*, the name for God used in Genesis 1 that is the template for humanity, but an image of *YHVH* (the Tetragrammaton, often translated as “Lord”). *YHVH* alludes to a higher dimension of God than *Elohim*, and the letters of the Tetragrammaton, *Yud Heh Vav Heh*, represent the structure of the *Sefirot*.

On the largest scale, the four letters of the name *YHVH* were seen as corresponding to the multi-level process of emanation that creates and sustains all, which was characterized according to “the four worlds” or stages of being: emanating (*Yud*), creating (*Heh*), shaping (*Vav*) and acting (*Heh*). From this perspective, emphasized in Cordoveran Kabbalah, the entirety of Creation, embracing all the levels, was conceived as an image of God.

God’s Image Within the World

If the *Sefirot* are the image of God and the soul of the world, then the elements of Creation are sometimes also treated as the embodiment and manifestation of that image and that soul:

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 (*Tikunei Zohar* §70, Margaliot 1994a, 120a-b).

In rhythmic language, the author surveys the whole of Creation, discerning ten elemental parts that correspond to the ten *Sefirot*, which function as an analogue for God’s image.

God’s image in Adam also unites the whole of Creation in part because it carries within itself each created species and individual, that is, the entire diversity of Creation. Isaiah Horowitz (1562-1630) even taught that God’s purpose in creating humanity was in fact 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). Similarly, we have seen how Ashkenazi included all the creatures in God’s seal, which is God’s image. So humanity’s place as the last to be created was not in order for humanity to rule over everything, but rather to enable humanity to serve everything. Moreover, for Ashkenazi, idolatry was

forbidden not because it falsely attributed divinity to some object of worship, but rather because by worshipping a piece of the whole, one removes that piece from its rightful place within divinity (see below).

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. The *Sefirot*, the angels, the animals of 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). This highlights another motif in Kabbalah, which is that anything that represents the whole of reality, such as the four elements, also represents the image of God.

Since Kabbalah uses the letters of the Tetragrammaton to represent the structure of the *Sefirot*, seeing these letters in a creature or thing also expresses the idea that God's image is manifest through it. For example, in *Tikunei Zohar* (a series of meditations on the first verse of Genesis) 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, mapped on to *YHVH* (Margaliot 1994a, 146a).

This trope, however, 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. Correspondences with *YHVH* were also drawn 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*.⁴ In general, those creatures which were seen as uniting the upper and lower worlds 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* (Seidenberg, 2015, 217–31).

While all Creation in general is part of God, some texts emphasized the role of the lower creatures as an essential part of God's name. For example, *Zohar Chadash* explains the final *Heh* of God's name in *Sitrey Otiyot* ("Secrets of the Letters of Creation"):

In the secret of the ten *Sefirot*...all is included in this image of *Heh* (the fourth letter of God's name). . . [I]n this secret were created and ordered all these lower ones. For this [reason] it's written: "Elohim said: Let us make /na'aseh Adam in our image as our likeness..." "Na'aseh/N'SH"—certainly this [refers to the letter] *Heh*, literally, and all these that are existing below and are united in her, in her image, truly (Margaliot 1994b, 2a).

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 mostly 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. At the same time, the mythical elements that Kabbalah inherited from Biblical and rabbinic

traditions were transformed and systematized (Liebes, 1993). The raw material for kabbalistic cosmology includes the animism of the rabbis and the Torah before them, the personification of the land as a covenantal partner in the Torah, the midrashic idea that the upper beings or heavens were created in God's image, and the idea that the human body is a complete microcosm of Earth. Even the expression "there is no place empty of God" is Talmudic in origin.

A second-century esoteric teaching known as *Shiur Komah* ("The Measure of the Body"), which described God's body as similar in structure to the human body but measured in the ancient equivalent of light-years, also provided a critical element that allowed Kabbalah to connect God's image and the physical cosmos. The classical rabbinic 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 Earth were not created in God's image. Kabbalah penetrated the boundaries between heaven and earth and between upper and lower realms, projecting the image of God onto the "lower beings."

Contemporary scholars such as Green (2002) and Seth Brody (1993) understand these texts to be the product of imaginations that embraced the diversity of Creation; a parable from the *Zohar* related to this theme has been translated by Matt (1996, 134). Krassen explains,

For the Kabbalists, [N]ature 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 (1999, 137).

Others scholars like Hava Tirosh-Samuelsan (2002) have questioned whether 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 that we can use to express the religious meaning of our encounter with the diversity of life.

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

Here 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 position radically divided all Kabbalah from medieval Jewish philosophy, which completely dissociated the body from God's image.) In Lurianic doctrine, this is described as raising the sparks to their root in divinity and purifying them

from their materiality, *berur han'tzotzot*. Through this process, the original brokenness of Creation could be repaired, and this is the purpose of our existence. Thus, unlike 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, we find kabbalists who developed an acute sensitivity concerning other creatures and how we use them⁵ (Seidenberg, 2015, 162–5). The seeds for these ideas can already be found in the classical rabbinic understanding that everything has a place and one must despise nothing in the world (*Mishnah Avot* 4:3). Cordovero, who developed this rabbinic principle further than any other kabbalist, wrote that a person must

honor the creatures entirely, since he recognizes in them the exalted quality of the Creator / *ma'alat haborei'* who “formed the human with wisdom” and so [it is with] all creatures – the wisdom of the One who forms [them] is in them, and he sees himself that they are so very very honored, for the One who forms [them] cares for all . . . And it is evil in the eyes of the Holy One if they despise any creature of His creatures, and this is [why] it says: “How manifold/diverse/*rabu* are Your works” (Ps. 104:24) . . . *rabu* [like] the language “*rav beito* / important in the house [of the king]” (Esther 1:8) – very important, (1969, 19-20; 1974, 78; cf. 1969, 16; 1974, 71).

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 mercies should be distributed to all the creatures, not destroying and not despising them. For so is the highest Wisdom distributed to all the creatures, silent, growing, moving and speaking [i.e., mineral, plant, animal and human]” (1974, 83).

The wisdom of the Creator is distributed according to 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:

[A person should] not uproot a growing thing except for need, nor kill any animal except for need. And he should choose a good death / *mitah yafah* for them, with a carefully examined knife, to show mercy however is possible. This is the principle: compassion [should be] over all existences, to not hurt them . . . unless [it is] to raise them from level to level / high to higher, from growing to living, from living to speaking, for then it is permitted to uproot the growing thing and to kill the animal, the debt [being outweighed] by the merit (1969, 20; 1974, 84).

Differing broadly from normative *halakhah* or Jewish law, Cordovero understood other creatures not in terms of human need, but rather in terms of the need of all living things to fulfill their divine purpose. More subtly, when Cordovero uses the term *mitah yafah*, he is referencing the Talmud's use of this term as an embodiment of the Levitical principle "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Bavli *Sanhedrin* 45a, 52b), intentionally applying a human ethical principle to non-human 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 and lower ones are all of them tied into [God's] great, mighty and awesome name, therefore He warned [Israel] to not worship them in separation from His name – [but] only [to worship] through the name of *YHVH* [as] one... (1984, 148).

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. Applying these principles to ecotheology, if the image of God is an image of the diversity of life, then we might say that God's image is diminished every time human beings cause another extinction (Seidenberg 2015, 239).

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. 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. This engendered a deeper respect for the intrinsic value of other creatures and things than one finds in normative Judaism.

The potential to create a phenomenology of holiness was further developed from Kabbalah by Hasidism in the eighteenth century. These ideas also inspired many other Jewish thinkers, in both the Renaissance and the early modern period, to use Kabbalah to reconcile theology and science.

Some modern kabbalists also 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 ...[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... (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 be called biocentric, in the broadest sense (as further evidenced by his impassioned embrace of the theory of evolution). Kook’s spiritual directives may be realized in contemporary work that ties together Kabbalah and ecology.

Conclusion

Together, Maimonides and Kabbalah provide the basis for a robust Jewish ecotheology and ecological ethic. Looked at over the course of its history, Kabbalah is a process that has led to an increasing embrace of the more-than-human world as divine in all its aspects. Equally importantly, Maimonides rejected anthropocentrism and embraced the whole of Creation. Both teach us to see ourselves in relationship to the whole, and to regard the whole as the ultimate ethical end.

The road toward healing this physical world and living responsibly and sustainably within it may even depend on more fully developing holism as the ground of morality. We cannot expect religion to serve its societal purpose – the purpose of shaping a right way of life – if our theologies leave human beings at the center and pinnacle of Creation, here to serve God and to be served by the rest of Creation. A Hasidic master taught that one should always remind oneself of two dictums: “The whole world is created for my sake” and “I am nothing but dirt and ashes,” and that the key to righteousness is to know when to take which dictum to heart (Seidenberg 2015, 118). Keeping this lesson in mind, we could rewrite these dictums to reflect our two sources of teaching: for Kabbalah, “I was created for the sake of the whole world”; and for Maimonides, “I am nothing but conscious dirt and ashes.” Holding these truths close to our hearts, encountering this manifold universe with both humility and responsibility, we can develop a Judaism that is closer to the sources of the tradition than the religion we live today. That same Judaism, and that same reading of Biblical tradition, is one that can carry us forward into a world that is both more redeemed and more vivid, and is sweetened by the human presence.

References

- Abram, David. 1996. *The Spell of the Sensuous*. New York: Random House.
- Aquinas, Thomas. 1920. *Summa Theologica*, 2nd edn., translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1047.htm>.
- Aquinas, Thomas. 1955. *Summa Contra Gentiles*, book 3, translated by Vernon Bourke. <http://www.dhspriority.org/thomas/ContraGentiles3a.htm>.
- Ashkenazi, Yosef ben Shalom. 1961. *Perush Hara'vad*. In *Sefer Yetzirah*. Jerusalem: Monzon. http://www.hebrew.grimoar.cz/jecira/ravad_jecira.htm.
- Ashkenazi, Yosef ben Shalom. 1984. *Perush L'parshat B'rei'shit* (Commentary on Creation in Genesis), edited by Moshe Hallamish. Jerusalem: Magnes Press (Hebrew).
- Brody, Seth. 1993. "Human Hands Dwell in Heavenly Heights: Contemplative Ascent and Theurgic Power in Thirteenth Century Kabbalah." In *Mystics of the Book: Themes Topics and Typologies*, edited by R. Herrera, 123-158. New York: Peter Lang.
- Cordovero, Moshe. 1965. *Or Ne'erav* (Sweet Light). Jerusalem: Kol Y'hudah (Hebrew). http://www.hebrew.grimoar.cz/kordovero/or_neerav.htm.
- Cordovero, Moshe. 1969. *Tomer D'vorah* (Palm Tree of Deborah). Jerusalem: Or Yiqar (Hebrew). <http://www.daat.ac.il/he-il/mahshevet-israel/yesod/mahshava/tomer-dvora.htm>.
- Cordovero, Moshe. 1974. *The Palm Tree of Deborah*, translated by Louis Jacobs. New York: Sepher Hermon Press. <http://www.digital-brilliance.com/contributed/deborah/deborah.htm>.
- Green, Arthur. 2002. "A Kabbalah for the Environmental Age." In Hava Tirosh-Samuels, ed. *Judaism and Ecology*, 3-15. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. Originally published in *Tikkun* 14:5, 33-40.
- Habahir, Sefer*. http://www.hebrew.grimoar.cz/anonym/sefer_ha-bahir.htm.
- Hazohar, Sefer*. http://www.hebrew.grimoar.cz/zohar/zohar_vilno_1.htm.
- Horowitz, Isaiah. 1996. *The Generations of Adam*, translated by Miles Krassen. New York: Paulist Press.
- Kaplan, Aryeh, trans. 1989. *The Bahir*. York Beach, ME: Weiser.
- Kook, Abraham Isaac. 1978. *Abraham Isaac Kook*, translated by Ben Zion Bokser. New York: Paulist Press.
- Krassen, Miles. 1999. "Peri Eitz Hadar: A Kabbalist Tu B'shvat Seder." In *Trees, Earth, and Torah: A Tu B'Shvat Anthology*, edited by Ari Elon, Naomi Hyman, and Arthur Waskow, 135-153. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.
- Liebes, 1993. "De Natura Dei: On the Development of Jewish Myth." In *Studies in Jewish Myth and Messianism*, translated by Batya Stein, 1-64. Albany NY: SUNY Press.
- Maimonides, Moses (Rambam). 1963a. *The Guide for the Perplexed*, 2 vols, translated by Shlomo Pines. Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Maimonides, Moses (Rambam). 1963b. *Mishnah Im Peyrush Harambam*, vol.1. Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook.
- Maimonides, Moses (Rambam). 1980. *The Guide for the Perplexed*, translated by Moses Friedlander. New York: Dover Books.

- Margaliot, Reuven, ed. 1984. *Sefer Hazohar*, 3 vols. Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook.
- Margaliot, Reuven, ed. 1994a. *Sefer Habahir* and *Tikunei Hazohar*. Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook.
- Margaliot, Reuven, ed. 1994b. *Zohar Chadash* and *Shaarei Zohar*. Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook.
- Matt, Daniel, ed. 1996. *The Essential Kabbalah*. San Francisco: HarperCollins.
- Saadyah Gaon. 1970. *Emunot v'Dei'ot*, translated by Yosef Kafich. Jerusalem: Makhon Sura. www.daat.ac.il/daat/mahshevt/kapah/4-2.htm (Sep. 2012).
- Scholem, Gershom. 1991. *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, translated by Joachim Neugroschel. New York: Schocken Books.
- Seidenberg, David. 2015. *Kabbalah and Ecology: God's Image in the More-Than-Human World*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Shneur Zalman of Liady. 1972. "Igeret Hakodesh 20." In *Likutei Amarim* (also called *Tanya*), translated by Nissan Mindel et al, 497–513. London: Otzar Hachasidim. http://www.chabad.org/library/tanya/tanya_cdo/aid/7965/jewish/Epistle-20.htm.
- Tirosh-Samuelson, Hava. 2002. "The Textualization of Nature in Jewish Mysticism." In *Judaism and Ecology: Created World and Revealed Word*, edited by Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, 389-396. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Waskow, Arthur. 2001. "The Emergence of Eco-Kabbalah." Philadelphia: Shalom Center. <http://.theshalomcenter.org/node/170> (Sep. 8).
- Wolfson, Elliot. 2002. "The Mirror of Nature Reflected in the Symbolism of Medieval Kabbalah." In *Judaism and Ecology: Created World and Revealed Word*, edited by Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, 305-331. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Further Reading

- Elon, Ari, Naomi Hyman and Arthur Waskow, eds. 1999. *Trees, Earth and Torah: A Tu B'Shvat Anthology*, Part IV, "Kabbalah and Hasidism," 113-162 and Part VI, "Eco-Judaism," 229–341. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.
- Green, Arthur. 2002. *EHYEH: A Kabbalah for Tomorrow*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights.
- Green, Arthur, 2010. *Radical Judaism: Rethinking God and Tradition*. Yale University Press.
- Hellner Eshed, Melila. 2009. *A River Flows from Eden*. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press.
- Matt, Daniel. 1998. *God and the Big Bang: Discovering Harmony Between Science & Spirituality*. Woodstock VT: Jewish Lights.

Biographical Note

David Mevorach Seidenberg teaches on ecology and Judaism throughout North America and internationally, and is the author of *Kabbalah and Ecology: God's Image in the More-Than-Human World*. David created and directs neohasid.org, which disseminates eco-Torah, liturgy, and Hasidic *nigunim*. He was ordained both by the Jewish Theological Seminary, where he completed a doctorate in Jewish thought, and by Rabbi

Zalman Schacher-Shalomi. His research interests include midrash and Talmud, Nachman of Breslov, Buber, and the theurgy of dance.

¹ In fact, Maimonides held this position as a young man (1963b, 21–2).

² It was also determinative for how he understood the problem of evil. See 3:12 and 3:25.

³ For a complete translation of this prayer, see Krassen (1999), 148-151.

⁴ In the example of the bird, *Tikunei Zohar* describes the head is the *Yud*, the body is the *Vav*, and the two wings are the two *Hehs* of God's name (Margaliot 1994a, 82b).

⁵ One seminal concept in Kabbalah engendering this sensitivity was reincarnation; for many kabbalists this included the possibility that human beings could reincarnate as animals or even plants. In another vein, many Kabbalists asserted that only one knowledgeable in Torah and raising the sparks should be allowed to eat meat.