



Being Here Now: This Creation is the Divine Image

BY DAVID SEIDENBERG

Response to Arthur Green's Review of *KABBALAH AND ECOLOGY: God's Image in the More-Than-Human World*. Cambridge University Press, 2015

ART GREEN AND I agree on so many important issues — not only on the environment, the rejection of religious triumphalism, and the embrace of human and ecological diversity, but also (and perhaps most importantly) on the role of theology in the ethical evolution of humanity. Yet I believe we disagree in some fundamental ways about how to do theology, specifically Jewish theology, and about what the best theology looks like. Green also understands my work very differently than I do. I

never make a claim that all creatures are equally in God's image; on the contrary, if we follow the lead of the Kabbalists, all of being participates in God's image, but in different ways and to different degrees. This makes for an important and meaningful debate, and I hope *Tikkun's* readers will indulge me as I explore its various dimensions.

Green and I agree that the most pressing issue of our time — indeed the only issue that matters if as a species we are to have time left — is our relationship to this planet. But do we need more clarion calls? Jewish environmentalists, like environmentalists of all stripes, have been exhorting us for half a century. Will one more exhortation make the difference? I do

not think so. When there are so many issues competing to be the most pressing one, sounding one more clarion can do little except reassure people who are already convinced that their issue is the right one.

Of course, many pages in *Kabbalah and Ecology*, especially in the introduction and conclusions, do sound a clarion call. (I encourage *Tikkun's* readers to go to kabbalahandecology.com and download the introduction in order to listen for themselves.) But such clarity and intensity of purpose is the reason for doing theology; it is not theology. Admonishments without deeper ethical transvaluation can only bring us so far along the path. What we need instead is a transformational theology, which requires us, as Hillel says,

to “go and study.” Theology cannot just be about ethical assertion, nor can it be only a matter of making one’s old religion line up with one’s modern (or post-modern) values. Theology is about reading one’s tradition coherently, accounting for all its moving parts — both the ones we agree with and the ones we do not — and learning from the way all those parts are interrelated.

This is exactly what Jewish eco-theology has yet to accomplish. We have mostly taken for granted that our Jewish values are correct, and that our personal values are also correct. It goes without saying that theology may realign a religious tradition in accordance with one’s own values, but it should first and foremost bring insight to the tradition and uncover its inner dimensions. Moreover, what theology uncovers must have the power to correct the values one starts out with, so that we are changed by what we learn.

Our eco-theologies, however, have tended to be woven together with apologetics explaining how environmentally sensitive Judaism already is, just as we would wish it to be. These apologetics use such poor examples of Judaism’s bona fides as *bal tashchit* (the Torah-rooted obligation not to waste) and stewardship. What is wrong with those by now old chestnuts? In a nutshell, in Jewish law, destroying something in a way that makes a monetary profit is not considered wasting. And stewardship teaches us the vastly incorrect lesson that we are somehow wise enough to become managers of the planet, when a fundamental root of the crisis is our very human arrogance. In the same way, declaring along with Green and Isaiah that “the whole earth is filled with God’s glory,” which Jews have already been doing for two-plus millennia, is probably not going to change much. The best translation for this verse, by the way, is “the fullness of the whole Earth is God’s glory” (which is also a much stronger statement on behalf of the Earth).

Doing better theology is important

for more than its own sake. The problem we face, as Green so rightly notes, is not just pollution, or climate change, or the exponentially increasing rate of extinctions, and the solution is not just technological or political. Fundamentally, we need to understand who we are, and how and why we are in relation to the more-than-human world, in new ways. Moreover, the spiritual solutions we come up with must be useful to us both now, when we might still change what happens, and later, if the worst of the climate crisis and the predicted wave of extinctions unfolds. As I wrote in *Kabbalah and Ecology*:

[W]hen we have to confront a world in which beauty has been driven from our presence, in which Spirit will seem to have abandoned us . . . humanity will also face the twin spiritual challenges of mourning for what has been lost and of sustaining compassion for each other and all Life. (p. 344)

To do all this, we need to draw on deep spiritual resources, rooted in a more textured and in-depth theology.

The central theological problem that occults and distorts our ability to meet these challenges is anthropocentrism, the idea that humanity is the center and purpose of Creation. Nowhere in the Jewish tradition is this problem more evident than in the idea of the image of God. Because we see ourselves as being created in God’s image, “*b’tzelem*,” we make God in the image of humanity, separating both God and humanity from Nature. However,

[t]he 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”. (p. 6) [Furthermore,] if we understand humans to be the only creatures in God’s image, then we isolate those qualities that set human beings apart . . . repressing those aspects of our own being that unite us with all life. (p. 32)

Focusing only on humanity’s uniqueness, we also lose sight of “the diversity inhering in what we call God,” which is an aspect of God’s infinitude. (p. 34) But, as Green would heartily agree, divinity is vaster than anything we can be or represent. Thus, a strongly anthropocentric understanding of God’s image alienates us not only from the abundance and blessing of the natural world, but also from our own nature and from divinity itself. This would be the case even if we were not facing an environmental crisis of world-shifting proportions.

Of course, it would be wrong to deny that anthropocentrism is a major theme in Jewish thought, but it was medieval radicals like Saadiah Gaon who distorted the tradition to say that this was the truth of our religion. Surely, one could point out, the Talmud teaches that everyone must say *bishvili nivra ha’olam*, “the world was created for my sake.” But that is one voice, which is tempered in typical rabbinic fashion with contradictory voices, both in our ancient texts, and in more recent voices, like the voice of Rebbe Nachman, who says, “If the world was created for my sake, I better pray for the whole world.” Or the voice of Simcha Bunim, who said that a person should have in one pocket the saying, “The world was created for my sake” and in the other, “I am nothing but dirt and ashes.” Or the voice of Yosef (Joseph) Ashkenazi, who in the thirteenth century wrote that when the midrash puts human beings at the center, it is because we include within us and stand for all the creatures of the universe, who are altogether called “Adam.” Or the voice of Maimonides, who says that anthropocentrism is fundamentally a mistake that distorts our view not only of God, but of evil, of the nature of the living universe, and of our ethical obligations to other species. In fact, the *p’shat* or original meaning of *bishvili* may be that each person is as unique as a whole species — with the concomitant

implication that each species also has ultimate moral significance. (p. 117)

I am piling on these examples to make a point: though it may be a real and valid perspective to see ourselves at the center, it is not the whole truth of the matter, nor the truth of Judaism, but a facet of a larger truth that includes opposing perspectives. That kind of conjunction of opposing ideas is in fact a common pattern of rabbinic thought, what Max Kadushin called “organic thinking.”

How then does Judaism need to transform in order to be more at home upon the Earth, and at home with biocentrism, the idea that all Life and all species are of ultimate value? One way is to arrive at a more complex view of the image of God and of the Jewish tradition. Can biocentrism become a lens to sharpen our sight so that we can achieve this? Can we transform Judaism in a way that is deeply respectful of the trajectory of the tradition and the path it has taken — all the way from Sinai? In what ways do our modern interpretations of Judaism need to be displaced, so that we can hear the biocentric tendencies already woven within the tradition? These are all questions that require vaster resources than what we can learn from our opinions or our politics, from science, or from our modernist or humanist values.

Here are some insights that illustrate what I mean. In *Kabbalah and Ecology*, I demonstrate that not a few Jewish thinkers saw the universe as the greatest image of God, and human beings as an image of that greatness. I demonstrate that some Chasidic rebbes used the term *qomah shleyimah* (meaning “a complete body”) to indicate that Creation itself was God’s image, while the Baal Shem Tov used the same term to refer to levels of God’s image within the more-than-human world, even if some of those levels were attenuated compared to the image of God in each human being. I demonstrate that Kabbalah

almost universally saw fruit trees, rainbows, and certain other natural phenomena as images of God. Though radical-seeming, there is nothing “Jainist” about these conclusions. Here’s the ringer: they are scholarly conclusions, and even someone who has no interest in ecology or the environment can agree that the texts say this.

I believe that this kind of theological progress can move the dial. What has also moved the dial, in a practical way, is the gathering of Spirit in the renewal of Judaism with song and davening, with connection to the land and to our bodies, through many different paths, whether they be farming, Zionism, wilderness, dance, etc. Even though Green describes this realm that we both have a hand in evolving as “the edges of the organized Jewish community,” what we are really talking about are the growing edges, growing into what is no longer marginalized but rather becoming more and more embraced by the organized Jewish world. In fact, where I live in Northampton, Massachusetts, environmentally-conscious Judaism is both the norm and backbone of much of our synagogue life, and I am grateful to be very much within the center of that community.

So even though we live in a scary time, we also live in a special time, when the radical depths of the tradition are opening up to us, even as we reforge our tradition. Green’s discomfort with some of those depths stems from his ethical anxieties, rather than from a better reading of the texts that I lift up in *Kabbalah and Ecology*. But I do not mean to make light of those anxieties. They ought to be taken very seriously. I only begin to address them in *Kabbalah and Ecology*:

[C]ould expanding God’s image to the more-than-human world and removing humanity from its pedestal have the unintended effect of trivializing human life? If we do so consciously,

I think not. When we come to expand *tzelem’s* reach, its original meaning is also intensified. Imagine, or remember, the awe you feel standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon, or descending into a forest, or witnessing an extraordinary storm or sunset. What would it be like to look at another person and feel that kind of awe? Imagine regarding a bus driver or a stranger who sits down beside you, or even an enemy, with those eyes. Imagine or remember what it is like to see a lover or a child with those eyes. (p. 313)

As the reader may already understand, theology is not enough — praxis, conscious practice of meaning and value in our real relationships, with people and with the more-than-human world, is needed. We also need to be conscious of what our theology does and how it can be used or misused. Green’s concerns are important, because the value of each unique human life is a central teaching of Judaism, a teaching our world needs. For this, I appreciate that theologians like Art Green, who share a love of the Earth, are also watching with a wary eye. As we move forward into a new world and not just a new interpretation of Judaism, we need to be bold in our questioning, resolute in our vision, and conserving, in the best sense, of our tradition’s wisdom. ■

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DOI 10.1215/08879982-3769539