

## **Nondual Judaism**

“When King James appointed a committee to translate the Bible into English, they decided to translate this sentence as, “I am that I am.” Since they were reporting to a king, it made sense to please him by suggesting that the universe was static. What king would like the universe to change and keep changing? But at the Bush, the Voice was addressing not a king but a revolutionary—someone who was being called to shake the very foundations of Kingship. So the Hebrew—which was actually in the future tense—would say that the roots of the universe are Change. Continuous change, for “Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh” is clearly an affirmation that goes on forever: “Ehyeh asher ehyeh asher ehyeh asher ehyeh....”

- Rabbi Arthur Ocean Waskow, *Dancing In God's Earthquake*

“A tree imitates God by being a tree.”

Thomas Merton

In the opening chapters of Bereisheet, Hashem famously creates humanity *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the divine image. For millennia Jews (and Christians) have been debating what that means. The word *tzelem* referred to an image of statue used in non-Jewish Temples, and Umberto Cassuto (1883-1951) argued from this that the writer was trying to imply that for Jews, worshipping God

means serving other people. The only allowable tzelem (image of God, object of devotion) is the human being.

Rabbi David Mevorach Seidenberg, in his voluminous *Kabbalah and Ecology*, asks whether it is *only* humans who are created in the divine image. When viewed in terms of Cassuto's understanding of the divine image, the urgency of R' Seidenberg's question is highlighted.

“All who wound God's works wound God's image,” says the Zohar (Ra'aya Mehemna 3:123b). What of those, then, who heal and revere God's works?

Seidenberg goes questing for evidence that the non-human world was also seen as part of the divine image and finds it, particularly in the Zoharic literature. He points out that in the Tikkuney Zohar it says, “The ten sefirot...are clothed in ten things that were created on the first day, and these are: heavens and earth, light and darkness, abyss and chaos, wind and water, the measure of the day and the measure of the night. (70, 120a-b).”

This means that the sefirot, which are God's manifest “personality” or “energies” are clothed in the energies of creation. This not an identical concept to tzelem, but it does mean that the natural world is animated by, and reflects, the divine personality, and so is in that sense an image.

The Zohar Chadash says, “In the secret of the ten sefirot...all is included in this image of [the letter] *He'*....In this secret were created and affixed/ordered/it'ta'qnu all these lower ones. For this [reason] it's written: “Elohim said: Let us make/na'aseh Adam in our image as our likeness...all

these that are existing below and are united in her, in her image, truly/mamash.” (Sitrey Otiyot, 2a)

These texts say that all of the creations of the physical world embody the sefirot and are created in the image of the Shechinah. Another strong indication of this tendency in Rabbinic thought is the classic Hasidic equation of nature (teva) and God (elohim) due to their sharing the gematria of 86 which we've discussed before. YHVH here represents the transcendent aspect of God, and Elohim is the world of plurality, Shakti to Shiva, *k'vayichol*, and ultimately YHVH and Elohim are One.

Despite my sympathy with R' Seidenberg's ethical goal, in traditional texts from the Tanakh onwards there is still a distinction between the way that creations and creatures are a divine image and the way humans are. All of creation is an expression of the divine name, an embodiment of the sefirot, and an image of the Shechina whose essence is divine, *yes*. Yet humans have the power to be “subcreators” and channelers of divine blessing (or unholy harm) in a way that a fox or pine tree can not. Humans are intended to be, in some way, priests over the rest of creation.

Do we need to abandon this distinction, or can it empower our ethological ethics? What do you think?

**Telos**

Traditionally some Jews have asserted that humans are the *end goal* of creation: the pinnacle and purpose of everything that exists. This view is ecologically concerning because it may make everything else expendable. At best it is an argument for preserving ecologies for our own sake. There are ancient streams of Jewish thought that argue against this view, however. In Midrash Rabbah it says "Every single blade of grass has a corresponding '*mazal*' [angel] in the sky which taps it and says, "Grow, grow." (Midrash Rabba, Bereshit 10:6).

Does this mean, though, that the blade of grass is valued by God for its own sake, and not for its service to human beings? The Rambam (Maimonides, 1138-1204) thought so. The Rambam wrote that "the purpose of creation consists in bringing into existence the way you see everything whose existence is possible" (Moreh Nevuchim 3:25). This is one of a few occasions, by the way, in which the Rambam and the Rabas (Rabbi Baruch Spinoza) agree. It follows from the Rambam's take on this position that YHVH delights in the creation of all that has been created *for its own sake*.

The Tzava'at Harivash, the first collection of teachings of the Ba'al Shem Tov, says:

"Do not think that by worshiping with *deveikut* [clinging to YHVH] you are greater than another. You are like any other creature, created for the sake of His worship, blessed be He. God gave a mind to the other just as He gave a mind to you. What makes you superior to a worm? The worm serves the Creator with all its mind and strength! Man, too, is a worm and maggot, as it is written "I am a worm and no man." (Psalms 22:7) If God had not given you intelligence you

would not be able to worship Him but like a worm. Thus you are no better than a worm, and certainly [no better] than [other] people. Bear in mind that you, the worm and all other small creatures are considered as equals in the world. For all were created and have but the ability given to them by the blessed Creator. Always keep this matter in mind.”

We see here a tension, then between the view that humans have a special creative, contemplative, and/or priestly role, and the assertions that all creations have their own value, and play a role in divine service which is equal to the human, or even greater. Maybe it is not that image-bearing humans are superior to non-image bearing creatures, but, like we suggested last class, that different creatures bear the image or serve God in different ways. Humans are called to a certain kind of responsibility and gifted with the potential for a certain understanding, but that doesn't mean we should assume that we serve God better than an earthworm does.

How does it affect your divine service to consider all animals as divine servants? How can we rise to the level of serving YHVH shown by a flower or a fox?

Kierkegaard, in his essay *The Lily Of The Field and The Bird Of The Air*, argues that flowers and birds (and other nonhuman beings) serve God in silent obedience (he writes that even when they cry or speak, or rustle or stream or roar, the beings of nature never make noise, but are always, unlike humans, silent). The bird “keeps silent and waits” it does not fret about the future or rebel against the present, it “knows” that everything takes place at the right time and “unconditionally” does the will of God. Because of this for them it is always “today” and their being is “joy.”

## **Animal Souls**

The more nondual aspects of Judaism tend, in practice, to be more liberal in their assignment of dignity and value- both on a social level and an ecological level. The Ba'al Shem Tov....

Jewish thought has generally regarded animals as spiritually inferior to humans, with notable exceptions we have looked at in the last couple of days. Yet animals have always been regarded as possessing souls as humans do, and there is an ambiguity in Jewish thought, which is reflected in stories of talking and teaching animals. Solomon, or the author of Qohelet, questions the assumption of inferiority:

“Who knows if the ru'ach of the children of Adam, if she rises upward, and of the beast, if she descends below, to earth? (Ecclesiastes/Qehelot 3:21)

As we saw yesterday, other voices warned humans of assuming their spiritual service was greater than animals. Throughout, though, animals were always seen as objects of ethical concern.

The Ramban (Nachmanides) wrote “[The first humans did not have permission to eat meat] because the ones who possess a moving soul (b'aley nefesh t'nu'ah) have a little of the superiority in their soul that makes them similar (nidmu) to the ones who possess a rational soul (ba'aley hanefesh hamaskelet) and in them there is choice/freedom/b'chirah concerning their good and their sustenance, and they flee from pain and death, and [so] scripture [as above] says, “Who knows....”

“How can the blood of this one that *did not sin* be shed by the hand of a sinner?” asks Sefer Chasidim. Many Jewish thinkers saw vegetarianism as the ideal, notably the great Kabbalist theologian Rav Avraham Isaac Kook in recent times. Kabbalists also built on the belief that animals had souls to assert that reincarnation as animals was possible for human beings.

Jewish tradition also sees animals as moral agents and teachers. There are stories of Rabbi’s animals who kept Halacha or taught Torah lessons. Pirqa D’ Rabbi Eliezer tells that when Cain killed Hevel, Adam and Chavah did not know what to do.

*One raven whose companion died said: I will teach Adam this is what to do. He set down his friend and dug in the earth before their eyes and buried him. Adam said: Like the raven, this is what I will do.*

R’ Seidenberg points out that the Raven thereby practices two mitzvot: burial of the dead and comforting a mourner. The medieval devotional text Perek Shira presents all animals (and other creations) as singing verses of Torah to God, and Kabbalists believed that all creatures send praise to God in their own way.

Quote Perek Shira

What experiences have you had of animals as ensouled, or as teachers?

## **Treatment of Animals**

Jewish law prohibits cruelty to animals, and has a care for things like not muzzling them while they work to prevent them eating, not taking the life of a mother and child together (or cooking a child animal in its mother's milk). Kosher slaughter laws have long been regarded as being formulated to avoid causing pain during slaughter as much as possible. Wild animals have the right to enter fields to eat during the Shemittah year, and when wild animals are caught and slaughtered, their blood is given a burial, which implies respect for the animal's soul, as does the prohibition against eating blood. The blood was believed to house the animals soul.

Although the laws of animal sacrifice may strike us today as violent and murderous towards animals, it should be noted that they massively reduced the amount of animal sacrifices done each year compared to Israel's neighbours, and also reduced meat eating by stipulating that many animals to be eaten must be brought to the Temple first.

A famous story from the Talmud tells R' Yehuda HaNassi being approached by a mournful calf seeking refuge from slaughter, and saying to it, "Go, for you were made for this purpose."

Listening angels are unimpressed and say, "Since he shows no mercy let afflictions come upon him." They do.

There is an argument to be made that much of Kosher law originally exhausted to protect the ecological integrity of ancient Israel: in other words, eating those particular animals would

destablize the ecology, for example, pigs tend to eat the underbrush and in an arid climate that can lead to soil instability. If this is true, then the correct application of kashrut today would in fact lie in not eating things that destabilize the local or global ecologies.

As Jewish philosophy developed, it may surprise as to know, the sense of the moral significance of animals actually *decreased* for some time, and the mitzvot about cruelty to animals came to be seen as existing to train human character, not to protect animals.

The Rambam, however, the arch-philosopher of Judaism, wrote otherwise: “It is forbidden to slaughter an animal and its young on the same day, this being a precautionary measure to avoid slaughtering the young animal in front of its mother. For in these cases animals feel very great pain, there bring no difference regarding this pain between humankind and other animals.”

R’ Seidenberg brings a fascinating analysis to the famous statement in Bereishit that humans should “guard and keep the garden” but “dominate” all creatures. Since the Tanakh at this point assumes vegetarianism, this cannot mean to kill and eat. Even more problematically, it cannot even mean to use them as farm animals since humans are still in Eden and do not engage in agriculture. Rashi says that Adam would “call them and they would come, for they were in his r’shut/domain.” Seidenberg explains that Adam thus had the power to “name and tame” the animals. The picture we get was that humans were to be the benevolent namers and tamers of all animals, leaders above them all, but not, originally, to use them or to kill them for food.

## **Beyond Human And Animal**

Perhaps the strongest sentiment compassion beyond even animals was stated by Moshe Cordovero (1522-1570) in *Tomer Devorah*: “A person’s mercies should be distributed to all creatures, not despising them and destroying them, for so is the highest divine wisdom distributed to all creatures, mineral, animal, vegetable, human.”

The Alter Rebbe of Chabad, the doyen of Jewish nondual theology, wrote “The existence and being of the light of Eyn Sof [the infinite Being of YHVH] has no limit of place at all and encompasses all worlds equally, and [so it says,] “the heavens and the earth I fill” [Je 23:24] with one equal-measure/hashva'ah, and, “There is no place empty of Him” even in this material earth/arets.” Here although divine presence is affirmed in the earth, it is “even this material earth.”

Yet the Alter Rebbe also taught, in the last thing he wrote before he died, that from the earth itself shines the “or chozer” or returning light, spiritual light returning to its source. The fecundity of the earth, he wrote, reflects the power of God to bring *yesh m'ayin* (something from nothing) as the earth is continuously producing life. This power, said the Rebbe, is greater than that of angels, who do not continually give life. He says this power is “chesed chinam” (groundless love), the “one remnant of the original Chesed that created the world which we can access directly” in Rav Seidenberg’s summary of his words.

This idea complements what the Alter Rebbe says elsewhere, illustrating how the letters of creation form all things through the process of *tseruf ha'otiyot*:

*Stone/even/'BN אבן, by way of example, her name points out that her root is in the exalted name whose number is B"ן 763,ב"ג and a further Alef א is added to her from another name, for a reason known to the One who formed her. And behold, the name B"ן in itself is in very high worlds / `olamot `elyonim m'od, but by means of numerous and powerful contractions, from level to level, there descended from him a lifeforce concentrated very very much, until it could clothe itself in a stone. And this is the soul of the silent one /domem, which makes it live and brings it into being from nothing to something in every moment.*

Returning to where we began, this is a matter of all things being, in a sense, created in the image of God. The most straightforward statement of this, Rav Seidenberg tells us, is probably in the writing of the Kabbalist Yosef Ashkenazi commenting on the Sefer Bahir:

*All the existences, which all have in them the ten Sefirot, are constructed through the joining of letters, whether silent [inanimate], whether growing [plants], whether moving [animals], whether speaking [humans], and thus each one is in the structure of the seal [i.e. image] belonging to God.*

So the earth itself radiates the Or Chozer, the returning light, and is the last bastion of the *chesed chinam*, or absolute, groundless love with which the universe was created, as seen in its

fecundity. All things are formed of letters, and those things which don't have individual souls (like rocks, maybe like plants) are ensouled by the divine letters of creation themselves.

## **Ecological Ethics**

There are three basic approaches to Ecological ethics in Jewish thought. The first one could call "commanded stewardship." According to this view, YHVH commanded us to be stewards of the Garden of Eden (l'ovdah u l'shomrah) and gave us commandments against destruction, waste and cruelty to beings. We are meant to be the stewards of the earth (to rule it, as the Torah says) but as stewards, not as exploiters and destroyers.

The second approach is popular among Kabbalists, and consists of seeing all created things as made by divine wisdom and precious. In this point of view, we should respect and care for all creations.

The third approach is the most "nondualist" one: the creations are pervaded by and made of God; when we wound God's works we, in a sense, wound God.

## **Waskow**

Rabbi Arthur Ocean Waskow (1933-), architect of the original Freedom Seder, originator of the widely influential theology of "Godwrestling", now in his 90s and still getting arrested, and is

one of the most revered Rabbis in the Jewish Renewal movement. To quote Wikipedia's excellent summary: *Waskow took pioneering roles in supporting the full presence and equality of women and of LGBTQ people in all aspects of Jewish life and religion, including same-sex marriage; in mobilizing opposition in the Jewish and general communities to the Vietnam and then the Iraq wars; beginning in 1969, after his first summer-long sojourn in Israel and visits to the Occupied Territories, urging a two-state peace settlement between Israel and Palestine; in treating the planetary climate and extinction crises as a profound concern of Torah, necessitating action by the Jewish community; and in urging the Jewish community to treat the increasing concentration of top-down power by small minorities of the ultra-rich and by giant corporations as the reappearance of "pharaoh" in modern American life. In 2011, he (with Daniel Sieradski) co-inspired the creation of "Kol Nidre in the Streets" as a part of [Occupy Wall Street](#).<sup>[16]</sup> Since spring 2012 he has been a member of the Coordinating Committee of the US National Council of Elders, a network of veteran activists of the crucial justice and peace movements of the mid-20th century who are continuing their nonviolent social action and are partnering with the new movements of the 21st century.*

Waskow writes in his *Dancing In God's Earthquake*, "When I first, on the spur of the moment, decided to break the rule that said never to try pronouncing it [the divine name], what came from my mouth was, YyyyHhhhWwwwHhhh. Breathing. Simply a breath. ....For me, that first moment of saying, "YHWH", by simply breathing– that first moment was transformative. My first thought was that this made good sense: Surely one of the real names of the real God should not be only in Hebrew, or Egyptian, or Greek, or Lation, or Chinese, or Urdu, or Swahili, or

English. It should be in all of them. And there is no sound that vibrates in every human tongue except the sound of breathing.”

“My second thought was that it is not just human languages. Every life form on this planet breathes, and indeed we breathe each other into life. We humans, and all other animals, breathe in what the trees breathe out. The trees breathe in what we breathe out. What could be a truer name or God?”

Further, Waskow writes, “The climate crisis is a crisis in God’s name.” As he writes, “Every Kaddish begins by naming God “Shmei Rabbah, the Great Name”.....what came to me [at the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington DC] was that “shmei rabbah, the Great Name” of the Kaddish, is the weave of all the names of beings, past, present, and those yet to be— all the beings of the universe. Every galaxy and every quark. Every human, every fargo, every buttercup. This understanding of the great name bears a family resemblance to YHVH as the great Interbreathing. Both of them see God embodies in and rising from all the myriad bearings of the universe.”

### **Waskow’s Meditations (from *Dancing In God’s Earthquake*)**

Lift up the names of some beings who have been your teachers. Some may be human beings—a long-dead grumpy cousin, a wise beloved pastor, a singer of the songs you came to love. Others, a turtle sunning itself on a rock, a full moon, a stinging jellyfish, a howling dog that woke the neighborhood. Give each a name, and weave those names into your own small and local pattern

of the Great Name. · Lift up the names of some beings you have taught and changed. Weave those names as well into your own small portion of the Great Name. · Lift up your own name. Find just the right place in your woven pattern to receive it. Then take the whole pattern you have woven and place it in the heart of you. Your name glimmers, along with many others, in the Great Name; and the Great Name glows within you. Set aside a time each day to meditate on the in-flow/outflow of our Breathing.

There are three brief passages of Jewish prayer that might help us remember·

*Elohai nishama sheh-natah bi tehorah hi.*

My God, the Breath you have given me is clear. Stand or sit quietly following the breath as It enters your own mouth and nose, journeys to your own lungs, is carried by your bloodstream to brain and arms, to legs and belly, genitals and skin, and back to lungs and mouth and nose to be breathed out. ·

*Nishmat kol chai, tivarekh et shim-cha, Yahhhhh eloheynu.*

The Breath of all life praises Your Name, for your Name Itself whispers all life, Our God. Follow your Breath as you breathe it out, as it merges with the out breaths of every animal on Earth, as it enters the leaves of every plant, as its CO<sub>2</sub> solidifies into the living carbon of root and branch and flower and seed, and as each plant breathes out oxygen for you and every animal to inbreathe. Hear each human, each plant, each animal whisper, “OUR God.”

