



# Kabbalah and Ecology

*God's Image in the  
More-Than-Human World*

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## Overview of *Kabbalah and Ecology*

This book examines precedents in Jewish thought for going beyond the strictly anthropocentric interpretation of the cosmos that characterizes Judaism and the Abrahamic traditions. The fulcrum for this examination is the idea of God’s image, or *tselem*, and the ways it has been stretched in both Midrash and Kabbalah to include more than human beings. At the book’s core is a transvaluation of the human–Nature relationship, indicated by a relatively new term for Nature: the “more-than-human world” (see Introduction, n.4).

One central focus is to establish a theology grounded entirely in traditional texts that envisions Creation and all creatures as participating in the divine image. Throughout, I examine precedents from Midrash, Kabbalah, and *Chasidut* (Hasidism) that differ from modernist or humanist anthropocentrism and that point toward alternative anthropologies or ways of understanding humanity. While in each case I am interested in the historical meaning of the texts, and there are many insights that I hope will make a meaningful contribution to the history of Jewish thought, the overarching purpose is to enable Jewish theology to sustain a more biocentric reading of Torah and the Jewish tradition.

The Introduction discusses the challenges that arise from ecology, beginning with general reflections on the ecological crisis and its impact on religious thought and on specific challenges faced by the Abrahamic traditions. A survey of previous work in Judaism and ecology can be found here, along with discussion about the contribution and method of this book. Broad questions are explored under the headings of “diversity”, “non-human subjecthood”, and “evolution”. In the last section, on evolution, anthropocentrism is critiqued directly from a Maimonidean perspective. Evolution, which contradicts human exceptionalism, is discussed in light of the thought of both Maimonides and Abraham Isaac Kook. The Introduction concludes with what I call a

“theological map”, that is, a homiletical statement of the thesis developed herein, based on *Mishnah Avot* 3:14, which is this: When we affirm and extend the idea of God’s image to other creatures, we more fully embody the image of God. This may be deemed our theological niche.

Part I of the book, on Midrash, outlines classical rabbinic anthropology and ideas about the image of God (*tselem Elohim*), the soul, and the human place in the world. This provides a basis for comparison with the texts of Kabbalah. Here it is demonstrated that the standard interpretation of *tselem* given by modern thinkers – that only human beings are in God’s image – is not the best reading of rabbinic texts.

In [Chapters 1](#) and [2](#), midrashic interpretations of *tselem* are organized according to whether they focus on intellectual, physical, behavioral, or ethical qualities as the essence of the divine image. *B’rei’shit (Genesis) Rabbah* is the central midrashic text analyzed, while other texts are looked at in comparison to it. A central idea in early midrash is that only half of Creation, the *elyonim*, higher or upper creatures, is in God’s image, while the *tachtonim* or lower creatures are not. This metaphysical division is queried in all subsequent chapters.

Throughout these chapters, I explore the ramifications and evolution of various midrashic motifs in both medieval and modern thought. Maimonides, who adopts some remarkably eco-centric theological positions, is a frequent reference point. Here and in [Chapter 4](#), the growing influence of anti-corporealism theology in Judaism – that is, the belief that the body is in opposition to Spirit<sup>1</sup> – is also traced from early midrash to later midrash to Jewish philosophy.

In [Chapter 3](#), I tease apart the value complex that unites within the human being the ideas of *tselem*, soul, and infinite value. This value complex characterizes most modern Jewish thought. I use the term “modernist-humanist” to refer to this value complex in the rest of the book. Midrashic texts thought to be the source of these ideas are carefully analyzed to show that they do not ground human value in God’s image, but in the value of Creation.

Four points are drawn from these three chapters:

1. *Tselem* according to the rabbis is not limited to human beings but includes the angels and the heavens.
2. Soul, *nefesh* or *n’shamah*, is not equated with *tselem* in early midrash.
3. The modern idea that human life has “infinite value” has no clear representation in rabbinic thought.
4. The rabbis do not connect the idea of God’s image with imitating God until after the close of the Amoraic period (around the eighth century).

Focusing on these points clears space for alternative readings of the tradition. Modernist-humanist theology is not “disproven” by this. In fact, a central element in the modernist (and medieval) understanding of *tselem*, the idea

<sup>1</sup> “Anti-corporealism” can also refer to a different belief, that God has no physical body or form.



that God's image is realized through imitating God, is also central to any ecotheological interpretation. Rather, the modernist-humanist interpretation is shown to be a hermeneutical choice.

Chapter 4 deals with the evolution of the rabbinic understanding of soul, including the impact of Hellenism on Jewish thought and the conception that animals have souls.

Chapter 5 discusses the ethical norms applied to animals in Torah and rabbinic literature, the fact that the rabbis believed animals have moral standing and the potential to be moral actors, and how the rabbis understood stewardship and dominion. The rabbinic view of animals elucidates how the rabbis viewed the non-human other in general, including mountains, stones, and rivers, and most especially land, and how they extended a kind of moral standing to such entities.

This chapter is followed by a brief summary of the Intermediate Conclusions arrived at in Part I, as well as reflections on the idea of biophilia.

Part II, on Kabbalah, begins with a survey of ideas about *tselem* in Kabbalistic texts. Chapter 6 focuses on interpretations that extend midrashic ideas, while Chapter 7 discusses ideas that differ from the Midrash. The most important points in these chapters are:

1. In Kabbalah, *tselem* has a physical meaning that includes sexuality and the structure of our bodies and that simultaneously reflects the divine realms of the Sefirot.
2. Kabbalah sees many non-human creatures or dimensions of the earthly or lower realm as being in the divine image.

That sexuality in Kabbalah is part of *tselem* is well known but especially important, because sexuality and reproduction were defined in many classical midrashic texts as qualities we share with the lower creatures that are not *b'tselem*, not "in the image".

The second point is based on a hermeneutic essential to Kabbalah: the system of the Sefirot (attributes or vessels of God) and the name YHVH, writ upon the human body and soul, are identified as what constitutes God's image. Under the veil of esotericism, Kabbalistic texts use the same terminology to identify this divine imprint in various non-human creatures and more-than-human dimensions. Generally, elements of the *tachtonim* treated this way represent either the unification of the heavens and the earth (trees, birds), the whole of Creation, some spectrum that stands for the totality of world or cosmos (all colors, all animals), or all of the above (the *mishkan*, the rainbow).

Chapter 8 discusses the connection between *chiyut* or lifeforce and divinity in the thought of Shneur Zalman of Liady and Yaakov Lainer and whether a general theory about the extension of *tselem* to all the *tachtonim* can be grounded in these concepts.

Chapter 9 looks at how Kabbalah conceives the universe in its totality. In particular, the terminology "*Adam Qadmon*" describes the cosmos, including

the Sefirotic worlds, as divinity. Some Kabbalists, especially Yosef Ashkenazi, drew the conclusion that if Adam is in God's image and the universe in the form of *Adam Qadmon* is in the human image, then Creation is *b'tselem*.

The second part of [Chapter 9](#) discusses Shneur Zalman's description in *Igeret Haqodesh* 20 of the earthly realm as part of the living body of *Adam Qadmon*. Using the rubric of *Or Chozer*, returning or reflected light, Shneur Zalman of Liady specifically valorizes the Earth, which uniquely manifests the originary love present at the beginning of Creation.

[Chapter 10](#) examines parallels between Maimonidean thought and *Adam Qadmon*, both of which attribute tremendous value and personhood to the whole of Creation, and between both of these and Gaia theory, which posits that the Earth is best understood as a living, whole organism.

[Chapter 11](#) identifies several synonyms for *tselem* that evolved in Kabbalah. One in particular, *qomah*, can be traced from early Jewish texts of midrash, mysticism, and liturgy, through Kabbalistic and Hasidic thought. For Yishayah Horowitz, *qomah* came to mean *tselem in potentia*. The Ba'al Shem Tov and his disciples finally applied *qomah sh'leymah* to the idea that human intervention can reveal the divine image in other beings.

This chapter is followed by a second Intermediate Conclusions section that reviews some of the conjunctions between Kabbalah and ecotheology.

Part III looks more specifically at ecotheology. [Chapter 12](#) focuses on language, a chief element of *tselem* according to early midrash, in the form of prayer, song, and naming. While it does discuss midrashic themes and texts, unlike other chapters it relies on modern thinkers, in particular Martin Buber and Nachman of Breslov, to elaborate the idea that all Creation has language.

[Chapter 13](#) looks at how ideas discussed in earlier chapters line up with popular expositions of Jewish ecotheology found in the writings of Arthur Green and Arthur Waskow, and with "secular" ecotheologies. I also provide two other "theological maps" for extending *tselem* to the more-than-human world; these are analogous to the one discussed in the Introduction, but are earth-centered rather than human-centered. This chapter may be read as a second introduction to the book.

The Conclusion explores the use of historical-critical methods in constructive theology, the limitations of stewardship, and some of the halakhic and ethical implications of expanding God's image to the more-than-human. Finally, it asks: What does the theological process have to do with ecological reparation, with *tiqun* (*tikkun*), and with redemption? How do we turn theology into a living practice?

*Methods for Jewish Constructive Theology*, published separately online at [www.kabbalahandecology.com](http://www.kabbalahandecology.com), situates this book in the continuum of theological discourse, Jewish Studies scholarship, and literary theory. *Methods*

responds to the questions that *Wissenschaft des Judentums*<sup>2</sup> scholars may have about combining critical analysis of texts with constructive theology.

<sup>2</sup> “The Scientific Study of Judaism” – the “positive-historical” school of criticism that began in the nineteenth century.