

Gardens of the Spirit: Land, Text, and Ecological Hermeneutics in Jewish Mystical Sources

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When I took the sapling in my hand, seeking to plant the tree in the holy land, I sensed that I was connected to the blessed Holy One, to Shekhinah, to that consuming [sacred] fire. All of my limbs began to quake.

—Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook¹

Each and every leaf holds countless counsels and goodness for human beings. Now that plant has a doubled-existence; its own existence, and the existence that endures within my soul.

—Zelda Schneurson Mishkovsky²

ABSTRACT: The present essay explores the place of gardens in the interplay of theology and hermeneutics in a range of Jewish mystical sources, from the classics of medieval Kabbalah to the devotional worlds of early Hasidism and the dazzling poetry of the twentieth-century author Zelda Schneurson Mishkovsky (known to her readers simply as Zelda). I am particularly interested in how such sources tie the act of scriptural exegesis to the kabbalistic understanding of the garden as a place of intimacy and connection, the encounter with which brings the worshipper to a radical awareness of the interconnectivity of God and world. This project is as much constructive as historical,

¹ Preserved in Ze'ev Gold, *Zahav ha-Arets: Derush ve-Hagut le-Tekufot ha-Shanah* [The land's gold: Homilies and reflections on the sacred calendar] (Jerusalem: Histadrut ha-Tsiyonit ha-'Olamit, 1982), 89.

² Zelda Schneurson Mishkovsky, *Tsippor Ahuzat Kesem: Ketavim ve-Tsiyurim* [An enchanted bird: Writing and art] (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 2014), 88.

however, as I am interested in the relevance of these religious teachings for building a robust, poetically engaged environmental humanities that can appreciate and address the gravity of the looming catastrophe. I suggest that Jewish mystical sources offer a potential wealth of narrative, myth, and ritual that predate extractivism and carbon capitalism, challenging the mindset that has neither the values nor the vocabulary to deal with the climate disaster. These classical Jewish mystical sources assert the centrality of humanity while underscoring our fundamental, even pre-ontological, obligation to ensure the flourishing of the nonhuman world. As a literature addressed to those charged with tending the sacred gardens both heavenly and terrestrial, I aim to read the teachings of Jewish mysticism as demanding that we take an active role in preserving the beauty and biodiversity of a created world filled with God's presence.

INTRODUCTION

GARDENS AND ORCHARDS ARE AMONG the most fertile symbols in the classical works of Jewish mysticism. Their prevalence in the mythic, symbolic language of medieval Kabbalah and their prominence as the settings of spiritual experience—both imagined and lived—reflect the centrality of gardens in the Hebrew Bible. The Song of Songs, a book that was cherished by the medieval Jewish mystics,³ depicts the garden as a realm of intimate encounter; it is in this multi-sensorial landscape filled with evocative sights and smells that the beloved accepts his lover's invitation.⁴ Rabbinic literature gives this particular biblical garden an additional theological layer, reinterpreting the entire Song as a passionate, even erotic hymn expressing the mutual desire of God and Israel.⁵ Their exegesis plucks verses from the Song, applying its wild and lustrous imagery to the verdant intertwining of heaven and earth in the Tabernacle (and, later, in the Temple), to the revelation of Torah at Sinai, and quite often to the devotional act of sacred study. Such moves set the stage for the later mystics' enamorment with the garden at the heart of this work of biblical poetry and its viridescent images.

The prominence of orchards and gardens in classical Jewish mysticism, of course, also reflects the vast kabbalistic myths spun around the biblical tale of Eden.⁶ This realm is described by the medieval mystics as a place of sacred communion teeming with flora and fauna held in perfect balance, a paradisaical ideal in which human and divine thriving demands the flourishing of all natural and nonhuman life as well.⁷ Exile from this primordial garden, by contrast, is

³ Arthur Green, "Intradivine Romance: The Song of Songs in the Zohar," in *Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Songs*, ed. Peter S. Hawkins and Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 214–23; Arthur Green, "The Song of Songs in Early Jewish Mysticism," *Orim* 2, no. 2 (Spring, 1987): 57–58.

⁴ See esp. Song 4:12, 14–16, and 5:1, as well as the magisterial reflections of Michael Fishbane in *The JPS Bible Commentary: Song of Songs* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2015).

⁵ On Song of Songs in rabbinic literature, see Judith Kates, "Entering the Holy of Holies: Rabbinic Midrash and the Language of Intimacy," in Hawkins and Stahlberg, *Scrolls of Love*, 201–13; and Reuven Kimelman, "Rabbi Yokhanan and Origen on the Song of Songs: A Third-Century Jewish-Christian Disputation," *Harvard Theological Review* 73, no. 3/4 (1980): 567–95.

⁶ See David Mevorach Seidenberg, *Kabbalah and Ecology: God's Image in the More-Than-Human World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), esp. 91, 158–59, 167, 300.

⁷ See Evan Eisenberg, *The Ecology of Eden: An Inquiry into the Dream of Paradise and a New Vision of Our Role in Nature* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998).

reimagined as a profound theological rupture but also a dramatic transformation of humanity's relationship to the nonhuman world. Kabbalistic sources refer to the sin of Adam and Eve and the consequential banishment as a moment of cosmic shattering, a precursive scene for all later exiles (territorial, spiritual, and metaphorical). Jewish mystical teachings often connect the yearning for redemption as a return to the land of Israel with the desire to come home to the Garden of Eden itself, thus restoring balance to what had been an unstable, fractious, and off-kilter cosmos.⁸ Unlike the medieval Jewish rationalists, who refer to the World to Come as a time of glowing intellectual communion with the Divine, the Kabbalists describe the restoration of Eden as an embodied experience of that magnificent and verdant realm that is both earthly and heavenly.⁹

Descriptions of the garden trip across nearly every page of the Zohar, an extraordinarily influential work of Jewish mysticism that emerged in thirteenth-century Castille.¹⁰ Such images build upon rabbinic precedent but are far more common in medieval Jewish literature of all stripes,¹¹ surely reflecting the importance of physical gardens in the shared cultural world of Andalusian or Iberian Muslim, Christian, and Jewish life.¹² As an associative work of biblical exegesis, the Zohar is similar in style to that of classical rabbinic midrashim; it interprets verses from all over scripture in light of one another. It is also a romantic work in every sense of the term,¹³ using sensual, often erotic, imagery to describe the relationship between masculine and feminine elements of the *sefirot*¹⁴ and the dynamic between humanity and the Divine (and the Torah). Language and descriptions plucked from the Song, introduced to the mystical canon by the commentary of Rabbi Ezra of Gerona in the thirteenth century, suffuse the text with an amorous vitality.¹⁵ The verse, "A river flows from Eden to water the garden" (Gen. 2:10), is used countless times to describe the rushing stream of divine vitality that constantly infuses the

⁸ See Shalom Rosenberg, "The Return to the Garden of Eden: Remarks for the History of the Idea of the Restorative Redemption in the Medieval Jewish Philosophy," in *The Messianic Idea in Jewish Thought: A Study Conference in Honour of the Eightieth Birthday of Gershom Scholem*, ed. Shmuel Re'em (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1982).

⁹ See the sources in Moshe Halbertal, *Nahmanides: Law and Mysticism*, trans. Daniel Tabak (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020), 116–30.

¹⁰ See Elliot Wolfson, "Hebraic and Hellenic Conceptions of Wisdom in *Sefer ha-Bahir*," *Poetics Today* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1998), 147–76; and the source translated in Daniel C. Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah: The Heart of Jewish Mysticism* (Edison, NJ: Castle Books, 1997), 7.

¹¹ See Raymond P. Scheindlin, *Wine, Women, & Death: Medieval Hebrew Poems on the Good Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), esp. 3–11; and Jonathan P. Decker, "A Myrtle in the Forest: Landscape and Nostalgia in Andalusian Hebrew Poetry," *Prooftexts* 24, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 135–66.

¹² D. Fairchild Ruggles, *Garden, Landscape, and Vision in the Palaces of Islamic Spain* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000).

¹³ See Eitan P. Fishbane, *The Art of Mystical Narrative: A Poetics of the Zohar* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), esp. 336–411.

¹⁴ The term *sefirah* (pl. *sefirot*) first appears in late antiquity in *Sefer Yetsirah*, where it represents the numerical (*mispar*) elements used by God to create the universe. Since the twelfth century, kabbalists have employed the word *sefirot* to designate the matrix of ten illuminated (*sapir*) emanations, which emerge from God's limitless being, and the anchors for the vast array of kabbalistic symbolic clusters. See Arthur Green, *A Guide to the Zohar* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), esp. 28–59.

¹⁵ Yehuda Liebes, "Zohar va-Eros" [*Zohar and Eros*], *Alpayim* 9 (1994), 67–119; Melila Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows from Eden: The Language of Mystical Experience in the Zohar*, trans. Nathan Wolski (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), esp. 204–28.

Godhead and the cosmos with sacred vitality.¹⁶ In such discussions, the gardens of Genesis and of the Canticle are braided together through the Zohar's imaginative exegesis.¹⁷

Many classical kabbalists refer to the religious quests as a journey or soul-ascent to Eden.¹⁸ Building upon ancient apocalyptic literatures, they map this imaginal garden onto the sophisticated structures of emanation and the armature of the *sefirot* and describe it as a realm that is neither entirely physical nor entirely spiritual. For other Jewish mystics, the yearning to meet God in the sacred garden became largely interiorized; the garden is described as an inner space continuously filled by the renewing fountains of mind and heart.¹⁹ The Zohar delights in its variegated, mythic ruminations on the divine gardens without internalizing the motif: "The blessed Holy One fashioned the Garden of Eden exquisitely upon the earth, resembling the one above."²⁰ There it is frequently associated with *Shekhinah*, the tenth *sefirah* and God's immanent presence that is often described in feminine terms. Also called "land" (*erets*) and the "holy apple orchard" (*hakal tapuhin kadishin*),²¹ the image of *Shekhinah* as garden represents that fertile world of divine self-becoming in which both the cosmic and physical realms thrive with sacred energy.

We should note that the Zohar refers to scripture as a lush textual garden overflowing with secrets. Each letter of the Torah blossoms into an untold number of new interpretations, and the exegesis of its sacred words is reckoned a mystical experience second to none. Against this textual backdrop, the Zohar also takes the physical landscape of its imaginal world seriously. The stories about Rabbi Shim'on bar Yohai and the wanderings of his mystical fellowship (called the *hevraya*, or "comrades") are more than a convenient frame for its theological teachings: their adventures, many of which take place in gardens, serve to mirror and amplify the *Zohar's* mystical ideology.²² Theological discussions are sparked by encountering animals, trees, mountains, and rivers, with the experience of such living and inanimate phenomena reflexively shaping the *hevraya's* interpretation of their sacred texts.²³

The present essay explores the place of gardens in the interplay of theology and hermeneutics in a range of Jewish mystical sources, from the classics of medieval Kabbalah to the devotional worlds of early Hasidism and the dazzling poetry of the twentieth-century author Zelda Schneurson Mishkovsky.²⁴ I am particularly interested in how such sources tie the act of scriptural exegesis to the kabbalistic view of the garden as a place of intimacy and connection, the encounter with which brings the worshipper to a radical awareness of the interconnectivity of

¹⁶ See Zohar 1:34a, 35b, 2:83a, 3:65b; and Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows from Eden*, 229.

¹⁷ On the link between the Song of Songs and the Genesis narrative, see Francis Landy, "The Song of Songs and the Garden of Eden," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98, no. 4 (1979): 513–28.

¹⁸ See Avishai Bar-Asher, *Massa'ot ha-Nefesh: Gan Eden be-Mahshavah u-ve-Dimayon be-Sifrut ha-Kabbalah bi-Yemei ha-Beinayim* [Journeys of the soul: Concepts and imageries of paradise in medieval Kabbalah] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2019).

¹⁹ This is a recurrent theme in *Ayalet Ahavim* (Venice, 1552), Rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz's commentary on the Song of Songs.

²⁰ Zohar 1:47b.

²¹ See Zohar 1:35b.

²² See Fishbane, *Art of Mystical Narrative*.

²³ See Green, *Guide to the Zohar*, 3, 34, 67–74; and, inter alia, Zohar 3:266a-b. Such journey-tale stories build upon the famed account in early rabbinic literature of the "four who entered *Pardes*," as well as a similar story in which two rabbis discuss the mysteries of Torah while walking along the way. See t. Hagigah 2:2 and b. Hagigah 14b.

²⁴ Medieval Jewish mysticism is correctly famous for its vision of multiple levels of interpretation, a spectrum that is often described as *Pardes* (or "orchard"), but the particulars of this exegetical frame are beyond the present study. See Michael Fishbane, *Song of Songs: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2015).

God and world.²⁵ The Zohar portrays the boundaries between text, cosmos, and self in strikingly fluid and porous terms,²⁶ thus intertwining the quest for knowledge of the created world, of the inner workings of the divine superstructure, of the interior majesty and mysteries of scripture, and of the gateways to the mystic's own heart.²⁷

My present project is as much constructive as historical, however, as I am interested in the relevance of these religious teachings for building a robust, poetically engaged environmental humanities that can appreciate and address the gravity of the looming catastrophe.²⁸ As nearly incontrovertible evidence of biological collapse has increased in the decades since Lynn White Jr.'s infamous indictment of religion as a primary cause of this emergency,²⁹ individuals and communities have looked to traditions of faith to develop moral vocabularies, rituals, and theologies that can contribute to the discourse of ecology and environmental ethics. Some have mined religious literature for notions corresponding to contemporary keywords, while others sought to "green" ancient traditions through heavy-handed reinterpretation.³⁰ These approaches are sometimes effective but generally serve to shore up established paradigms. More recently, however, religious thinkers³¹ and scholars of religious studies³² have begun the deeper work of reexamining traditional sources of wisdom in search of alternative modes of theorization, modes of practice, and bodies of knowledge that unseat and disrupt regnant assumptions about humanity and our relationship to the world around us.³³

²⁵ See Elliot R. Wolfson, "Mirror of Nature Reflected in the Symbolism of Medieval Kabbalah," *Judaism and Ecology: Created World and Revealed Word*, ed. Hava Tirosh-Samuels (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 305–32.

²⁶ See David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996); James Miller, *China's Green Religion: Daoism and the Quest for a Sustainable Future* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 25, 34, 38, and esp. 126.

²⁷ See Michael Fishbane, "The Book of Zohar and Exegetical Spirituality," in *Mysticism and Sacred Scripture*, ed. Steven T. Katz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 101–17.

²⁸ Following the lead of Seidenberg, *Kabbalah and Ecology*, 19, I am interested in sources that are not only "nature-positive" but are also "ecologically significant"—texts that provide new ways of conceiving of the nonhuman world and guiding or prompting our actions therein. For a critique of naïve conceptions of interconnectedness, the beauty of nature, and wonder in contemporary religious sources, see Lisa Sideris, *Environmental Ethics, Ecological Theology, and Natural Selection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

²⁹ Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203–05.

³⁰ See the frank assessment in Bron Taylor, "The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part One): From Lynn White, Jr and Claims That Religions Can Promote Environmentally Destructive Attitudes and Behaviors to Assertions They Are Becoming Environmentally Friendly," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 10, no. 3 (2016): 268–305; and Bron Taylor, Gretel Van Wieren and Bernard Zaleha, "The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part Two): Assessing the Data from Lynn White, Jr. to Pope Francis," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 10, no. 2 (2016): 306–37.

³¹ I note for example, Pope Francis's bold encyclical called *Laudato Si'* (2015), a remarkable text that draws upon the wisdom of the Catholic spiritual tradition in response to the human and environmental devastation wrought by modern capitalism and the carbon economy. See also Frank Pasquale, ed., *Care for the World: Laudato Si' and Catholic Social Thought in an Era of Climate Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); and Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), esp. 205.

³² For a further discussion of this venture in religious studies, see Anna M. Gade, *Muslim Environmentalisms: Religious and Social Foundations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 1–36.

³³ On this, see Ariel Evan Mayse and Alexander Weisberg, "As the Deep River Rises: Rethinking Halakhah in the Anthropocene," *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture and Ecology* 26, no. 1 (2022): 1–24, and the literatures discussed therein.

Jewish mystical sources offer a potential wealth of narrative, myth, and ritual that predate extractivism and carbon capitalism, challenging the mindset that has neither the values nor the vocabulary to deal with the climate disaster. “The poets and artists,” Thomas Berry claimed, “can help restore this sense of rapport with the natural world. It is this renewed sense of reciprocity with nature, in all of its complexity and remarkable beauty, that can help provide the psychic and spiritual energies necessary for the work ahead.”³⁴ These classical Jewish mystical sources, much like works of the classical romantic poets,³⁵ assert the centrality of humanity while upsetting hubris and underscoring our fundamental, even pre-ontological, obligation to ensure the flourishing of the nonhuman world.³⁶ Ongoing environmental calamity requires us to read ancient sources with new eyes, thinking with their wisdom, imagery, and narratives in an attempt to generate a new matrix of cultural values.³⁷ As a literature addressed to those charged with tending the sacred gardens both heavenly and terrestrial, I read the teachings of Jewish mysticism as demanding that we take an active role in preserving the beauty and biodiversity of a created world filled with God’s presence.

GARDENS OF INTIMACY AND INTERPRETATION

The Zohar’s mythic descriptions of the garden as a realm in which God’s presence may be experienced often collapse time by merging accounts of the biblical Eden with visions of the future redemption (the world to come).³⁸ These teachings, however, underscore that such intimacy may be achieved in this world through exegesis of scripture; one enters the divine garden, as it were, through journeying across the verdant textual landscape of the Hebrew Bible. An individual who awakens at midnight to engage with Torah is said to step into the Garden of Eden,³⁹ thus taking an active role in ensuring the continued flourishing of both cosmic and worldly gardens:

[At midnight] the blessed Holy One arouses, following His custom, to delight with the righteous in the Garden of Eden. At that moment, happy is the share of the human being who rises to delight in Torah, for the blessed Holy One and all the righteous in the Garden of Eden listen to his voice, as is written: “You who dwell in the gardens, companions listen for your voice; let me hear! (Song of Songs 8:13). . . .

Rabbi Hizkiyah said, “Certainly whoever engages in this shares constantly in the world that is coming.”

³⁴ Thomas Berry, “Alienation,” in *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality, and Religion in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 48. See also Thomas Berry, “The New Story: Comments on the Origin, Identification and Transmission of Values,” in *Teilhard in the 21st Century: The Emerging Spirit of Earth*, ed. Arthur Fabel and Donald St. John (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 77–88.

³⁵ See Kate Rigby, *Reclaiming Romanticism: Towards an Eco-poetics of Decolonisation* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

³⁶ See Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

³⁷ See Ghosh, pt. 1.

³⁸ See Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows from Eden*, 125–27; and Christine Hayes, “Heaven on Earth: The World to Come and Its (Dis) locations,” in *Olam ha-zeh v’olam ha-ba: This World and the World to Come in Jewish Belief and Practice*, ed. Leonard J. Greenspoon (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2017), 69–90.

³⁹ The Zohar builds upon and gives new theological meaning to the ancient rabbinic custom of arising at midnight in order to study Torah; see b. Berakhot 3b; and Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), 146–150; and, on the power of such “nocturnal delight,” see Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows from Eden*, 121–45.

Rabbi Yose said, “What do you mean, ‘constantly’?”

He replied, “So we have learned: Every midnight, when the blessed Holy One arouses in the Garden of Eden, all the plants of the Garden are watered profusely by the stream called the Stream of Antiquity, Stream of Delights, never ceasing. If one rises and engages in Torah, then that stream, gushes upon his head, as it were, saturating him among those plants of the Garden of Eden.”⁴⁰

The scholar’s voice, transformed into that of the Song’s lover in search of the divine Beloved, is carried aloft in an interpretive garden filled with sages both past and present. Rather than a place held in abeyance for the righteous in the hereafter, the Garden of Eden has been reinterpreted as a realm in which the thin space between present time and the redeemed future temporarily collapses.

The student of Torah steps into the world to come—parsed here, as elsewhere in the Zohar, as “the world that is always coming”—becoming saturated by the ever-flowing stream of divinity that surges from the “ancient” depths of the Divine and into the cosmic garden. The portal to this sublime, lush kingdom of reawakening is the textual landscape of the Torah, its hermeneutical outcroppings and the swirling eddies of love-soaked exegesis. Study is itself reconceived as a mode of theurgic religious praxis that brings delight,⁴¹ filling *Shekhinah* with a flowing river of sacred vitality that inundates the *sefirot* and the many animate and non-animate inhabitants of the primordial garden (collectively called “plants”).⁴²

Perhaps straining against Christian interpretations of Eden and the Song’s garden as exemplars of celibacy,⁴³ the Zohar celebrates the pleasurable intimacy of this life-giving and world-sustaining encounter between God and the scholar in erotic terms. This garden, dynamic and overflowing with vivacity, is a place of resplendent delight, pleasure, and inspiration—especially on the Sabbath, described by the Zohar as a time of intimacy in which human sexuality is transposed onto the upper spheres.⁴⁴ The Zohar also describes the garden as a place of realization and awakening to the complicated reality of cosmic interconnectivity and the embedded nature of human existence within it:

When King Solomon descended to the depth of the nut, as is written: “I descended to the nut garden” (Song of Songs 6:11), he took the shell of a nut, contemplated all those shells and knew . . . [that] the blessed Holy One had to create everything in the world, arraying the world. All consists of a kernel within, with several shells covering the kernel. The entire world is like this, above and below, from the head of the mystery of the primordial point to the end of all rungs: all is this within that, that within this, so that one is the shell of another, which itself is the shell of another . . . This, the kernel; this, the shell. Although a garment, it becomes the kernel of another layer.

⁴⁰ Zohar 1:92a-92b, Daniel Matt, trans., *Pritzker Zohar*, vol. 2 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), 80–81

⁴¹ See Liebes, “*Zohar and Eros*,” 67–119.

⁴² See also Zohar 2:133b-134a.

⁴³ Gary Anderson, “Celibacy or Consummation in the Garden? Reflections on Early Jewish and Christian Interpretations of the Garden of Eden,” *Harvard Theological Review* 82, no. 2 (1989): 121–148.

⁴⁴ See Zohar 2:136a, Matt, *Pritzker Zohar*, vol. 5, 256; b. Ketubbot 62b; and Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), esp. 107–33.

Everything is fashioned the same way below, so that a human in this world manifests this image: kernel and shell, spirit and body. All for the arrayal of the world, and so the world is.⁴⁵

Wandering into the garden and paying close attention to the intricacies of its vegetative life, Solomon achieved a new way of seeing the world. The legendary king of Israel noticed the majestic simplicity and interactivity of the fruits and nuts that surrounded him in this garden by gazing intently upon their physical forms, coming to understand that the world is filled with an inexhaustible number of intertwined dimensions. Much as an edible kernel of nutmeat is bound to its shell, the many levels of cosmos and reality are inherently connected with one another. Likewise, the human soul—or spirit—and the body are part of a single indivisible entity rather than two distinct or discrete forms. Contemplating this endless progression of interconnected forms, Solomon discovered that things appearing to be an exterior shell of materiality at first blush are actually filled with sweet divinity.

The Zohar's rich portrait of Solomon's imaginative efforts to conceive of the "inescapable network of mutuality,"⁴⁶ could serve, I believe, as the "kernel" of the reader's own contemplative practice.⁴⁷ This depiction of the garden as the place in which knowledge of God and world grows, expanding upon both vertical and horizontal axes, also provides an interesting pre-modern correlate to the "rhizomatic" theory of knowledge described by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.⁴⁸ Rather than linear advancement, Deleuze and Guattari write, the development of ideas and our patterns of thought mirror or "imitate" the nonbinary aspects of nature; new growth erupts in expansive multiplicity and multi-dimensionality from ordinary roots. This same Zoharic teaching continues with a description of how the entire cosmos unfolds from a single fleck of divinity: "The expansion of that point became a palace, in which the point was clothed—a radiance unknowable, so intense its lucency. This palace, a garment for that concealed point, is a radiance beyond measure, yet not as gossamer or translucent as the primordial point, hidden and treasured."⁴⁹ This inestimably bright point spins itself into gossamer of ever-inclusive garments that together form material and spiritual existence.

This process of emanation is elsewhere likened by the Zohar to the work of a silkworm or a snail.⁵⁰ Much as these creatures generate an external "home" to which they remain essentially connected, the cosmos is described as an endless series of interconnected garments that are layered upon one another. Without overturning the singularity of human beings, a move that would have been impossible for this anthropocentric medieval text, the Zohar argues that nothing is disconnected from the endless font of God's energy. Within this strikingly nonhierarchical version

⁴⁵ Zohar 1:20a, Matt, *Pritzker Zohar*, vol. 1, 151.

⁴⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" (https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html).

⁴⁷ On this subject, see the magnificent by Douglas E. Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁴⁸ See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London and New York: Continuum, 2003), 3-25.

⁴⁹ Zohar 1:20a, Matt, *Pritzker Zohar*, vol. 1, 151.

⁵⁰ See Zohar 1:15a and Bereshit Rabbah 21:5

of the “great chain of being,”⁵¹ all creatures and layers of the physical world are interconnected by their ultimate divine source.

This example about Solomon is surely meant to be more than a retrospective bit of exegesis about the mythic history of Israel. Such teachings call the readers of this evocative, affective book of medieval Jewish mysticism to realize that they, too, are embedded within a polychromatic universe that is filled with divine radiance. This-worldly experience is described as a veritable sensorium of raw datum for theological reflection. These moments spark reflective interiority, but, as physical beings, our modes of reflection and knowledge-building are also deeply situated within and constructed by the variegated phenomena of our life-realm. “The living world,” scholar and activist David Abram writes, “. . . is both the soil in which all our sciences are rooted and the rich humus into which their results ultimately return, whether as nutrients or as poisons.”⁵² Rather than diminishing the importance of this-worldly experience in developing knowledge, a common tactic in post-Cartesian science and philosophy, medieval Jewish sources anticipate the importance attributed to intersubjectivity in the works of latter phenomenologists.⁵³

Scripture, claims the Zohar, is composed of a similar array of nested garments, an infinite multiplicity of meanings that parallel the layered cosmos.⁵⁴ The Zohar’s garden—and so, too, the Earth and the cosmos writ large—is an object of speculation, but it is also a subject that shapes our own life-world through encounter, examination, and reflection. “Besides that which I directly see of a particular oak tree or building,” Abram writes, “I know or intuit that there are also those facets of the oak or building that are visible to the other perceivers that I see.”⁵⁵ The Zohar asks its readers to conceive of the universe as an infinite array of kernels, of garments layered upon some garments and concealed within others. In mythic terms, this expresses conviction that the interconnected universe and its biodiversity are the very ground of our own intellectual and religious awakening. This demands that we train our eyes upon the “world that we count on without necessarily paying it much attention . . . [which] is always there when we begin to reflect or philosophize.”⁵⁶ We ought to do this with a heightened sensitivity to the claims of connection and obligation made upon us by those to whom we are fundamentally linked.⁵⁷ “The universe,” Thomas Berry wrote, “is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects. The devastation of the planet can be seen as a direct consequence of the loss of this capacity for human presence to and reciprocity with the nonhuman world.”⁵⁸

The garden-world is a site of metaphysical reflection and awakening, and, in the kabbalistic imagination, it also a place of song. Picking up on an odd biblical locution, the fourteenth-century mystic Rabbi Bahye ben Asher describes the nonhuman world as filled with sacred melodies:

⁵¹ See the passage from Moshe de Leon’s *Sefer ha-Rimmon* translated in Matt, *Essential Kabbalah*, 26; and, more broadly, Christopher Manes, “Nature and Silence,” *Environmental Ethics* 14, no. 4 (1992): 339–50.

⁵² Abram, *Spell of the Sensuous*, 34.

⁵³ See the sophisticated appraisal in Matthew T. Kapstein, “Rethinking Religious Experience: Seeing the Light in the History of Religions,” in *The Presence of Light: Divine Radiance and Religious Experience*, ed. Matthew T. Kapstein (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 266–99, making the counterintuitive but convincing argument that both romantics and scientists privilege experience as a source of knowledge and investigation.

⁵⁴ See the famous passages in Zohar 3:152a and 2:176a-b.

⁵⁵ Abram, *Spell of the Sensuous*, 39.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁵⁷ See Michael Fishbane, *Fragile Finitude* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

⁵⁸ Thomas Berry, *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as a Sacred Community* (Counterpoint Press, 2006), 17–18.

“No shrub of the field was yet in the earth, and no herb of the field had yet sprung up; for the Y-H-V-H God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was not a man to till the ground” (Gen. 2:5). The verse should have said “no trees of the field.” It says “shrub” (*si’ah*) because the word is connected to “conversing in the field” (*la-su’ah ba-sadeh*, Gen. 24:63), which the Sages interpreted as prayer. This means that all the trees and plants give praise, extolling the blessed Holy One, as the Sages taught on the verse, “[The meadows are clothed with flocks; the valleys also are covered over with corn;] they shout for joy, indeed, they sing” (Ps. 65:14). The stalks of corn sing out God’s praises. The blessed Holy One yearns for this song to ascend from all species, even from living plants.⁵⁹

The continued flourishing of the earth, then, is directly connected to the songs of life in that primordial garden.⁶⁰ This theme is developed more fully in *Perek Shirah*, an ancient text describing the song of creation both animate and inanimate, often recited at the conclusion of daily prayers. Many Jewish mystical sources describe worship as infusing new life into the physical world, drawing together the human, divine, and cosmic melodies into the song-breath of prayer. This medieval source resonates with a teaching from the Hasidic leader Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, a spiritual seeker and theologian who understood the symphonic power of the natural world:

Each shepherd has a unique melody (*niggun*), according to the grasses and the place where they pasture, for every animal has a grass unique that it must eat and the shepherd does not always remain in the same place... Each grass has a song... and the shepherd’s melody is made from their song... The shepherd knows the melody by which strength is given to the grasses... and there is food for the animals.⁶¹

The world is filled with the unique songs of each and every animal species, claims Nahman, but all forms of inanimate being have their melodies as well. These songs are learned and threaded together by creatures as they interact with the various kinds of vegetative life and physical phenomena in their environments. A shepherd must hear these intertwined songs, taking them to heart and weaving them into a melody that reflects her or his own experience of the places through which they have traveled and the forms of sentient life they have encountered. Rather than instrumentalist attempts to extract from the earth and to domesticate animals solely for human benefit, this reciprocal process requires depth of connection, sensitivity, and engagement. In order to summon up the food for his animals, the shepherd must first learn to listen to the surrounding world and, from its melodies, to braid a song of her or his very own.

⁵⁹ *Perush Rabbenu Bahye ben Asher* on Gen. 2:5. See also Seidenberg, *Kabbalah and Ecology*, 319–31.

⁶⁰ On *Perek Shirah* in medieval Kabbalah and Hasidism, see Malachi Beit-Arie, “Perek Shirah: Mevo’ot ve-Mahadurah Bikortit” [Perek Shira: Introductions and critical edition] (PhD dissertation, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1966), vol. 1, esp. 12–17, 24–35; Moshe Idel, “Le-’Olam Hashem Devarkha Nitsav ba-Shamayim’: ‘Iyunim be-Torah Mukdemet shel ha-Besht ve-Gilguleihah ba-Hasidut [Your word stands firm in heaven’—An inquiry into the early traditions of R. Israel Baal Shem Tov and their reverberations in Hasidism], *Kabbalah* 20 (2009): 236 n. 74; Ariel Evan Mayse, *Speaking Infinities: God and Language in the Teachings of Rabbi Dov Ber of Mezritsh* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 223–24.

⁶¹ Likutei Moharan 2:63. See also, David Mevorach Seidenberg, “Building the Body of the Shekhinah: Re-enchantment and Redemption of the Natural World in Hasidic Thought,” *A New Hasidism: Branches*, ed. Arthur Green and Ariel Evan Mayse (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2019), 132; and Howard L. Harrod, *The Animals Came Dancing: Native American Sacred Ecology and Animal Kinship* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000).

Max Weber famously described the mindset of traditional societies as one that perceives the world as a “great enchanted garden in which the practical way to orient oneself, or to find security in this world or the next, was to revere or coerce the spirits and seek salvation through ritualistic, idolatrous, or sacramental procedures.”⁶² Many texts and traditions of classical Jewish mysticism are an excellent example of this way of thinking, and in my estimation these teachings offer a compelling alternative to the shadowy legacy of Rene Descartes and his description of the natural world as little more than a sterile machine. “The thousandfold voices of the natural world became inaudible to many humans,” wrote Berry about the consequences of this vision. “The mountains, rivers, wind, and sea all became mute insofar as humans were concerned.”⁶³ These Jewish mystical sources demand a rich appreciation of the textured, polyphonic musicality of the world. We must be careful not to fall into the classical trope of associating nature with femininity,⁶⁴ reifying a dualistic world in which nature/women are other, lesser, and acted upon by men,⁶⁵ but the Zohar’s mythic association of the garden with *Shekhinah* (the divine feminine) may afford a particularly useful opportunity for eco-feminist scholars to unseat assumptions about the natural world by shattering through the insipid visions of patriarchal monotheism.⁶⁶

Kabbalistic sources describe both the oral and the written Torah as a conduit for the ever-flowing river of “primordial light,” a divine illumination that emerged on the first day of creation and predates even the sun and the moon. The “hidden” or “primordial light” is often associated with the *Torah kedumah*, a preexistent font of sacred wisdom that undergirds all creation and a reservoir of creativity both human and divine from which new ideas emerge. While rabbinic teachings claim that this light was hidden away as a future reward for the righteous,⁶⁷ the Zohar asserts that the cosmos endures because this divine light has been lovingly sown into the very fabric of being.⁶⁸

This light was sown by the blessed Holy One in the garden of His delight (*ginta de-idnoi*), and He arranged it in rows by the hand of the Righteous One, who is the gardener of the Garden. He took this light and sowed it as seed of truth,⁶⁹ arranging it row by row in the Garden, and it sprouted and grew and yielded fruit, by which the world is nourished, as is written: “Light is sown for the righteous” . . . (Psalms 97:11).

It is written: “as a garden makes its sowings spring up” (Isaiah 61:11). What are “its sowings”? The sowings of primordial light, which is constantly sown. Now it bears and yields fruit, and now it is sown as in the beginning. Before the world can eat this fruit, this sowing bears and gives

⁶² Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischhoff (Beacon Press, 1993), 270.

⁶³ Berry, *Evening Thoughts*, 18.

⁶⁴ See Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1978); Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980).

⁶⁵ See Grace Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1998), 267.

⁶⁶ See Seidenberg, *Kabbalah and Ecology*, esp. 8–9, 14, 266; Mary-Jane Rubenstein, *Pantheologies: Gods, Worlds, Monsters* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, “Religion, Ecology, and Gender: A Jewish Perspective,” *Feminist Theology* 13, no. 3 (2005): 373–97; and Leore Sachs-Shmueli, “Shekhinah and the Revival of Feminine God Language,” *Modern Judaism* 39, no. 3 (2019): 347–69.

⁶⁷ See, inter alia, Va-Yikra Rabbah 11:7; b. Hagigah 12a; Bereshit Rabbah 3:6.

⁶⁸ See also Zohar 2:148b and Oded Yisraeli, *Temple Portals: Studies in Aggadah and Midrash in the Zohar*, trans. Liat Keren (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 33–49.

⁶⁹ See Jeremiah 2:21.

fruit, not subsiding. So the worlds are nourished by the supply of that gardener called Righteous One, and He never subsides or ceases, except in time of exile.⁷⁰

This teaching offers a powerful vision of a self-sustaining world, a cosmos whose interior and exterior flourishing is driven forward by the vitality of these divine seeds. Rather than being hidden away only in the World to Come, the Zohar claims that this primordial light is constantly re-emerging and being reborn within the material realm.

Much like annual wildflowers that automatically self-seed and regrow each year, this world—called the garden of God’s delight—is defined by a kind of sustainable ecology of sacred energy that was set into motion through the processes of creation. This garden is also *Shekhinah*, the source of God’s pleasure and a realm that constantly gives birth and recreates.⁷¹ The fertility of this garden is, to be sure, threatened by the parching fractures of exile:

Now, you might say, “Of the time of exile is written: ‘Waters vanish from the sea, and a river becomes parched and dry’ (Job 14:11). How can it generate offspring?” Well, it is written “sown”—continually “sown.” From the day that the river ceased, that gardener has not entered the Garden; yet that light that is continually sown yields fruit, and is sown of itself as in the beginning, never subsiding—like a garden generating offspring, some of that sowing falling on its own, right in its place, generating offspring as before.

Now, you might say that such offspring and fruit are the same as when the gardener was there. Not so! But this sowing is never withheld.

Similarly, “and Torah is light” (Proverbs 6:23)—Torah too is constantly sown in the world, generating offspring and fruit, never subsiding, and by its fruit the world is nourished.⁷²

The primordial light constantly renews its illumination in the form of saplings and plants that grow, wither, and then regrow in an endless cycle that continues even without the active intervention of the gardener. We might expect the flow of emanation to cease, but the World to Come is thus continuously arriving, manifest in the ceaseless fertility of the divine garden. Similarly, the Torah reveals its endless inner illumination as it tirelessly yields new “fruits” of meaning. The fertile text cannot yield the fullness of its interior dimensions without human sowing, without the struggle and toil of our exegesis and interpretation, yet the automatic regeneration of illumination and production of new ideas continue unabated even in periods of rift and exile. Drawn forth from the ancient textual garden through human interpretation, the vitality of Torah is effervescent and unceasing.

“Land,” Aldo Leopold claimed, “. . . is not merely soil; it is a fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils, plants, and animals.”⁷³ A proper and toothsome “land ethic,” then, must have an expansive vision of the entire community of phenomena upon which it lives. And if ecology is, as Leopold once suggested, “the science of relationships,” then these Jewish mystical sources provide the stuff of a mythic ecological narrative rooted in connection, reciprocity, and responsibility. They articulate a worldview in which the cosmos is portrayed as mighty and

⁷⁰ Zohar 2:166b-167a, based on Matt, *Pritzker Zohar*, vol. 5, 465–66.

⁷¹ See also Zohar 2:35a.

⁷² Zohar 166b-167a, based on Matt, *Pritzker Zohar*, vol. 5, 465–66.

⁷³ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 216.

productive; the garden is a place of rarified communion between God and human beings, but it is also a magisterial and verdant site of delight and self-sowing elegance. Rather than “othering” nature as a space or concept divorced from our own domains, the Zohar notes that human beings are very much an integral part of this economy of breath, energy, and interdependence.⁷⁴ Every part of this landscape reflects divinity, from the wafting scents of beautiful trees and blossoming fruit to the songful flourishing of the interconnected species. As readers of these texts, we are called to awareness of this garden’s untold layers, “garments” of existence that are essentially linked to one another. This multitiered yet integrated universe parallels the various planes of meaning that may be derived from the sacred text, itself a garden of delight for those who strive to encounter the spiritual radiance of its words. But these sources also emphasize the centrality of human activity as critical for reinfusing the garden with new energy, stimulating new growth and allowing it to continue to thrive. It is to this theme of agency and responsibility, and its implications for contemporary environmental ethics, that we shall now turn.

TENDING THE GARDEN

Jewish interpretive traditions regarding the Garden of Eden often point to human activity as necessary for the flourishing of God’s world. In the first of the two creation stories presented in the Hebrew Bible, human beings are created in the divine image⁷⁵ and given the infamous charge, “Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that creeps upon the earth” (Gen. 1:28). Human beings are given permission to enjoy the world’s beautiful bounty, and though many have read this verse as granting a mandate to conquer, subjugate, and ruthlessly extract benefit from the nonhuman world, scholars have challenged this simplistic reading of the biblical legacy.⁷⁶ “Life created in God’s image,” Ellen Davis writes of the first creation story, “is meant to conform with other forms of life, into a single harmonious order.”⁷⁷ While the verse makes clear that “humans play a special role, both powerful and responsible, in maintenance of the order that God has established . . . what is left *unstated* here—but should be burned into the memory and moral understanding of those who hear—is that land, the habitable earth, can be lost in penalty for disobedience.”⁷⁸ Such biblical readings challenge the notion of an unfettered anthropocentric ethics without undermining the unique place of humans within the created landscape.⁷⁹

Medieval Kabbalah frequently underscore the theurgic dimension of human worship, often describing ritual action as fulfilling “divine need” (*tsorekh gevoha*).⁸⁰ The many commandments

⁷⁴ See Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁷⁵ See Seidenberg, *Kabbalah and Ecology*, esp. 1–34.

⁷⁶ See White, Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” 1203–5; and Jeremy Cohen, “*Be Fertile and Increase, Fill the Earth and Master It*”: *The Ancient and Medieval Career of a Biblical Text* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).

⁷⁷ Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 57.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 62–63, comparing the Genesis story to Lev. 26:32–34.

⁷⁹ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “Ecology in a Biblical Perspective,” *Torah of the Earth*, vol. 1, ed. Arthur Waskow (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2000), 55–69; Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

⁸⁰ See the comments of Nahmanides on Ex. 29:46; Daniel C. Matt, “The Mystic and the Mitzvot,” *Jewish Spirituality: From the Bible through the Middle Ages*, ed. Arthur Green (New York: Crossroad, 1988),

that govern Jewish religious life are framed as ways of cultivating the sacred garden and fulfilling the mandate “to work it and to keep it” (Gen. 2:15).⁸¹ Human action enables the divine world—better, God’s garden—to flourish and teem with a multiplicity of life; and the Zohar describes their role as one of tending and caring for creation rather than heedless extraction from the nonhuman world:

“[They have forsaken me, the well of living water, and hewed out cisterns, broken cisterns,] that can hold no water” (Jer. 2:13). Come and see: the River gushing forth waters the whole Garden, saturating every single place, as we have established, until filling the place in the Garden called “a well of living waters,” whence those above and below are nourished. . . . And one who succeeds in guarding it becomes worthy of being watered by that flow of the stream in this world and in the world that is coming, and he becomes worthy of having that supernal Well filled, conveying blessings above and below. . . . and regarding this it is written: “You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring” (Isa. 58:11).⁸²

Humans are charged with guarding and protecting God’s garden, ensuring that the river of blessings and vitality running through it remains intact. The flourishing of spiritual life is intrinsically tied to the fate of the world; religious inspiration and human well-being, described here as “being watered by that flow,” are bound up to the continued thriving of the cosmos and all the forms of life that fill it. A similar picture appears in Rabbi Ezra ben Solomon’s commentary on the Song of Songs, a marvelous work written shortly before the Zohar and which influenced it significantly:

“A garden locked up is my own, my bride” (Song 4:12),—*Shekhinah* is likened to a garden because we establish greenery and put walls around it, drawing water into it to irrigate it and bringing forth all kinds of plants and beautiful vegetation. So, too *Shekhinah* is surrounded by the Cherubs [on the ark], the plants are the seventy nations, the trees are the angels. All are saturated from that spring flowing forth from Eden, from [God’s] wisdom (*hokhmah*), from which all souls take flight in joy. It is drawn forth and ceases neither day nor night. The world endures because of this this.⁸³

Human actions ought to lead to a healthy and fruitful cosmic garden, a realm that includes all created and angelic beings. Our work is needed for this nonhuman world to flourish, Rabbi Ezra claims, because human beings cause the rivers of sacred vitality to run correctly and to irrigate the world with divine mercy, blessing, and beneficence. The energy surges forth ceaselessly from the upper—or inner—fountains, but it continues to do so only if human worshippers perform their duties and obligations. The success of this process is visible in a mutually flourishing, balanced, and healthy world defined by a kind of cosmic homeostasis.

Human beings can now manipulate and reshape the environment in unrecognizable ways, wielding forces that are dangerous and damaging on a scale previously unimagined. And yet, as if anticipating this era that is often called the Anthropocene, the Zohar offers a mythic language for conceiving of human beings as a source of devastation and brokenness as they lay waste to the

367–404; and Arthur Green, “God’s Need for Man: A Unitive Approach to the Writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel,” *Modern Judaism—A Journal of Jewish Ideas and Experience* 35, no. 3 (2015): 247–61.

⁸¹ See Zohar 2:165b, and Bereshit Rabbah 16:5. See also Davis, *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture*, 29–30.

⁸² Zohar 3:266a-b, based on Matt, *Pritzker Zohar*, vol. 9, 700.

⁸³ Charles Chavel, ed., *Kitvei ha-Ramban*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1964), 497.

world. The biblical Adam and Eve were charged with taking care of their primordial garden, but transgression swiftly led to the shattering of this idyllic existence. In one of the Zohar's retellings, the pair are allowed to enjoy the delights of the Edenic garden as long as they were mindful of the unity of being, described earlier as a nested set of interrelated kernels and garments.⁸⁴ When they lost this unitive vision of cosmic interconnection, however, they ate the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge and that which had been filled with the gift of life was transformed into a source of death and exile. One Zoharic passage even suggests that Adam and Eve were run out of Eden precisely because they had already cast out God:

“He drove out Adam (*et ha-adam*)” (Gen. 3:24) Rabbi El’azar said, We do not know who divorced whom: if the blessed Holy One divorced Adam, or not. But the word is transposed: He drove out *et* [i.e. *Shekhinah*] — precisely!... Consequently it is written: “Y-H-V-H God expelled him from the Garden of Eden” (ibid., 23). Why did he expel him? Because Adam drove out *Et*, as we explained.⁸⁵

Jewish mystical sources often interpret the word *et*, a Hebrew particle that signifies the direct object and which is almost impossible to translate, as a symbol for *Shekhinah*. Just as the word *et* includes all the letters of the alphabet from *aleph* to *tav*, so, too, does *Shekhinah* include all worldly manifestations of the Divine.⁸⁶ Reinterpreting the word “cast out” (*va-yegaresh*), which can also mean “to divorce,”⁸⁷ the Zohar argues that God cast out Adam because *Shekhinah* had already been divorced from Her divine beloved and sent out of Eden.⁸⁸ Adam and Eve went into exile, along with *Shekhinah*, mirroring a fracture that took place within the Godhead.

By cutting this link between the different aspects of God, Adam turned the Tree of Life into the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. “When Adam sinned by eating from the tree, he transmogrified that tree into a universal source of death; he caused a defect, separating the Woman from Her husband.”⁸⁹ The twentieth-century writer Franz Kafka famously described the sin of Adam and Eve as their having separated the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil from its true source: the Tree of Life. Recent scholars have noted that this clever interpretation dovetails with an ancient kabbalistic tradition (of which Kafka was likely unaware), a myth that speaks of a single tree inhabiting the Garden of Eden.⁹⁰ Adam and Eve grasped for knowledge, said the early kabbalists, and thus attained a vision of the world defined in binary categories. Their sin lay in forgetting that the quest for understanding or knowledge must never become distinct or separate from the journey toward the essential sacred energy that unites the cosmos. The ultimate purpose of the human mind and soul is not to accumulate knowledge; rather, we are called to

⁸⁴ Zohar 1:35b, Matt, *Pritzker Zohar*, vol. 1, 222.

⁸⁵ Zohar 1:53b, Matt, *Pritzker Zohar*, vol. 1, 297–98.

⁸⁶ See Zohar 1:29b and 247a. See also b. Hagigah 12a and b. Pesahim 22b.

⁸⁷ Bereshit Rabbah 21:8.

⁸⁸ Bereshit Rabbah 19:7.

⁸⁹ See Zohar 1:53a.

⁹⁰ See Rivka Horwitz's insightful analysis in her “Kafka and the Crisis in Jewish Religious Thought,” *Modern Judaism* 15, no. 1 (1995): 21–33. See also Zohar 1:11a, and cf. 1:8a, 18a, 35a, and 53b. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 232, writes that the primordial sin of rending the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge “interrupted the stream of life which flows from sphere to sphere and brought separation and isolation into the world. From this time on there has been a mysterious fissure, not indeed in the substance of Divinity but in its life and action.” See Arthur Green, *Radical Judaism: Rethinking God and Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 42.

become vessels for the ever-flowing vitality that flows from the roots of all Being in the Tree of Life. For those of us tempted by the siren call of consumption and technological creativity, who have been tempted to reach for the Tree of Knowledge in isolation, this vision offers a powerful corrective of remembering that we must choose wisdom above accomplishment and universal flourishing—both human and nonhuman—above personal comfort and privilege.

The expulsion of humanity is described by the Zohar as having cosmic ramifications. All the sacred rivers dried up in the wake of their exile, and the garden began to wither. The problem is not temporal exile; indeed, as the Zohar says, the lights are resown even—and perhaps *especially*—in the time of physical and geographic dislocation. The sacred text is a landscape that may be tilled and transformed even outside the land of Israel. But the cosmic divine garden, resilient though it may be, cannot continue to thrive if it is unremittingly accosted with human callousness and iniquity:

“The earth and her fullness are Y-H-V-H’s” (Ps. 24:1) . . . Filled with everything, filled by the sun, a moon complete on every side, full, of supernal substance, like a treasure ship filled with all the best of the world . . . When the virtuous abound in the world, this “earth” yields fruit and is filled with all. When the wicked abound in the world, it is written: “Waters vanish from the sea; a river dries up and is parched” (Job 14:11). “Waters vanish from the sea”—the Holy Land we have mentioned, drenched by supernal saturation.

“A river dries up and is parched”—that single pillar standing above Her, by whom She is illumined. “A river dries up and is parched,” as is said: “The righteous one perishes” (Isa. 57:1).⁹¹

Jewish mysticism is hardly geographically neutral. Although the Zohar is a work of Iberian literary and theological creativity, its teachings constantly highlight the land of Israel as a *terra sancta*. Jewish mystical sources, however, often suggest that the boundaries of the sacred do not stop with the territorial boundaries of the land of Israel; the holiness of the world as a manifestation of God’s garden is often expanded to all places and all spaces.⁹² If humans righteously follow the divine command and lead a life of balance, attentiveness, and awareness, then the earth-garden yields its fruits and the sublime rivers of divine vitality follow their course. If they act with capriciousness and selfishness, however, these streams dry up, causing the world—and *Shekhinah*—to become arid, parched, and infertile. The sixteenth-century mystic Moses Cordovero gives a particularly striking interpretation of this dynamic, tying issues of human agency directly to the image of God’s garden:

This river that flows forth—how it waters the garden, its actions and its conduct—all depends upon the human being. The garden is sustained according to one’s actions. Water is drawn into it and its vegetation increases and flourishes; its fruits multiply, bringing delight and fertility in the mystery of worship.

The opposite is true as well—the fountain dries up, the river is destroyed and the garden is laid waste. The plantings become diminished and desiccated. Everything has been given over to the human being, according to one’s actions.

⁹¹ Zohar 1:67a; Matt, *Pritzker Zohar*, vol. 1, 393–95.

⁹² On the biblical and rabbinic legacy behind this vein of mystical thinking, see Bradley Shavit Artson, “Our Covenant with Stones: A Jewish Ecology of Earth,” in *Judaism and Environmental Ethics*, ed. Martin D. Yaffe (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2001), 161–71.

Truly, no deed is inconsequential. Every action in this garden makes an impression . . . Everything leaves a trace, if for good, or for bad.⁹³

No action, claims Cordovero, is without consequence. We are called to tend God's world, acknowledging that our deeds shape the world around us in many and profound ways. In the terms of his metaphysical system, human actions control the degree to which God's vitality flows throughout the divine realm and into the cosmos itself. The garden can flourish, or it can lay fallow. The choice is ours, and it emerges directly from our behaviors and our mindset.

We are in the midst of a major ecological crisis manifest in extreme weather events, loss of biodiversity, depletion of fisheries, pollution of air, water, and soil, prolonged droughts, and mass extinction of species. Scientists concur that we are barreling toward the point of no return. Our modern correlate of these parched mythic rivers and withering fruits means the staggering loss of species, the increasing fragility of the biosphere, and the outright destruction of our environment. The garden of our world, as it were, has indeed been fracked by greed and hubris. This cutting message is presaged in one of Nahman of Bratslav's fantastic stories, a tale about a imaginary garden that is surely an allusion to the Garden of Eden, or to the whole of this world in its ideal form, or perhaps to both:

There is a land where they had a garden, and in this garden there were fruits that had all the flavors in the world. And all the odors in the world were also there, all the forms, all the colors, and all the blossoms in the world were all there in that garden. Over the garden there was a gardener and the people of that land lived a good life because of this garden. But then the gardener disappeared, and, of course, everything in the garden withered and died since the gardener was no longer there. However, they were still able to live off the aftergrowth of the garden.⁹⁴

This perfect, almost Edenic, existence degenerated when a "cruel king arose in the country," a callous, greedy, and thoughtless leader who destroyed the "good life." He decimated the many good things that came from the garden and spoiled its fruits, though Nahman is careful to note that even this wicked king could not affect the garden itself. His wastrel minions are left to run free in the land; following the king's orders, they destroy the capacity for taste, smell, and vision so that nobody could enjoy or even yearn for the garden's delights. Yet those who dwell in that corrupted land long for healing and repair, and their situation is diagnosed by a team of emissaries. The spoilage of the garden's harvest is rooted in three sins: obscenity, bribery, and lechery. The inhabitants of the garden-world are told to fix these indiscretions, but they must first recover the lost gardener who had been exiled from the beautiful world. "There is a madman who wanders about crying he is the gardener and whom everyone considers mad and stones him and chases him away. Perhaps he is really the gardener." Only by welcoming this figure back from the margins of society, claims Nahman, can the garden be repaired.

Nahman's garden is surely an allusion to the verdant settings of Eden and the Song of Songs, described by the Hebrew Bible as being filled with evocative smells, sights, and tastes. At the same time, his tale is a narrative about the fate of the cosmos as a whole, which, he notes at the tale's beginning, had been given over to human beings by another king (King?) who abdicated his

⁹³ Moshe Cordovero, *Or Yakar*, vol. 2 (n.p.), 181. See also Seidenberg, *Kabbalah and Ecology*, 37–38.

⁹⁴ Arnold Band, trans., *Nahman of Bratslav: The Tales* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 263.

control.⁹⁵ Nahman's tale is a powerful warning against sullyng the earth. The garden is destroyed by human indifference, greed, and lust, and the garden's decay stems from unfettered desire and self-interest. As for the Zohar, Nahman's gardener is a righteous individual (*tsaddik*) who "is charged with the care and sustenance of God's creation. The world depends on his labors, in his absence, we may suppose the garden would wither and die."⁹⁶ Following Cordovero, we might expand this vision of *tsaddik's* role to *all* people, and thus consider that each and every one of us has an obligation to ensure that the earth-garden remains uncontaminated and healthy.

These sources provide a way of thinking that is, in my estimation, a useful paradigm of thinking about environmental ethics precisely in the period that is known as the Anthropocene. This idea is contested, but it is essentially irrefutable that human beings can now impact and shape their environment and indeed the world as a whole in previously unimaginable ways. If we are the gardeners, we would do well to avoid assuming that a technological solution will appear as a veritable *deus ex machina*. On the contrary, it is the immense forces of an increasingly discontented planet that are more likely to intrude.⁹⁷ Jewish biblical, rabbinic, and mystical traditions provide us with a model in which we can view the earth as a living other, a forceful entity with agency with whom we must live in relationship.⁹⁸ Moreover, we should recognize that healing comes from those on the periphery, those who had been sidelined and even described as mad. It might be interesting to consider this tale as a demand that modern scientists and scholars take seriously the philosophical and ecological teachings of Indigenous wisdom traditions. Though these traditions are marginalized in American thought and policy, often brutally so, we are starting to witness the power of their methods of preservation and their social understandings of relationships founded in kinship, responsibility, and gratitude.⁹⁹

Hans Jonas argued that medieval and modern iterations of religious ethics cannot adequately respond to the globalized world of industry and technology and the challenges of the twentieth century. He suggested that the concept of responsibility "nowhere plays a conspicuous role in the moral systems of the past or in the philosophical theories of ethics,"¹⁰⁰ demanding that this paradigm change because "a kind of metaphysical responsibility beyond self-interest has devolved on us with the magnitude of our powers relative to this tenuous film of life, that is, since man has become dangerous not only to himself but to the whole biosphere."¹⁰¹ Ancient models, Jonas suggests, are no longer sufficient for addressing the new reality in which human beings have endowed themselves with the capacity to destroy life on this planet. Ignoring this truth, whether because of false modesty or abject denial, may have dire consequences indeed.

⁹⁵ See also Shaul Magid, "Nature, Exile and Disability in R. Nahman of Bratslav's 'The Seven Beggars,'" in Samuelson, *Judaism and Ecology*, 333–68.

⁹⁶ Ora Wiskind-Elper, *Tradition and Fantasy in the Tales of Reb Nahman of Bratslav* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 20.

⁹⁷ Isabelle Stengers, "Autonomy and the Intrusion of Gaia," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no. 2 (2017): 381–400.

⁹⁸ See Mayse and Weisberg, "As the Deep River Rises," 10.

⁹⁹ See Margaret Kovach, "Emerging from the Margins: Indigenous Methodologies," *Research as Resistance: Revisiting Critical, Indigenous, and Anti-Oppressive Approaches* 2 (2015): 43–64; Kyle Whyte, "Indigenous Climate Change Studies: Indigenizing Futures, Decolonizing the Anthropocene," *English Language Notes* 55, no. 1–2 (2017): 153–62; Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

¹⁰⁰ Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, 123. See also Hava Tirosh-Samuelson and Christian Wiese, eds., *The Legacy of Hans Jonas: Judaism and the Phenomenon of Life* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2008).

¹⁰¹ Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, 136.

Such criticisms of the shortcomings of many ethical frameworks are all the more appropriate in the third decade of the twenty-first century. Jonas and others who levy this critique are, in my estimation, correct on a one-to-one application. The tools of medieval Jewish thought are insufficient on their own. The problems of contemporary climate disaster are so complicated and seemingly intractable that neither pre-modern jurisprudential paradigms nor ancient mythic theology provides ready-made answers. These traditions, however, have much to offer that we cannot get through the set of values bequeathed by the Enlightenment and by capitalist theories of economics and social organization.¹⁰² The Anthropocene shows the failure of these understandings of modernity as freedom and liberation, as unfettered extractivism, as an intellectual world of human beings as set apart from (and above) nature, and as an ever-accelerating technological capacity.¹⁰³ We must find new models of responsibility and obligation grounded in old-new myths that can, as Ludwig Wittgenstein would have it, “show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle.”¹⁰⁴

“In that global warming poses a powerful challenge to the idea that the free pursuit of individual interests always leads to the general good,” Amitav Ghosh writes. “It also challenges a set of beliefs that underlies a deeply rooted cultural identity, one that has enjoyed unparalleled success over the last two centuries.”¹⁰⁵ Responses grounded in starting points of liberal and market individualism have failed to generate the collective action we need. The struggle to develop a language or mindset for comprehending and addressing the dangers of the Anthropocene stems, in part, from a combination of the trans-jurisdictional nature of the global challenge and the legal and social default toward market individualism where collective action on a grand scale is required. These are, Robert Cover notes, exactly characteristics of the context in which a jurisprudence of the social order might provide needed heft. In contexts in which “centralized power” and “coercive violence” are lacking, he argues, “it is critical that the mythic center of the Law reinforce the bonds of solidarity. Common, mutual, reciprocal obligation is necessary.”¹⁰⁶ Jewish literatures, while they cannot provide a wholesale, transferrable solution to environmental problems, offer a robust accounting of socially embedded duties and commitment to other human parties and the nonhuman world.

The biblical, rabbinic, and mystical traditions describe human beings as part of the natural world, yet these sources assign them a special importance in terms of their responsibility. They must thus practice restraint, working for healing rather than injury or extraction from the world. Here I invoke the wisdom of Hayim Tyrer of Chernowitz, a Hasidic thinker who read “fill the earth” (Gen. 1:28) as permission to “fill” oneself by taking something of the world’s marvelous and fertile beauty.¹⁰⁷ This permission is tempered, however, by the twin imperative of “conquer it,” which Hayim Tyrer brilliantly interprets as a command to overcome the coarse, “earthy” human desires of constantly trying to take more and gain more. Such greedy impulses, he claims, must be utterly stamped out. His words echo the sentiment of a famed passage from the classical Midrash:

¹⁰² See the comments of Audre Lorde, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* (London: Penguin Books, 2018).

¹⁰³ See Hartmut Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

¹⁰⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed. (Chichester, UK: Blackwell, 2001), 309.

¹⁰⁵ Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 134.

¹⁰⁶ Robert M. Cover, “Obligation: A Jewish Jurisprudence of the Social Order,” *Journal of Law and Religion* 5, no. 1 (1987): 68.

¹⁰⁷ *Be'er Mayim Hayim, bereshit*, commenting on Gen. 1:28.

“Consider the work of God; for who can heal that which is damaged?” (Eccl 7:13). When the blessed Holy One created the first person, God took and showed Adam all of the trees of the Garden of Eden, saying, “Consider My works—how beautiful and wonderful they are. All that I have created, I have created for you. Pay heed to this—do not damage or destroy my world, for if you do, who will heal it after you?”¹⁰⁸

Human action has the power to destroy a flourishing but fragile world, and such spoliation and devastation cannot be undone. Rather than seeking to only take, then, we should remember that we are here to give and to serve. This calls to mind another rabbinic teaching that describes the act of planting trees as an experience of *imatatio dei*:

Is it possible for flesh and blood to ascend to the heavens and cleave to *Shekhinah*, about Whom it is written, “For the Eternal your God is a consuming fire” (Deut. 4:24)? Rather, understand the verse as follows: At the beginning of creation, the Holy One engaged in planting, as it says, “God planted a garden in Eden” (Gen. 2:8). Similarly, when you enter in the Land of Israel, you should first engage in planting, as it is written, “When you come into the Land, you shall plant all types of fruit trees” (Lev. 19:23).¹⁰⁹

The Talmud claims that we cleave to the Divine through acts of compassion and lovingkindness. Just as God visits the sick, we, too, are charged with visiting the sick, and so forth. In this passage, human beings must plant trees in this world, just as God planted and cultivated the perfect garden of Eden. This causes the celestial waters to flow, allowing that great and beautiful self-seeding garden to flourish rather than wither. Human agency must be brought about to help and to heal, to restore the way that the water runs. We cannot do so unthinkingly, of course, since the idea of “crisis” can easily lead to people making poor and unstudied decisions in the name of ecological advancement. We need to bring together the sharpest scientific thinking along with new conceptual models and vocabularies for assigning value and evaluating modes of engagement. Our intellectual and technological capacities must not be used to power our own unending quest for material benefits, but to ensure that we continue to exist as part of an ecosystem world that must either flourish—or vanish—together.

POETIC GARDENS OF JERUSALEM

Imaginative explorations of Eden and the love-soaked language of the Canticle remain part of Hasidism’s lexicon of religious experience, but it is noteworthy that the garden motif recedes significantly in the devotional literature of this pietistic religious movement. The ethos of Hasidism, which swept across eastern Europe in the late eighteenth century, evinces a deep connection to nature and to the physical world,¹¹⁰ and its hagiographical literature frequently describes the spiritual power of the forest, but evocative narratives about gardens and orchards are strikingly

¹⁰⁸ Kohelet Rabbah 7:19

¹⁰⁹ Va-Yikra Rabbah 25:3.

¹¹⁰ See, inter alia, Seidenberg, “Body of the Shekhinah,” 129–50; Arthur Green, “Abraham Joshua Heschel: Recasting Hasidism for Moderns,” *Modern Judaism* 29, no. 1 (2009): 67; and Jerome (Yehudah) Gellman, “Early Hasidism and the Natural World,” in Samuelson, *Judaism and Ecology*, 368–88.

rare in Hasidic teachings.¹¹¹ No doubt this is, at least in part, because it emerged in a cultural milieu—and climate—so different from the Zohar’s medieval Iberia.

It is striking, then, that images of gardens and orchards figure so prominently in the poetry of Zelda Schneurson Mishkovsky (1914–84), an Israeli poet, teacher, and artist whose works are saturated with images and ideas taken from Jewish mysticism, and from Hasidism in particular.¹¹² Born in Ukraine, she moved to Palestine with her family in early adolescence and lived most of her adult life in Jerusalem. Zelda studied painting and taught primary school, publishing her first volume of poetry only in 1968. Her work, which was swiftly embraced by the Israeli world of letters, is characterized by an evocative style that combines the pathos of Hasidic devotion with intuitive poetic vision and striking literary sensitivity.¹¹³ The mystical richness of Zelda’s poetry stems, at least in part, from her spiritual background.¹¹⁴ She was the direct descendant of several prominent leaders of the Chabad Hasidic community, including the movement’s founder, and Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902–94)—the Seventh Rebbe of Chabad—was her first cousin. Zelda’s poems are filled with images absorbed from traditional religious life—prayer services, ritual objects, sacred times—and her language sparkles with allusions to the literature of Jewish mysticism.¹¹⁵

Zelda used this ancient vocabulary to build a new literary vision, reinterpreting her Hasidic past in a poetic key but also expanding far beyond its social and intellectual confines. “She intuits truth about the world,” claims scholar and poet Marcia Falk, “that she cannot express strictly in the terms of the theological system she has inherited.”¹¹⁶ Zelda speaks in torn acknowledgment of the tangled complexity of mortality and life; she whispers a radical awareness that God is veiled and absent, yet also revealed through the magnificence of ordinary phenomena. Her poems describe the peregrinations of the soul, probing the fraught tension of existential aloneness and one’s life as part of a community. Rather than abrupt rupture or jejune nostalgia, Zelda’s unique vision of the world—and of the self—allows her to hold tradition and creativity together without surrendering either.¹¹⁷ Zelda was a modern Jewish mystic whose religious personality and

¹¹¹ See Daniel Reiser, *Imagery Techniques in Modern Jewish Mysticism*, trans. Eugene Matanky (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 94; and Mayse, *Speaking Infinities*, 170–72.

¹¹² For a brief and informative overview of Zelda’s life and literary impact, see <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/zelda>.

¹¹³ These volumes were collected together and published as Zelda Schneurson Mishkovsky, *Shirei Zelda* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Ha-Me’uhad 1985). For a wonderful English translation of many of these poems, see Zelda, *The Spectacular Difference: Selected Poems*, trans. Marcia Falk (Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College Press, 2004).

¹¹⁴ For a biographical sketch, including her reception within Israeli literary circles, see Hamutal Bar-Yosef, *‘Al Shirat Zelda* [On Zelda’s poetry] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Ha-Me’uhad, 1988), 9–30.

¹¹⁵ See Nitsa Kann, “A Boat of Light: Zoharic Images in Zelda’s Poetry,” *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women’s Studies & Gender Issues* 19 (2010): 64–95; Hamutal Bar-Yosef, *Mysticism in Twentieth Century Hebrew Literature* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2010); Shachar Pinsker, “And Suddenly We Reached God? The Construction of ‘Religious’ and ‘Secular’ in Israeli Literature,” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 5, no. 1 (2006): 21–41; Shachar Pinsker, “‘Never Will I Hear the Sweet Voice of God’: Religiosity and Mysticism In Modern Hebrew Poetry,” *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History* 30, no. 1 (2010): 128–46. See also David Jacobson, *Creator, Are You Listening? Israeli Poets on God and Prayer* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); and Wendy Zierler, *And Rachel Stole the Idols: The Emergence of Modern Hebrew Women’s Writing* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 264 and 268–71.

¹¹⁶ Marcia Falk, “Strange Plant: Nature and Spirituality in the Poetry of Zelda: A Translator’s Reading,” *Religion & Literature* 23, no. 3 (1991): 107.

¹¹⁷ See Aubrey Glazer, *Contemporary Hebrew Mystical Poetry: How it Redeems Jewish Thinking* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2009), esp. 103; and see also Aza Zwi, “The Poetry of Zelda,” *Ariel* 65 (1986): 58–70; Zvi

literary works collapse conventional categories such as “secular” or “sacred” before her readers’ eyes. The startling, often decentering, power of encountering the mundane world is a key element of this project.

Scholars have noted the prominence of the garden as a motif in modern Hebrew poetry and literature,¹¹⁸ and Zelda’s writings from the years after her family’s emigration to the land of Israel reveal a particular appreciation of its verdant settings.¹¹⁹ Her generous use of garden images, however, is richly informed by kabbalistic and Hasidic precedent.¹²⁰ The works of Zelda follow Hasidic theology in emphasizing divine immanence, offering the reader a radiant vision of non-human phenomena,¹²¹ and in doing so Zelda subtly sacralizes the mundane; this holy inflection prompts the reader to re-envision both the self and the world. Her verses describe even most seemingly ordinary objects or creatures—flowers, trees, and insects—as pulsing with vitality and divine presence. Even “the floor of the sea / is a chariot (*merkavah*) for God.”¹²² “Moon is teaching Bible,” writes Zelda, invoking a familiar symbol that represents renewal, transformation, and the constancy of change.¹²³ Her moon also represents a breath of the wing of the World to Come; its soft illumination “lights the gate / to the hidden world.”¹²⁴ Rather than a static illumination of the sun, Zelda draws our attention to the quiet dynamism of the moon.¹²⁵ She invites her readers to reimagine what David Abram has called the “life-world,” that powerful realm of immediate sensory experience of this physical world, and perhaps even to act differently in light of that awakening.

I believe, therefore, that Zelda’s works should rightly be interpreted as an example of mystically inflected Jewish ecopoetry.¹²⁶ Following John Shoptaw, I understand an ecopoem to be a work that engages deeply with the “nonhuman natural world” but whose verses also have “designs on us, that imagines changing the ways we think, feel about, and live and act in the world.”¹²⁷ Celebrating or investigating the quotidian¹²⁸ as well as the majestic and sublime, ecopoetry asks us to see the world with new eyes, so that, once “jolted” into awareness by an encounter with something beautiful and natural, “we may think twice in a moment of recognition, even act on

Mark, “Distant Signs and Ancient Wonders: Hasidic Faith in the Poetry of Zelda,” *Havruta* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 62–71; and Michele Paskow, “A Study of Themes and Techniques in the Poetry of Zelda” (PhD diss., Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, New York, 1991).

¹¹⁸ See Hannan Hever, “Our Poetry Is Like an Orange Grove”: Anthologies of Hebrew Poetry in Erets Israel,” *Prooftexts* 17, no. 2 (1997): 199–225.

¹¹⁹ See also Zelda, *Ganei ha-Ayin: Ketavim ve-Tsiyurim* [Gardens of yonder: Writing and art] (Jerusalem: Old City Press, 2020), 24, 26.

¹²⁰ See Kann, “Boat of Light,” and 64–95; Bar-Yosef, *Mysticism in Twentieth Century Hebrew Literature*.

¹²¹ See Falk, “Strange Plant,” 97–108.

¹²² Zelda, “From the Songs of Childhood,” Falk, *Spectacular Difference*, 76–77.

¹²³ Zelda, “Moon is Teaching Bible,” Falk, *Spectacular Difference*, 56–57; and see Bar-Yosef, *On Zelda’s Poetry*, 33–34.

¹²⁴ Zelda, “In the Moon’s Domain,” Falk, *Spectacular Difference*, 214–15.

¹²⁵ On the symbolic association of the moon with the feminine in medieval and early modern Kabbalah, see Green, *Guide to the Zohar*, 52, 57; and, more broadly, Susan Berrin, ed., *Celebrating the New Moon: A Rosh Chodesh Anthology* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1996).

¹²⁶ See, more broadly, Anat Kopolowitz-Breier, “‘The World Was Given Us to Fix It’: Jewish American Women’s Ecopoetry,” *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology* 26 (2021): 1–23.

¹²⁷ John Shoptaw, “Why Ecopoetry?” *Poetry* 207, no. 4 (2016): 395 and 408. See also Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 44–45.

¹²⁸ On ecopoetics and “the ordinary,” see Cary Wolfe, *Ecological Poetics: or, Wallace Stevens’s Birds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

it.”¹²⁹ This is exactly what Zelda’s poetry seeks to do. She lifts up what Richard Kearney refers to “epiphanies of the everyday”¹³⁰—moments of awakening and experiential triggers of transformation that occur in ordinary life—and demands that we respond to this summons.

Some of the stirring descriptions of encounters with the physical world in Zelda’s works are surely autobiographical. Writing in the first person, drawing together the position of speaker and author, she refers to the transformative power of walking through fertile meadows and reflecting upon a preverbal connection with their inhabitants: “I walked in the field / The trees received me with love and simplicity. / The stone understood why I am silent.”¹³¹ This sublime attachment to the surrounding natural world makes room for a communion founded in silence and reciprocal understanding that is not without its own complexities:

My soul goes out¹³² among the green fields, among the plantings. But I am embarrassed to ask them if they will accept me with all the jumbled baggage; if there is room in their little tree-shed, for the many heavy pitchers of suffering in my home; for my silver candlesticks, for my mother’s ancient crown, for the collection of our nocturnal sufferings; for the silent gardens of Naught through which I wander, my child.¹³³

The speaker’s journey into the pastoral setting, seeking and finding the intuitive soul-friendship of the trees, is fraught with quiet unknowing. Can they truly comprehend the complicated, freighted totality of her inner world? Is there really space in this peaceful, tranquil repose for the aching foment of her sadness? For the crushing pain of fertile stories yet untold? The question remains unanswered, and perhaps precisely so; unknowing leaves room for connection, encounter, and communion without the pretense of total understanding.

This emphasis on relational community with the nonhuman world is a key dimension of Zelda’s poetry. Her works frequently highlight the profound majesty of trees or plants, but she generally does so without collapsing their otherness or fully imposing human characteristics upon them:

Only in the plants
are the nectars not sullied
a step away from the abyss.
Only in the flowers
does the sweetness not retreat
a step away from death.
For the plants are a different nation
from us—
except for the olive trees,
which are sad and wise, like people.¹³⁴

¹²⁹ John Felstiner, *Can Poetry Save the Earth? A Field Guide to Nature Poems* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 6.

¹³⁰ See Richard Kearney, “Epiphanies of the Everyday: Toward a Micro-Eschatology,” in *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy*, ed. John Panteleimon Manoussakis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 3–20.

¹³¹ Zelda, *Enchanted Bird*, 21.

¹³² See Song 5:6

¹³³ Zelda, *Gardens of Yonder*, 37.

¹³⁴ Zelda, “Place of Fire,” Falk, *Spectacular Difference*, 147. See also Deut. 20:19.

Zelda's verses trouble and break through the human/nonhuman binary, showing that deep connection and friendship ought to be cultivated between plants and people without erasing the distinctions or eliding the nuances of that relationship. Her arresting images are deployed in the power of encountering the residents of gardens and orchards to the reader. One of her most famous poems describes, and celebrates, the miraculous quality of a common insect:

When the orange butterfly wends its way
through a river of colors and scents
toward its flower-mate, and clings
as though this flower were the star
of its secret self—
an inexplicable clamor of hope
rises in every heart.¹³⁵

Butterflies are magisterial precisely because of their ordinariness; these precious insects embody the spiritual quest and self-becoming in their simple task of seeking out their flowers. This image stirs the heart and awakens the speaker's mind. So, too, with plants that fill gardens and homes:

The white jasmine that put forth
a branch in my flowerpot
so gloriously,
peace surrounding its beauty—

In the palm of its fragrance,
my soul drifts in sleep,
dreaming of a fountain.¹³⁶

Figuratively interweaving the realms of plant and person, Zelda conjures up a dreamworld filled with longing, yearning, and connection. The jasmine, it seems, has reached across the divide that separates human and nonhuman life, planting a vine within the speaker's heart and soul. This soft, gentle expression of attachment, propagated in an act of friendship, flourishes in the speaker's fertile inner world, radiating peace and lulling her to sleep with a scent redolent of the incense offered in the Temple in Jerusalem.¹³⁷

The speaker concludes with the dream of a fountain, perhaps drawing upon Nahman of Bratslav's account of a certain "fountain" or "spring" (*ma'ayan*) that yearns to connect to reach the heart of the world. This spring, however, cannot ever attain the object of its desire, for all existence would be snuffed out if it does. Much like the lover's and beloved's desire in the Song, this spring cannot be fully united with the ultimate source for which it longs. Called *epektasis* by the Christian mystics,¹³⁸ the world is propelled forward by this perpetual strain or quest for God

¹³⁵ Zelda, "The Orange Butterfly," Falk, *Spectacular Difference*, 191.

¹³⁶ Zelda, "The Friendship of White Jasmine," Falk, *Spectacular Difference*, 183. See also Zelda, *Enchanted Bird*, 88.

¹³⁷ These scents, too, mirror the wafting fragrances of Eden and in the garden of the lover's delight in the Song.

¹³⁸ Anthony Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa* (London: Routledge, 1999), 106: "The soul is forever inflaming its desire for what is hidden, by means of what it has already grasped." See also Phil. 3:13; and Liviu Petcu, "The Doctrine of Epektasis. One of the Major Contributions of Saint Gregory of Nyssa to the History of Thinking," *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 73, no. 2 (2017): 771–82.

and the unconsummated love.¹³⁹ The garden, much like the fertile soul in the speaker's breast, is a space of longing as well as delight; its inhabitants ripple with yearning for connection.

The power and pull of interior darkness were by no means unknown to Zelda. Painfully aware from her own experience of the fragility of life and the certainty of death, her works constantly recall a looming abyss that may represent mortality as well as the potential meaninglessness of existence. Some of Zelda's verses reveal an intense yearning for death as an escape from the perennial suffering of life, but she finds spiritual grounding in the ordinary phenomena of the natural world. "Her rescue," claims Marcia Falk with characteristic insight, "most often seems to come from the world itself as it enters her ordinary life—from a tree or a flower or a garden, from the wind or the sun or the sea, sometimes from another human being."¹⁴⁰ These encounters rekindle her appreciation and tolerance for this-worldly existence; when nearly overcome by despair, a simple flower upon her dining room table reminds Zelda that: "And the sadness? / Even there—radiance."¹⁴¹ The speaker is often delivered from the pit of despondency by encounters with plants, animals, and gardens.

The expansive, hidden ground from which all being emerges—called *ayin*, "naught," or "nothingness"—is simultaneously a yawning abyss that sparks fear. This term for the infinite Divine occupies a critical place in the history of Jewish mysticism,¹⁴² and Hasidic sources often refer to *ayin* as an interior locus of transformation reached during the raptures of prayer and song.¹⁴³ For Zelda, roots can take hold and new life can emerge even in this seemingly impossible terrain:

For out of the scent of Nothingness
the tree blossoms—
glorious, beautiful.
And in its crown—
an enchanted bird.¹⁴⁴

The abyss is Janus-faced, for it both threatens extinction and is the infinitely life-giving source of being. This vital reservoir of potentiality, akin to the rushing rivers described in the Zohar, undergirds everything from the ordinary phenomena of the natural world to the sacred texts. Trees of meaning grow forth and begin to shine precisely from amid this fertile and dynamic, yet ever-uncertain, realm. These saplings are beautiful, even regal, serving as the home for a new type of mysterious species of bird whose very being is radiantly magical. In an untitled poem from her 1981 collection, we read:

¹³⁹ See Ariel Evan Mayse, "'Seek Me and Live': Hasidism and the Spiritual Journey," in *Studies in Jewish History, Literature, and Thought in Honor of the Centenary of Hebrew College*, ed. Arthur Green, Michael Fishbane, and Jonathan Sarna (forthcoming, 2022).

¹⁴⁰ Falk, "Strange Plant," 106.

¹⁴¹ Zelda, "[In the Morning, I Thought]," Falk, *Spectacular Difference*, 177.

¹⁴² See Daniel C. Matt, "Ayin: The Concept of Nothingness in Jewish Mysticism," in *Essential Papers on Kabbalah*, ed. Lawrence Fine (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 67–108; Rachel Elijior, "The Paradigms of *Yesh* and *Ayin* in Hasidic Thought," *Hasidism Reappraised*, ed. Ada Rapoport-Albert (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1997), 168–79; Mayse, *Speaking Infinities*.

¹⁴³ See, for example, the homily translated in Arthur Green, *Speaking Torah: Spiritual Teachings from Around the Maggid's Table*, vol. 1, with Ebn Leader, Ariel Evan Mayse, and Or N. Rose (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2013), 83.

¹⁴⁴ Zelda, "Enchanted Bird," Falk, *Spectacular Difference*, 137.

The first rain—
 a plenitude of freshness
 with no sign of Cain...
 Each drop is a link
 between me and things,
 a link
 between me and the world.
 And when night
 conjures up the abyss,
 the abyss conjures up
 fields and gardens.¹⁴⁵

The break of rain, suggests Zelda, showers the world with renewal (*ra'ananut*),¹⁴⁶ and this fertile meeting of ground and water produces “multitudes” (*alfei revavah*).¹⁴⁷ When this precious, life-giving rain returns once again, perhaps reappearing after its seasonal absence, the stigma or “sign” (*ot*) of Cain has been removed. The description calls to mind droplets of ink, a physical form of language that links the author (or scribe) and the reader, bridging beyond individuated identity and gazing past the mask of the cosmos. It is this openness to the inner unity that binds (or “links”) the speaker to the cosmos. Gazing beyond the boundaries of the self also leads the speaker into an encounter with the “abyss” (called *tehom*), an inner crevasse that seems to be a place of rebirth and regrowth as well as a yawning chasm of absurdity and unknowing. New life, it seems, will spring forth from the nullification of the self, a vital inner response to the gentle fall of rain. These “fields and gardens” represent verdant life, filled with growth and change, a return from the abyss and an embrace of particularity and the dynamic—and subtle—phenomenon of the world.

Zelda’s works combine her profound sense of personal interiority with a call to connection to the surrounding world. “Poetry always proves that there’s no discounting human presence,” claims John Felstiner, suggesting that “egocentric and ecocentric: lives by the tension.”¹⁴⁸ Zelda’s attempt to twin interior spirituality with encounter and obligation vis-à-vis the nonhuman world, I believe, offers a powerful corrective to the post-Enlightenment West’s obsession with the “individual moral adventure” as the cornerstone of its ethical framework. The shortcomings of this perspective have been interrogated by Amitav Ghosh and Kyle Whyte, who underscore the importance of communal networks of responsibility rather than an exclusive focus on individual choices or rights.¹⁴⁹ The poetry of Zelda demands attunement and presence to lived experience and prompts us to action in light of that experience.

This ethos of reciprocity and social connection is characteristic of Hasidism as well, a movement that sought to transform the teachings of Jewish mysticism into a mass religious

¹⁴⁵ Zelda, “[The First Rain],” Falk, *Spectacular Difference*, 193.

¹⁴⁶ On the spiritual power of rain, see Zelda, *Enchanted Bird*, 26–28.

¹⁴⁷ Cf. Gen. 24:60. On the generative property of rain, described in plainly erotic terms in the Talmud; see *b. Ta’anit* 6b.

¹⁴⁸ Felstiner, *Can Poetry Save the Earth?*, 6.

¹⁴⁹ Ghosh, *Great Derangement*, 171; and Kyle Whyte, “Against Crisis Epistemology,” in *Handbook of Critical Indigenous Studies*, ed. Brendan Hokowhitu, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Linda Tuhiwai-Smith, Chris Anderson, and Steve Larkin (London: Routledge: 2021), 52–53.

movement.¹⁵⁰ These authors were well aware of earlier kabbalistic and rabbinic traditions that emphasize the need to withdraw from the world in order to cultivate a pious, ascetic approach to study. One Hasidic sermon by Dov Ber of Mezritsh quotes a meditative technique, found in the work *Reshit Hokhmah*, in which the scholar is to imagine himself standing in the Garden of Eden, stepping away from other people—and the physical world at large—and retreating in contemplative solitude.¹⁵¹ Dov Ber then remarks:

But we must understand, how can he think this? One must surely know that he is in the world, amid people that he recognizes! The matter is thus: When one studies or worships with fear and love, connecting and binding his mind to the Creator, he contemplates that He fills all of the worlds and there is no place devoid of His glory, and all is filled with the life-force of the blessed Creator. Therefore, in everything that he sees he will see only the divine life-force that is drawn into it.¹⁵²

He quotes the medieval source on the importance of solitude with reverence, yet Dov Ber is subtly challenging the original meditative technique. He shifts the emphasis rather dramatically by calling upon the scholar to visualize God's life-force as manifest through the physical world and the people around him as suffused with sacred vitality.¹⁵³ Rather than seeking to escape from the chains of the world, Dov Ber puts forward an embracing vision of the world as saturated with God's word. In doing so he suggests a metaphysical basis for serving God through corporeal deeds, which, as we have noted, occupy a place of tension in his theology. The cosmos reverberates with the divine Word and is filled with the radiant letters of God's formative utterances—as well as the thundering command of Sinai—but engagement with these aspects of the Divine requires prudent circumspection. This, he suggests, is what it means to inhabit the Garden of Eden: an experience cultivated through devotional investment in the ever-present sacral qualities of language and the physical world.

The textured portraits of the world found in Zelda's verses reverberate with verdant motifs, offering microscopic descriptions in which change and transformation are defining factors of temporal existence. One of her poems explores the overwhelming power of the sky itself:

There was something startling
in the hue of the sky.
I was amazed that the treetops swayed gently
with no shadow of fear.
I wanted to flee from the white sky
but the small garden showed me signs
that His mercy had not ceased.¹⁵⁴

The crushing openness of the sky looms over the speaker's head, staggeringly incomprehensible in its coloration as well as its expansiveness. The sight and the sense of this sky is electrifying,

¹⁵⁰ See Philip Wexler, *Social Vision: The Lubavitcher Rebbe's Transformative Paradigm for the World*, with Eli Rubin and Michael Wexler (New York: Herder and Herder, 2019).

¹⁵¹ Elijah de Vidas, *Reshit Hokhmah, sha'ar ha-kedushah* (Jerusalem: 1984), ch. 4.

¹⁵² Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer, ed., *Maggid Devarav le-Ya'akov* [He spoke his words unto Jacob] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1976), no. 200, 325–26.

¹⁵³ See also Schatz-Uffenheimer, *Maggid Devarav le-Ya'akov*, no. 181, 281–82.

¹⁵⁴ Zelda, "[There Was Something Startling]," Falk, *Spectacular Difference*, 205.

but it is also terrifying. Yet the treetops, she notes, are remarkably unafraid. They seem to be safe in the knowledge that their roots reach to the soul, in the depth of the unperturbed sacred ground. Gardens show us the mercy of the Divine, embodying the fact that God's love is endless, perhaps because they are filled with beautiful things. These remarkable, shining natural phenomena are perfect precisely in their ordinariness. Much like Zohar's mythic description of the garden filled with an infinitely self-sowing light that expresses divine love, Zelda's garden, small and unprepossessing though it may be, contains infinite multitudes of radiant complexity and the vital heart of life.

Her prose writings, many of which were published posthumously, offer an even more explicitly autobiographical dimension to these profound encounters with the verdure world:

I opened the window in my mother's room, may her memory be for a blessing, to gaze upon the neighbors' garden. My bones were filled with an unexpected renewal (*ra'ananut*). Rain fell, joyous, springlike, sparkling, laced with sun, the rain of *Iyyar* which brings joy to all life. All the world blossoms like those plants, becoming scented with the renewal of rains. Terror ceased and was extinguished; melancholy and opposition were erased.

The pear tree that grows in the neighbors' garden is a sudden ray of light, bringing into it the rays of all the world. Stretching out, it raised up its branches and tiny pears to me, filled with that same honey-wine, sweet and delicious. With the pressure of longing, its blossoms fluttered, soaked with spices by the wind of the Nothingness. The tree was illuminated, revealing a secret to my soul: the world endures only because of the secret of light, the light of beauty.

... I talked with that wet tree with great love, without words or gestures. Its beauty stretched out a finger directly into my soul. The pear tree, resplendent entirely with rain, is ingratiated (*mithate*) before its Parent in Heaven, seeking abundant love and sweetness from the treasure-house of unconditional gifts.

Hope was opened within me. Vision was opened within me. This was a time of looking, a moment of contemplation whose roots are in the Garden of Eden. The gateway to the Nothingness was opened—to Eden.¹⁵⁵

Zelda's decision to open the window in her mother's room led to an intense encounter with a simple tree. This moment of conversation, indeed communion, transformed her life. Zelda felt herself lifted out of melancholy, brushed once more by the breath of wind from the wings of renewal. The simple yet radiant pear tree, described in terms that evoke the Edenic Tree of Life, is a beacon of awakening and deeper meaning, one that opens up the soul in order to brush aside fears of the abyss and meaninglessness.

This type of dialogical "I-Thou" moment,¹⁵⁶ as it were, is not the only way that human beings encounter their natural surroundings. Zelda was keenly aware that people often gloss over the radiant beauty of plants, animals, and gardens, gazing upon them with disinterest. Or worse, they treat these phenomena as nothing more than objects for the taking, potential value to be extracted and then destroyed. Such is the theme in her evocative poem "Ancient Pines":

When the snows melted,
grim men emerged from the ruins

¹⁵⁵ Zelda, *Enchanted Bird*, 83.

¹⁵⁶ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), 57–59.

to fell ancient, powerful pines
 that once responded to the mountain winds.
 Limber branches were crushed to dust
 in the courtyards,
 branches that had sketched in space gentle motions
 from the innermost flowering.
 They tossed the pale green shadow
 into the trash,
 and kicked at the fragrance, the sap.¹⁵⁷

Snows thaw and unfreeze, and, as they do so, they leave passage for people to move in and grab what they want. This is the entrée of those “grim men” (or “dark,” “gloomy,” or “despondent”) who enter the forest from “the ruins,” perhaps a reference to the collapsed and bankrupt world outside of the forest. Rather than seeking to ensure new life, these dreadful figures destroy the venerated giants that weathered the storm. At first they seem to harvest and bring in the fallen trees for lumber, perhaps to build up those “ruins” and cities. They bring low the giants that had once lived in community with the mountain, whose branches had once pleasantly and unobtrusively whispered through the air. But then these men toss them all away in an act of wanton destruction, destroying even the ethereal, small things that bring joy: they kick and deride the scents that transform, but also the life-giving sap that is the vitality of the plants.

This could be a description of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, or the razing of a field or demolition of part of the beautiful forest in contemporary Jerusalem. But Zelda’s stirring epigraph draws the poem in a different direction:

“And trees—you’re allowed to kill trees?”
 blurted a small boy, whose eyes
 were like something from a painting.¹⁵⁸

These lines seem to point toward the biblical prohibition of not destroying fruit-bearing trees, a complicated and contested category of Jewish law called *bal tashhit* that eventually comes to mean an interdiction on waste or wanton destruction and undergirds much of modern Jewish environmental discourse. But Zelda’s use of the word “to kill” (*la-harog*) is striking; it means also “to murder,” and its verb in Hebrew does not generally take a nonhuman object. This linguistic move clearly nudges the trees into the domain of personhood; not only are they joined as part of the more-than-human world, but their destruction is tantamount to murder. This fact is pointed out by a small boy, perhaps because, in his youthful innocence, he cannot understand what is going on. How is such flagrant destruction possible, he wonders? The child’s eyes are like paintings, vitally alive with creative possibility—but also dancing with the flames of destruction mirrored in the eyes.

Zelda’s poetry draws the reader into a personal journey of the gardens of her world, places and spaces that are filled with plants and animals. These creatures and beings are unremarkable, and yet, in their very ordinariness, they are unspeakably radiant and powerful. We are called by her poetic works to notice them and pay them mind, and in doing so to open ourselves up to

¹⁵⁷ Zelda, “Ancient Pines,” Falk, *Spectacular Difference*, 171.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

the processes of intellectual and spiritual transformation. Trees are our teachers. Gardens are moments of the flowering of divine revelation. Despite the fact that she does not present herself as an ecopoet, Zelda seems very much to seek to change the way that her readers perceive the natural world, reevaluate their place within it, and then change their mode of acting in accord with that startling new realization.

CONCLUSIONS

Where does all of this leave us? I have argued that the Zohar refers to the garden as a place of delight, pleasure, and yearning, fusing the sensuous biblical languages of Genesis and the Song of Songs into an integrated dynamic of coterminous human, nonhuman, and divine flourishing. We seek to enter this garden, becoming aware of its awe and might through engaging deeply with the sacred text. Scripture is itself a veritable linguistic orchard, sown with divine light and overflowing with secrets and multiplicities of meaning.

We are also called to attention and care by the electrifying micro-phenomena of ordinary life. The experience of gazing at the natural world within this garden mythic allows those same texts to come to life in new ways, and engagement with the textual sources enables one to see the gardens shining with added radiance. This mythic vision of the interconnectedness of being offers a way of thinking about human beings as a part of nature rather than apart from it. The world and the cosmos flourish to the extent that the heavenly floodgates of vitality remain open, and human beings must accept their responsibility and obligation to ensure the continued balance of this created world. Likewise, the poetry of Zelda paints a lyric picture of the garden's capacity to open one's eyes, heart, and soul in new ways. The biodiversity of this world—the trees, plants, and creatures—recall our vision of the sacred with their mundane, yet majestic, qualities. Through encountering these beautiful manifestations of ordinary resplendence, we come to understand that all living beings have their own radiant song and potent silence. Plants and animals—indeed, all aspects of the created world—shimmer with a capacity for interiority that is shared by human beings, even as the inner worlds are not fully synonymous.

The point of this exercise, however, has been to consider theological and poetic sources from within the Jewish tradition that can contribute to revising our assumptions about the “natural world” and the place of human beings therein. As a society, and perhaps as a species, we have reached an inflection point that appears Gordian in complexity and scope. Our hungers for expansion and extraction have led us to the brink of environmental collapse. Scholars of religion must work toward building such vocabularies, lexicons, and storehouses of myth in the face of this pressing climate disaster whose consequences are already becoming tragic and manifest. Rather than greedily clamoring to extract the material resources of this world and use them for our own desires, and rather than serving as custodians for a natural world from which we are divorced and lord above, we ought to remember that we exist within a network of shared relationships and obligations that include *all* elements of this planet. Urgent action on both collective and local levels, on the scale demanded by this hour, cannot be left to the wiles of the individual moral adventure. We need new narratives, and in our search for these stories and ethical frameworks, we would do well to search for the wealth of useful paradigms found in the sacred domain of religious literatures. A