CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CARETAKER OR CITIZEN:
HANS JONAS, ALDO LEOPOLD, AND THE DEVELOPMENT
OF JEWISH ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

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Hans Jonas’s last public words ended with this prophetic call:

It was once religion which told us that we are all sinners, because of
original sin. It is now the ecology of our planet which pronounces us all
to be sinners because of the excessive exploits of human inventiveness.
It was once religion which threatened us with a last judgment at the end
of days. It is now our tortured planet which predicts the arrival of such
a day without any heavenly intervention. The latest revelation—from
no Mount Sinai, from no Mount of the Sermon, from no Bo (tree of
Buddha)—is the outcry of mute things themselves that we must heed by
curbing our powers over creation, lest we perish together on a wasteland
of what was creation.

I first encountered the work of Hans Jonas twenty years ago when
I read “The Concept of God After Auschwitz.” At the time, I did
not fully appreciate Jonas’s radical theology. Since that initial reading
I returned to Jonas’s work again and again as my own interest in

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1 I dedicate this paper to the memory of my late father Jack Martin Troster z”l
(1913–1984) who, like Hans Jonas, was a combat veteran in World War II.
2 Hans Jonas, “The Outcry of Mute Things,” in idem, Mortality and Morality: A Search
for the Good After Auschwitz, ed. Lawrence Vogel (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University
Press, 1996), 198–202, here 201f. This is from a speech that Jonas gave on January 30, 1993, in Italy on the occasion of receiving the Premio Nonino Prize. He passed away six days later, upon his return to the United States.
bioethics and environmentalism grew. As I spoke and wrote about Jonas, it became clear that he and his work are not generally known among Jews and Christians, even among those who are interested in the kind of philosophy and theology that he represented. Within Jewish circles, Jonas has been one of the most neglected philosophers of the twentieth century. And while among European environmentalists his writing on environmental ethics is highly regarded, among North American environmentalists his work is not well known. This is the case despite the esteem that his work on bioethics and in general discussions of the relationship between religion and science has generated.

Jonas is the only modern Jewish philosopher who has fully integrated philosophy, science, theology, and environmental ethics. At this time, Jewish environmental theology, and ethics is still in its infancy and there are few real thinkers upon whom a modern Jewish environmental ethic can be based. I believe, however, that Jonas’s work can provide a foundation for a Jewish environmental ethic. Jonas’s work is a prophetic voice that challenged the way we live. Unfortunately, most of the North American Jewish community has not yet been willing to listen to such a call. We have been, individually and communally, too embedded

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7 For example, the recently published *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, ed. Bron R. Taylor and Jeffery Kaplan (London: Continuum, 2005), does not have an entry for Jonas.

8 See, for example, the essays of Leon Kass and Strachan Donnelley in *Hastings Center Report* 25, no. 7 (1995).