Introduction

*New Approaches to Jewish Environmental Ethics*

Moments of radical change demand new sets of tools. As the event horizon of cataclysmic climate change draws nearer, we are beginning to see evident consequences in the form extreme weather patterns such as drought, flooding, and wildfire. These phenomena, symptoms of a planet that is increasingly inhospitable to human life, are further compounded by the depletion of natural resources, pandemics, intolerable levels of pollution and staggering loss of biodiversity and mass extinction. The impact of this constellation of factors upon human flourishing is increasingly dramatic and obvious, ranging from the “slow damage” experienced by rural communities to near instant devastation in major centers. In the coming decades we will, by many accounts, witness climate refuges in the hundreds of millions. The calls for action have reached a fever pitch, yet mindsets of crisis, argues Kyle Whyte, are generally rooted in the fear of looming specters perceived as unprecedented.¹ The result is, perhaps ironically, attempts to reify the present by protecting the economic, philosophical and political structures of power that define the status quo. Rather than seeking to shore-up the social and intellectual patterns that undergird the present, we ought to look to alternative bodies of knowledge and wisdom to address climate change. We need new tools, but we also need new eyes.

Religious traditions can, in our estimation, offer us a critical set of values and the vocabulary with which to begin addressing and thinking beyond the staggeringly complicated cluster of problems bound up with climate change. Religious communities are multi-territorial, extending beyond the geographical boundaries of the modern nation-state, and they can therefore motivate action beyond private interests (whether individual or national), and spur collective action. The secularization hypothesis has been hopelessly disproven on historical as well as philosophical grounds, and any solution to climate change must involve mobilizing global religious populations. But the potential yields

of environmental thought and action are so much deeper: these wisdom traditions and ethical frameworks offer alternatives mode of theorizing the world, epistemologies and pathways of action that differ from—and often predate—the axes of carbon capitalism and the systems of instrumental or extractive reason that govern our contemporary philosophical and economic structures.

The essays in the present special issue of Worldviews represent a polyphonic attempt to think with the sources of Judaism in order to help us conceive of the devastation of climate change, present and future, and to address these issues in meaningful and substantive way. They are historical, analytical and theoretical studies, but the articles are linked by a constructive thread. Rather than searching Jewish texts for analogues to contemporary environmental keywords, thus proving that amorphous and contested concepts like “stewardship” are actually ancient Jewish values, and rather than greenwashing those sources with a veneer of ecological concern, these essays attempt to do something bolder: they seek to look into the past while reexamining the present, thus expanding the toolbox of ideas available to grapple with the unique threats of our day and age.

Dramatic external shifts—individual, communal, and national—often begin with internal transformations of mind and spirit, and the interpretive craft of theology is key to that process. Bar Guzi’s essay explores Arthur Green’s writings on radical divine immanence and God’s presence in the natural world, examining the implications of this theory and the concomitant portrayal of human reasonability as partner in the unfolding of God’s being. Guzi compares Green’s work to that of Hans Jonas, suggesting that both take issue with simplistic naturalism and argue for theistic visions of human responsibility rooted precisely in Judaism’s theistic vision.

Judaism is rightly described as a religion of law, and, as Robert Cover has noted, “[T]o be one who acts out of obligation is the closest thing there is to a Jewish definition of completion as a person within the community.”2 Halakhah, often translated as “Jewish law,” is a complete modus vivendi of ritual practices that together form a rich network of shared social and religious duties. The commandments at the heart of this framework may aptly be described as embodied promptings of the heart-mind, serving to shape the practitioner’s intellective processes and their worldview. Beth Berkowitz’s article explores what she calls a “bird-centric approach” to the seemingly obscure biblical commandment of sending away the mother bird. Reading rabbinic discussions of

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this subject, she interprets them from an anti-anthropocentric perspective, using Matthew Calarco's concept of “indistinction” as an analytical lens to overcome the animal/human binary. Training his eyes on present-day rabbinic sources, Tanhum Yoreh interrogates why contemporary Orthodox rabbis have not taken environmental issues more seriously, suggesting the tremendous potential of another (frequently marginalized) interpretation of the biblical commandment “do not waste.” Alexander M. Weisberg and Ariel Evan Mayse examine three categories of law having to do with land ethics, torts and damages, and conceptions of the animal, demonstrating how these categories of rabbinic legislation—and halakhah more generally—may aid contemporary scholars and activists in the face of climate change.

Human behavior across the past four decades has revealed that significant change will not come from the dire warnings of climate modeling or the devastatingly detailed IPCC reports. The scientific facts are essential, but they are themselves not sufficient for sparking massive collective action and social change. We need new narratives in order to change paradigms, and poetry is an essential part of that story. Tafat Hacohen Bick's article looks at the interface of spirituality and environmental ethics in the works of Haviva Pedaya, a contemporary Israeli poet, scholar and activist. She suggests that Pedaya's recent book The Eye of the Cat advances what Hacohen Bick describes as a “theology of waste,” a constructive interpretation of over-industrialization and urban excess grounded in the languages of classical Kabbalah. Anat Koplowitz examines the eco-poetry of three prominent American Jewish women, arguing that each reinterpreted the Jewish traditions and theological categories through the twin lenses of Jewish feminism and ecofeminism. All of these three writers did so, argues Koplowitz, as part of their differing attempts to repair the world and transform it.

Jewish thinkers and activists have long been an important part of the various religious and spiritual environmentalist movements that emerged in the wake of Lynn White, Jr.'s infamous essay on the religious roots of the ecological crisis. Young American Jews—and in a different way, their Israeli counterparts—have increasingly come to place environmental concerns at the core of their Jewish practice and their performance of Jewish identity. Adrienne Krone's article examines the way that Jewish community farmers have developed an experiential form of Jewish environmentalism that emphasizes kinship as a key value. She also argues that, rather than the ambiguous notion of the Anthropocene, we would do well to conceive of the coming age and its potential calamities as the Chthulucene—a more specific characterization that also reflects the way that many Jews—including Jewish farming communities—seek to engage with ancient traditions in order to renew their responsibility for the planet.
These seven essays are intentionally short and programmatic. Rather than exhaustive treatments, they aim to be exemplary of new thinking in those domains of theology, law, literature and poetics that define the many-roomed castle of religion. It is our hope that they will be of use to scholars, activists, policymakers and practitioners as they struggle to develop alternative, or additional, frameworks for comprehending and addressing this present moment of crisis and opportunity in the face of potential devastating destruction to human and nonhuman communities alike. Our authors suggest that the literatures of Judaism offer both source-material and conceptual guidance for that crucially important project.

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