

Article

“There Is No ‘Away:’” Ecological Fact as Jewish Theological Problem

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Abstract: The “second law of ecology”—that all matter remains part of the earthly ecosystem—poses a theological challenge to Jewish monotheisms. Climate change has further underscored the urgency of understanding and acting in light of the interconnected materiality of the world. Yet Jewish theological discourse has remained largely detached from broader planetary conditions and from the metabolization of these conditions in the environmental humanities. The few contemporary Jewish theologians who recognize ecological crisis as worthy of comment have largely responded to it by propping up apologetic accounts of Jewish theology and ethics that rely on a construction of the divine as outside of the world. I argue that ecological crisis reveals the inadequacy of extant approaches to Jewish theology, which either promote ethical monotheism and a stewardship model of relation to the nonhuman world or claim to promote divine immanence while nonetheless reinscribing human dominion.

Keywords: ecology; Jewish theology; transcendence; immanence; ecotheology; environmental humanities; anthropocentrism



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Planet Earth has already become uninhabitable to many species, and will soon be mostly uninhabitable for the human species.¹ This fact upends the conceptual and narrative frameworks within which Jewish ritual, liturgical, and philosophical traditions have taken shape over millennia. Certainly, there have been great ruptures in Jewish history, from the destruction of the Temples to the Shoah, and those ruptures challenged the certainty of a providential history, the promise of a future redemption, and the nature of God’s election of Israel. This moment, by contrast, presents not merely and not primarily a crisis for the Jewish people, but a planetary crisis. While the effects of climate disaster are unequal, and exacerbate existing inequalities, ecological disruption on a grand scale will eventually undermine the possibility of all human and much non-human life.² Climate catastrophe—a shorthand for a cluster of anthropogenic disruptions that arise from fossil fuel consumption on a grand scale—makes clear the incoherence of Jewish narratives that implicitly center the Jewish people among all humans and *Homo sapiens* among all life forms.³ It is not clear that any extant Jewish theology can speak meaningfully in a moment when not only Jews, but all people and indeed many life forms, are imperiled if not already extinct.

The motivating concern for this essay is the reluctance, or perhaps refusal, of most contemporary Jewish thinkers to reckon with the existential, ecological catastrophe that faces human and non-human life on Planet Earth and the profound challenges this catastrophe poses to Jewish cosmologies and anthropologies. I write both as a scholar of Jewish theology and as theologically inclined Jew; as a result of these and other intersecting positions, I sometimes speak in first person plural about the intellectual challenges “we” face. This “we” generally refers to people inclined toward fundamental questions of theology, cosmology, and ethics as they surface in Jewish texts and contexts. My apprehension is that there is fundamental incompatibility between what many of us recognize as “Jewish thought” and a world on fire: when we speak in the terms and frameworks that have shaped Jewish intellectual traditions, we may feel less and less able to speak about the reality of our world and of ourselves *in* and *as* that world.

The pickings for the present scholarly critique are remarkably slim. An unscientific survey of recent Association for Jewish Studies conference programs suggests that climate disaster and other “environmental” issues remain marginal to critical scholarship in Jewish studies. This paucity of engagement stands in marked contrast to the proliferation of critical theorizing that has, for the last decade and a half, aimed to metabolize the meaning of this unfolding disaster for the humanities beyond Jewish studies.⁴ In what follows, I consider the work of the handful of contemporary scholars of Jewish theology who *have* addressed environmental issues in some form.⁵ I will argue that although some of the contributions are more intellectually adequate than others to the current moment, extant theological work directly addressing climate catastrophe has sidestepped the most critical intellectual challenges.

This problem bears examination from multiple directions. In this essay, however, I limit myself to considering a specific point of conflict between familiar modes of Jewish theological expression and the current moment. On the one hand, dominant forms of Jewish liturgy, practice, and speculation largely affirm a God who is in some sense not, or not yet fully, here in the earthly realm: the world exists because a God who is not here created it and because a God who is not wholly available within ordinary earthly processes and materials revealed a set of teachings not otherwise available to the people of Israel. On the other hand, the principle of the conservation of matter, applied to ecology, teaches us what Barry Commoner called, in *The Closing Circle* (1972), the “second law of ecology” half a century ago: “Everything must go somewhere. There is no ‘waste’ in nature and there is no ‘away’ to which things can be thrown” (Commoner [1972] 2020, p. 36). Ecologically speaking, everything that *is*, is “here”, and our ecological disaster reveals that truth ever more starkly.

In this essay, I argue that contemporary Jewish theological commitments to a God who is in some crucial sense, if not completely, “away” fundamentally obscures the interconnected materiality (itself inseparable from the creative agency) of the world revealed by ecological disaster.⁶ While Jewish modes of speaking about ultimate reality are, of course, variegated and polyvocal, and while some esoteric mystical Jewish traditions raise the possibility of a fully present God, the vast majority of the exoteric tradition is incompatible with contemporary ecological knowledge. I argue that Jewish thought has a *theological*, and not only a social or ethical, problem when it comes to ecology.

Before proceeding, I want to state plainly that I am *not* arguing that a shifted theological landscape will directly (or perhaps even indirectly) shift human behavior with regard to the climate crisis. In my view, human activity is far too complex and multidetermined to sustain such a claim. Nor am I arguing that Western religions’ understanding of a transcendent God is directly complicit in or culpable for ecological crisis. The locus classicus of that argument is Lynn White, Jr.’s “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis”, a brief but much-cited piece which argued that, “viewed historically, modern science is an extrapolation of natural theology and . . . modern technology is at least partly to be explained as an Occidental, voluntarist realization of the Christian dogma of man’s transcendence of, and rightful mastery over, nature” (White 1967, p. 1206). Christian cosmology, for White, was thus culpable for contemporary environmental exploitation and the resulting disaster of climate change.⁷ White’s essay ignited scholarly interest in the topic of religious environmental ethics, and many scholars sympathetic to normative religious claims were eager to defend Jewish and Christian theological traditions in the face of White’s charge.

I begin with a fundamental ecological principle—the so-called second law of ecology—and the frequently suppressed knowledge of ecological crisis to investigate how climate disaster interrogates the theological economies of Judaism. In particular, I juxtapose the “hereness” of earthly matter in ecological thinking with the “awayness” of God in dominant Jewish theological traditions. I then consider the two principal approaches Jewish theologians have taken when writing about matters of ecological concern: one that doubles down on the “awayness” of God and another that, while acknowledging the ‘hereness’ of life and divinity on the earthly plane, only partially reckons with the

theological implications of that concession. Theology, as I understand it, is a discourse that claims to address ultimate reality and to conceptualize our place in the world; for this reason, it is especially troubling when theologians participate in what Amitav Ghosh has called the “Great Derangement”.⁸ I hope with this critical essay to prompt Jewish theologians, rabbis, activists, and others to begin the difficult, and necessarily collective, constructive work of grappling with planetary crisis.

1. “There Is No ‘Away’”

Eventually, all biotic matter becomes soil and nutrients; minerals, over time, eventually become biotic. Inorganic compounds corrode or degrade and leach into soil, the air, and the water. Industrial waste intermixed with organic matter may be ingested by birds or swallowed by sea creatures, rummaged through and reused one last time by the impoverished, or carried off to eventually reach the local harbor or river, and from there onward to the next waters. But even “final destinations”—landfills, wastewater treatment facilities, the Pacific Garbage Patch—are not final in any ultimate sense. Microplastics eventually enter human bodies through human consumption. Industrial waste settles in the soil out of which new life is to emerge; growth continues, but under compromised conditions.

Those of us in the wealthiest and most insulated enclaves of the Global North think about the waste we produce with our bodies, with our habits, and with our societal infrastructure only occasionally. Most privileged inhabitants in these wasteful societies—and I include myself in this group—could furnish these answers to “where things go” if pressed. The journey of matter might cross one’s mind when the toilet breaks, when we “downsize”, when we have occasion to visit the town dump, or when we have the burden of disposing of a deceased relative’s possessions. But, by and large, those of us whose comfort is made possible by environmental racism and global inequality have repressed the knowledge that all things end up *somewhere*, and that the somewhere remains terrestrial: here, with us. As the consequences of these choices become increasingly severe to more and more people, this strategy of “not knowing” will be tested.⁹

The shorthand in ecology “there is no ‘away’” expresses the principle of the conservation of matter within the planetary system. We still use the phrases “throw it away”, “give it away”, or “flush it away” to refer to the act of removing from our immediate sight or proximity what has been designated as no longer valuable. This persistent linguistic fiction shelters the privileged from grappling with the fact that there is no ultimate “away” to which we can run, and there is no “away” to which we can relegate what is unwanted. The resistance to this fact feeds the ongoing quest by the privileged to move “away”, whether in the form of relocating a town or in a flight into space.¹⁰ While ecological disaster is traceable to political, economic, and cultural factors, a *conceptual* world in which there is an “away” buttresses and makes sensible material and social structures.

Commoner’s translation of the conservation of matter into ecological terms was formulated as a general principle: that everything—whether we regard it as valuable or as waste—remains “here” in some form:

A persistent effort to answer the question “Where does it go?” can yield a surprising amount of valuable information about an ecosystem. Consider, for example, the fate of a household item which contains mercury—a substance with serious environmental effects that have just recently surfaced. A dry-cell battery containing mercury is purchased, used to the point of exhaustion, and then “thrown out.” But where does it really go? First it is placed in a container of rubbish; this is collected and taken to an incinerator. Here the mercury is heated; this produced mercury vapor which is emitted by the incinerator stack, and mercury vapor is toxic. Mercury vapor is carried by the wind, eventually brought to earth in rain or snow. Entering a mountain lake, let us say, the mercury condenses and sinks to the bottom. Here it is acted on by bacteria which convert it to methyl mercury. This is soluble and taken up by fish; since it is not metabolized, the

mercury accumulates in the organs and flesh of the fish. The fish is caught and eaten by a man and the mercury becomes deposited in his organs, where it might be harmful. And so on (Commoner [1972] 2020, p. 36).

Commoner's holistic approach, taken up by James Lovelock as the "Gaia hypothesis", foregrounds the greater whole within which all specific phenomena and processes are contained (Rubenstein 2018, chp. 3). Each of the many particulars leads to and ultimately connects with the others, thanks to the winds and waters that keep all matter in motion and the processes of decay and growth that circulate throughout all living systems. The half century since Commoner's book appeared, which has seen rapidly escalating and interrelated environmental crises, has vindicated this vision of an interlinked planet in which "there is no 'away'".¹¹ And in the last two decades, newly developed fields have become a site for wrestling with the significance of this reality. Scholars in the environmental humanities have examined the inadequacy of many assumptions endemic to intellectual discourse, within and beyond the humanities: the "nature" and "culture" distinction, the presumption that humans are the only truly agentic beings and that the non-human serves merely as the background or landscape upon which humans are placed.¹²

Yet in the face of an expansive interdisciplinary rethinking of the world's elements and their relationships, contemporary Jewish theological discourse has seemingly continued undisturbed. Rosenzweig's trinity—"God, human, and world"—persists in Jewish theological discourse as an apparently neutral and intelligible categorization. Those of us committed to the relevance and flourishing of Jewish theological discourse must decide against intellectual compartmentalization. We can no longer bracket this most dire, existential situation by focusing on, for instance, the continued existence of Jews as though it were separable from the continued habitability of the planet.

2. The Limits of Jewish Theological Discourses

Although *ecology* remains a word without broad resonance in Jewish thought, another set of terms—*transcendence* and *immanence*—appear frequently as position markers when so-called environmental questions appear in contemporary Jewish writing. "Transcendence" functions as a rallying cry for thinkers on one side of the discussion, as "immanence" does for those on the other. In discussions of Jewish thought and environmental questions, "transcendence" and "immanence" are often deployed as though they are stable terms that can be usefully juxtaposed to one another. But careful reading shows that these terms are endowed with a variety of different meanings: "transcendence" is sometimes glossed as awayness—the condition of being exterior to and above the earthly realm—but is just as often used to indicate alterity, inaccessibility, immateriality, moral absolutism, and/or the guarantee of necessary ethical hierarchies. In the writings I consider below, "immanence", by the same token, can variably refer to connectedness, identity, equality, participation, and/or materiality. Tracing how Jewish thinkers engage nature or ecology demands that we inquire *how* "transcendence" and "immanence" mean in contemporary Jewish theological writing.

Such diversity of meanings in Jewish discourse highlights these terms' embeddedness in the social and political projects of emancipation and acculturation.¹³ To this day, most Jewish theologians advocating "transcendence" or "immanence" as a theological position unwittingly maintain the cultural struggles that first emerged in central and western Europe in the eighteenth century. "Transcendence" and "immanence" typically are deployed, in other words, as symbolic performances concerning politics or ethics, and always in implicit or explicit relation to one another.¹⁴ As a consequence of both the instability and the perceived stakes of these terms for Jewish discourse, shadow-boxing takes the place of exploration of different theological models. In the fray, ecological disaster itself becomes occluded as a serious issue for Jewish theology. I fear that ecological considerations will remain marginal as long as the terms of discussion remain fenced in by polemical enactments.

And yet, these are the terms that mark the boundaries of the (limited) discourse to date, and thus I trace how they function in two principal angles from which Jewish thinkers have approached “the environment” in contemporary discussions. In the first, the descriptive characterization of Jewish theological assumptions I sketched above—of a God who is envisioned as outside of our world—becomes a prescriptive orthodoxy: the God of Israel *must* be outside of “nature”; in the more extreme versions of this position, the God of Israel *opposes* the “natural order”. Only a God so constructed, it is claimed, can ground ethics, for “nature” itself is amoral and unable to furnish the grounds for ethics. This argument was fervently endorsed among modernizing central European thinkers in the 19th century and has appeared once again, in the context of environmental issues, among 21st century American Jewish thinkers (Erlewine 2020).

For thinkers in this vein, divine transcendence is not a problem but, on the contrary, the *sine qua non* for any theology that can properly be called Jewish. From this starting assumption, the only possible response to ecological crisis is to double down on the affirmation of divine transcendence. The God who is elsewhere has left in his stead a capable viceroy—the human being—who stands analogously apart from creation and acts in an analogous relation of care/dominion over it. This model, often referred to as a model of “stewardship”, thereby affirms divine transcendence and, in so doing, reinscribes both a God who is away and the ambiguous and distinctive position of humans in relation to the rest of the phenomenal world.¹⁵ This approach is affirmed explicitly by the vast majority of contemporary Jewish thinkers who address ecological issues as the appropriate grounding for Jewish environmental ethics. It is the also a model implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, echoed by most Jewish environmental activist organizations, including Dayenu, Hazon, and the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life.¹⁶

The second approach, evident in the contemporary flowering of neo-Hasidism, translates some aspects of the mystical and Hasidic corpora into terms that can speak to the current moment of ecological crisis. Jewish mystical traditions are attractive to some contemporary Jews because mystical corpora seem to offer an indigenous Jewish language with which to articulate the intrinsic value of the created world as a manifestation of the divine, and humans as integrated into rather than apart from the created world. Proponents of a “immanentist” reading of Jewish thought argue for the problems, variously, of the domination or alienation represented by the “transcendent God”. However, I argue, most articulations of Jewish theological immanence embrace a form of panentheism that reproduces, if in less dramatic form, a God who is “away”.

2.1. In Defense of Transcendence

Some contemporary Jewish theologians reject, on principle, the rethinking of the conceptualization of the world that ecological disaster has prompted in so many other corners. The argument that consistently appears among such thinkers turns on the claim that Jewish theology (or “Judaism”) stands or falls on the disentanglement of God from the so-called natural world. “Transcendence”, in these arguments, functions as the guarantor of not only the distinction between God and nature but of *all* distinctions, even the capacity for making distinctions, which, it is claimed, “ethics” requires.

Given this starting point, it is little wonder that the (few) theologians in this group who engage environmental concerns reproduce the apologetic claim that “Judaism” promotes “respect for nature” (Goodman 2002). A few recent examples should suffice to draw the outlines of this approach, which retains a surprisingly tenacious hold on contemporary Jewish theological discourse.

The title of Kenneth Seeskin’s “A Plea for Transcendence” (2014) indicates the reactionary tone that characterizes his essay.¹⁷ Seeskin speaks in military metaphors of a “battle for transcendence and against immanence” and issues a call to “defend” transcendence (Seeskin 2014, pp. 415, 426). Immanence, in this account, stands for the confusion of categories (“light and darkness, the sacred and the profane, the divine and the human”) and thereby reflects a far graver improper mixture: confusion between the “is” and the “ought”

(Novak 2019, p. 99). Such confusion is the enemy Jewish monotheism has been called upon to vanquish, whether in ancient form or in the present: “In the world of mythology, the line separating the divine and the human is porous: gods take on human characteristics and humans take on divine. In the world of monotheism, it is otherwise: there is light and darkness, the sacred and the profane, the divine and the human. To cross or confuse them is to threaten the foundation on which the world is based” (Seeskin 2014, p. 413). Seeskin’s essay forecloses asking how the transcendent/immanent duality has been constructed and how the relationships among phenomena in the so-called natural world might be reimagined beyond it. The binary itself, and an insistence on the disenchantment (Seeskin’s term) of the world is critical to what Jewish philosophy has insisted on and must insist on (Seeskin 2014, p. 415).

This argument retraces the arguments of nineteenth-century ethical monotheists, who imagined Jewish religiosity as a rejection of “paganism” (which was, they claimed, the logical end of immanent understandings of the divine) and any other possible affirmation of divinity within the created world.¹⁸ The contemporary polemic closely resembles, and in fact reanimates, the defensive stance adopted by Jewish thinkers who responded to philosophical and political anti-Judaism in modernizing Germany, who argued that Judaism’s untainted monotheism guaranteed a universal ethics. The continuation of this thinking even extends to the portrayal of Christianity, which, as in earlier accounts, is characterized as partly “pagan” insofar as a doctrine of incarnation affirms immanence unapologetically.¹⁹

The tenacity of this approach is evident in the title of David Novak’s 2009 Gifford lectures, *Athens and Jerusalem: God, Humans, and Nature*, which organizes itself in terms of the contrast between Greek philosophy and Jewish religiosity, as in (Strauss 1997). As in the ethical monotheist rhetoric of German Jewish philosophy, the contrast between “Judaism” and some version of “paganism” forms the axis along which a “Jewish approach to nature” must be plotted.²⁰ Novak’s account, like Seeskin’s, underscores this contrast: “There is no greater difference between biblical theology and classical philosophy than in their different approaches to how humans are related to nature . . . What underlies the essential difference between Hebraic and Hellenic myths of God’s relation to nature is that in the Hebraic view the One God is the Creator of the whole universe, and that humans are God’s chief creation in that universe”. Novak, like Seeskin, cannot but present the “Hebraic” view of the world created in time by the “inscrutable will of the transcendent God” without an opposite, even as he attempts to offer a contemporary response that transcends both poles.²¹

Given this approach, it is no surprise that Novak rejects any possible “environmentalism” that questions the fundamental distinctiveness of the human being from the rest of creation or that challenges the hierarchical relationship Genesis 2 seems to authorize: “Our non-subordination to the earthly environment is evidenced by the fact that we do not simply accept our place in the environment, but have to work to make the environment our home *in* the world. That is because we are not *of* the world”.²² This approach precludes the fruitful questioning of the “natural world” and humans’ place in, as, or beyond it that has been so exciting in recent years throughout the environmental humanities; the world of living things and dynamic processes, in Novak’s account as in many others, is necessarily flattened and made into the precondition of covenant. But of more immediate concern here is the insistence on a kind of “away” that grounds ethics and theology, the former of which, in particular, functions as a shorthand for the essential meaning of Jewish monotheism. Novak’s imagining of humans (and, one suspects, of Jews in particular) as “not *of* this world” means that the biblical stewardship model entails caretaking that which is fundamentally separate from the self.

Hava Tirosh-Samuelsan offers a final and in some ways distinctive example of this strain among contemporary Jewish theologians. Tirosh-Samuelsan, unlike the others I have mentioned in this section, has demonstrated a consistent interest in contributing to scholarship at the intersection of science and religion. Over the last twenty years, she has devoted significant scholarly energy to exploring environmental issues and especially

Jewish environmental ethics. Her approach has remained consistent: humans are stewards in relation to the so-called natural world.²³

In her 2001 essay, “Nature in the Sources of Judaism”, Tirosh-Samuelsan framed this model of stewardship as *the* Jewish approach: “Jewish environmental philosophy and ethics cannot be based on a simplistic version of pantheism that acknowledges only the world and nothing beyond the world. From a Jewish perspective, ‘biocentrism’ is just another form of paganism that must result in idolatrous worship of nature”.²⁴ Jewish thought, she argues, does and must reaffirm the exceptional place of the human being within the created order. Human care for and position in relation to the earth, she notes approvingly, replicate the relation between the transcendent God and the created world. Only by affirming this position can Judaism distinguish itself from “paganism”. The only properly Jewish theology, it seems, is one that recognizes a God who is “away”.

In her most recent essay on the topic (2020), Tirosh-Samuelsan makes the same argument for stewardship, but now foregrounds monotheism: “religion, or more precisely the *monotheistic traditions*, offer a meaningful framework to face the Anthropocene because they relate human flourishing to history”.²⁵ Tirosh-Samuelsan recommends that we

draw our inspiration from the religious imaginaries of the monotheistic traditions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—because they offer a meaningful narrative in which humanity and nature are *interdependent but not fused into each other*. A religious imaginary will enable humanity to modify and adapt its behavior in order to survive and perhaps even thrive on our damaged planet which they might heal if they choose to alter their conduct (Tirosh-Samuelsan 2020, p. 396).

Notably, Tirosh-Samuelsan does not mount an argument in which she explains the preference for monotheism; non-theistic, polytheistic, and indigenous (“animist”) traditions are apparently not worth examining. The reader can only infer that traditions beyond monotheism do not draw the lines between humanity and nature clearly enough; they fuse what ought to be separate. In keeping with the tradition of nineteenth-century ethical monotheism, Tirosh-Samuelsan positions Judaism as the best expression of this monotheistic ethos. Thus, even in a thinker who has devoted remarkable energy to environmental issues, we find a triumphalist account of the moral superiority of Judaism (or perhaps any monotheistic religion) against the false and dangerous religions of “nature”.

To blithely dismiss indigenous religious traditions as false, amoral, or unable to accommodate ethics represents an approach that has long outlived the historical moment and conditions that gave rise to it and is inadequate in a moment of ecological crisis. Jewish theology and ethics can and must find another path, one not predicated on polemics.

2.2. *God within and behind the World: Immanence and Ecology in Jewish Discourse*

In contrast to arguments for transcendence, other contemporary Jewish thinkers have argued that the present moment underscores the necessity of conceiving God in immanent terms. As noted above, immanence is an elastic term. For some thinkers who endorse an immanentist approach, to speak of God as immanent means that God partners with humans in some form, in their individual lives or in history as a whole. For others, the claim that God is immanent in the world means that everything in the created world bears a trace of the divine within it, which ennoble the material world.

In modern Jewish theology, the privileging of immanentist conceptions of God as a corrective to the perceived failures of overly transcendent ideas of God long predates the current environmental crisis. Indeed, this interest reaches back to the first wave of neo-Hasidic thought, in the early 20th century, and is especially prominent in Martin Buber’s work. Theologies of immanence gained a foothold in North America in the American counterculture of the 20th century and in feminist theology and have remained important among early 21st century thinkers who claim the mantle of neo-Hasidism. In Jewish Renewal, leaders were instrumental in amplifying and transforming immanentist elements of mysticism to a wide audience; Arthur Waskow in particular has been an influential voice

in arguing for the centrality of environmental concerns to Jewish tradition since the 1990s (Waskow 1997, 2000, 2015).

Feminist theologians have made immanent theologies central to their critical and constructive projects in Christian/post-Christian as well as Jewish contexts. Feminist theologians across both traditions, typically emphasizing the link between how we imagine God and the social order, have argued that transcendent concepts of God justify men's domination of women, racial hierarchies, and ultimately, the colonization of the consciousness of the oppressed. For feminist thinkers within these traditions, immanence became a central project for creating post-patriarchal theology and society. Among Jewish thinkers, feminist interest in immanence gave rise to liturgical creativity, especially in the work of Marcia Falk, and an interest in reclaiming Shekhina within Jewish Renewal and a focus on "earth-based spirituality" at the Kohenet institute.²⁶

For feminist theorists across disciplines, the exploitation of the earth was inextricably tied to misogyny. Both phenomena were interlinked in the philosophical foundations of Western thought, where the earthly and the female were associated with one another and with the category of materiality; these, of course, were inferior to the spiritual and the male. Feminist ecotheology emerged in response to the theological dimensions of this philosophical orientation (McFague 1993; Ruether 1992). However, Jewish feminists have, by and large, not extended their theological reach to include ecological matters; the devaluation of earthly, material reality is generally regarded as but one among many consequences of metaphors of divine dominion. In other words, hierarchy and oppression, rather than ontological questions concerning the significance of matter, have been Jewish feminists' central concerns. As a result, the ecological argument for immanence remained undeveloped among Jewish feminists.²⁷

As in the case of transcendence, "immanence" signifies diverse meanings in each of these contexts: in popular neo-Hasidism, it can point to a transvaluation of corporeality and materiality (*gashmiut*) such that they become a path to experience the divine, rather than an obstacle in the path of the adept.²⁸ In feminist contexts, a structurally similar operation of transvaluation has occurred, whereupon immanence may be called upon to affirm the gendered body as a site that facilitates contact with the divine (Benjamin 2020, pp. 19–25).

Ecological versions of immanence in Jewish theological context focus yet another facet of this affirmation of materiality: creation. In this vein, Arthur Green's *Radical Judaism* (2010) and David Seidenberg's *Kabbalah and Ecology* (2015) compel our attention.²⁹ Both of these volumes argue for a Jewish theology of creation that locates the divine within the created world in contrast to a theology oriented toward the revelation of Torah. As Green states, "Creation, or perhaps more neutrally stated, 'origins,' a topic almost entirely neglected in both Jewish and Christian theology of the past century, must return as a central preoccupation in our own day",³⁰ a position that Seidenberg's volume tacitly endorses as well in its project of finding "God's image in the more-than-human world". Both thinkers ground their approach to creation by seeking out and building on traditions of divine immanence within Jewish tradition.

The stated purpose of *Radical Judaism* is to offer a response to the Darwinian account of evolution and the challenge it represents for reconciling theology with intellectual/scientific thinking. Green writes that "the task of the theologian" is that of "reframing, accepting the accounts of origins and natural history offered by the scientific consensus, but helping us to view them in a different way, one that may guide us toward a more profound appreciation of that same reality" (Green 2010, p. 20). Green notes in passing that his work may speak to what he calls "the ecological agenda", but he largely presents his case for immanence as a religious interpretation of what "scientific explanations of the world" have conclusively shown.³¹

Green's religious interpretation of current scientific understandings of the Earth's origins is one he calls "mystical panentheism": God is that singular, unified One that "underlies all being" and who "is and dwells within (rather than 'oversees') the evolutionary process".³² The One, then, "reveal[s] itself to us within and behind the great diversity of

life. The One, for Green, is Being itself, the constant in the endlessly changing evolutionary parade" (Ibid., p. 20):

I think of that underlying One in immanent terms, a Being or life force that dwells within the universe and all its forms, rather than a Creator from beyond who forms a world that is 'other' and separate from its own Self. This One—the only One that truly is—lies within and behind all the diverse forms of being that have existed since the beginning of time; it is the single Being (as the Hebrew name Y-H-W-H indicates) clothed in each individual being and encompassing them all (Ibid., pp. 17–18, 20).

Divine immanence, for Green, is the most coherent "religious interpretation" of evolutionary adaptation, which he calls the "great sacred tale". Anticipating the charge that his position amounts to support for Intelligent Design, Green argues that he differs from this approach precisely because his God, or Intelligence, is not *beyond* the world but immanent *within* the processes of biological life themselves. He claims that where advocates of intelligent design speak of a *personal* God having planned the unfolding of creation in the form it has taken, he himself speaks in *non-personal* terms, that is, of Being (Ibid., p. 24).

At the same time, Green's argument hinges on the claim that evolutionary adaptation reveals a directional movement toward a telos; evolution has a direction without a director.³³ While Green heralds "every creature and cell" as part of the garb in which The One appears, and as participating in "the work of God" by their existence, the complex diversity of life-forms is not sufficient for Green. Rather, he ascribes to evolution a developmental, linear movement toward the "ever-greater complexity of life", a movement that has culminated (so far) in the human being.³⁴ Humans, for in his view, are uniquely positioned in relation to all creation; they are full "partners of the One" by virtue of the "self-reflective consciousness of humans", such that Being "manifests itself in the human mind" (Ibid., pp. 24–26). Humans therefore "represent a new and important step in this [evolutionary] journey" (Ibid., p. 27).

Green's stated aim of providing a Jewish-inflected theological interpretation of evolution is at odds with his commitment to enshrining humans in a unique ontological position vis-à-vis the rest of the world. "There is a different meaning to human existence that cannot be denied", he argues. Panentheism, in Green's hands, provides this guarantee.³⁵ The "more-than" to which the *en* in panentheism gestures is consciousness, or the intelligence *behind* rather than *within* creation. This consciousness is, for Green, that which Being itself and humans uniquely share. Even as the distance from the "here" to the "away" shrinks, in Green's account, a shadow remains: the shadow of human exceptionalism, destined to have a destiny unlike that of all the multitudes, and who are therefore not entirely *of* the earth.

Even if we agree with Green that the theologian's task is to offer a religious interpretation of scientific claims, we run into problems immediately with his account. First, *The Origin of Species* does not provide any basis for a teleological interpretation of species adaptation. Moreover, the field has shifted enormously in the century and a half since Darwin's text first appeared. Evolutionary biologists, pushed in particular by the work of Lynn Margulis, have begun to recognize microscopic organisms, rather than humans, as the critical quanta of life. Speaking of Margulis' revolutionary research, Mary-Jane Rubenstein argues that

... the "truly productive organisms", the ones who truly matter and act and (therefore) are, are the earth-others who condition the possibility of everything we tend to consider superior to them. Specifically, for Margulis, the most significant life-forms are the protists and bacteria that build, shape, and constitute Gaia. Margulis thus turns the Great Chain of Being on its head, attributing agency primarily to those previously "subordinate engines" relegated to the lowest ranks of the Neoplatonic-turned-neo-Darwinist hierarchy (Rubenstein 2018, p. 123).³⁶

A theology that retains the human position atop a species-differentiated hierarchy cannot be supported on the ground of evolutionary biology, whether in Darwin's or in Margulis' accounts.

I note as well a second objection arising from the contemporary biological sciences: we can no longer assume—as Green does—the boundedness of the singular species as a unit of analysis. As Haraway argues, “bounded individuals plus contexts, . . . organisms plus environments, or genes plus whatever they need, no longer sustain the overflowing richness of biological knowledge”. This biological turn parallels one on the social and political plane: “organisms plus environments can hardly be remembered for the same reasons that even Western-indebted people can no longer figure themselves as individuals and societies of individuals in human-only histories”.³⁷ Just as scholars in the humanities do not assume the individual as the basic quantum of society, no longer in the sciences can we sustain the notion of singular organisms that are discontinuous from others and from that which was once constructed as their “habitat” (Ingold 2013). These entanglements are not so much a rejection of ethics as a different starting point for it: the imbrication and porosity of lively beings demand that our ethical obligations account for dependence and interconnection with many places and life-forms.³⁸

I noted above that Green mentions the “ecological agenda” at the outset of *Radical Judaism*. However, the rest of the volume does not engage environmental catastrophe at all. Thus, while creation is a “pressing concern” for Jewish theology, ecocide is virtually absent from the book. Perhaps Green's focus on nineteenth-century intellectual fights over the theological meaning of evolutionary adaptation enables him to wax exuberant about creation—even to the point of imposing a triumphant teleology on evolutionary adaptation!—without mention of the destruction of creation currently manifesting in our ecological crisis. It is remarkable indeed to read a twenty-first-century account of the theological meaning of species adaptation and increasing complexity of life without reference to anthropogenic species extinction and biodiversity loss. While it is hardly the case that *anthropos as a whole* bears responsibility for the climate catastrophe of the present, the anthropogenic nature of climate disaster furnishes obvious and damning evidence that any assertion of human distinctiveness must reckon with the distinctively human forms of remaking and unmaking the worlds that lie within and beyond the human.³⁹

David Seidenberg's *Kabbalah and Ecology: God's Image in the More-Than-Human World* is the most extensive contemporary scholarly study in Jewish thought informed by ecological questions. This text affirms and develops Green's call to foreground the neglected topic of creation in contemporary Jewish theology, and although Seidenberg articulates substantive critiques of Green's approach—among them, the authority of “science” for “religion”—he, like Green, positions Kabbalistic and Hasidic material as indigenous Jewish resources for articulating the sacrality and revelatory quality of creation itself. Seidenberg identifies this strain of thinking in classical rabbinic midrash, and therefore antecedent to Kabbalah, which enables him to lay claim to a more ancient and non-esoteric tradition within Judaism.

Seidenberg's project includes both critical and constructive components. The former centers on revealing lesser-known midrashic traditions, and their adumbration in Kabbalah, that imagine many specific phenomena and, indeed, the cosmos as a whole to reflect God's image. This idea serves as a corrective to and decentering of the triumphalist, “strong anthropocentric” reading of *tselem 'elohim* (the image of God) as exclusively realized in the human being. In Seidenberg's reading, these sources envision a “weak anthropocentrism” that nonetheless constitutes a powerful rejection of the better-known accounts that imagine Torah authorizing human dominion over the rest of creation.⁴⁰ The constructive argument of *Kabbalah and Ecology* is that these sources should not only be lifted up in accounts of Jewish thinking on creation but that they may also ground a new and necessary approach to the environment: “Kabbalah's readiness to draw each new thing into relation with God's image models a way we can embrace the diversity of the more-than-human world and expand our imaginations beyond the narrow vision of contemporary culture”.⁴¹

Seidenberg gestures toward climate change as a concern at the outset and in the closing pages of *Kabbalah and Ecology*, as a reality that motivates the development of ecotheology. But, like Green's work, the book does not primarily engage climate disaster as a current fact. This project, truly the most serious critical attempt to develop an ecotheology in a Jewish key, brackets climate disaster, treating it not as present fact but rather as a potential but still preventable future. It is worth quoting the following passage from the concluding pages at length:

If the Earth's climate has reached or does reach a tipping point—a point where the climate will be driven toward a new equilibrium that is both hotter and more chaotic, and that may cause massive extinctions (something no one can know for sure until after it is happening)—then we will need to face another level of spiritual crisis. This crisis will arise not only when we experience the very real tragedies of displaced humanity and impoverished communities. It will arise not only when we witness the suffering of species whose survival will be in jeopardy or who will not survive (this crisis is already facing all who are paying attention). It will also arise when we have to confront a world in which beauty has been driven from our presence, in which Spirit will seem to have abandoned us. In such a scenario, we will cross a different threshold, from a feeling of being embraced by Nature, which motivates so many of us who are striving to create a sustainable world, to an experience of Nature as fierce and fearsome, a literal equivalent of the Biblical curses for not letting the land rest: "And I will break the pride of your power, and I will set your heavens as iron, and your earth as brass" [Lv 26:19] (Seidenberg 2015, p. 344).

Seidenberg implies that his own extensive theological work will be superseded if climate change continues and increases. He argues that the tipping point for this is the moment when we reach a point of mass extinction, climate refugees, and temperatures that exceed what humans can withstand. But all of these terrifying phenomena *are* current reality. They ought no longer to be referred to in the conditional; they are fact and have been for some time, especially for the world's least economically and geographically sheltered. By Seidenberg's own admission, the present reality of climate disaster challenges the relevance of the trove of textual evidence he has unearthed in ancient and medieval Jewish sources and the ends to which he puts it.

In my view, theologies of creation serve as a distraction when they are all paean and no elegy. Putting new, creative energy into rereading the Genesis narratives—whether by doubling down on "working and guarding" the earth as its stewards or by extending the "image of God" beyond the human—should not serve as a proxy for addressing ecological crisis. Jewish theology must give substantive attention to climatological grief, loss, and destruction.

Moreover, theologies of creation must reckon with a more general challenge as well: if formation and growth can serve as theological testimony, processes equally intrinsic to the biotic world—decay, transformation, regeneration, and death—must also testify to the divine. A truly immanentist theology is one in which the god manifest in creation is the same god manifest in decomposition, and in which both processes endlessly cycle into one another. Green and Seidenberg cordon off this ecological truth, relegating it to theological meaninglessness. Only by doing so can each theologian maintain his anthropocentrism, "weak" as it may be.

3. Hearing Dissonance

Our dire planetary situation cannot be relegated to the margins of Jewish theological concern. Climate disaster calls into question the foundations of many strands of Jewish theology. Therefore, any inquiry that begins by presenting what "Judaism has to say about the environment" proceeds from the wrong point of departure. The starting point must instead be: what is this living and dying world saying to us? At the very least, this world on fire is telling Jewish thinkers is that they—we—are existentially immersed in an ecological

situation incompatible with Jewish theological frameworks as we have known them until now.

No scholar or thinker I have read yet has named that incompatibility for what it is, presumably because it is painful to recognize the incoherence of a tradition to which one is attached with lived reality. But it will not do to elide the problem, cherry-picking verses here and there or appealing to “Jewish values”. Contorted arguments for Jewish theological superiority over and against “animism” or “paganism” cannot help us here. Nor can we prop up ethical monotheism as an obvious good, juxtaposing it with superficial and self-serving accounts of other religious modalities. It is time for us to face the fact that climate disaster has pulled Jewish theology up short.

I have explored one dimension of a profound intellectual and existential conflict. The critical work needed to examine other aspects of this conflict, and any constructive work that follows, will necessarily require many voices. I imagine the intellectual work to come as structurally analogous to the process characterizing the emergence of feminist American Jewish theology in the 20th century. In that case, a sense of dissonance between contemporary actors and Jewish tradition as they had known it, shared and analyzed collectively, became the engine of change. In reflecting on the galvanizing effect of the women’s movement on them, many Jewish feminists speak of their despair when first encountering what seemed to be a fundamental incompatibility and their exhilaration upon the discovery of fellow travelers in the journey to a future beyond patriarchy (Antler 2018; Plaskow 2015). For many of them, hearing silence was a first step.⁴²

At this moment in planetary history, reasons for despair abound. I nonetheless contend that grief, despair, and disorientation in the face of global catastrophe can serve productive ends. In the case of the potential incoherence of one’s own tradition, acknowledging despair may help us begin to speak about our inseparability from the world, about the “hereness” of all that is. Our quest to grasp a planetary reality may enable us to slowly make our way toward anthropologies, cosmologies, and theologies that do not ask us to close our eyes to the endings around and ahead of us. Then, we can at least reckon with the pain and the truth that there is no “away”.

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² On climate disaster as “unprecedented”, and the problems with speaking about it as such, see (Whyte 2020).

³ Danowski and de Castro, following work of Rockström et al., identify “nine biophysical processes of the Earth System” that should be understood as that to which “climate disaster” refers: “climate change, ocean acidification, stratospheric ozone depletion, global freshwater use, biodiversity loss, interference with the nitrogen and phosphorus cycles, changes in land use, chemical pollution, and atmospheric aerosol loading”. The authors of the report note that each of these processes is interlinked with and thus inseparable from others, and that (already at the time of publication), three of those processes had passed the point at which human civilization can continue to develop. Danowski and DeCastro cite (Rockström et al. 2009a) See also the more extensive report of the team of the same researchers (Rockström et al. 2009b) Also see the most recent data from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

- 4 See the introductory essay to the first volume of the journal *Environmental Humanities* for a brief introduction to the field that has arisen from the work of theorists such as Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, and Dipesh Chakrabarty (Rose et al. 2012).
- 5 I use the term “environmental” reservedly, because it tends to reify rather than address the problem of seeing humans and other organisms as distinct from their “environments”. I return to this point, building on Donna Haraway, below.
- 6 On the tendency of some scholars of the “new materialisms” to reproduce the very duality they seek to overcome, see (Rubenstein 2018, pp. 69–70).
- 7 “Our science and technology have grown out of Christian attitudes toward man’s relation to nature which are almost universally held not only by Christians and neo-Christians but also by those who fondly regard themselves as post-Christian . . . To a Christian a tree can be no more than a physical fact” (White 1967, p. 1206) Willis Jenkins has recently noted that White presumed the kind of direct relationship between cosmology and environmental degradation that has been justly challenged on multiple fronts. (See Jenkins 2009).
- 8 (Ghosh 2016) Throughout this essay, I use the term “Jewish theology” expansively, to indicate discursive reflection from within Jewish sources on fundamental concepts, including the relations among the beings within and beyond the known world, the temporal and spatial nature of the world, and the organization of the cosmos.
- 9 On privilege and “not knowing” disaster, see (Belser 2014).
- 10 The wealthiest humans are, for now, undeterred in their quest to find or create an elsewhere to which they can escape. Jeff Bezos’ “Blue Origin” flight epitomizes this quest. On the phenomenon of the superrich and the attempted escape from environmental crises, see Osnos, “Doomsday Prep for the Super-Rich”, *New Yorker*, 22 January 2017 (<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/01/30/doomsday-prep-for-the-super-rich#> accessed on 20 June 2021). See also (Danowski and De Castro 2017; Koslov 2016).
- 11 At the same time, scientists and theorists have become increasingly attentive to the complex, porous systems through which specific species and phenomena are linked. “Here” has become contoured, differentiated, and localized. As Rubenstein notes, the eminent biologist Lynn Margulis performed “a significant conceptual departure from Lovelock: whereas he was happy to call Gaia ‘a single organism,’ . . . Margulis was insistent that the Earth is not by any means a single organism. Just as interdependent cells and bacteria, or fungi and trees, amount not to individuals but to ‘symbionts,’ the chimerical multitudes of Gaia compose not a monistic whole but interdetermined multiplicities” (Rubenstein 2018, p. 121).
- 12 (Latour 1993); (Latour and Porter 2017); (Rose et al. 2012); “Thinking through the Environment, Unsettling the Humanities”; (Morton 2010).
- 13 I am grateful to Robert Erlewine for helping me think through this critical point and arrive at this formulation.
- 14 Bruno Latour has theorized this issue in relation to so-called modern discourse as a whole. See (Latour 1993, pp. 128–29).
- 15 On the “ambiguous position” of the humans, Elion Schwartz argues that the stewardship model is distinct from what he calls “the ‘little lower than the angels’ model”. Both models agree, however, on humans as proper and capable stewards: humans are not fully divine (and are thus termed “little lower than the angels” [Ps. 8:6]); nonetheless, they are the closest creations to the divine, and therefore are fit to serve as stewards (Schwartz 2002). It should be noted that there are other models of stewardship than the one I contend with here. In particular, the concept of stewardship articulated by many indigenous North American communities emphasizes *reciprocity* rather than control or mastery. See (Kimmerer 2014, 2017) I thank Mark Cladis for his important corrective to an earlier draft on this point. To indicate the specificity of the Jewish theological tradition I am concerned with here, I will speak below of “biblical stewardship” to gesture toward the passages in Genesis that ground the concept (especially Gen. 1:28 and 2:15).
- 16 The home page of the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL, founded 1993) invites the visitor to “join us in stewardship”, and the first sentence of its mission statement reads, “COEJL’s mission is to deepen the Jewish community’s commitment to the stewardship of creation and mobilize the resources of Jewish life and learning to protect the Earth and all its inhabitants”. (Similar language appears in relation to Shomrei Adamah, which existed 1988–1996, and was the first Jewish environmental organization with a national reach.) Hazon, which describes itself as “the Jewish lab for sustainability”, does not explicitly use the language of stewardship. Instead, it seeks to create “movement of like-minded people within and outside the Jewish community who take responsibility for fixing what has gone awry in our relationship to the world and for designing a more sustainable future for all”. The language of relationship (“our relationship to the world”) is ubiquitous, so much so that it may seem unremarkable. When viewed from outside of Jewish normative frameworks, however, it becomes a curiosity: what is the “world” that excludes the human? On the historical construction of a world, or “nature”, that excludes “civilization” see (Oelschlaeger 1991). Dayenu: A Jewish Call to Climate Action (founded 2020), offers as a first response to the FAQ “Why do we need a Jewish response to the climate crisis?” the following: “So many Jewish values call us to rise to the challenge of the climate crisis: *dor l’dor*/generation to generation; *shomrei adamah*/protecting the earth; *bacharta bahayim*/choose life, *bal tashchit*/do not destroy; *tirdof tzedek*/pursue justice, and *shomer ger yatom v’almanah*/protecting the vulnerable. (And these are just a few of them!)”. From an activist point of view, the alignment of climate justice action with “Jewish values” makes strategic sense. However, a normative claim for stewardship as a “Jewish value” passes over the question of whether this kind of stewardship offers a worthy or sustainable model.
- 17 Seeskin echoes the earlier, and more polemical account of (Schwartzchild 1984).

- 18 “For example, Hirsch asserts the fundamental incompatibility between Judaism and all other religious traditions because it alone grasps the one true God and thus it alone understands the true purpose and meaning of human existence” (Erlewine 2020, p. 95).
19 (Erlewine 2020, p. 91) “Without apology” in (Seeskin 2014, 414), On the prehistory of this position, see especially (Erlewine 2020).
20 Also in (Goodman 2002) The contrast between “Judaism” and “paganism” has remained axiomatic in Jewish thought throughout the modern period; see (Erlewine 2010, 2020).
21 (Novak 2019) “Inscrutable will” and “transcends both poles” from (Novak 2002, 155–156), Also: “Contrary to the view of classical philosophy, nature’s purposes is not inferred from nature itself . . . While the covenant does presuppose nature, nature does not entail the covenant”. (Novak 2019, p. 104) Cf. Latour on transcendence without an opposite (Latour 1993, pp. 128–29).
22 (Novak 2019, p. 101; italics in original) Cf. Latour: “There is no cure for the condition of belonging to the world. But, by taking care, we can cure ourselves of believing that we do not belong to it, that the essential question lies elsewhere, that what happens to the world does not concern us”. (By contrast, Novak argues for “the acceptance of our human presence in the natural world as our appointment by God to be responsible for one another (reciprocally) and for the natural world (non-reciprocally)” [p. 99]).
23 In chronological order: (Tirosh-Samuelsan 2001, 2002, 2005, 2017, 2020).
24 (Tirosh-Samuelsan 2001, p. 116) Seidenberg, whose work I discuss in more depth below, engages this passage and the argument it represents in (Seidenberg 2015, p. 9 n. 29) Seidenberg agrees with Tirosh-Samuelsan’s statement here but disagrees with her characterization of “Nature” as amoral. By contrast, I disagree with Tirosh-Samuelsan that theology of radical immanence is, by definition, amoral.
25 Italics mine. (Tirosh-Samuelsan 2020, p. 384) “‘Judaic vision’, she argues, ‘endorses the interdependence of humans and their physical environment, and instead of control of natural resources for the sole benefit of humans, the Judaic vision counsels self-control through cultivation of environmental virtues’ (Tirosh-Samuelsan 2020, p. 397).
26 (Falk 1989, 1996; Weissler 2005; Rock-Singer 2020) A small number of Jewish feminists have registered objections to the claim that divine transcendence was inevitably antiwoman or antifeminist; see (Dubin 2002; Madsen 2001) I address immanence as an issue in Jewish feminist theology in (Benjamin 2020).
27 By contrast, Christian and post-Christian ecofeminist thought has been much more fully developed.
28 See especially the contribution of Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, as discussed in (Magid 2013, pp. 91–96).
29 (Green 2010; Seidenberg 2015) Note that Green’s most recent volume, *Judaism for the World* (2020), reaffirms the theological material developed more fully in *Radical Judaism* (Green 2020, pp. 203–9).
30 (Green 2010, p. 16) Italics in original.
31 (Green 2010, p. 16) Space does not permit me to address the science/religious duality Green reifies here, but on the categories of “science” and “religion” in the context of ecology, see in particular (Rubenstein 2018; Sideris 2017).
32 For a thorough overview of panentheism, in particular, of German Idealism and the scientific revolution as key developments in the emergence of modern panentheism and important critiques of pantheistic theology, see (Culp 2020) As many critics of panentheism have argued, a non-personal understanding of the divine as coterminous with life and its processes, if embraced fully, can be pantheological. It all depends on how we understand “life and its processes”; as Mary-Jane Rubenstein has argued, “To be sure, if what is is finite, then an infinite God cannot be exhausted by it. If, however, the world itself is infinite, then one could argue that ‘what is’ is ‘the more of what is’” (Rubenstein 2012, p. 117).
33 Green denies that he makes such a claim (“There is no ‘plan’ of Creation, no sense that humans are the apex or final goal of the process”, p. 24), but his argument belies this disavowal. The argument that evolution has a teleology is, of course, “antithetical to the foundations of the dominant scientific consensus on evolution” (Robert Erlewine notes this point in a critique of Green [unpublished manuscript]).
34 Green affirms that there may yet be a “more complex” form of life in the future: “I do not view us humans—surely not as we are now—as the end or purpose of evolution . . . Mind will one day be manifest to a degree far beyond our present ability to comprehend or predict” (Green 2010, p. 27). Yet this evolutionary triumphalism, in which the later is always better, is hardly the only perspective on evolutionary adaptation. A particularly compelling alternative is presented in (Kohn 2013).
35 To be sure, panentheism has not always been constructed as the justification for human uniqueness, though certainly German Idealist versions of it point in that direction.
36 See Margulis, “Big Trouble in Biology: Physiological Autopoiesis Versus Mechanistic Neo-Darwinism”, in *Slanted Truths: Essays on Gaia, Symbiosis, and Evolution*, ed. Margulis and Sagan (New York: Copernicus, 1997), 277–78, cited in (Rubenstein 2018, p. 123).
37 (Haraway 2016, pp. 30–31) The quote in the original is: “What happens when the best biologies of the twenty-first century cannot do their job with bounded individuals plus contexts, when organisms plus environments, or genes plus whatever they need, no longer sustain the overflowing richness of biological knowledge, if they ever did? What happens when organisms plus environments can hardly be remembered for the same reasons that even Western-indebted people can no longer figure themselves as individuals and societies of individuals in human-only histories? Such a transformative time on earth must not be named the Anthropocene”! See also (Latour, 2017).
38 See especially (Rubenstein 2018, pp. 174–79).

- ³⁹ As many theorists have noted, the designation of a geologic era as the “Anthropocene” implicitly renders those humans and systems responsible for climate disaster as the true “Anthropos”, and have therefore suggested other ways of designating this era, such as Plantationocene or Capitalocene; on this debate, see (Altvater et al. 2016) On specifically human forms of making and remaking worlds, see also (Kohn 2013).
- ⁴⁰ For instance, Seidenberg explains that “humanity’s unique nature does not cause us to stand apart from Creation, but rather aligns us more closely with Creation. This is one facet of the ‘weak anthropocentrism’ we find in rabbinic texts that runs counter to ‘anthropo-archism’ [or ‘strong anthropocentrism’], and it leads to a very different relationship with the more-than-human world” (Seidenberg 2015, p. 57).
- ⁴¹ (Seidenberg 2015, p. 232) Because he explicitly embraces the constructive nature of his project, Seidenberg does not need the tradition to be perfect; he acknowledges, albeit briefly, the limitations of the sources he engages, from midrash to Buber.
- ⁴² (Plaskow 1991, p. 1) I am grateful to Judith Plaskow for many conversations about these parallels and about lessons from the feminist movement for thinking about climate disaster.

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