The Ark and Other Bubbles: Jewish Philosophy and Surviving the Disaster

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Abstract: The story of Noah is the story of a near-total biocide. And yet, in popular imagination, it appears as more of a floating petting zoo, a charming menagerie that follows the far more serious Edenic storylines of Genesis 1–5. In this paper, the ark, and midrash it inspired, acts as a guide for a set of speculations and arguments about the role Jewish philosophy might play during the present ecological disaster. These speculations are guided by the following claim: Jewish philosophy best responds to ecological crises when it does not attempt to provide an ecological ethics “out of the sources of Judaism”—making expansive normative and metaphysical claims—but instead explores enclosures and spaces; when it thinks about our relation to disasters, rather than trying to prevent or solve them. In other words, there is an element of Jewish thought which attempts to think enclosures and protect small but important things in the midst of disasters, and it is this I wish to highlight. My goal is to demonstrate that this kind of thinking presents viable possibilities for ecological thought. Specifically, I will argue that Mara Benjamin’s work gives us an indication of where such philosophy can go and how it might get there.

Keywords: Noah; Genesis; ecology; ethics; disaster; Jewish philosophy

1. Introduction

The end of all flesh is come before Me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth. —God

Who built the ark? Noah, Noah. Who built the ark? Brother Noah built the ark. —Traditional

The story of Noah is the story of a near-total biocide. And yet, in the popular imagination, it appears as more of a floating petting zoo, a charming menagerie that follows the far more serious Edenic storylines of Genesis 1–5. Cain killing his brother inspires horror (and horror movies), whereas the drowning of nearly all life is seen as little more than the backdrop for the survivors’ adorable journey. I am not going to add to these cheerful readings, nor develop a darker one: instead, the ark, and midrash it inspired, will here act as a guide for a set of speculations and arguments about the role Jewish philosophy might play during our own disaster.

These speculations are preliminary and incomplete, but they are guided by the following claim: Jewish philosophy best responds to ecological crises when it does not attempt to provide an ecological ethics “out of the sources of Judaism”—making expansive normative and metaphysical claims—and instead explores enclosures and spaces; when it thinks about our relation to disasters, rather than trying to prevent or solve them. In other words, there is an element of Jewish thought which attempts to think enclosures and protect small but important things in the midst of disasters, and it is this I wish to highlight.

My goal is to demonstrate that this kind of thinking presents viable possibilities for ecological thought. Specifically, I will argue that Mara Benjamin’s work gives us an indication of where such philosophy can go and how it might get there. This is not to suggest Benjamin is the only person who can help Jewish philosophy think about
enclosures—indeed, other ways, such as Elliot Wolfson’s thinking about containment, will be suggested in the notes below. But Benjamin is this study’s primary focus.

Directing Jewish philosophy towards the logic of enclosure—philosophy directed towards understanding spaces that contain, protect, and foster, rather than either deontic or cosmological thinking—means that Jewish thought, so read, is neither an attempt to “escape the earth” (Latour) nor to save it. But neither is it to be apologetic and present these enclosures as idyllic, or even desirable—there is violence and hierarchy even in these womb-like spaces. Rather, it is to consider what we have to offer in the face of disaster.

Enclosure is of course a very partial and incomplete element of Jewish thought: partial because the small is usually examined in a relationship to or dialectic with the expansive; incomplete because there are many connected topics, themes, and arguments which recommend themselves in the face of disaster. But enclosure is the element I wish to focus on because it is an element with enough humility equal to the event and because it, like the story of the ark, is sharable. As particular as the story of the ark, or any specific small space, may be, they are sharable, if not already shared.

It could fairly be asked why such a paper needs to deal with the ark story at all, let alone the ways it has developed in Bereshit Rabbah and other interpretive traditions. I am unable to fully defend my method here, but as a preliminary, I would suggest that thought, especially in its early stages, leans very heavily on a shape, or vision: a great deal of philosophy is committed to extrapolating, improving, and defending this vision, whatever it might be. Consider it a heuristic, or a Peircean icon: the ark itself is a classical shape, or model, for enclosure and survival in a catastrophe. The story cycle surrounding the ark (the Noah stories) helps me understand ways Jewish thinkers—philosophers or not—have thought about enclosure; and from these, I take what can assist in the organization and development of a Jewish philosophy of enclosure and disaster.

This paper is organized into two rough halves, the first backwards–looking and critical, the second forward–looking and constructive. The first part will make a rough sketch of previous attempts to stage a Jewish ethical intervention in the thinking of ecological disaster, focusing in particular on attempts to formulate an ethics of stewardship, or caretaking. This will be done by a bird’s eye view of the two major anthologies of Jewish ecological thought and then closer readings of two texts: Steven S. Schwarzschild’s “The Unnatural Jew” and Hava Tirosh-Samuelson’s “Human Flourishing and History: A Religious Imaginary for the Anthropocene”. This odd pairing is made because these papers can act as bookends (one is a classic, the other quite recent) and because they seem wildly dissimilar, and yet, I argue, they end up in the same place: an ethics of stewardship that is completely inadequate to the problem. The second half then tries to suggest an alternative way of thinking the disaster, one that does not centre ethics, but rather space. These suggestions will be centred by the ark and will use Benjamin as a case study for future directions in Jewish philosophy. In other words, the paper begins by criticizing the standard model and then suggests a new one.

2. Judaism Is Not the Solution to the Ecological Disaster

And nor will it ever be one. The by and large depressing and misguided panoply of responses to the ecological crises by Jewish philosophers—Hans Jonas being an important exception—is testament to the absolutely unsurprising inability of the Jewish tradition to prevent ecological collapse. There is no reason to think Jewish thought would, or even should, have a total response to a universal crisis. Any attempt to found a “biblical and yet transferrable” ecological ethics is arguably little more than a vestige of the Ethical Monotheism Complex that once played too large a role in religious thought. Specifically, religious thought that sought to preserve a role for religion in liberal modernity and therefore fell back on the claim that religion, or at least monotheism, has an essential role in our ethical formation (and thus, in turn, our political, social, and economic behaviour); however, if Judaism, or monotheism, was going to solve the ecological crisis, it would have done so by now.
Thus I suggest we reject both the notion that Judaism is an original sin leading inexorably to the contemporary disaster, or that it (together with the other “Abrahamic” religions) is capable of preventing ecological collapse. The former position is perhaps most infamously and sloppily expressed by Lynn White (White 1967), whose work is merely one expression of the assumption that the command to “fill the earth and subdue it” has dictated at least 500 years of human history. One is of course entitled to ask why this phrase, and not countless other phrases, has dominated scientific and technological growth for the past 500 years and led inexorably to ecological destruction.

The second notion has a similar problem, in that it too looks for biblical or rabbinic or cultural “phrases” or concepts which are in turn to provide a mechanism for ecological conservation or salvation. Most of these responses end up suggesting Judaism promotes stewardship, or ecological shepherding: the earth is the Lord’s, and we are its caretakers. This is the position I will seek to address first.

I will move through this position quickly, as my hope in this section is to make the need for a third position plausible: where Judaism, or more specifically, Jewish philosophy, is neither the cause nor the solution to this problem but nonetheless has something to say. Indeed, part of what makes this disaster so difficult to handle is that it is a universal problem, in a negative sense, and therefore requires countless collectives to work alongside each other, however tensely, to deal with it. This will not be solved by technology, nor by a change of attitude, nor still less by individual ethical positions.

3. The Drunken Farmer Noah Is a Better Model for Jewish Philosophy Than Abraham the Herdsman

To repeat the refrain at the centre of this paper: Jewish philosophy does better when thinking about spaces rather than solutions, relationships to catastrophe rather than how to avert disaster. While my interest is more in the figure of the ark, a figure which for good reason has countless afterlives in disaster stories, dystopias, and science fiction, Noah’s mediocrity is too useful to pass over. A relatively humble figure, Noah is more or less mute for much of the story and certainly cannot be accused of an excess of charisma or wisdom. And as the disaster abates, Noah sets about making alcohol, as if to ensure he is not viewed as a great leader. This is not a messianic figure, nor even an apocalyptic one: he and those alongside him survive a disaster, and that is all.

Noah, the first person born after Adam’s death, is interesting precisely for how un-heroic and uninteresting he is: there are no wise words, no arguing with God, no attempt to save more people. He saves himself and his family, and an array of non-human creatures. Noah is a drunk: a reliever, not a redeemer (Kishik 2018). At the risk of repetition: what relief can be brought during disaster is, I suggest, a question Jewish philosophy is better suited to treating than “how can we fix this”. Jewish philosophy often functions better as a therapeutic process than a problem-solving apparatus.

4. In Defense of Herding Things

In 2001 and 2002, two large volumes on Judaism and ecology were produced, both of which—despite the great deal of time which has passed since their production—still reasonably represent what the “field” has generally been thought to offer. The first, Judaism and Environmental Ethics, serves as a collection of “classic” texts from the 1960s to the 1990s, complete with a very critical introduction by Martin Yaffe. The second, Judaism and Ecology, is part of a set of sustained attempts to see what “religion” can offer the ecological crisis. The first of these volumes is largely apologetic: arguments as to why Lynn White is wrong abound, and it is shown again and again that Judaism not only accords with environmental ethics but demands them. The latter volume is far more exploratory, looking for resources to bring to the table.

Despite their variations, one thing is a near constant across the volumes: where arguments are made in favour of a Jewish environmental ethics, or a Jewish ecological position, it is very often an argument for stewardship, with a corresponding Judaism-inspired re-
straint (from damaging things needlessly). In sum: Judaism leads to stewardship of this land (which is the Lord’s); these forms of stewardship are typically supplemented by a supposed Jewish position, or set of affects: by wonder, by a sense of connectedness, by a respect for creaturely existence, creation, or even an ersatz pantheistic joy. Schwarzschild’s article, “The Unnatural Jew”, is interesting precisely for how it eschews these supports, and for this reason, it will be interrogated below.

5. The Case of the Unnatural Jew

Steven Schwarzschild’s “The Unnatural Jew” (1984) is useful because it attempts to promote an ethics of stewardship without any affection or nostalgia for nature. It is telling that his proclamation of the “proper” Jewish (and Christian) “understanding of nature” occurs at the end of the article as something he considers self-evident and hardly worthy of discussion: “Nature is precious because God is its koneh (“maker”-“owner”). Man is God’s perpetual partner in perfecting the world toward and by means of the kingdom of God. He is the steward, the responsible caretaker, and husbandman, of nature” (Schwarzschild 2001, p. 275). The rest of the article has two primary functions: to position the Jew as a figure not embedded in, nor even interested in, “nature” and to combat any philosophical attempts to resacralize nature.

Schwarzschild begins by noting his hostility to picnics and then uses the work of Celan to suggest this is a general Jewish characteristic (Schwarzschild 2001, p. 270). No fool, Schwarzschild is well aware his position only holds if he is able to draw the line separating Jew from non-Jew such that many expressions of Judaism are excluded as either mistaken or heretical: from “Chassidism” (and any form of Judaism that allows for incarnation, which he claims is a Christian motif) to Zionism to the Frankfurt School, all of these have an un-Jewish relation to nature. Finally, a number of corresponding theological enemies are quickly arrayed, then dispatched: pantheism, paganism, dialectics, all are considered to depose the human and are part of an ideology seeking to resacralize the natural.

Defining Judaism to exclude opponents is the right of any theologian, but one can nonetheless wonder if it is indeed useful philosophically (and Jewish philosophy does take up much of the article). Texts sampled to advance his point can just as easily be countered with other texts. Schwarzschild expresses affection for Pirkei Avot 3:7, which is perhaps the urtext of all “Unnatural Judaism”: “Rabbi Jacob said: if one is studying while walking on the road and interrupts his study and says, ‘how lovely is this tree’! [or] ‘how lovely is that furrow’ scripture imputes it to him as if had forfeited his soul”. This sentence is interesting in its own right and calls for analysis I cannot give it. But two things are of note for my purposes: the lovely objects differ greatly, as the tree is a creature that can grow without human involvement, while the furrow is a near-archetypal symbol of land cultivation; further, one can easily sample other elements of the tradition which favour a more intense relationship to nature, as with this gem from Bereshit Rabbah: “No SIAH (TREE) OF THE FIELD, etc. All the trees, as it were, conversed with each other; all the trees, as it were, conversed with mankind; all the trees were created for man’s companionship”. Thus it is far from clear that the affective-relational anti-nature position he espouses exhausts what is “properly Jewish”.

But the existence of this midrash, or forms of Judaism such as Hassidism, do nothing to Schwarzschild’s position: the properly Jewish aesthetic, and properly Jewish desires, should remain sternly at odds with any appreciation for nature. And this makes his embrace of a strong ethics of stewardship all the more intriguing. For him, this ethics is both obvious and shared across multiple religions. And he is hardly alone in considering this to be the proper, or default, ethics. Thus, Schwarzschild ensures the reader knows that, while abjuring any warm or pleasant relationship with so-called nature, he nonetheless embraces vegetarianism and other “green” positions out of the bare ethical obligation of stewardship. This paper suggests that the ethics of stewardship is so dominant, so fundamental, it is able to penetrate even the defenses of a picnic despiser like Schwarzschild.
6. Contemporary Shepherds, Imaginary Sheep

The above section from Bereshit Rabbah presents another Jewish relationship to nature (and one assuming a relationship between natural beings). We can, following Tirosh-Samuelson, say this allows for a different Jewish imaginary. And yet, even a Jewish imaginary inclusive of relations to natural beings can still end up in exactly the same form of stewardship Schwarzschild considers obviously “Jewish”. This is exactly the case with Tirosh-Samuelson’s “Human Flourishing and History: A Religious Imaginary for the Anthropocene”. It is a useful complement to the “Unnatural Jew” if only because it is more conciliatory and contemporary, employing Jewish resources to establish an “imaginary” which allows for human flourishing and ethical behaviour in this age of climate disaster. In other words, where Schwarzschild claims Jews, aesthetically, philosophically, and halachically, are “at two with nature”, Tirosh-Samuelson seeks to modify this such that human beings remain distinct from “nature” but are (literally) sympathetic to it.

The “imaginary” in this paper is considered “religious” but is largely “Jewish”, or at least, Jewish-friendly.19 But what is this Jewish imaginary called up to support? The answer is a kind of ethical humanism. Religion (or really, Judaism) is asked to both preserve the distinct status of human beings and supply these distinct humans with an imaginal bridge leading to “nature” (the very thing they are distinguished from). As Tirosh-Samuelson writes:

Instead of looking to human technology as the salvation of the human species, we will do better to draw our inspiration from the religious imaginaries of the monotheistic traditions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—because they offer a meaningful narrative in which humanity and nature are interdependent but not fused into each other. A religious imaginary will enable humanity to modify and adapt its behavior in order to survive and perhaps even thrive on our damaged planet which they might heal if they choose to alter their conduct. (Tirosh-Samuelson 2020, p. 395)

This is laudable, seemingly quite different from the approach taken in the “Unnatural Jew”, and very much like the goals of this paper (using images as resources to think how to live within a collapse—I am less sanguine about the prospect of “healing”). But despite this promising note, the paper ends up playing the same old song. To construct the promised “imaginary”, we are taken on a trip through which it is revealed that Judaism (and therefore, mutatis mutandis, Christianity and Islam) allows for both natural law and a contract with the divine and nature, and these forces can be combined into an ecologically friendly virtue ethics (Tirosh-Samuelson 2020, pp. 408–17).

Oddly, the enemy is not rapacious capital but techno-optimism (the “religious” or ideological companion to technology). And the virtue ethics we are promised is to provide an alternative to transhumanism and other competitors for the imaginary of the future—imaginaries that will supposedly eliminate human distinctiveness (Tirosh-Samuelson 2020, pp. 414–15). The ease with which these imaginaries declare the human overthrown—as if anthropocentrism can be defeated by fiat—is indeed troubling.20 But of what does this alternative ethics consist, and what is the basis of its imaginary, or the image it pursues? This capacious imaginary is “post-Secular … planetary … relational … pluralist … historical … embodied” and, most importantly, “ecological” (Tirosh-Samuelson 2020, p. 416). But here is the difficulty: this effort to construct an imaginary that allows us to thrive in an age of ecological destruction, and actually enjoy doing so, ends up falling back on very old strategies—strategies which, because of their pedigree, it is assumed we will more easily accommodate (i.e., religion and virtue). Further, no matter how many times virtue ethics and the ethics of care are invoked, religion and virtue themselves end up doing little more than providing support for the same old questionable position of “stewardship”: “In the Judaic religious imaginary, the human and the natural world are not fused into each other nor is one reduced to the other; instead, the natural and the human are interwoven while humans care for a world that does not belong to them” (Tirosh-Samuelson
This is the same steward-position (a position which bizarrely seems to escape critique) even if it is presented as both virtue ethics and an ethics of care. The solution to the problems of the Anthropocene is found in so-called “Abrahamic traditions”; we have just not properly done it yet. To do that, we seemingly need only to pour this old wine into a new “imaginary” (Tirosh-Samuelson 2020, p. 403).

And therefore, as the paper comes to a close, we are told: “this vision is ecological because it looks at human beings not as masters of the Earth who have a license to exploit its resources but as creatures whose task is to protect and care for the world”.21 It seems that after all this effort, what we are given is yet another version of stewardship, however mollified. We remain caretakers (of the world, no less); the only real difference between this image and Schwarzschild’s is here we are allowed, indeed, required, to enjoy and thrive in our position as shepherds or caretakers (Tirosh-Samuelson 2020, pp. 389–390).

7. It Is Too Late for Good Behaviour

Therefore, we have two papers with completely opposing views of the proper Jewish relationship to nature, one looking towards the past for models, the other intentionally using past models to suggest a relationship of near-total dissociation and discomfort, the other seeking to construct a future religious imaginary which takes account of this past but seeks to develop a pleasing and embodied relationship to “nature”. But despite this seeming divergence, both end up in the same place: our job, as humans, is to care for nature, to steward it. Nature, a concept left largely undefined, seems to be all of creation, except humans: in other words, everything earthly that is not human or spirit. I am assuming the nature we are to shepherd does not involve nebulae, or the earth’s fiery core: it is that which we can affect and which in turn affects us.

There is no doubt the many calls for stewardship made by Jewish thinkers since Jonas are calls spurred by ecological disaster or the growing awareness that the non-human systems on which we depend are more fragile than any ancient thinker could ever have believed (Jonas 1984, pp. 1–8). But this is perhaps exactly why the model of stewardship is so troubling and, indeed, ineffectual. Indeed, the very notion that we are caretakers is perhaps a problem: it arrogates us to a position of domination, however genteel, and in this sense ends up replicating Lynn White’s tiresome critique. Ignoring the fact that a stewardship model based on biblical models is hardly universalizable, we are still left with a position where the human stands above the ecological system and refuses any challenges to our domination. A kind master is still a master.

I am quite partial to human beings—I assume most of us are—and always speak and think from a human perspective—as I assume is true of anyone reading this. Further, one can adduce many reasons for why a qualified anthropomorphism is desirable, if not necessary, for thinking about this disaster (is it a disaster for roaches, or octopi?).22 Indeed, anything other than a qualified anthropocentrism seems an abdication of responsibility:23 it is awfully convenient that the moment when we are fully aware of the destruction we have wrought, we are ready to abandon the notion that humans have special agency or responsibility here. The issue here is not that humans are at the centre of our thinking, or that we think from the human position: the issue is not anthropocentrism, but the need to retain our position as master and not allow it to be challenged by catastrophe. Indeed, the above two projects, and the many which echo them, have merely replaced an acquisitive master with a solicitous one.

But there is a further difficulty: in addition to the arrogance the ethics of stewardship seeks to protect—an arrogance especially odd in the case of Judaism, which is a rather small religion—there is the troubling fact that most “interventions” by Jewish philosophy take refuge in ethics. It is far from clear that what is needed here is more “good behaviour”, whether by individuals or small religious groups. Recycling will not stop a forest fire, and buying used clothing cannot hold back a flood. Good behaviour is, of course, important—but it seems, if the goal is prevention or human thriving, then mass collective political, economic, and legal actions are required.
Therefore, there is a strong sense, even in Tirosh-Samuelson’s quite recent article, that there is still a chance that we might prevent disaster, and further, ethics is what the present situation calls for. But this is precisely what is at issue: does ethics—in these cases, anthropocentric by design—really address this disaster? Let alone an ethics which deliberately positions humans as shepherds? I suggest (and here it can only be a suggestion) it does not. A new ethics and aesthetics, and perhaps a new religiosity, are needed, but if ethical restraint or convincing rhetoric is all religion brings to the table, it is clearly insufficient, if not part of the problem.

As Zupančič has noted: a great deal of ecological thought mirrors the preventative thought of the Cold War: do not push the button, change as little as possible while seeking to prevent disaster (Zupančič 2018, p. 17). Ecological ethics does exactly this: it says “avoid destroying things” but allows us to continue as we were (with a few modifications in our behaviour). One wonders: what will this lead to? A more thorough recycling program? Some modifications in our diet and transport? Not only does it seem no set of personal-ethical considerations is adequate to a moment which seems to require mass political action, there is a much more serious problem:

Today, the most lucid analysts do not warn against what will happen if we press the wrong buttons; they rather insist that the wrong button has already been pressed. The apocalypse has already started and is becoming an active part of our life and our world, such as it is. It is not waiting for us somewhere in the future, but is dictating our social, economic, environmental conditions as we speak.

Any adequate response to this disaster, and perhaps any disaster, cannot be merely preventative, especially if the tools for prevention are integral to the situation which created the disaster. Prevention is an absolutely understandable—and even good—response to a problem, but I would suggest it is absolutely inadequate for any attempt to think the present disaster: surely Blanchot is correct that any disaster which transforms the world (in his case, the Bomb) requires that our thinking about it must undergo a corresponding change (Blanchot 1997). If the history of Jewish thought teaches us anything about disaster, it is this: a serious disaster requires that we change the way we think and the way we write, even (or especially) where philosophy and its connected theologies are concerned.

If the goal of Jewish thought is neither to cajole Jews into right ecological behaviour, nor the construction of a more “eco-friendly” Jewish identity, nor even to inspire other “monotheists” to behave, what, then, can Jewish philosophy offer? Again, I am going to suggest it offers strange but shared forms of thinking: specifically, forms of thinking about disaster in terms of survival and enclosure.

8. New Figures

The Jewish “imaginary” (to borrow from Tirosh-Samuelson) has several resources to help us develop our thinking to account for this disaster which has already begun. Unsurprisingly, I suggest God’s attempted biocide is one such resource. In this vein, Kishik suggests:

There is little to be gained by reading [Genesis] 1–11 as a warning sign of an approaching “natural” disaster. The Noah of Genesis, unlike his equivalent in the Quran (11:25), is not a prophet trying to amend humanity’s corrupt ways before it is too late. . . . A better way of approaching the story of the flood would have us notice that although the Abrahamic tradition tends to relegate Armageddon to some messianic future, the Torah treats it as an accomplished fact that occurred in the primordial past. It is thus coping with the aftermath of an event that some are still anticipating. (Kishik 2018, p. 63)

I am suspicious of Kishik’s invocation of the “Abrahamic tradition” and of his complete relegation of the disaster to the past. Arguably the “tradition”, insofar as it can be said to exist, is a series—one disaster after another—with some in the primordial past and others in the messianic/apocalyptic future. The attempt to relegate disaster to one particular
point in time is needlessly partial. In a mundane register, we can say depending on who and where we are the catastrophe is more or less recent, more or less present, and more or less dominates the future. But in any case, it is present.

Therefore, what is an appropriate response for Jewish philosophy, if it is not a recycling of ethical monotheism? I believe no one knows the answer to this question. What we have right now are a series of potential directions to consider and a number of figures to help us organize and direct our thinking.

This does not mean we have nothing to work with: a great deal of serious thinking is taking place about these issues, and we should absorb these conversations relentlessly; and we have a number of shapes and trajectories to start with. Employing the figure of the ark, I suggest Jewish philosophy should ignore any call to “think big”, or think cosmologically: it is a good time to think small and explore the enclosed and crowded spaces we find, and will find, ourselves contained within as this disaster unfolds.

As Latour perpectively writes:

Don’t be fooled for a second by those who preach the call of wide-open spaces, of “risk-taking”, those who abandon all protection and continue to point to the infinite horizon . . . . Those good apostles take risks only if their own comfort is guaranteed. Instead of listening to what they are saying about what lies ahead, look instead at what lies behind them: you’ll see the gleam of the carefully-folded golden parachutes, of everything that ensures them against the random hazards of existence. (Latour 2018, p. 11)

In the midst of disaster, a celebration of a life outside a bubble of care or protective walls borders on cruelty.

Thus, while there are many directions in which we can (and should) proceed (in the face of an unknown disaster, a multiplicity of tactics is surely called for), I am suggesting we look at protective bodies and small spaces. In the midst of disaster, we begin with what we have. And we happen to have an extraordinarily evocative model of a protective space. How we think this space remains open, but (again) I suggest the following philosophical response: a philosophy of intimacy (epitomized here by Mara Benjamin). The ark is nothing if not crowded, and this generates intimacy, whether desired or not. In what follows, I will present Benjamin’s work in an unabashedly particular (and partial) manner, exactly as I engage the religious sources. Consider the remainder of the paper as an incomplete assemblage built along the lines of Noah’s Ark, a place of potential protection during the flood.

9. How to Think Small Things

The ark is the first constructed space in the Bible and the second significant enclosure. It can be fairly read as the dismal repetition of Gan Eden. A space of survival, it is a shared figure: there are several well-known ancient flood stories, where a floating vessel becomes the bottleneck through which all surviving creatures must pass. That this story is not “unique” is a hermeneutic asset: the more we can share here, the better. Of course, this is not to read these different stories identically: the narrative and theological background conditions differ greatly story to story, as does the shape and function of the ark itself; these differences are apparent even when it is unclear what the ark actually is.

But what the ark most emphatically is not is a petting zoo floating on the water. On several occasions, I have had my students read Genesis 6 and 7 aloud to each other and asked them to summarize “what happened”. They have invariably skipped over the story of the Nephilim which precedes the Noah myth and focused entirely on the contents of the ark, at the expense of the devastation in the background. On the one hand, this oversight smacks of delusion; on the other, it is in tune with the story itself, which seems far more concerned with the ark’s dimensions and inhabitants than the slaughter going on outside.

It is far easier to think about what the ark means than what it is. Tellingly, the English “ark” (the translation for tevah, תְּבַח) meant a chest, box, or similar enclosure, long before it
took on the valence of “boat”, or other seacraft. Comparative work might help a little here: in some Sumerian versions, the “ark” was likely a large boat, a flat-bottomed river boat, with the shape of a large canoe. But there are instances where the vessel is round, and this is also perhaps the case with the second most famous such story, with Gilgamesh (11: 28–31): “Let the length of the boat and the width of the boat be equal. Roof over the boat as the abyss is roofed”. This craft is either square or circle, but it is certainly not a standard ship (Finkel 2014, p. 130; George 2000). The round space—this bubble—is quite sensible given the circumstances: there is no journey here, just survival: running for the exits is a sensible way to flee a local catastrophe, but hither and yon is the only way to travel in the midst of an absolute storm. After all, it is not like we are going anywhere when the whole earth is flooded.

Noah’s ark is not round, but a trace of this roundness inheres in it through the link to the basket the baby Moses was placed in—this basket being the only other instance of the word ark (tevah) in the texts we have. Indeed, this link between the baby basket and the ark gives the entire vessel a maternal valence (taken up in the treatment of Benjamin below). It is not, I suggest, a coincidence that the same term is used for the floating tub in which the baby is placed, and the floating thing which preserves all the earth’s animals and insects.

What the ark is not is a ship (oniya, πολιος), or a device intended to get from a to b. As Ibn Ezra interprets it, the story “uses the term ark (tevah) and not ship, for it did not have the shape of a ship nor did it have oars” (Ibn Ezra 1988, p. 100). And this is, I think, a fruitful reading: the vessel (like Moses’) must float, and must protect its precious inhabitants, to save them for the future. But the journey it begins has no set destination. It is more like a free-floating protective bubble or casing than a ship. In any case, it is a protective thing. But while it is unclear from the text what the ark is, what it does is clear, at least to its many interpreters: it protects in the midst of disaster; it is a refuge (and not a sacred place). Bereshit Rabbah highlights this: “AND ELOHIM REMEMBERED NOAH. What did He remember in his favour? That he provided for [the animals] the whole twelve months in the Ark”. The ark protects, Noah cares for the ark’s co-inhabitants, and only for this reason are they (physically, not spiritually) saved.

10. Looking Out, Looking At

At the risk of being accused of just reinventing stewardship in the midst of a bubble, I want to note the difference between caring for a plant, or globe, and working within an enclosure. And while I am far from wanting to reignite the tiresome battle between Jerusalem and Athens, it might be useful to think of Noah in opposition to Atlas (not the weightlifter, but the titan): the person who survives within an enclosure and the man who holds the globe aloft. Here, we might adopt Sloterdijk’s opposition between globes and bubbles. As Latour nicely summarizes the Sphären project:

Sloterdijk borrowed von Uexküll’s notion of Umwelt and extended it to all spheres, all enclosures, all the envelopes that agents have had to invent to differentiate between their inside and their outside . . . For Sloterdijk, the complete singularity of Western philosophy, science, theology, and politics lies in the fact that they have infused all the virtues into the figure of a Globe—with a capital G—without paying the slightest attention to the way in which that Globe might be built, tended, maintained, and inhabited.

While Noah leaves a great deal to be desired as a figure—indeed, all the patrician figures of the Bible are questionable exemplars—the difference between the ark, coated with pitch and slime, and the globe, or planet, is significant. No one “lives” on a planet: they are merely located there. Spaces of life are often packed, smelly, and loud: crying babies, animal sounds, the endless urination, these are the marks of a legitimate vitalism (and not some super human realizing his destiny). The ark floats where it floats, the globe is where it is; and in a sense, it—and not the sun—is a figure of the centre. Home is always
worth fighting for, but the planet? Is it really a surprise that the calls to “save the planet” have gone completely unheeded? How can they sound anything but arrogant and helpless at the same time?

But the primary difference between the two, phenomenologically speaking, is that one looks at the globe (or planet), and one looks out of an ark (or bubble); failing vision, one can always send out messenger birds—the use of animal intermediaries is a nice touch. Here, Heidegger is surely correct that the photo of the earth—seeing it as a planet, or globe—is alienating: “This is no longer the earth on which man [sic] lives” (Heidegger 1993, p.106). This is not to condemn alienation, only to note one lives in an ark, for however short a time, and speaks out of it, whereas one sees the planet/globe from outside. One can be invested in the ark as a caretaker, patching holes, feeding the animals, mopping up piss, but one is interested in the globe/planet only as an outsider: “To put it in still other terms, he who looks at the Earth as a Globe always sees himself as a God”. But we are not gods with artificial limbs, no matter how much we might wish this to be true (and yet, no matter how unhappy this fantasy makes us, we persist in it; see Freud 2010).

Looking-out (rather than looking-at) also allows us to occupy something like a qualified anthropocentric position: we are always looking out of human spaces, but talking to (and with, and through) non-human things and creatures. Whereas when we are looking-at the globe or planet, we see from the position of a de-centred little god: problems, disasters, these are happening there and not here. But the fires that tear through houses on the west coast, or the floods which ravage coasts, these are always here for someone.

11. Jewish Thought and Maternal Spaces

Let us say enclosure thinking can better come to terms with the ecological disaster, or disasters, as the systems which support us start to fail. And this is because they are or were or will be enclosed within these storms. And let us further grant that one way Jewish thought, broadly construed, can work through this problem is by thinking this shape, perhaps aided by the ark myth (developed through midrash and other interpretations). What can Jewish philosophy do to help develop this image?

Here, I suggest the maternal space of the ark (either Noah’s or Jochebed’s) can be thought through the work of Mara Benjamin: her phenomenology of maternal life, her thinking of obligation, and her historical positioning of Jewish philosophy are all useful here. They are not merely able to help us think about these enclosures but also open up ways we can continue to think them. This is both by opening a pathway, but also by allowing us to bring several thinkers of enclosure into relationship with Jewish thought, many of them ignored, as well as rejuvenating employment of major thinkers such as Freud.

12. Liberal Relationships

Benjamin’s recasting of the history of Jewish philosophy presents us with a critical vantage point from which we can easily re-think the place of Jewish philosophy: what does the 20th-century thought of relationships look like if placed within an enclosure, or in the ark? And why would we even want to do such a thing? To answer these questions, it is useful to see the recent history of Jewish philosophy as an attempt to recast old theological positions and myths in such a way that they are able to defend themselves from liberal critique:

Many of the great central European Jewish thinkers of the previous century . . . recast the anthroplogy of the “obligated self” they inherited from classical Judaism into relational terms. In the realm of interpersonal relationships and embodied daily life, they saw the potential to understand the nature of the divine, or at least the tools with which to investigate the human relationship to the divine. These thinkers reread obligation, seeing in it not the burden imposed by a commanding God on the Jewish people, but rather a status generated in the encounter between two subjects in everyday human relationships.
There are two properly spatial considerations to this recasting we can note here: one is of use to us, and the other will need to be either jettisoned or transformed.

The first is that the space of encounter is small, or at least, smaller than its classical variation. Benjamin sees this as a deficit, but I hope to show it is an asset contemporary Jewish philosophy could develop and improve upon:

In the modern Jewish imagination, obligation would be confined to the intimate, intersubjective realm. The sphere of obligation was to be primarily realized within dyadic encounters ... This restriction of obligation to the intersubjective sphere testifies both to theological creativity and, simultaneously, to the impoverishment of the scope of obligation in the modern period ... What remained was the dyadic encounter with another individual, a realm protected from the social and political critiques that continued to vex practitioners of the mitzvot. (Benjamin 2018, p. 12)

The smallness of these little dyads allows us to think of these encounters in an enclosure, and not, say, thundering from a mountaintop (and even the mountain scene is “smaller” than the theological visions that dominate once the world is seen as a globe, or planet). While the dyad may be too limited a form to understand the chaos and noise aboard an ark, the notion of obligation within small spaces may be needed if we are to find comfort as we are buffeted about by collapsing natural systems. Where I rejoin Benjamin is when she notes these small relationships have no location:

Most influential Jewish thinkers conceived of the intersubjective encounter, and therefore of the individuals who participate in it, in decidedly abstract terms. The “other” they envisioned has no specific social location or set of needs. It is difficult, on the basis of these thinkers’ writings, to imagine how such meetings occur in the course of ordinary life, and how duration of relationship, social proximity, and differences of power might affect them. An insistent tendency toward abstraction enabled these thinkers to argue for the universality of dyadic encounter and obligation. (Benjamin 2018, p. 13)

Even Buber, a thinker of intimacy if there ever was one (albeit, non-sexual intimacy), falls prey to this: it is hard to imagine a location for an encounter when “The You-world does not hang together in space and time” (Buber 1970, p. 84). Here, I somewhat trivialise Buber’s point, which is to say these encounters do not take place on a mappable grid of space and time; but what is this it-grid replaced by? An encounter which produces its own world and then relativizes all other objects: “It fills the firmament—not as if there were nothing else, but everything else lives in its light. As long as the presence of the relationship endures, this worldwideness [Weltweite] cannot be infringed” (Buber 1970, p. 126). Location is a zero-sum game for Buber: either objects bump into each other in space and time, or meetings absorb space and time into themselves:

And even as prayer is not in time but time in prayer, the sacrifice not in space but space in the sacrifice—and whoever reverses the relation annuls the reality—I do not find the human being to whom I say You in any Sometime and Somewhere. (Buber 1970, p. 59)

Here, Buber’s laudable rejection of reducing dialogue to mappable interactions falls prey to exactly the abstraction his philosophy seeks to repudiate. Thinking in terms of enclosures, maternal or otherwise, allows us to suggest that encounters occur neither in the “world” (as earth, globe, or grid) but also neither in the midst of a world generated exclusively by the encounter itself. It is true that encounters sometimes build their own envelope, or seem to excrete them—the encounter in a strange place that creates a bubble of security around itself—but these are the exception, not the rule, and romanticizing meetings in liminal and desolate places often just spares us the work of thinking through enclosure.48 And again, here, the ark is an excellent form for thinking: the ark is not a universal space, even as it contains the future universal.49 And the constitution of the enclosure matters: an ark is not a ship, indeed, despite having a long and very material description of its construction, it is not clear what it is at all.
13. Maternal Obligation in the Storm

Let us return to the maternal valence of the ark—which requires bracketing Noah, himself hardly a maternal figure—and its parallel in the Moses story. Benjamin program-matically notes that “the neglect of the lived reality of child-rearing, and the profound existential and ethical questions that arise for those immersed in it, has impoverished Jewish thought”. But what does this have to do with enclosure or ecology? In addition to the above, where I note her work allows us to pay attention to actual embodied relations, relations which almost invariably occur in an enclosure, or bubble, which protects the space in which relation can occur, Benjamin’s work on obligation in these (enclosed) relations can help us better extrapolate and interpret the ark-space.

In particular, I would like to draw attention to her treatment of asymmetrical relations, not in the Levinasian sense where asymmetry generates an ethical relationship (as the other is “higher”) but rather relations that are asymmetrical because of the kinds of bodies we have (Levinas 2004). Anyone who has cared for a sick baby through the night, a creature which can die just from being placed stomach down on a soft surface, knows this relation is extremely asymmetrical. And while the asymmetry changes as the child grows, it is not clear that a relationship of absolute equality and openness is very possible, except as a fantasy, and often a destructive one. The maternal relationship is asymmetrical in a manner largely unseen in Jewish thought, which tends towards a placeless abstract meeting between spontaneous equals, or positions the subject “below” the other, be the other God or a human being.

Why does this matter? Jewish thinking about relationality is perhaps one of the most important things we can bring to ecological discussion, but that requires rethinking these relations in their inequality, and not pretending equality between an ant and me (or other “creeping things”) is something possible outside of fiction. If we are to be part of this discussion, we simply must come up with something other than abstract equality or stewardship. An enclosed maternal relation strikes me as an ideal place to start developing other ways of relating to non-humans. And further, I would like us to start considering space as part of this relation, as its condition. What kind of spaces are needed for a relationship of survival that remains (in some way) caring? And how do we craft them?

14. Wooden Bubbles

The ark, again, the second enclosure in Genesis after the garden, is an enclosure in and for a disaster. There is no suggestion it is a desirable place to be—the raven would sooner fly around above the water than return, and Noah and his family do not tarry there. This is not a suburban house, protected by a gate: beyond the walls of wood and pitch, there is only mass extinction. It is telling that the ark is built, and not by God: God gives a blueprint (as he is prone to doing), but the building is human. I suggest we too are not only going to have to think about spaces that protect relations, but we are also going to have to build them, materially, socially, politically, and religiously. One of religion’s possible futures is as an aid in making these bubbles livable.

The story I keep returning to not only has a shape that can guide thinking here but is also about a shape: a shape which encloses (so much so the door is shut by God). And what is inside? Here, it is again interesting to compare Genesis with Gilgamesh: with Genesis, a single instance of every life (more in some cases, depending on the verse); with Gilgamesh, “civilization” is also included (he saves a variety of craftspeople in 11:86). Read in one way, we can say the biblical ark is far more exclusive than its cousin in Gilgamesh—it is an absolute throttling of all life on earth and only allows for a single human family to survive (as for the other animals, there seem to be discrepancies). Read with greater sympathy, we can say the Genesis story is simply more interested in life than the arts. The goal is to save life, but life is saved only through caring for it. Again, the midrash is useful: “AND ELOHIM REMEMBERED NOAH. What did He remember in his favour? That he provided for [the animals] the whole twelve months in the Ark”. Inside the ark is only life and care.
Further, it is not entirely clear the crafts (saved in Gilgamesh via their practitioners) are there to be saved yet: the narrative is thus far sparse, and the only practices we know of are farming and herding. What we do know is that the world is full of living beings, and the ark replicates these on a small scale. In this the inside of the wooden bubble mirrors its outside, not in proportion but in sheer diversity: one does not save more ducks than swans just because swans are rarer; a set of each is needed.

The bubble is thus, despite its exclusion of the masses of humans and other breathing animals, a mirror of the outside world, and not a suburban home on the water or an exclusive club. It is a freakishly diverse swarm protected by wood, pitch, and slime, and in this sense, the first ark is far more monad-like than the basket which later carries the lawmaker Moses. This was not lost on the makers of grotesques—the ark is a favoured theme for grotesque images—and in terms of its sheer crowding and diversity, this is an ancient form of Bakhtin’s upside-down world. This grotesque form is unsurprisingly developed in the midrash which populate the ark with spirits and magical (inverted) glowing gems that anticipate electric lighting: “During the whole twelve months that Noah was in the Ark he did not require the light of the sun by day or the light of the moon by night, but he had a polished gem which he hung up: when it was dim he knew that it was day, and when it shone he knew that it was night”.

15. Violence in the Womb (We Will Need a Better Ark)

The form of thought taken from the ark—the inverted world, the wooden bubble, this floating maternal space, this protected swarm—is too easily made “cute”, or safe. Here, Aronofsky’s Noah—a film focused on the titular character, and not the ark itself—is, for all of its many flaws, a useful reminder of the patriarchal brutality that clings to these stories and the forms we pull from them. Indeed, this masculine moralism the movie foregrounds at the expense of the ark’s organic swarm-like characteristics is found throughout the interpretive traditions, as in the midrash where God tells Noah to ensure the creatures he brings aboard be properly patriarchal in their orientation: “If thou seest a male pursuing a female, accept him; a female pursuing a male, do not accept him”. This is one of many such readings which seek to ensure the ark’s potential for chaos, and organic exuberance is properly restrained.

In addition to not covering over the potential for violence in small spaces—real or imaginary—there is the related concern, where we need to ensure in our attempt to reject both the arid cruelty of wide-open global spaces and the masculine violence of the patriarchs that we do not end up appropriating maternal imagery and spaces. Modern Jewish thought is hardly innocent here, and there are countless apologetic attempts to retrieve an ethical or feminist philosophy from religious sources that end up merely covering over ugliness and undesirable positions, rather than countering them.

To help avoid these dual errors—to neither perpetuate violence nor pretend it does not exist—I return to my above suggestion that Jewish philosophy resists the temptation to be tactical. In looking for and developing shapes and forms, we should remember that our goal when we do philosophy is not to save the world, and neither is it to save a tradition. The programme I have been outlining requires we be able to prescind forms from traditional sources, to take what the project demands, without pretending either the past or the future will be purified by this. In this sense, what we are looking for is a pragmatism (which looks to develop iconic modes of thought and see what follows from holding certain things to be important or true) and not strategic thinking. There is certainly a place for strategic thought in dealing with the ecological crisis but that only in our capacity as propagandists or engineers. Insofar as we are doing philosophy, creativity should be accompanied by honesty—about our shortcomings and limitations—and not by desperation or hubris; for this reason alone, all “constructive” work should be continually informed by, and intermingle with, critical-historical scholarship.

It would be obnoxious if an attempt to attend to small spaces and enclosures ended up facilitating an expansive attempt at illegitimately conquering and transforming sources, or
arrogantly looking to dominate the ecological discussion. I again suggest we think about small spaces and see where it takes us.

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Notes

1. Kavka rightly notes that to understand the general role “catastrophe or doom plays in Jewish theology”, we cannot limit ourselves to any single text, no matter how seemingly exemplary. Instead, one would want to track the role “catastrophe” plays in the “Jewish theological imagination”. This paper is thus in no way an exploration of the general concept of disaster, or response to disaster in Judaism, or Jewish philosophy: it focuses instead on a single figure which is used to bind together a few possible responses, chosen not because they teach us about the phenomenon of Judaism but, rather, because I think they are useful for thinking about disaster, right now (Kavka 2014, p. 111).

2. More will be left out here than included, and Hans Jonas’ work will be noticeably absent: because much of his work, while fairly characterized as Jewish philosophy, presented itself as a form of secular Kantianism. His explicitly Jewish attempt at ecological thought will be glancingly treated, as it falls into the same trap as the other works I will survey. His Luria-inspired cosmology and theodicy will not be treated here, for as fascinating as they are, they will lead me too far afield. For the clearest articulation of his cosmology, see (Jonas 1996). See Margolin for the relationship between Jonas’ religious and secular thought (Margolin 2008).

3. I am not invoking the obnoxious cliché that Judaism is relentlessly particular, and therefore not helpful for universal problems. Judaism, or Jewish philosophy, is a well-known intersection between the particular and the universal, or a particular with universal significance, a space of universal particularity (and therefore illustrative of other positions) or particular universality (and therefore an instance of the manifestation of the universal), but it is one of many such intersections, and there is no reason to think it should be dominant here (Jaffee 2001). For a development of this logic, see (Erlewine 2010). For an attempt to move beyond it (as regards philosophy), see (Hughes 2014). Erlewine and Hughes are united in seeing much of Jewish philosophy as an exercise in identity construction. While I am compelled by this position, I believe there is philosophical value in staying with the tension generated by supposedly particular forms of universality. For a view that embraces this tension as productive but remains critical of apologetic deployments, see (Tirosh-Samuelson et al. 2015).

4. Here, my concern with invoking the “Abrahamic” is not so much the levelling of particularity (as in Levenson 2012) but the strangeness of falling back on it in order to “spread”, or “generalize”, Jewish ethics. It is clear that Jews, a small group, are not going to have a particularly massive impact on ecological issues. Thus, the only way for “Jewish ethics” to do any work outside of this population is to suggest that Christian or Muslim ethics should follow the lead set by Jewish thinkers. One notes in many articles (and especially Tirosh-Samuelson’s) a convenient slippage between “Jewish thought” and “religious thought”, as if the one is isomorphic with the other (when convenient).

5. There are many thoughtful responses to White, but I am not entirely sure his piece is deserving of them. If one wants to make the move from a text to a political reality, more work is needed than just indexing a few problematic phrases. That said, for those looking for such a response, see Martin Yaffe’s introduction to Judaism and Environmental Ethics: A Reader (Yaffe 2001), as well as several papers therein, such as Jeremy Cohen, “On Classical Judaism and Environmental Crisis” (Cohen 2001); Jeanne Kay, “Concepts of Nature in the Hebrew Bible” (Kay 2001). The nub of Yaffe’s critique is as such: White does not ask “whether the promoters of modern science and technology were historically accurate, or merely rhetorically opportunistic, in ascribing to Genesis 1:28 or the biblical tradition the morally dubious reasoning they attached to it.” See (Yaffe 2001), p. 8.

6. By a negative universal, I mean a thing which affects us all (is universal), but not as a positive characteristic we all share but rather a problem which manifests differently depending on our locations. Thus, it is both equally true that the ecological collapse affects and endangers us all and, yet, does so in completely different ways depending on our location (both political and geographical). For a recent popular articulation of this, see (Butler 2021). Therefore, we are all in this together but not in the same way. If only for this reason the problem inspires apathy. Because it is hard to imagine us doing anything when the rich seem to literally respond to this by a drive to leave the planet, or at least, move to their bunkers. As for the rest of us, we are—as regards agency—by nature fractured. As Latour notes: “It would be absurd in fact to think there is a collective being, human society, that is the new agent of geohistory, as the proletariat was thought to be in an earlier epoch. In the face of the old nature—itself reconstituted—there is literally no one about whom one can say that he or she is responsible. Why? Because there is no way to unify the Anthropos as an actor endowed with some sort of moral or political consistency, to the point of charging it with being a character capable of acting on this new global stage”. See (Latour 2017), p. 122; see also p. 42. On climate apathy, see (Zupančič 2018).
It will require a level of collective action previously unseen and, for this reason alone, is terrifying. Jewish philosophy cannot guide this collective, but it might participate in it.

Kishik notes: “a winemaker is a rather dubious savior, and alcoholism is not a legitimate branch of messianism”. This, like many other gnomic statements from Kishik’s book, helped develop my reading of the ark story, without my being in accord with his overall kabbalistic or political theological claims about the nature of God in the text (as created by the “beginning”) or the desire to prescind the first several chapters of Genesis from the rest of the text. The former is too speculative for me to follow, and the latter—like many source-critical approaches—does not accord with my hermeneutic approach which (following Buber et al.) is to treat the redacted text as a whole, one that in turn inspires and influences several traditions (which are the object of my study). See (Kishik 2018), p. 61.

This saving of nonhumans is cited approvingly in Bereshit Rabbah as the reason God stopped the flooding. “AND ELOHIM REMEMBERED NOAH. What did He remember in his favour? That he provided for [the animals] the whole twelve months in the Ark, hence AND GOD REMEMBERED NOAH, and the spirit of justice approves it, for the sake of the clean animals that were with him in the Ark”. See Midrash Rabbah on Genesis: (Midrash 1983), 1:263.

I am not promoting Boethius’ view of the world or suggesting a return to Wittgenstein’s psychoanalytically inflected philosophy of mind and language (nor am I discouraging them). And I am far from presenting ataraxia as a goal of thought, or uncritically taking a Stoic position. But much as Maimonides’ Guide seeks to cure an intellectual-psychological condition, contemporary Jewish philosophy might well help us here. In this respect, I follow Hadot, but in a more circumscribed manner, holding philosophy “as a way of life” must be more circumscribed by political and social location than, say, philosophy of math. See (Hadot and Davidson 1995).

I mention this because Yaffe, despite organizing the collection, is not overly sanguine about the power of a stewardship ethics, despite this being the position argued for by an overwhelming number of the contributions.

I am thus excluding the more relentlessly critical pieces (including the Wolfson piece I will treat below) from the discussion in this section, or Jonas who asks in some articles what we should do “if we are Jews” even as the majority of his work is not aimed at a Jewish argument, nor does it appeal to Jewish authorities (although this in no way suggests the work itself is not Jewish philosophy). And even Jonas ends up calling for an ethics of restraint, one that is arguably futile. See (Jonas 2001; Scodel and Jonas, 2003). For an ecologically adjacent ethics that does not call for restraint, see the discussion of ought and can (where Serres argues that can and must are equivalent) in (Serres and Latour 1995).

I reject absolutely any claim that pantheism leads necessarily to good ecological behaviour. Seen cosmologically, the Earth is but a speck of God’s pantheistic body, and there is no reason to think it needs protection or care: these needs must have some other ground. This is, in a nutshell, the problem with David Mevorach Seidenberg’s Kabbalah and Ecology: God’s Image in the More-than-Human World: see (Seidenberg 2015).

“Nature” is a painfully fraught word, and notoriously difficult to define. One half of a number of binaries, or an all-inclusive concept of physical language, or the object of pleasure: it often obscures more than it illuminates. Thus, a very partial definition will have to do: for the analysis of the following papers, the authors seem to mean all Earthly non-human physical systems that in some way support or impinge upon human existence.

(Seidenberg 2001), pp. 270–73. For a thorough refutation of the view that there is no incarnation in Judaism, see (Wolfson 2008; 2005; 2012) and (Magid 2015).

Intriguingly, his notion of Judaism would exclude a number of feminist approaches, and Judith Plaskow’s Standing Again at Sinai would be downright heretical.

(Seidenberg 2001), p. 275. Note that because of a small typo in the article, this is listed as 3:9.

Here, it depends on how one reads “all the trees were created for man’s companionship”: is this more important than the conversation that trees have with one another? If so, arguably the creation of the trees remains instrumental from an anthropocentric vantage point. Seen otherwise, this allows for a more Buberian, or Jonas-inspired, philosophy of nature. See Midrash Rabbah on Genesis: (Midrash 1983), 1:100.

This is important because, citing Clingerman, it is claimed (Tirosh-Samuelson 2020, p. 391) that any discussion of ecology must take into account religion, “since religion is fundamental to how human beings understand themselves and their place in the world”. The word “fundamental” does too much work here: I can think of several forces we could call “fundamental” (love, anxiety, or sexuality, for instance), which may well need to be part of this discussion, but the case needs to be made for each fundamental. The other argument adduced is that religion is important, because these questions concern ethical “oughts”. But again, a case needs to be made as to why religion is the proper source of oughts for this discussion. Otherwise, we spare ourselves the difficult question of asking the pragmatic question: “is this useful, or are we engaging this out of necessity?” Our answer to this question will surely affect how we think about this problem. More crassly put, if the issue is just that we are religious, then surely Jewish responses will be unimportant to anyone other than Jews, and there are hardly enough Jews to matter as regards ecology.

Indeed, as Latour notes, “At the very moment when it was becoming fashionable to speak of the “post-human” in the blasé tones of those who know that the time of the human is “outdated”, the “Anthropos” has come back—and with a vengeance—owing to
the thankless empirical work of researchers whose lack of culture intellectuals like to mock by calling them mere “naturalists”. See (Latour 2017), p. 117.

(Tirosch-Samuelson 2020), p. 417 (emphasis added).

By qualified anthropomorphism, I mean a pragmatic position which places humans at the centre of a set of fundamental problems but not therefore as metaphysically central.

Anthropocentrism modified to say the human is at the centre of our thought and action is not the same as anthropomorphism, or the belief that humans are intrinsically superior to all other forms of life. See Shaviro for an appositive discussion, albeit one which comes to the opposite conclusion I take. See (Shaviro 2014).

My work here is influenced deeply by Samuel Moyn’s critique of “rights” language, and the cold-war re-use of natural law language to ground “rights” and “ethics” as a substitute for serious political transformation. See (Moyn 2018).

Indeed, as suggested above, Tirosch-Samuelson’s claim that religion is important because people are religious really means little more than “we will be unable to convince people unless we can translate ecological thought into religious language”; in other words, religion is useful for propaganda. This may well be true, but this is a tactical, not philosophical, position. Note above that Jonas, despite his long studies of political forms and ecology, often falls back on the notion that what is needed is ethical and aesthetic “restraint”.

(Zupančič 2018), p. 24 (emphasis in original).

Neither can it merely turn to nihilism, and take pleasure in the supposedly sublime act of destruction. See (Heglich 2019). Kant is correct when he notes that the sublime can only be enjoyed from a position of safety, and who would dare to claim such a position now?

See Braiterman on the collapse of theodicy after the holocaust for a recent example. (Braiterman 1998).

For a thorough critique of the identity-building function Jewish philosophy serves, see (Hughes 2014). Where I part way with Hughes is that I think tarrying with the tension between particular and universal allows for a philosophy that takes account of the role it plays in discourses of power while still unapologetically using this tension to develop concepts.

It is also the case that the flood episode is not, strictly speaking, an apocalypse: it lacks the revelation, and in terms of genre conventions, the encounter with God is completely lacking in the visual element which is so preponderant in the ancient apocalypses. From a properly philosophical perspective, the flood episode in Genesis (as when an “ark” saves the baby Moses) keeps a firm distinction between space and time (unlike the apocalypses, where they bleed into one another) and the element of a divine secret is completely lacking. See (Wolfson 2000). For the visual element, see the introduction and chapter one in (Collins 2016). As well see (Henning 2020). Finally, for the genre conventions of ancient apocalyptic literature, see (Himmelfarb 2010).

For a thorough social-political critique of the way ethical monotheism has been used to construct Jewish identity, see (Erlewine 2010).

It is these figures—more than any specific code of behaviour—that I think “religion” in general, and Judaism in particular, can offer thinking when it moves into new domains. Following Peirce, I think much of our thinking is directed by images, icons, and diagrams, and much of our work is little more than the protection and extrapolation of these figures.

Each of these further opens up other resources for Jewish thought: Wolfson obviously opens up elements of the mystical tradition for philosophical analysis (and vice versa), and I will contentiously suggest Benjamin provides us with the tools for a philosophical analysis of psychoanalysis, especially in its Kleinian formation.

As noted above, I am committed to the position that a great deal of philosophical work consists in working out the details of a pre-existing image or shape, or if the reader prefers, that many of our pre-theoretical commitments have a form (often visual, but not always). This dovetails nicely with the phenomenological tradition (as epitomized in Jewish philosophy by Elliot Wolfson) where the forms of thinking this paper suggests would consist of the working out of a phenomenological vision, or form of “seeing”. It also accords with the closely related hermeneutic school, as these shapes are thought in relation to a text (and the text interpreted through these forms of thought). Here I include everything from Derrida, Plaskow; to Ochs and his school of textual reasoners. Braiterman has further demonstrated that a great deal of early 20th century Jewish aesthetic and religious thought was dominated by the relation between forms and the formless. My direct inspiration for this approach is, however, more mundane, owing itself to Peirce and his belief that the foundation of most thinking is iconic. For those who find no value in any of these approaches, I hope what follows provides some value only for the possibilities it marks out. The two books that most inform this project’s phenomenology are: (Wolfson 1994, 2011). On shape, see (Braiterman 2007).

Note Schwarzchild and Tirosch-Samuelson both call upon the various monotheisms to join together as shepherds (and here they have good company). This figure is far more expansive still and has the virtue of not reducing other groups to “offshoots” of Judaism. A reviewer has helpfully noted that the covenant made at the end of the story (Genesis 9:12–13) is a covenant made with the earth itself (including all of its inhabitants), and this can be employed to undercut the claim to theological supremacy on the part of all specific so-called Abrahamic religions, further increasing the figure’s extension.

One can more easily make extravagant claims with Kishik (“The ark is God’s hedge against this genocide, which is actually a biocide, for even the basic distinction between man and animal is lost at the moment the waters gush through the land”) than actually picture this object. Granted this has not prevented countless illustrators and toy makers from trying (Kishik 2018, p. 65).
This text is not afraid to make massive extrapolations from a very small amount of data, but this is perhaps understandable in an area where there is not much data to be had. I nonetheless restricted myself to Finkel’s more sober insights and ignored his extrapolations, where possible (Finkel 2014).

With these words, a link is drawn between the Noah myth and the beginning of the political drama of Exodus: “she took for him an ark of bulrushes, and daubed it with slime and with pitch; and she put the child therein, and laid it in the flags by the river’s brink” (Exodus 2:3).

See Midrash Rabbah on Genesis: (Midrash 1983), 1:263.

Sloterdijk’s trilogy operates very much in the background, and I would suggest any thinking of enclosures would have to take him seriously, especially the first volume (Bubbles). There are echoes of modern Jewish philosophy (especially Buber) throughout the book (it is notable that Sloterdijk wrote an introduction to Buber’s ecstatic Confessions). While here I mostly employ the critique of the Globe (volume 2), it is the “bipolar intimacy” which comes from a community of breathers that inspires my vision of an ark-intimacy. (Sloterdijk 2011). It is easy (perhaps too easy) to accuse this text of conservatism: viewed as a text about intimacy and desire, and the systems liberalism ignores which maintain these spaces, it is of immense value.

Also, here Jonas’ work on metabolism—and not his ethics—recommends itself for any future thinking of ecological disaster on the part of Jewish philosophy. See (Latour 2017), p. 122.

It is for this reason Bereshit Rabbah presents two opposing readings of “Noah was in his generations a man righteous and whole-hearted” [Gen 6:9]: it could mean either that he was only righteous in comparison to the horrendous people of his generation or that it is doubly impressive a person from such a loathsome generation was able to be righteous.

That both the Genesis and Gilgamesh floods use birds as sense organs, or instruments, is not unimportant here.

Here Kishik’s reading over-reaches in his attempt to see the planet itself as an ark: “Seen from outer space, this planet is itself an ark floating in an unlivable void. The very fact that there is an earth, where special conditions make the lives of animals and plants possible (even if they are miserable), is extremely abnormal from a cosmological perspective. As with the ark and with the garden, God did not intend the earth to embody a universal and boundless truth, for it was fashioned from the start as a rather small space for living, beyond which reigns heavenly death” (Kishik 2018, p. 62). But of course this is not the case: there was no one outside the ark to look at it, other than God. And we are not gods: indeed, the ecological crisis calls Feuerbach into question in a manner no Marxist was ever able to. As an aside, it is Feuerbach’s Principles, more than any of his religious texts, where his transformation of theological principles into anthropological ones is on full display (Feuerbach 1986).

Thinkers as various as Kristeva, Melanie Klein, Winnicott, Sloterdijk, and Sedgwick, often treated or used only glancingly, could make a genuine contribution to this way of approaching the disaster. This of course presumes Jewish philosophy “wants” to think about ecological disaster, which so far seems not to be the case.

This goes a long way to explaining why so much 20th-century Jewish thought is better understood as philosophical anthropology than, say, metaphysics (as one might perhaps characterize the classics of Arabic Jewish philosophy). See (Benjamin 2018), p. xv.

The liberal (and neo-liberal) adoration for empty spaces in which bodies self-organize can sneak into the work of even the most careful and thoughtful philosophers and theologians. Andrea Poma, an extraordinary interpreter, actually exacerbates this tendency in Buber in an attempt to accommodate post-modern criticism (Poma 2006). It is even more bizarre to see this fantasy of empty space in the work of leftists: thinking about enclosure and bubbles should not be left only to conservative thinkers such as Sloterdijk (who remains one of the greatest contemporary thinkers of enclosure and the need for safety).

The work of Elliot Wolfson provides another, phenomenological, approach to containment thinking. Again, as with my treatment of Benjamin, this would require some shifting of emphases, and perhaps even distortion, of his work. There are two resources that leap to mind in which Wolfson’s work offers containment thinking. The first is a thoroughgoing critique of the way kabbalist sources employ the feminine enclosure, and the rose-tinted appropriation of these “feminine” elements of the godhead (covered in some detail below). The second is his philosophical exposition of a number of kabbalistic principles, figures, and themes, where (to simplify) the finite protects the infinite. Perhaps the crudest instance of this is the claim that the name protects the name, meaning that the “revealed” or spoken name (Adonai) encloses and protects the “hidden” name (YHWH). From this starting point, the aporias and paradoxes of enclosure can be established (I owe this observation in part to conversations with Zachary Braiterman). An instance closer to my heart is the work on fragments and wholes, where the fragment encloses and protects the whole (of fragments). This leads into a fundamental tension at the heart of Jewish thought, the universal and the...
singular; read through Wolfson, we need not see the singular as a “piece” of the universal, but rather, see the universal only through the singular. Where I distort Wolfson is by emphasizing the protective element of these enclosures. For a discussion of the name, see (Wolfson 2015). For fragments, see (Wolfson 2019), pp. 220–30.

Benjamin deliberately sticks with the word “maternal” (rather than “parental”) in order to not obscure the ways gendered power relations inform this form of relationship, and I follow her in this. See (Benjamin 2018).

I would note that precisely here it would be useful to bring back Melanie Klein and both Freuds into the canon of modern Jewish thought, or at least develop a stronger conversation about their work: their extensive work with children and child rearing could go a long way to rectifying this absence Benjamin notes. See (Benjamin 2018), p. xiv.

Note that many parents who seek a friendship relationship (or seek to be “best friends”) with their children, often just generate confusion and alienation.

As is common, Jonas is something of an exception here.

It would be interesting to examine Arnold Eisen’s work in relation to the forms of familial enclosure-systems that allow for, and are created by, American Judaism. Neusner also recommends himself somewhat: if Judaism is a “religion of pots and pans”, one needs a place to keep them.

See notes 39.

He would of course be unsurprised: we find the grotesque in the “mythology and . . . archaic art of all peoples”. The basic dialectic of this grotesque inversion, while not exactly applicable to the ark, remains very useful for this “archaic” wooden bubble, and those we might need in the future: “Negation and destruction of the object are therefore their displacement and reconstruction in space. The nonbeing of an object is its ‘other face’, its inside out. And this inside out or lower stratum acquires a time element; it may be conceived as the past, the obsolete, or the nonexistent. The object that has been destroyed remains in the world but in a new form of being in time and space; it becomes the ‘other side’ of the new object that has taken its place” (Bakhtin 1984, pp. 30, 410). The primary difference here is that this is a grander reversal than the carnival: the carnival assumes the survival of “the world” and therefore is an inversion of objects in this world. The ark is the inversion of the world made into an object.

See Midrash Rabbah on Genesis: (Midrash 1983), 1:244.

For a magisterial reading of cuteness and its appropriations, see (Ngai 2012).

The film itself seems to draw from various midrashim, but the movie’s Noah himself is a violent zealot who seems to be enacting violence with the animals sedated and the human beings enacting a stark and ascetic drama which recalls the akedah more than any traditions related to Noah (Aronofsky 2014). In this way, Noah is a dark mirror of Benjamin’s claim that in these spaces, it becomes impossible to determine the source of law and obligation: “As my own experiences of motherhood over the years have demonstrated, the boundaries between ‘external’ and ‘internal’—like the difference between the law of the other and the law of the self—are not so clear. Not only bearing a child but also loving and caring for one breaks down these formal categories. The child for whom one takes responsibility becomes part of oneself. When that happens, it is impossible to know whether the law comes from outside or from within”. See (Benjamin 2018), p. xviii.

See Midrash Rabbah on Genesis: (Midrash 1983), 1:247.

For a study of Buber’s womb-appropriation (and erase) and Levinas’ employment of the feminine (famously criticized by de Beauvoir in the Second Sex), see (Benjamin 2013). On Levinas, the feminine, mystery, and modesty, see (Wolfson 1996).

Attempts to “make” the kabbalistic sources reflect contemporary gender norms, or express feminist positions—while ignoring the tradition’s unmistakable androcentrism—are a case study in what I hope to avoid here. For a corrective, see Wolfson, especially the fourth study here (Wolfson 1995). This is particularly pertinent, given that this androcentric tradition uses the idea of feminine enclosures as a means of thinking the godhead, and these enclosures have been read as providing a feminist alternative to “traditional” theology. However, as Wolfson notes at length, and in several studies, these readings assume an androgynous “body” for God, where we would be better reading the God presented in these sources as a “male androgyne”: the “return” of the female enclosure to the male is a condition of redemption (Wolfson 2015).

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