

Cosmology and Biodiversity: The Divine Purpose in Creating Many Species

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Reflections on the Meaning of Diversity in Creation

And God saw everything that He had made, and here: very good! (Genesis 1:23)

Seeing the world as God sees it means seeing that something is “good”, good-in-itself and not just good for our purposes. Every day of creation ends with the statement, “And God saw: that it is good”. From a philosophical perspective, we might say that seeing is itself brought into reality by the goodness which is there to be seen. In the texts below, three different teachers explore what it means to see the world and all the creatures which are part of this world.

1) Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, selected from III:12-13, pp.442, 452-3.

Maimonides, or “Rambam”, who worked in Spain and Egypt in the 12th century, was one of the great philosophers of the Middle Ages. For Maimonides, understanding the natural order of the universe was an important way to understand God: “I have already let you know that there exists nothing except God and this existent world, and that there is no possible inference proving His existence except those deriving from this world taken as a whole and from its details.” (I:71, p.183) Maimonides understood the universe to be a living being: “Know that this whole of being is one individual and nothing else.” (I:72, p.184)

In the following passage, Maimonides responds to the notion that everything was created for the sake of humankind. Maimonides, who integrated medieval philosophy and Judaism, warned against seeing everything in anthropocentric terms, suggesting instead that we think of the whole creation and each creature in terms of itself instead of in terms of its usefulness to us.

[A]ll the existent individuals of the human species and, all the more, those of the other species, are things of no value at all in comparison with the whole that exists and endures... [One] should not make the mistake of thinking that [the whole of] what exists is in existence only for the sake of him as an individual... [nor should it] be believed that all the beings exist for the sake of the existence of man. On the contrary, all the other beings too have been intended for their own sakes and not for the sake of something else...

If you consider the account of the beginning, the notion that we have in view will become manifest to you. For with reference to none of them is the statement made in any way that it exists for the sake of some other thing. He only says that God brought every part of the world into existence and that its existence conformed to its purpose. This is the meaning of his saying: “And God saw that it was good”. About the whole, it says, “And God saw everything that He had made, and, behold, it was very good.”

When we think about ecology, it often seems as though we must choose between human desires and the value of nature. Maimonides, however, is comfortable asserting the value of human beings over other species even when he is stating that human beings are “of no value at all in comparison with the whole”.

Maimonides suggests a hierarchy in which humanity has greater significance than other species, but this significance is subordinate to both the whole cosmos and the existence of other creatures. Can a sense of importance about ourselves coexist with submitting to the needs of other creatures and recognizing the greater importance of the world as a whole?

A subtle question, underlying Maimonides’ interpretation of Genesis, may sharpen this point: If we see creation as God sees it, how then should we see ourselves?

God sees and affirms the goodness inherent in each created thing as well as celebrates the overwhelming goodness of all of creation together. We are a creation brought into being by God’s will, made somehow in “God’s image”, yet we are only a small, perhaps inessential part of that which makes all of creation “very good”. The tension between these contrasting perspectives characterizes Jewish perspectives on diversity and ecology.

2) Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, *Likutei Moharan*, section 17, pp.160-1.

Rebbe Nachman, a descendant of the Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder Hasidism, taught in the late 1700's through the beginning of the 1800's in the Ukraine. His teachings, which ascribe extraordinary significance to what we would call existential emotions, were unique in Hasidism and in Jewish history. He was known for his practice of praying in the field, which he called "hitbod'dut", the cultivation of aloneness for the sake of coming closer to God. For Nachman, meditation and prayer helped to reveal this divine aspect in all things. He taught, for example, that when one prayed in a field, the grasses themselves added their song to one's prayer.

In the following passage, Nachman emphasizes that every detail of every creature and every species reveals something important about God. In what certainly sounds curious to our ears, he also suggests that each such revelation which is manifested by creation has a corresponding manifestation within the Jewish people.

The *tsadik*/righteous person seeks and searches to reveal the willing/intentions of God. For in every thing there is the will of the blessed name: so it is in the whole of creation, and so in the details of creation, since the blessed name desired that each thing would be thus, with this form, with this power, and with this nature. So it is with all the creatures in the world, *domem*/silent (mineral), *tsome'ach*/growing (vegetable), *chai*/living (animal), *m'daber*/speaking (human)—in all of them there are a great many differences without number, between each one and its companion. And so it is with every single individual within itself—in each there are many differences in the particular details, i.e. between every limb, and so forth—with the grasses and trees and the rest of the particulars of creation. In all of them there are great differences in their forms and in their powers and behaviors. And all of it was the result of the Creator's will, blessed be His name, for He desired that this one would be like so and that one so. And the righteous person searches out the will behind each one, and clarifies and manifests it by relating it to the realization of beauty that manifests itself in [the people] Israel in general and in the details [of each person]. For in every single individual of Israel there is a specific realization of beauty.

It is through the contemplation of creation in all of its diversity, according to Nachman's introduction to this passage, that we are able to understand fear and love for God. God's presence is manifest at all levels of creation, and "leit atar panui mineih/there is no place empty of Him." (Zohar III:225a, Raya Mehemna) More than this, God's will is expressed uniquely in each species and in each individual creature. It is an expression of righteousness to try to understand how this will is expressed.

Nachman uses certain categories, common to his time (see 5 below), to classify this diversity, corresponding to what we call "human, animal, vegetable, mineral". The Hebrew suggests a kind of aliveness and dynamism which our terms do not. Inanimate matter is the category of "silent" creatures. Vegetation is what is "growing" or "sprouting", animals are "living" i.e. moving, and humans are "speaking". Each kind of creature has its own way of revealing divine will.

Throughout medieval philosophy and theology, the language used to refer to other creatures was full of this sense of aliveness. One of the reasons for studying texts from the past is to remember how other people have understood the world. What is the relationship between the way we talk about the world and the way we treat it? Does the way we label or talk about other species affect our determination to protect them?

Nachman asserts that Israel's diversity (or, we may also interpret, human diversity) is given meaning in the context of the diversity of species and creatures. If this is true, how does protecting biological diversity impact the survival of human diversity? Conversely, how can appreciating the diversity of human cultures help us protect biological diversity?

3) Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, *Lights of Holiness*, p.226.

Rav Kook, the rabbi of the old yishuv in Jerusalem and the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Palestine, believed it was possible to love all creatures with the same sense of love and responsibility we have for other people: "The heart must be filled with love for all. The love of all creation comes first, then comes the love for all mankind, and then follows the love

for the Jewish people, in which all other loves are included, since it is the destiny of the Jews to serve toward the perfection of all things.” (p.135)

In the passage below, Kook describes the universe as a place in which true love radiates from God to all beings in full measure, without hierarchy or subordination.

The whole [creation] is constituted of numberless particulars, particular individuals and particular communities, whether small or large, of which it is constituted. The higher unification [of the whole], in which everything finds its completion, rests on the influence of the knowledge of God and the love of God. . . . When the knowledge of God is suffused by a great love, there radiates from its absolute light 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. They draw into themselves the love for all existence, differentiated into its many forms of being, from the higher love for God, from the love of absolute and total perfection in the Cause of all, who created and sustains everything.

Rav Kook ascribes ontological value to the diversity of “particular communities”, rather than only to the species or individuals. Kook asks us not just to concern ourselves with species, but also to develop “love for all worlds, for all creatures, on all levels of their being.” This corresponds to the fact that the diversity of creatures on this earth is a direct function of the diversity of habitats and ecosystems. Understanding this is crucial to protecting species and to understanding what protecting species really means.

The meaning placed upon communities of species in Kook is unusual. The texts from Maimonides and Rebbe Nachman we studied above focus only on individual species. In the spirit of Rav Kook, can we also apply their teachings concerning the manifestation of God’s will in each creature, and the creation of each species for its own sake, to the entities we call “ecosystems” or “communities of species”?

Rav Kook somewhat radically describes a love for all that “fills the hearts of the good and kindly ones among creatures” as well as among humans. Do we witness such love in other creatures? If so, when and how, and how do we know it?

On Uniting the Soul with All Creation

What practices, sciences and meditations, can give us the power to see the depth of being, of divinity, to which these teachers call us? Rav Kook developed the capacity for love to its highest degree; Rebbe Nachman practiced hitbod’dut, aloneness; Maimonides found mystical depth in the metaphysical order of the universe. The following three teachers also sought ways to experience the depth of our relationship, and God’s relationship, to other creatures. Their teachings may suggest practices which we can use to understand in a deeper way the manifold diversity of creation.

4) Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, pp.223-4.

Franz Rosenzweig worked between the World Wars in Germany, developing a philosophy which is both intensely modern and profoundly based in Jewish practice. He saw God, humanity, and the world as vertices of a triangle whose sides represented creation (from God to the world), revelation (from God to humanity) and redemption (from humanity to the world). This sense of triadic relationships is expressed sometimes in terms of love: “Being loved comes to man from God, loving turns toward the world. . . . Thus love turns the world into a world animated with a soul. . . .” (pp.240, 259) While Rosenzweig’s emphasis on love is very reminiscent of Rav Kook, his formulation accounts for the fact that our relationship to God and our relationship to the world are not always in sync.

In the following passage, Rosenzweig anticipates a time when our love for God and our love for creation will be unified. In that time, creation will become transformed into “the kingdom of God” and united with the human soul.

The kingdom of God is actually nothing other than the reciprocal union of the soul with all the world. This union of the soul with all the world occurs in thanksgiving, and the kingdom of God comes in this

union and every conceivable prayer is fulfilled. But admittedly this fulfillment only precedes, it is only anticipated. . . [In order for this to happen] the world must become wholly alive. It must become alive as a whole instead of becoming individual foci of life like so many raisins in a cake. That it is not yet thus means again that the world is not yet finished.

For Rosenzweig, “the world is not yet finished” because the fulfillment of the process of creation can only come through redemption. The union of the soul with the world, which comes through thanksgiving, is both that which completes creation and that which brings redemption.

Rosenzweig teaches that our prayer reaches exactly to the limits of our communion with other creatures. Our capacity to give thanks can expand to recognize the beauty and complexity of all of creation and the needs of all of its creatures. Redemption is “the fulfillment of every conceivable prayer”—but not because what we ask of God has finally come to pass. It is the other way around: what we pray for and what we give thanks for corresponds exactly to the multitude of needs fulfilled by and in the world, so that prayer is already answered before it is spoken. In redemption, our communion with other creatures becomes complete.

Thanksgiving is a special aspect of prayer, one which all of creation participates in: “Every breath/every soul, praise Yah!” (Psalm 150) Giving thanks for every creature and every moment is also an important part of recognizing the value of each species and each habitat. As we begin to understand the harmony between different species and the unity of all life, we may perhaps begin to understand what Rosenzweig meant when he said that “the world must become wholly alive.” What does it mean to think of our expanding vision and perception of life as a process of redemption? What does it suggest about how we should pray?

In Judaism, redemption is closely associated with social justice. If redemption means the full realization of justice in the world, what does this “turn toward the world” say about how we should pursue justice in our society and community?

5) Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyadi, *Likutei Amarim, Igeret Hakodesh 20*, selected from pp.507-11.

*Rabbi Shneur Zalman, known as “the Alter Rebbe”, outlined the philosophy of the Chabad movement in his book *Likutei Amarim* (often called “Tanya” by the first word of the book). He pays very close attention to something we have already heard much about: the manner in which the divine light, or life-force, sustains all of the creatures. One of the questions which concerns Shneur Zalman is how this infinite energy could become contained in finite objects. It is through what is called “tsimsum”, or “contraction” (a term taken from Lurianic Kabbalah) that this energy can make its way into the world through progressively narrower portals. By means of “all these contractions. . . the light and life-force could invest itself even in the lower created things, such as stones and dust. And this is the soul of the silent being, which gives it life and brings it into existence.” (Sha’ar Hayichud, p.317)*

The problem dealt with in the following passage is the reverse one: How does the contracted light present in all things make its way back to God? How does something so removed from its source retain its connection to the divine?

[T]he essence and nature of the light of [God’s] *Ein Sof*/infinite presence. . .encompasses all worlds equally [as it is said]: “And I fill the heavens and the earth” in one equal [manifestation], and “there is no place void of Him” even in this physical world. . .Furthermore, the radiance of [the *Ein Sof*] manifests its power in the element of the earth in an immense manifestation, surpassing even the hosts of heaven. For they do not have it in their power and ability constantly to bring forth, like the element of earth, [which] constantly makes something grow. . .It is the constant and everlasting effect, throughout the earth, of the command “Let the earth bring forth grass”—an aspect of *Ein Sof*/infinity, not limited to the six days of creation only. For during the seven days of the beginning there shone in this world a radiation from the light of the *Ein Sof* in a mode of pure *chesed*/kindness, making grasses and trees and fruits grow constantly, from year to year. [By means of these] the living (animal) is nurtured and lives by the growing, and the speaking (human) receives his life-force from both, even wisdom and knowledge. This is the aspect [which is called] “*or chozer*/reflected/returning light”; from below, from the bottom, upwards. . .

In Hasidism, great emphasis is placed on the twofold-ness of God's presence in the world: every individual being and object which exists is both filled with and surrounded by God's presence. By means of the interaction of all the species, and by the continuous replenishment of them, the light which fills each being makes its way back, so to speak, thus completing the cycle which began with "contraction". While this process might be seen as a mystical interpretation of the food chain, it really speaks to something more. According to Shneur Zalman, the infinity of birth and death, nourishment and decay, is a direct reflection of the infinity of God.

It is common in many religious traditions, including Judaism, to praise the eternity we see in the hosts of heaven, and to see the cycle of generation and decay which characterizes the earth's life as a kind of blemish. Here we learn a very different way of seeing the universe. Does a respect for the earth's "infinity" change the way we think about God's relationship to creation?

Shneur Zalman also claims that wisdom and knowledge come from the food that nurtures us, and the earth that produces it. As in the passage from Rav Kook, this suggests a theological way of understanding the concepts of habitat and ecosystem. Each creature manifests a permutation, as it were, of God's name, but it is the ecosystem as a whole which enables each manifestation to connect back to its root in God.

Is it possible to relate this idea that the light can return to God through the channel of human wisdom to secular scientific knowledge? Does our understanding of the inter-relationships species cohere with such a mystical view of our place in creation? How can our theological visions coexist with our scientific understanding of things in the world?

6) Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, selected from pp.57, 172-7.

Martin Buber published his great work, I and Thou, in 1923. I and Thou explored what it means to truly respond to another being as "You", to reach for a depth of relationship in which the I and the You are transformed and the depth of being becomes present to both.

Buber also translated the Bible together with Franz Rosenzweig. Their translation attempted to bring the full force of speaking, of God's speech as it were, into German. Buber's belief in the power and presence of language guided his philosophy, and led him to describe the two types of relationships he wrote about as "the basic word I-You and the basic word I-It". Even though Buber thought of relationships so strongly in terms of language, he nevertheless asserted that "You-saying", where we treat the other as an end-in-themselves, was something that could happen in the relationship between a human and an animal, or, in what became a famous example, between a human and a tree.

In the second part of the passage below, Buber answers criticisms made against his assertion that a tree could "respond" to a person's "You-saying". In doing so, he reveals much about what it means to see other creatures in their fullness.

I contemplate a tree... The tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no aspect of a mood; it confronts me bodily, and has to deal with me as I must deal with it—only differently.

One should not try to dilute the meaning of the relation: relation is reciprocity.

Does the tree then have consciousness, similar to our own? I have no experience of that. What I encounter is neither the soul of a tree nor a dryad, but the tree itself...

[W]hat is the character of this reciprocity, and what gives us the right to apply to it this basic concept?

Instead of considering nature as a whole, as we usually do, we must consider its different realms separately. Man once 'tamed' animals... he draws animals into his own sphere and moves them to accept him... and to accede to his ways—on the whole, this response is the stronger and more direct, the more his relation amounts to a genuine You-saying... Animals by nature are not twofold, like man: the twofoldness of the basic words I-You and I-It is alien to them although they can both turn toward another being and contemplate objects. We may say that in them twofoldness is latent. In the perspective of our You-saying to animals, we may call this sphere the threshold of mutuality.

It is altogether different with those realms of nature which lack the spontaneity that we share with

animals. It is part of our concept of the plant that it cannot react to our actions upon it, that it cannot “reply”. Yet this does not mean that we meet with no reciprocity at all in this sphere. We find here not the deed of posture of an individual being but a reciprocity of being itself—a reciprocity that has nothing except being. The living wholeness and unity of a tree is manifest to those who say You, is present when they are present. Our habits of thought make it difficult for us to see that in such cases something is awakened by our attitude and flashes toward us from that which has being. What matters in this sphere is that we should do justice with an open mind to the actuality that opens up before us.

This huge sphere that reaches from the stones to the stars I should like to designate as the pre-threshold, meaning the step that comes before the threshold. . . To understand it we must sometimes step out of our habits of thought, but not out of the norms that determine man’s thoughts about what is actual. . . [W]hat acts on us may be understood as the action of what has being.

Buber uses the metaphor of the “threshold” to explain how creatures without language can cross from silence into conversation. It is our language, expressed not in words but through a kind of active contemplation, which provides the bridge for the rest of creation to cross over. One can communicate across the threshold of an open door; just so, even those beings which cannot enter the room of language can become “visible” across the opening of our “You-saying”.

For Buber, what was most important was “the close association of the relation to God with the relation to one’s fellow men”. (p.171) In the moment of the I-You relation, we become open to the full presence of justice and the direct perception of love within and toward another person. It was Buber’s prophetic mission to lift up this dimension of human relationships. Though we may focus on the implications of Buber’s work for our relationship to other creatures, Buber would remind us that we must deepen our human relationships as well. What is the connection between our human relationships and our relationship to nature? What can we do to make the work of understanding and protecting all species something which also helps us understand each other?

What is our responsibility to the creature that “is awakened” toward us, that responds, as it were, by its very being? This is a question which Buber does not answer, a question which we must ask ourselves.

Conclusions

The creation as a whole has its own integrity and holiness, and so too does each species. Creation as a whole is an expression of God’s will and being, or in the terms of Kabbalah, of God’s names; each creature is a permutation of the expression of Divine will, something good-in-itself. The goodness of the whole of creation emerges from the goodness of all the creatures, but it is something much more. As Maimonides notes, “About the whole, it says, ‘And God saw everything that He had made, and, behold, it was very good.’”

Today, we are aware not just of the miracle of the renewal of creation as a whole, but of the miracle of the renewal of each species, each community, each habitat and each ecosystem. We know that the struggle of life is what leads to the generation and renewal of species. The death of extinction, brought by human hands, ends the cycle of life and death, the miracle of renewal. As Maimonides recognizes, the goodness of creation will continue, whatever happens to us and to the creatures that are affected by our actions. The extraordinary diversity, complexity, and beauty which is part of our world, however, is something we can destroy. For better and for worse, the miracle is now placed in our hands, and it is up to us to keep the light returning to its source.

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Note: Changes have been made in the cited translations to facilitate reading. The translation of Rebbe Nachman is by Rabbi David Seidenberg.