

REFLECTIONS ON OUR COHERENT AND COMPELLING UNIVERSE

Rabbi David Mevorach Seidenberg

I.

There's a lot to chew on in Rabbi Shai Cherry's book *Coherent Judaism*. Given that his most compelling model of coherence is Maimonides's synthesis of Aristotelian philosophy and rabbinic Judaism (130, 135, 410), he has set for himself a huge task. It would be impossible to say that he achieves such a grand synthesis, but he has lifted up some remarkable pieces of the puzzle and brought them to his readers' attention.

Cherry's discussion left me newly intrigued to explore Hasdai Crescas (Spain 1340-1410), for example (138-41, 276-8). I think most readers will find that Cherry's insights inspire new fascination with some facet of Jewish thought they will want to explore, whether for the first time, or with new eyes. Cherry divides his tome into three books: theology, creation, and halakhah. Some of the modern teachers and authors that are highlighted include Tamar Ross

and Melissa Raphael (Book One) and Hans Jonas (Book Two). It is worth noting that Cherry clearly values, and makes an effort to include, female voices among his sources of influence in the first and third book. Book Three — not the book I was tasked to focus on — is a cornucopia of halakhic figures. Some of the “old favorites” like Rav Kook (b. Russia 1865, d. Jerusalem 1935) will also inspire newfound levels of admiration as Cherry turns them and turns them in his process of thinking through what makes for coherence in contemporary Judaism.

Hans Jonas (b. Germany 1903, d. New York 1993) in particular may be a new star in the Jewish firmament for many people, and he is probably the most important figure in Book Two, which is my focus. In Chapter 10, “Omnicide as Threat and Theodicy”, Jonas is the banner carrier for Cherry in his campaign against the “omnis” — against thinking about God as omniscient, omnipotent and omni-benevolent — all-knowing and all-powerful and all-good.

Cherry calls this campaign “omni-cide” — killing off these ideas I suppose, none of which Cherry believes can be part of a coherent Judaism. (Interestingly, Cherry is not uncomfortable with God being omnipresent, as long as that means present with us in our suffering. More on this below.)

Unfortunately, this point is made in the chapter about creation and “omnicide” — the prospect that humanity could kill the planet. Cherry could have talked about ecocide instead of omnicide in order to avoid the confusion, or he could simply flag that he was making up a new term for a new idea when he first mentions “omni-cide.” I spent a few weeks being needlessly confused.

More than this, while I think Cherry’s omnicide means ecocide (destroying the biosphere), another definition of omnicide is killing off the human species (the latter definition being a legacy of the movement against nuclear war and nuclear weapons), and either definition could fit the way he uses the term. I did, but shouldn’t have to, ask the author to explain which kind of omnicide he means, and whether omni-cide was just a typo. Definitions are our friends, and I felt as a reader like I needed more friends.

II.

A few other aspects of this book felt to me like obstacles. I want to get them out of the way before I dive into the ideas. One is that Cherry sometimes aims for a chattiness that I found disrupted my focus. Here's an example that continues the "omni-" theme: God, as represented in Genesis 1, creates by mere speech and is omnipotent, or virtually so. But Cherry reports that fact in these words: "our God is super-duper powerful¹ and can create light without what we all know to be the source of light, the sun" (230). I'd like less friend-grabbing-a-beer-with-me talk. Something else worth noting about Cherry's discussion of scripture is that he has a fairly rosy perspective on Genesis 1's implications for ecology.²

Cherry also refrains from giving primary sources where they would be necessary in order for the reader to evaluate the claims he makes or come up with their own interpretations. Instead, Cherry contents himself too often with giving the reader secondary descriptions of medieval thinkers by modern scholars. His reading of Crescas, which, as I mentioned, was especially intriguing to me, is one of many examples where this stopped me in my tracks.

Lastly, and most importantly for me, Cherry mostly ignores a very wide body of thought and creativity on the subject of ecology and Judaism. Cherry is very interested in citing his teachers who influenced him (Jonas, Arthur Green, and Bradley Artson), but not as interested in the robust conversation that has been happening for decades among those who would be his colleagues. It's not that Cherry should cite every example of prior work that's relevant, the way one would in an academic book, which this is not, but that he should be joining up with their conversation.

¹ Cherry does bring up the term "super-duper" as a linguistic example in the same chapter, so that may be his reason for the loose talk here, but it's not a sufficient reason, and there are many more examples.

² For example: "In Genesis 1, the animals which preceded us on the earth contribute to our making" (240), by which I understand him to mean that when God says, "Let us make the human in our image" God is calling to the animals. This is a fine midrash that can be traced back centuries, but it seems unlikely to be the p'shat, the plain meaning of the verse, which continues by discussing human dominion over the other animals.

III.

For the remainder of this piece, I am going to focus mostly on Chapter 10. Returning to the question of omnicide (of humanity) versus omnicide (of all life), the fact that English-speaking humanity uses one word for both shows in one more way just how self-centered we are. This same problematic habit of human thought, our anthropocentrism, is one of the greatest obstacles to creating a sustainable civilization that does not commit omnicide (in either sense). Needless to say, it's absolutely imperative that we overcome this obstacle if we want to even imagine creating a coherent Judaism.

Cherry agrees: "A Halakhah that does not reorient itself to address the urgent needs of our planet is incoherent" (392). But while he promises in various places to return to ecology, and, I presume, to fully address these planetary needs (238, 334), he never really does. He doesn't even mention climate change except in reference to past mass extinctions, and the few places where he does touch directly on ecological questions seem more like checking off a box than a real wrestling with the greatest challenge of our times.

As I mentioned, there are resources out there that could have given Cherry more of a leg up to address both ecology and anthropocentrism from a deeper Jewish perspective.³ At least Cherry does recognize how important Maimonides's rejection of anthropocentrism is (267-8), though he doesn't build much on this foundation.⁴

Despite these limitations, Cherry makes one thing abundantly clear: the purpose and goal of Judaism is the exact opposite of omnicide. The Torah, however one believes it should

³ Cherry does cite my own work, *Kabbalah and Ecology: God's Image in the More-Than-Human World* (New York: Cambridge, 2015), though not on these subjects.

⁴ Perhaps the hurdle is that Cherry believes that Maimonides has "no theology of creation" (268). Though Cherry is not the first to think this way, his contention is amply disproven in numerous ways in the *Guide for the Perplexed*. Most obviously, Maimonides says that we know God's unity not just through philosophical reasoning but also through observing the unity of Creation, because "the One has created [only] one being" (*Guide for the Perplexed* 1:72). He also says that God's goodness is the goodness of creation itself (*ibid.* 1:54). See *Kabbalah and Ecology*, 20, 71-2, 268-70.

be updated, is meant to teach us how to “live long on the land” (xxi, xxii, 80, 324, 375, 392, 475, 481, 507).

IV.

Back to omni-cide and Hans Jonas. Jonas had extraordinarily far-seeing ideas about ecology, biology, the sacredness of all life, and our responsibility for it, according to Cherry. also promoted a myth of creation and God’s relationship to creation that Cherry finds compelling. I do too. It’s a wonderful example of how we can imagine letting go of omnipotence to gain in both omnipresence and “omnirelevance.” According to Jonas,

In the beginning, the ground of being, or the Divine, chose to give itself over to the chance and risk and endless variety of becoming. And wholly so: entering into the adventure of space and time, the deity held nothing back of itself; no...part remained to direct, correct, and ultimately guarantee...its destiny in creation.... Rather, in order that the world might be, and be for itself, God renounced his own being, divesting himself of his deity—to receive it back from the odyssey of time weighted with the chance harvest of unforeseeable temporal experience: transfigured or possibly even disfigured by it.... And then [God] trembles as the thrust of evolution, carried by its own momentum, passes the threshold where innocence ceases.... The advent of [humanity] means the advent of knowledge and freedom.... [T]he mere subject of self-fulfilling life has given way to the charge of responsibility under the disjunction of good and evil.... The image of God, haltingly begun by the universe, for so long worked upon...passes with this last twist, and with a dramatic quickening of the movement, into man’s precarious trust, to be completed, saved, or spoiled by what he will do to himself and the world. (Jonas, *Mortality and Morality: A Search for Good After Auschwitz*, quoted 320-1)

As Cherry notes, Jonas is not claiming that God’s omnipotence fails because evil exists beyond God’s reach, but because God’s self is omnipresent in the universe through and through. The fact that God is wholly committed to this “adventure,” that no portion is “held back” to act as judge and juror and guardian and enforcer, makes God’s omnipotence, as we naively understand it, an impossibility. It is true that this God, who has no place left outside the universe to act from, is also a God unable to circumscribe evil if and when it emerges. But this is a

consequence of God's "omni-distribution" within the world. A God equally distributed in all things and dimensions also has no place left inside the universe from which to act.⁵

Moreover, this idea of omnipresence may actually be used to buttress the idea of God's omniscience. Most people, when they imagine God knowing, imagine a vantage point, a place or perspective from which they might be seen (and seeing is most often the metaphorical sense invoked). One can only see from one perspective, from one side. But God's "omni-perspective" obviously can't "see" or know from this side more than that side, from above or below, from outside more than inside or inside more than outside. And that would be true not just for every individual—whatever kind or level of individual we mean—but for every atom of every molecule and every cell of every individual. God's knowing must coincide so completely with the being of what is known that God's knowledge is not different from Being itself (266). If that's the case, then God's omnipresence and God's omniscience are only coherent when imagined together. I would note that these inferences lead us only toward the "omni-cide" of omnipotence.

V.

It was in Cherry's discussion of Jewish responses to Darwinism in Chapter 9, "Nature Read in Truth and Awe", that I felt like I was on the most solid ground. Cherry has for a long time been one of the foremost experts on the subject. And while I don't always agree with his interpretations, they are all well-reasoned and well-founded. One thing that is most important for readers to know is this: Darwinism and evolution created zero problems for Jewish thought and theology, whether the respondents were Orthodox or Reform or any flavor of Judaism. The modern Haredi abhorrence of evolution is not traditional.

⁵ For Jonas and Cherry, this line of thinking is also the best way to understand God in the Shoah. One of the best statements of this position can be found in Melissa Raphael's work. In her words, "There has been too much asking 'where was God in Auschwitz?' and not enough 'who was God in Auschwitz?'.... God-She may have been so 'ordinarily' present among women whose personhood was getting ever less perceptible that she herself was imperceptible." (The Female Face of God in Auschwitz: A Jewish Feminist Theology of the Holocaust [New York: Routledge, 2003], 54, quoted in Cherry, 210).

As for Cherry's own way of understanding evolution, he strongly leans in the direction of seeing the possibility of life and intelligence as built into matter itself, into the substance and origins of the universe or creation. But given that position, I wonder why he found value in rehearsing what seems to me to be a canard when he writes, "Rounding up, one hundred percent of the species to have ever existed on our planet are now extinct" (341).

In statistics or calculations with irrationals, numbers get rounded up or down, but that's not relevant to the subject at hand. The false implication of this way of thinking is that the species alive now are virtually insignificant because their number is such a tiny percentage of the total. Cherry also states, "The majority of species were killed not because of bad genes but because of bad luck" (318). Elsewhere he calls this "bad optics" (342).

Such conceptual pessimism has no real bearing on questions of biogenesis and evolution. The emergence of innumerable species and individuals is the necessary condition for life to thrive in the face of potential cataclysms, while such cataclysms are an equally necessary condition for the elaboration of new and diverse forms of life through evolution. None of this could be deemed superfluous evil.

Why then does Cherry call out something that is merely "bad optics" when we are dealing with perfectly good ontics? Why use the "rounding up" analogy or any of this negating language – is it to sound more in sync with popular culture and the scientific orthodoxy of Neo-Darwinism? Neither pop culture nor orthodox Neo-Darwinism are the best foundation for arriving at a coherent way of seeing the world.⁶ Rather, it seemed to me that Cherry employed this rhetoric only in order to lead us to the problem of theodicy.

⁶ In the Neo-Darwinian synthesis, in which all change is essentially driven by chance genetic mutation, and selection is always on the level of the individual, there is no coherent explanation of speciation. Less orthodox understandings of evolution—based in symbiogenesis and "natural genetic engineering" (which refers to genetic and epigenetic mechanisms like horizontal gene transfer and gene duplication)—allow for the fact that genomes can change themselves and can explain speciation far more cogently. See Lynn Margulis, *Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1998) and James A. Shapiro; *Evolution: A View from the 21st Century* (Upper Saddle River NJ: FT Press, 2011). Margulis wryly calls Neo-Darwinism "a minor twentieth-century religious sect within the sprawling religious persuasion of Anglo-Saxon biology" (Charles Mann, "Lynn Margulis: Science's Unruly Earth Mother", *Science* 252 [2004]: 378–

VI.

Here is how Cherry formulates this problem: “[T]hat fact of earth’s history [meaning most especially, mass extinctions] is the single gravest indictment of the omnigod who is imagined as simultaneously omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent” (341). How indeed could a benevolent God plan a universe that depends on mass extinctions in order for beings like ourselves to emerge on a planet like ours?

I can readily understand Cherry’s reason and passion behind this objection, but I’m not sold on this point as the best, or most pressing, argument against omnipotence or omni-anything.

If we think about the fact of mass extinctions theistically, this is where my thoughts lead: God must create just such unimaginably large and uncountable numbers of worlds, galaxies, stars, planets, not to mention atoms, electrons, etc. etc., for life to emerge on even a single planet (and who knows on how many other planets). Life must equally lead to uncountable numbers of bacteria and cells, species and individuals, challenged by extinctions, among other things, for such as we to ever exist. And in a universe where God does not repeatedly intervene, everything must happen through a single cause, which we colloquially call the “Big Bang,”⁷ or the moment of “Let there be light.”

Of course, we don’t need to think about this theistically at all. Either way, these conditions are necessary in order for there to be a universe that can or will evolve not just life but also consciousness, intelligence, and love, and for that universe to be one that doesn’t depend on constant *external* divine intervention. And it is easy to imagine that just such a universe — one that, through its own nature, evolves into a realm where “free-will” and right and wrong and love and justice might appear — is one where astronomically large distances and quantities

81; 380). See also <https://www.thethirdwayofevolution.com/>. Note also that Cherry highlights Rav Kook’s idea that evolution must happen in leaps (312), which is congruent with the work of these evolutionary biologists.

⁷ Christian theologian Catherine Keller recasts this as the “Big Birth,” as Cherry notes (234).

and astronomically small chances reign, where what emerges is what numerically and, I think, falsely appears so rare as to be nearly impossible.

That is exactly the direction in which Cherry leads us: there is a “lure,” an “eros,” embedded in, or emergent from, the material world, whether as it comes into being or as it evolves, that is a kind of divinity within what appears to be the machinery of matter. He attributes his understanding of this idea most especially to Hans Jonas, though he finds hints and tow lines to it in other thinkers as well.⁸

If there is such a lure,⁹ such a “cosmogonic eros” (Jonas’s term), that binds the universe together, in the manner of love and not just in the manner of gravity, then all of the so-called dead ends are equally essential to furthering life’s evolution, and not just the contrast to it. To use a biological analogy, it’s not true that one sperm fertilizes an egg while the other tens or hundreds of millions fail. What’s true is that all were necessary, in all their numerical magnitude, in order for there to be a pathway and possibility for the union of sperm and egg. Similarly, in an ecosystem, all the organisms co-evolve, and no species could come to exist without the others, including those others that do not make it through the next evolutionary bottleneck. There is no survival of the fittest without a community of species to fit into.

If that’s true, however, there is no need to conjure theodicy in order to understand evolution or mass extinction. We would do better, I think, to see extinction and mass extinction events as fitting Maimonides’s belief that God’s purpose in creation is to “bring into existence everything whose existence is possible” (Guide for the Perplexed 3:25).¹⁰ Cherry himself lifts up Christian theologian Ruth Page’s congruent interpretation of the same facts: “Rather than a dead end, the emergence of a species for a finite interval is an expression of God’s goal of

⁸ The extended passage on this topic that Cherry quotes from Catholic theologian Karl Schmitz-Moorman (United State, 1939-1996) is especially inspiring (336-7). Schmitz-Moorman was a completely new discovery for me.

⁹ Artson adopts this term from Alfred North Whitehead (330).

¹⁰ This point must never be used to justify ignoring anthropogenic extinction or letting it happen.

'making beings-with-relationships possible.' Chance...is essential for creation" (342-3).¹¹ That is inspiring and correct.

Which brings us back to the start of this discussion: if we accept true omnipresence, of the sort invoked by Jonas's myth, we must reject the divine interventionist understanding of what omnipotence should mean. As Cherry astutely points out, a God that is not "all powerful" can still be full of potencies and empowerments (321). The problem with the claim that God is omnipotent is not that God has only some power but not all, nor that there is evil in the world. It's that the concept of power implied by "omnipotence" is incoherent.

VII.

According to the Jonas myth, "the image of God" has finally "passed into man's precarious trust, to be completed, saved, or spoiled by what he will do to himself and the world." For Jonas, only human beings are gifted with this trust. Given humanity's great potential for this great good, for "completing and saving" as Jonas terms it, that would seem to be enough to justify the process of evolution along with its mass extinctions.

But this idea of human exceptionalism and uniqueness is too limiting to understand the question at hand. If we widen our scope, the Anthropocene is predicated on the era of birds and mammals, most species of which need love (a direct consequence of being warm-blooded, among other things), many of which engage in play (which is connected to learning) in order to survive. Among our fellow endotherms, it has been shown by numerous researchers that many more than we ever imagined are thinking,¹² and may have the rudiments of culturally-transmitted knowledge, or symbolic communication, or even art (in which I mean to include art and artifice,

¹¹ Page, "Panentheism and Pansyntheism," in Clayton and Peacocke (eds.), *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being: Panentheistic Reflections on God's Presence in a Scientific World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 224.

¹² See for example "[The Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness](#)", adopted July 7, 2012.

tools and technology).¹³ Similarly, any species that can feel the quality we call love has a measure of empathy.

All such beings are like enough to ourselves to believe that they carry along with us the project that Jonas calls the image of God. Humanity is but the most extreme example. More than this, if we want to stay within Jewish tradition, the creation in its entirety bears the divine image, as various Kabbalists believed.¹⁴ All the species are therefore contributing to making real Jonas's idea of "the image of God." Human beings are the shield-bearers, as it were, for the whole of creation, uniting in each of our billions of microcosms the image of creation and divinity.

VIII.

Humanity's extremity, however, leads to potentials that seem to be unique to humanity, including achievements like abstract mathematics and moonshots, and perhaps the ability to conjure systems for diverting asteroids and mitigating other extinction-level disasters. That combination of intelligence and love necessarily entails acting in concert with greater and greater numbers of people, and it also entails being willing to sacrifice oneself for greater and greater goods. But it's a combination that also entails being able and willing to destroy others — not just for the sake of one's own survival, which we might label as selfish, but for one's children to survive, which we label colloquially but incoherently as "selfless." As Maimonides says, a human who does not aspire to embody God's image is just a uniquely dangerous animal (Guide, 1:7).¹⁵

All this has led to the fact of our species overrunning the biosphere, to the degree that we may very well accomplish our own extinction without any help from causes of past extinctions like asteroids or volcanism. Along with this potential for our own extinction, we are causing the already actual extinction of a vast number of our fellow species with which we cohabit the

¹³ This is not even to mention other kinds of world-founding but more alien intelligence in the social insects and cephalopods, and who knows where else that we have not yet looked.

¹⁴ You can find many of them in Kabbalah and Ecology, chapters 9 and 10.

¹⁵ Maimonides's understanding of that image is first developing one's intellect, along with love of God, but ultimately, he says, it means recognizing that "this reality as a whole...is hesed (lovingkindness)" (3:54) and that acting according to God's image requires hesed above all — which is where Cherry ends up as well (see 344, quoted below).

planet. It's not just a matter of global climate disruption. We are using up or degrading most of the habitat in every ecosystem, deforesting most of the planet, exterminating the insects that support vast food chains, hunting animals to extinction now just as people did many millennia ago to the megafauna of North America and Australia (and perhaps every other continent), etc.

This is where the question of theodicy becomes real for me. The mere possibility of an anthropogenic mass extinction is an indictment not just of humanity, but of the synergy between intelligence and the limiting boundaries of love that we share in some measure with other mammals and birds. Even if love in a larger sense is the lure of the cosmos towards greater and greater good, selfish love as it exists for us and our fellow endotherms, is an unavoidable step on the path towards that greater or cosmic love. There is no other way for love to come into manifestation, to emerge through a process like evolution, without being first love for one's own. If this love leads our planet into its sixth, anthropogenic mass extinction, wouldn't that either indict or prove illusory the very cosmogonic eros that Jonas and Cherry lift up as redeeming?

IX.

Even here, I am loathe to accept my own arguments without qualification. Some version of the Jonas myth underlies my own picture of the universe, whether or not it's consistent or coherent. As long as we have not actually extinguished ourselves, rachmana litslan (God have mercy), we can still imagine a mythical future where love is fully revealed as the foundation of the material world, despite all the suffering humans have caused. But if we are talking myth anyway, why not allow an "as-if" myth that says, we can imagine God to be listening for prayers, but we don't know how; we can imagine God's will always leaning into the good, but we don't know how, etc.?

Moreover, Jonas's myth would require us to embrace pantheism, whereas the idea of panentheism—that all of Nature is in and of God, but that God is more than Nature—seems to align better with Judaism. Panentheism is where Cherry lays his head as well. But I don't see any basis for that choice in Jonas's myth, and to me it didn't seem like Cherry explained this

discrepancy.¹⁶ Cherry also sees acosmism in Arthur Green's theology and expresses reservations about that, but again I saw no evidence in what he quotes for that being Green's position. And panentheism in any case does leave a place from which God can act on the world in a way that pantheism does not.

X.

In a way, the kinds of problems discussed above are inherent in the idea of a grand coherent synthesis of Judaism (or of anything). Coherence is something the universe may inherently have, but coherence on an intellectual level tends to be a single-minded pursuit of a single mind. It's a pursuit I deeply empathize with, but it has its costs. A single mind is driven as much by what is repressed or ignored as by what is affirmed. In pursuit of coherence, it's hard to admit that one may be of two or three minds on a subject, when in fact that is our more natural state.

Someone presenting what they consider to be a grand synthesis may also more easily admit to having many teachers, as Cherry does, but be less admitting of dialogue with colleagues, as I found in Book Two. This may be correlated with cultivating a kind of unspoken feeling that all Jewish thought up until now has led to this one book. That statement of course is trivially true about every book on Jewish thought ever written. But cultivating this feeling may not be the best practice, nor is it the most feminist method one could imagine. (I can by the way see some of these problems in my own theological work.) However, despite such concerns about

¹⁶ Cherry does lift up the concept of quantum entanglement as "scientific pointer towards transcendence" (335), which he equates with the panentheistic idea that God must be more than Nature. I was not convinced by this argument, and anyway I don't think it resolves the conundrum. On the topic of entanglement, Cherry also misinterprets the EPR paradox, which showed that the math of quantum mechanics implies the idea of entanglement – where (to greatly simplify) what happens to one particle happens to its entangled partner over any distance without any communication or signal between them. (ibid.) But the goal of Einstein, Podolsky and Rosen (EPR), was to show that quantum mechanics is incomplete because it led to this seemingly absurd (paradoxical) outcome, not to show that entanglement was real. Later research used EPR to design experiments that showed that entanglement was in fact "real." Nevertheless, since the latter fact is what matters to Cherry's argument, however one interprets the intent of EPR does not impact his argument.

Cherry's project, I found that the more I studied his book, the more it helped me generate meaningful questions and ideas.

I also found inspiration in many of Cherry's formulations. He writes, for example, that what survives after his critique of omnipotence is "a covenant of benevolence—hesed" (344). And I loved the connection Cherry made between the Hasidic idea of a spiritual leap and the concept of emergence that is so fundamental to evolution and cosmology (333).¹⁷ Finally, I can heartily endorse and extol what Cherry sets up as his goal and standard in the book's closing passage. There he ruminates:

The voice we hear in our wilderness, sometimes still and small, and sometimes howling, is a voice uniquely our own. How do we best let being become more free, more diverse, and more self-conscious? How do we best ensure that we live long on the land so that we can partner with God in the ongoing act of creation? Those are the questions of a coherent and compelling Judaism. (507)

Those are the questions – and it is a gift that Cherry is asking them.

*Rabbi David Seidenberg is the founder of neohasid.org and the author of *Kabbalah and Ecology: God's Image in the More-Than-Human World*. One of our foremost Jewish ecotheologians, he holds ordination from both JTS and Reb Zalman, and teaches internationally on Judaism and spirituality, human rights, ecology, animal rights, and astronomy. Seidenberg is well-known for his liturgy, as well as his translation of *Lamentations* (on neohasid.org). He is also an avid dancer and composer of Jewish liturgical music.*

¹⁷ As mentioned, Cherry also highlights that Rav Kook applied the concept of leaping to evolution (220, 312-3), and he explores the connection between love and leaping (43, 200, 219).

RESPONSE

By Rabbi Shai Cherry

Rabbi Seidenberg begins his generous and engaging critique by doling an appropriate wrist slap for some sloppy writing and editing on my part; *mea culpa*. In particular, he takes issue with my use of the neologism “omni-cide,” by which I mean the demise of the god who is omnipotent and omniscient of future particulars, not only should I have been clearer when I introduced the term on page 344, but I should have included the term in the glossary.

Seidenberg also chides me, not inappropriately, for failing to engage other thinkers in the Judaism and ecology subfield. *Coherent Judaism* could undoubtedly have been enriched by such an engagement, but it would also have been enlarged. Moreover, my primary purpose was to articulate coherence and then offer an illustration, in both the ritual and ecological realms, of how one could move toward a compelling Judaism. One example, in the book’s conclusion (pp. 499-501), addressed the need to drastically reduce beef production. I plan on returning to the multiple elements of a compelling covenant in my next work.

Seidenberg notes that my tone, in parts, is chummy and distracting. Once theologians made the shift from idealism to existentialism, from ideas to lived experience, theology demands personalizing. It’s necessarily idiosyncratic. A theologian can preserve more formal prose, of course, but in doing so there’s an increased likelihood that readers will ascribe something of an academic verisimilitude to an enterprise that, in my opinion, should emphasize its subjectivity. I also note in the Introduction (xxii) that there are chapters where my writing will reflect the style of the literature under analysis. Personalizing my authorial voice over the course of a 500-page book was a conscious decision for which I had hoped some readers would be grateful.

Seidenberg and I have additional points of disagreement or, perhaps, misunderstandings, but it is Seidenberg’s mega-critique presented in his final section that warrants a fuller response. Seidenberg claims that any attempt at a “grand synthesis... cultivates a kind of unspoken feeling that all Jewish thought up until now has led to this one book.” The first book of *Coherent Judaism* is entitled “A Partisan History of Jewish Theologies.” Since the two primary theologies I describe are mutually exclusive, a coherent Judaism can’t accept both as true. I reject the Mosaic theology of reward and punishment which becomes the primary

theology for the Jewish prayerbook. I also reject the Priestly anthropology which imagines Jews to be ontologically superior to gentiles and informs significant parts of the halakhic tradition.

Seidenberg's mega-critique applies to Maimonides—not me. Maimonides is the one who can't publicly admit that the Torah speaks with contradictory voices. Maimonides is the one who misreads a rabbinic midrash (See his *Guide* 3:26 on Genesis Rabbah 44:1) to claim that all mitzvot were given to *morally* purify us when the "purification" of the midrash is *metallurgical* and about the social separation of the Jews, the silver, from the gentiles, the lead. (See pp. 59-60 in *Coherent Judaism*.) Maimonides is the one who diverts all rabbinic rivers to his personal sea.

I am grateful to be an heir of both Priestly and Mosaic theologies, of both biblical and rabbinic theologies of creation, and of both realist and nominalist philosophies of halakhah. I am extremely grateful to be an heir to both Maimonides and Kabbalah, mutually exclusive though they often are. My challenge was not to shoehorn the parts of Judaism I don't endorse into something palatable. My challenge was to lift up those elements of the tradition that can contribute to a coherent Judaism while still recognizing that incoherent pieces of our tradition litter our literary history.

It is vitally important that we not erase or reread the nasty or benighted bits of Judaism. We must explicitly repudiate them just as we expect Christians and Moslems to repudiate their nasty and benighted bits, especially those that impact us Jews. Jews are partial to Hillel not because he was brighter or more knowledgeable than Shammai; we side with Hillel because he was able to admit when he was wrong (b. Eruvin 13b). Infallibilism is incoherent.

What passes for religion in America has, for many educated folks, a serious credibility issue. *Coherent Judaism* offers a contemporary version of ancient wisdom that avoids the pitfalls of Young Earth Creationism and a dictating god. My attempt to establish coherence, and re/establish credibility, was an exercise in metaphysical minimalism along the lines of what Mordecai Kaplan (1881-1983) did in the previous century. Seidenberg is nudging the conversation forward to make coherence more robust and, ultimately, compelling. That, too, is a gift.