

Article

A Jewish Ethical Account of the Abyss of Responsibility in the Anthropocene

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Abstract

This article addresses the “abyss of responsibility” in the Anthropocene, where accountability for climate change is routinely outsourced to institutions. By analyzing a global consumer society that reduces both humans and nature to mere commodities, this study develops a Jewish ethical framework for individual and collective ecological agency. Methodologically, it expands the tort liabilities of *Seder Nezikin* (*Mishnayot*)—originally addressing unintentional, successive, and shared damages—into a blueprint for systemic environmental accountability. To animate this legal structure, the paper puts rabbinic sources into conversation with modern Jewish thinkers. It utilizes Emmanuel Levinas’s concept of infinite responsibility, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks’s covenantal politics, and Rav Joseph Ber Soloveitchik’s account of a co-responsibility between the human and earth to shift accountability from the state to the individual, calling for moral agency and active citizenship. Crucially, the study argues that environmental and human spheres are deeply intertwined; as long as human suffering is ignored for economic profit, nature will remain exploited. By integrating the legal principles of *Nezikin*, the inescapable responsibility of Levinas, Sacks’ politics of hope, and earth’s sensitivity towards sinfulness as formulated by Soloveitchik, this paper provides actionable theological resources to democratize responsibility and mend a world in distress.

Keywords: Anthropocene; consumer society; responsibility; rabbinic literature; modern Jewish philosophy; Theodor W. Adorno; Emmanuel Levinas; Jonathan Sacks; Joseph Ber Soloveitchik; Seder Nezikin

1. Introduction

This paper argues that the Anthropocene confronts humanity with a crisis of responsibility that fundamentally questions the standing of (*post*-)modern man within the world they shape. The destabilization of planetary ecological systems through the carbon-intensive global consumer society and its throw-away mentality, together with its devastating consequences for both human and non-human life, is the historical and ongoing outcome of collective human action. Yet this collectivity remains profoundly unequal: the world’s poorest populations, especially those most directly depending on ecological systems, are bearing the gravest consequences while possessing the fewest resources with which to respond—even though their involuntary patterns of merely basic consumption did not cause the climate crisis. Industrialized societies, fossil-fuel economies, and affluent consumer cultures have contributed disproportionately to planetary damage, while the consequences are experienced asymmetrically across regions, classes, and continents—thereby exposing the enduring legacy of colonialism and the profound social and economic inequalities among



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humanity (Mikhail 2016, p. 225). The Anthropocene therefore exposes not only humanity's shared condition, but also the enduring legacies of colonialism, global capitalism, and structural inequality through which ecological destruction has historically unfolded and continues to unfold. It thus presents a profound political and ethical paradox: humanity has emerged as a collective force capable of transforming the conditions of life on Earth while remaining internally divided by radically unequal histories and structures of power, production, and vulnerability. Any ethical or political response must therefore confront the inequalities inherent in carbon responsibility. The problem lies not only in this inequality gap of responsibility but in the abyss of accountability. Because this destruction is diffuse, systemic, cumulative, and often experienced only indirectly, responsibility is becoming obscured precisely while having become planetary in scope.

Still, arising "from a shared sense of a catastrophe," this "negative universal history" (Chakrabarty 2009, p. 222) has generated a new awareness of humanity as a collective agent and calls us to "imagine and implement a new kind of oppositional politics" (Mikhail 2016, p. 219). At the same time, the recognition of planetary crisis must avoid what Hulme calls "climate reductionism" (Hulme [2011] 2013, pp. 516–18): the tendency to anticipate the future solely through the deterministic lens of climate models while neglecting the dynamism of political, cultural, and social life and the values of local populations and communities. Against the cultural pessimism and fatalism of Western societies, he stresses that the future "is precisely the most important territory over which battles of beliefs, ideologies, and social values have to be fought. And it is these imagined and fought-over visions of the future that—in many indeterminate ways—will shape the impacts of anthropogenic climate change as much as will change in physical climate alone" (ibid., p. 517). The challenge of the Anthropocene, then, is not only to reckon with humanity's destructive power as a planetary force, but to rethink responsibility, political agency, and collective life under conditions of ecological interdependence and historical asymmetry.

Historically, the climate crisis is unquestionably linked to the commercial success of steam engines in the 18th century and the fossil-fuel economy that propelled industrialization. During the Enlightenment, modern man emerged not merely as a morally self-conscious, political, and economic subject but as a collective geological and atmospheric force. Human energy consumption rose dramatically between 1800 and 1945, while urbanization and industrialization spread across the globe, empires gave way to nation-states, and agriculture lost its place as a primary economic force. Coinciding with the end of the Second World War and the beginning of the atomic age with its destructive force on a global scale, the Great Acceleration with an exponential increase in population growth and economic activity fostered a likewise augmenting increase in atmospheric carbonization, deforestation, extinction of non-human lifeforms, and so forth (Mikhail 2016, pp. 215–17). Human mastery over nature has increasingly revealed itself as a condition of planetary vulnerability of which we ourselves are a part.

Arendt underscores that the Promethean revolt of human productivity—which unleashes natural and cosmic forces into the human world and into the nature of the earth—could only construct a man-made world after partly destroying God-created nature, ultimately shattering the very purposefulness and instrumental stability of the world (Arendt 1998, pp. 139, 150). According to her, the tragedy of *homo faber* lies in their apparent fulfillment. By establishing the human user as the supreme "measure of all things," the artificial world is degraded into a realm of mere utility. Nature is reduced to worthless material, and even fabricated objects lose their intrinsic value, turning into disposable means for endless consumption (ibid., p. 155). Eventually, *homo faber* was overrun by process, alienating them from the products they created. Moreover, as Jonas emphasizes, *homo faber's* triumph over the object also signifies a triumph over the human being's inner

state. The collective and cumulative creation of technology leads to ever-increasing power over nature, driven by a self-reinforcing loop of functional necessity and the captivating reward of success (Jonas 1979, pp. 31–32). As humans become the very objects of their own tools, “[h]omo faber is turning upon himself and gets ready to make over the maker of all the rest” (Jonas 1973, p. 45). According to Jonas, this new nature of human action demands “a new ethics of long-range responsibility, coextensive with the range of our power, it calls in the name of that very responsibility also for a new kind of humility,” (ibid., p. 51) because we cannot foresee and judge the outcomes of our actions. This requires an ethics of shared responsibility for the future of the planet and humanity as such. This new revelation of a tortured planet commands us to hear “the outcry of mute things themselves that we must heed by curbing our powers over creation, lest we perish together on a wasteland of what was creation” (Jonas 1996, pp. 202, 201). Jonas derives this imperative of responsibility to protect the very existence into the future from the perspective of the unique emergence of moral and organic life within a mostly inorganic universe (Tirosh-Samuelson 2012, p. 353).

Since White (1967) famously identified the Judeo-Christian dogma of creation—and particularly the Western Christian arrogance towards nature—as the historical root of the environmental crisis, the nexus between religion, science, nature, and ethics has widely been researched, assessing the social and moral implications of religious narratives for environmental ethics in a mainly Christian setting (Deane-Drummond et al. 2017), or globally discussing different understandings of transcendence, holiness, creation, and faith in diverse belief systems and religions to create visions that might transform human consciousness (Hart 2017). Within this broader discourse on religion and environmental degradation, Jewish environmental ethics has emerged as an increasingly dynamic field, debating the historical, ethical, and philosophical dimensions of Jewish environmentalism (Yaffe 2001), and exploring ecology in Jewish thought across biblical, rabbinic, Zionist, and eco-kosher contexts (Waskow 2000). As Tirosh-Samuelson (2022) notes, early Jewish scholarship was largely apologetic—arguing that White overlooked the stewardship mandate in Genesis 2:15 by focusing exclusively on the mastery narrative of Genesis 1:28—and engaged in retrieving and reconstructing the ecological wisdom and normative values of Judaism (ibid., pp. 191–92).

While the stewardship paradigm shifts “the perspective from anthropocentric to theocentric” (Schwartz 2001, p. 305), two major schools emerged in the tension between these two narratives in Genesis: the non-anthropocentric, bio- or eco-centric school of deep ecology, and the anthropocentric school of social ecology (Tirosh-Samuelson 2022, p. 197). Wyschogrod ([1991] 2001) conceptualizes these as “upper” and “lower” ecology (ibid., pp. 290–91). He emphasizes that the upper ecology approach of returning to a nature religion is dangerous, especially for Jews, but acknowledges that the environmental destruction resulting partly from the desacralization of nature has reached an unsustainable stage, necessitating a combination of both approaches (ibid., p. 296). According to Katz (2001), the eco-centric worldview of deep ecology demands respect for all natural identities, de-emphasizes human interests, and asserts that maximizing the good requires the full realization of all life forms, prescribing a policy of minimal human intervention and a deep reform of society to harmonize with natural processes. In contrast, Judaism presents a theocentric universe with certain demands—such as prohibitions against causing animals to suffer (*tsa’ar ba’alei hayim*) and wanton destruction (*bal tashhit*)—to preserve and care for all of creation. To resolve the tension between both, the anthropocentric self-interest of humans must be merged with the interests of other creatures and natural entities (ibid., pp. 159, 164). Schwartz (2001) underscores that the environmental crisis offers a unique opportunity for a spiritual renewal of Judaism, a chance “for delegitimized voices to reassert themselves,” emphasizing that the crisis is ultimately one of the human spirit (ibid., p. 305). Schwarzschild

([1984] 2001), instead, reinforces that the unique contribution of Jewish theology, law (Halakhah), and philosophy is a strict monotheism with a transcendent God who is exterior to nature, enabling morality, and explicitly forbidding idolatry, the confusion of nature with the divine. As Schwartz (2001) elaborates, he positions the historical pagan-Jewish debate as a fundamental conflict between differing views of nature and morality. While nature represents “what is,” functioning according to amoral, deterministic laws, morality is born from the question of “what ought to be” (ibid., pp. 302–3). For Schwarzschild, Judaism stands profoundly at odds with the natural world since human beings transcend natural determinism and possess the unique “power to impose a moral order on an otherwise amoral natural reality” (Schwartz 2001, pp. 303). Expanding the Kantian foundation of his thought, Tirosch-Samuels (2012) notes that for premodern observant Jews, nature was understood as good but not inherently holy; pointing back to the Creator, nature could only be sanctified through the observance of divine commandments. For Schwarzschild, she argues, “Judaism supersedes pagan religions [. . .]. Whereas nature has no room for the weak and the marginal, Judaism enjoins humanity to defend the weak and the socially marginal.” (ibid., p. 347). These diverse views on the position of humanity within nature—and the extent to which nature possesses its inherent rights or sacredness—depend heavily on the researcher’s own identification with and participation in specific denominations of Judaism. For instance, scholars aligned with the Jewish Renewal Movement (like Watson) tend to embrace deep ecology approaches that remain unacceptable to those adhering to strictly Orthodox views (like the author), or to thinkers shaped by the philosophical horizon of the German Jewish Reform movement (like Schwarzschild).

Recognizing the responsibility gap as a central concern in addressing the challenges of the Anthropocene, Tirosch-Samuels (2022) demands “that we cultivate those virtues that lead us to act responsibly toward the environment, including humility, modesty, temperance, simplicity, and many others,” calling for a “green *Bildung*” that would prepare Jews for “ecological citizenship” (ibid., p. 213). In her valuable attempt to find a moral language for the climate crisis from the well of Judaism’s normative laws and homiletic stories, Zoloth (2023) draws in one of the chapters upon the biblical commandment to eradicate the archetypal enemy Amalek and erase their memory (Deut. 25:17–19). She invokes this narrative not to incite physical violence, but to forcefully condemn fossil fuel corporations for “producing, promoting, and selling doubt” (Zoloth 2023, p. 164). For Zoloth, these oil, coal, and gas extracting companies represent modern existential adversaries, the “sons of murderers, bad guys,” and urges humanity to recognize and blame them, to erase their lies, and to remove the doubt they sow (ibid., pp. 176–77). Far from blaming her personally, it must nevertheless be remembered that a truncated critique of capitalism risks being structurally antisemitic by personifying systemic economic processes and contributes little to resolving the issue. It is crucial to understand that environmental responsibility pertains to all rather than a personified group of evil doers. It is neither the infamous greed of transnational corporations alone, nor that of the oil-extracting industry that drives the planet towards disaster. Instead, ecological degradation is perpetrated by the multitude of individuals who refuse to restrain their freedom of short-term choices of consumption and mobility.

Living under the global conditions of a commodity-producing consumer society and its throw-away mentality—which commercializes planetary and human resources without boundaries—no single human being remains outside its attempt to compress the particular under the universal and to subsume life under its spell (Adorno 1966, p. 337). The objective reality of the universal commodity form forces human subjects to actively participate in their own deception. Mirroring the abstract lawfulness of Hegel’s totalizing identity thought, which forces the different into the same, or the nonidentical into the

identical, this market logic encrypts the truth that its mediation confronts phenomena—and individuals—as a mechanism of coercion (*ibid.*, p. 54). Consumer society directly manufactures the very desires it pretends to satisfy, fundamentally undermining true fulfillment. By projecting unachievable fulfillment onto disposable goods, the false consciousness embedded in consumer desires acts as a psychological compensation for authentic human needs—whatever that might be—that society systematically denies (*ibid.*, p. 97). The problem is that salvation lies outside the system but remains barely thinkable. The subjects of historical change are overwhelmed by an uncertain future, paralyzed by the vastness of a universal challenge that confronts the particular with insignificance, and dulled by a culture of victimization that convinces the individual of its own unaccountability. As Adorno writes: “The catastrophe lies within the structural conditions that condemn human beings to powerlessness and apathy, even though these conditions could be changed by them” (*ibid.*, p. 189). Instead of taking responsibility, changing our own habits, and organizing ourselves on a communal level to establish alternatives to the all-encompassing market logic, climate responsibility is outsourced to the market itself, which is keen to greenwash carbon emissions by investing in geoengineering—a cure that might be worse than the disease (Schneider 2008, p. 3856)—or the political arena. As Sacks notes, neither the market—determined by short-term profit—nor the government—dedicated not much beyond the next election—nor the self-interested individual—centered on their short-sighted desires—are capable of long-term responsibility (Sacks 2020, p. 155). Adorno adds that in the administered world, the socialized society, “all individuals are incapable of the morality that is socially demanded, but which would truly exist only in a liberated society.” In a structurally corrupting system, individuals cannot act morally. True ethical actions could be possible only in a future society that has broken free from commodity logic and exploitation (Adorno 1966, p. 292). Responsibility—individual as well as collective—is thus trapped in an abyss where moral agency appears to be either insignificant or inconceivable.

Yet, we should not accommodate ourselves with a feeling of collective remorse or guilt—a psychological accommodation that allows us to maintain the very behaviors we abhor, or at least which we have realized to be not as good. As Arendt underscores, “[w]here all are guilty, nobody is” (Arendt 2003, p. 147). One must be held liable, responsible, for things one has not done directly. Collective responsibility—the price of socialization, of being a member of a group one cannot leave—is as much political as individual responsibility is politically irresponsible, pertaining only to the self and not the world. But, she stresses, the human being is a person only in virtue of their moral quality. Moral concern, she writes, “rests on the insight that it is better to be at odds with the whole world than, being one, to be at odds with myself” (*ibid.*, pp. 100, 148–58, 79). Her concern, not to remain a bystander if another human being is in peril, is actually rooted in Jewish law. As Kirschenbaum stresses, the biblical command “do not stand by the blood of your fellow” (Leviticus 19:16) is a religious, ethical, and legal obligation to help out the other human being personally and financially, whenever one is in danger of being a victim of crime or distress caused by natural catastrophes (Kirschenbaum 1994, pp. 204–5). To help foster a sense of individual accountability and collective responsibility, this article sets out to explore the paths as found in Jewish tradition and their modern accounts.

2. Methodology

This paper argues that Jewish environmental ethics continues to struggle with the ethical abyss of the Anthropocene as a “total” condition, shaped by human capacities for power and destruction inherent in a carbon-based, commodity-producing society and its throwaway mentality. Because the moral agency and accountability of individuals and legal persons embedded within the global system of production, distribution, and

consumption remain underexplored, this article develops a Jewish ethical critique of our current condition that extends responsibility to each and every person, while investigating liability for collective and indirect harm.

To develop such an account, the article turns to the rabbinic legal literature of the *Mishnayot* of *Nezikin*. These texts offer a nuanced framework for assigning responsibility for foreseeable future harm, even when unintended, as well as for damages occurring within collectively shared spaces and across multiple actors. Read beyond their strictly juridical context, these texts articulate a logic of liability and accountability attentive to indirect causation and cumulative effects, thereby reframing individual responsibility for environmental stewardship and intergenerational justice. In dialog with these rabbinic sources, the article engages modern Jewish philosophers, especially Emmanuel Levinas and Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, to explore how infinite responsibility toward the Other and covenantal ethics can be reinterpreted in light of pressing ecological challenges. Subsequently, it will turn to Rabbi Joseph Ber Soloveitchik to develop an account of co-responsibility between humanity and nature. By proposing a Jewish ethical framework capable of addressing individual as well as collective responsibility within complex systems of environmental harm, this article offers constructive resources for religious thought and practice in the Anthropocene.

3. Concepts of Responsibility in Jewish Thought

Since Jewish thought begins with Torah, we will start from there. Sacks emphasizes that the biblical narrative serves as a progressive instruction in acquiring responsibility: Genesis illustrates the catastrophic failures of the protagonists in taking responsibility, while Exodus documents the necessity of human active engagement. In Genesis, we first find Eve and Adam eating the fruit from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. When God finds out about it, Adam blames Eve, and Eve blames the serpent. They deny their personal responsibility and that they were acting freely. Shortly afterwards, we find their son Cain slaughtering his brother Abel out of jealousy. He denies his moral responsibility. But, unlike his parents, he does not deny his freedom through self-deception, viewing himself as a passive object of external forces. He is not powerless before the world but powerless before his will, refusing morality. Then we are told the story of Noah, who constructs the ark to rescue his family and animal couples from the flood, yet remains entirely silent, failing to protest God's impending destruction of planetary life. He fails to assume collective responsibility. A few generations later, a united humanity attempts to build the Tower of Babel, aspiring to establish their home in heaven, directly confronting the distinctiveness of God. In doing so, they deny ontological responsibility, to be accountable to something beyond us (Sacks 2005, pp. 135–44). Read together, these narratives “constitute a developmental psychology of the moral sense. First we discover *personal* responsibility, our freedom to choose. Then we acquire *moral* responsibility, the knowledge that choice has limits; not everything we can do, we may do. Later we learn *collective* responsibility: we are part of a family, a community and society and we have a share in its innocence or guilt. Later still, we realize that society itself is subject to a higher law: there are moral limits to power” (ibid., p. 145). With Abraham, rectifying the previous failures in accepting all four kinds of responsibility, a new type of human being enters history, one who lives in response to the ethical call of God, and with it a new faith: “the faith of responsibility, in which the divine command and the human act meet and give birth to a new and blessed order, built on the principles of righteousness and justice” (Sacks 2009a, pp. 67–68). In Exodus, the structural pedagogy continues through a series of double narratives. The text details two distinct battles: first against Pharaoh, then against the Amalekites; two sets of tablets with the Decalogue: one inscribed by God,

the second carved by Moses; two divine epiphanies in a cloud of glory: once at Mount Sinai, later within the Tabernacle; two covenantal declarations: one by God directly, the other read by Moses from the book of the covenant; and two separate accounts of the Tabernacle's construction: before and after the Golden Calf. Sacks highlights that in each pairing, the initial account narrates an exclusive act of God, whereas the subsequent one involves human participation. As he observes: "There is an eternal message here. A people can be granted freedom by an external cause, in this case Divine intervention. But a people sustain freedom by their own efforts. *It is not what God does for us, but what we do for God, that changes us* (Sacks 2010, p. 16)." The pedagogical movement from "*acts done by God for the sake of human beings, to acts done by human beings for the sake of God*" in the history of Israel reiterates the developmental process from childhood to maturity (Sacks 2005, pp. 156–57). Hasselaar and Feldmann-Kaye (2026, p. 154) underscore that this shift towards human responsibility calls individuals to internalize the conflicts of interest inherent in freedom, actively fighting their own struggles as beings created in the image of God. For Sacks, both the transcendence of God, as being beyond nature, and His creation of humanity, as being endowed with creativity and freedom, mark the birth of religion as a world-transforming force dedicated to realizing what "ought to be," but is not yet (Sacks 2005, pp. 133–34).

3.1. Jewish Tort Law in Seder Nezikin

In the Babylonian Talmud, it is told that a Gentile demanded of Hillel the Elder to convert him on the condition to teach him the entire Torah while he was standing on one foot. Hillel responded with the Golden Rule: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the entire Torah; the rest is interpretation. Go study!" (Talmud Bavli Shabbat 31a). Still, even though the Torah commands a life that inflicts no harm upon others and their property, individuals remain prone to falling short of this moral standard of communal life. Additionally, loads of damages and injuries happen unintentionally. Consequently, the written Torah—the Pentateuch—prohibits various actions directed against fellow human beings and provides explicit instructions for cases of civil crime or damage. Many of these foundational laws are recorded in the Torah Portion *Mishpatim* (Legal Ordinances) in Exodus. For instance, the text decrees: "When a man opens a pit, or a man digs a pit and does not cover it, and an ox or donkey falls into it, the owner of the pit shall make restitution; he shall give money to its owner and the dead beast shall be his (Exodus 21:33–34)." Moreover, "[i]f a man causes a field or vineyard to be grazed, when he lets his livestock loose, or lets his livestock graze in another's field, he shall make restitution from the best of his own field and from the best of his own vineyard" (Exodus 22:4). And, furthermore, "[i]f a fire breaks out and catches in thorns, so that stacked grain, standing grain, or the field is consumed, the one who ignited the fire shall make full restitution (Exodus 22:5)."

To ensure the comprehension and continuity of the written Torah following the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE and the subsequent dispersion in exile, the oral tradition of legal interpretations and a few homiletic tales was written down and systematically codified. The first compilation of this Oral Torah, the Mishnah, was redacted by Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi at the beginning of the third century. Later commentaries on the Mishnah and additional sources were edited as the Jerusalem Talmud between the fourth and fifth centuries, and simultaneously into the more influential Babylonian Talmud by Rav Ashi and Ravina in the early fifth century—though its final redaction extended for at least two other centuries (Wald 2007, p. 478). In the Babylonian Talmud (hereinafter TB), Shimon Ben Lakish (3rd century) counts the Mishna on torts (*nezikin*) as the fourth order (*sefer*) of the Mishna and applies to it the word "salvation" (*yeshu'ot*) from Isaiah 33:6 (TB Shabbat 31a). Apart from matrimonial law, *Seder Nezikin* comprehensively compiles civil

law, addressing murder, theft, damages, and other forms of interpersonal harm. These mainly legal teachings are divided into three tractates: Bava Kamma (first gate), Bava Mezia (middle gate), and Bava Batra (last gate).

For our discussion about environmental and intergenerational responsibility and the accountability for inflicting collective or planetary harm, even if unintended or indirect, *Seder Nezikin* provides us with an account of liability in the public and private realm.

3.1.1. Liability for Indirect Harm

Before turning to specific examples, it is essential to understand the complicated issue of *gerama* and *garme*, both of which describe damage caused indirectly by a tortfeasor. Rabbi Hirsch (1808–1888) explains that the expansive principle of *gerama* governs indirect liability, distinguishing between proximate causes (*dinei de-garmi*) and more remote causes (*gerama be-nezikin*). He emphasizes that this distinction carries weight only within a court of law. Even in instances where a human tribunal cannot legally enforce financial restitution, any form of *gerama be-nezikin*, any action that indirectly causes another to suffer pain, remains a severe transgression for which the individual is held fully accountable before God (Hirsch 2009, p. 316; TB Bava Kamma 56a). The halakhic discussion surrounding these two terms revolves not only around proximity but also around foreseeability and accountability. Rashi (1040–1105) and several Tosafists (later commentators from the 12th to 15th centuries) argue that strict law views both forms of indirect damage as legally exempt, suggesting that the Sages who imposed liability for the more common injuries of *garme* did so exclusively for the sake of public order (Albeck and Elon 2007). Rabbi Lichtenstein (1933–2015) aligns with this view, claiming that the distinction between *gerama* and *garme* is not an abstract scholarly exercise, but a practical response to the mundane world. The Sages instituted financial restitution because failing to penalize indirect damages or injuries would have resulted in negative consequences for society. (Lichtenstein 2000, pp. 198–99). Similar to Rabbi Hirsch, the majority of Tosafists define *garme* as immediate indirect damage and *gerama* as remote indirect damage. In this vein, Albeck and Elon (2007) propose that *gerama* refers “to indirect damage that is too remote to have been foreseeable,” while *garme* denotes “indirect damage that should have been foreseeable—but which was caused solely by the independent act of a second person who acted negligently following the first person’s act, while he could have refrained from doing that which resulted in damage” (idem., p. 502). According to this approach, a tortfeasor who could not foresee a sequence of events that was unlikely to happen, since they were uncommon and too indirect, cannot be held liable for damages arising therefrom (Nadel 1991, p. 151). Haut proposes that “the term *garme* connotes causation in law and establishes that liability exists, i.e., that there is sufficient causal nexus between the actor and the damage to impose on him liability. The term *gerama* connotes either that causation is in fact not found [. . .], or, assuming such exist, there are other factors which for one reason or the other prevent the imposition of liability” (Haut 1988, p. 30). According to him, the *garme* rule allows flexibility while it imparts uncertainty, since hard and fast guidelines are missing, while the *gerama* rule allows for certainty due to its mechanical application of non-liability (ibid., pp. 47–48).

Haut highlights that the entire issue hinges on the legal and societal willingness to establish a causal nexus between the initial action of a purported tortfeasor and the resulting harm (ibid., p. 1). He stresses that early Amoraim (Jewish scholars recorded in both Talmudim, 3rd–4th century) utilize the expression *gerama be-nezikin asur* to denote indirect damages or injuries that were prohibited by the moral code (ibid., p. 4; TB Bava Batra 22b–23a). Moreover, the Stammaim (redactors of anonymous portions in TB, 6th–8th century) deem removing a source of sustenance or livelihood to be akin to bloodshed (ibid., p. 6; TB Bava Kamma 119a). According to Haut, early Tannaim (those scholars

recorded in the Mishnah) like Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Elazar (both 2nd century), as well as later Amoraim such as Rabbi Shimon Ben Eliakim (3rd century) and Amemar (4th–5th century), seem to permit retribution for harm caused indirectly. (ibid., pp. 8–10; TB Bava Kamma 100a–b, 117b, 98b). Maimonides (1135/38–1204), who considers both to be mutually exclusive, never clearly refers to the *gerama* rule. He adheres to the *garme* rule and tries to balance factors for whether to establish causation. His novelty was to inject the new concept of intention into the law and effectively abolish the rule of non-liability (Haut 1989, pp. 30–31, 46–48). Haut postulates that this mishnaic framework of *garme* was ancient. He concludes that two separated approaches coexisted, perhaps already shortly after the destruction of the Second Temple: the more restrictive view, attributed to Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Hananiah (died 131CE), which limits liability to direct physical harms, and the more expansive approach of *garme*, attributed to Rabbi Meir but probably older, which extends liability for indirect damages and injuries. Only in the third and fourth generation of Amoraim (3rd–4th century) was the terminology of *gerama* utilized as a rule of non-liability for indirect harm (Haut 1988, pp. 14–17; Haut 1989, p. 56).

This shifting boundary of responsibility is rooted in the text of the Mishnah itself. In Bava Kamma it states, for instance: “[In regard to] all for which I became responsible to safeguard it [if damage is caused to it, it is as if], I facilitated its damage. [If] I facilitated part of the damage, I am liable for payment as if the entire damage was facilitated [by me]” (ibid., 1:2). This strict liability applies to the last successive actor who brought about a damage. In the attempt to find other circumstances in which to hold liable one person out of a group acting either collectively or progressively, the Talmud concludes that this mishnaic rule can only be applied to the example of a pit: the person, who digs down an existing pit that was not yet deep enough to incur liability, until it reaches the liable depth, is held liable (TB Bava Kamma 10a–b). If multiple agents instead successively dig a pit until it reaches the liable depth of ten handbreadths (around 90 cm), each of them, one after the other, each of them is liable (Maimonides and Touger 1997, p. 116). Moreover, Maimonides applies liability to any actor who was the primary cause (*ha-gorem ha-rishon*). He rules: “Whenever a person causes property belonging to a colleague to be damaged—even though he himself is not the one who ultimately causes the damage—since he is the primary cause, he is liable to make financial recompense from the finest property in his possession, like others who cause damage” (ibid., p. 480). His example for this case is a person who takes away a pillow at the moment that the owner of a utensil throws that object from the roof onto the pillow, causing it to break.

Although the standard legal consensus for indirect liability follows the lenient *gerama* approach, where a person cannot be held liable for indirect damages, ancient and early medieval jurisprudence can offer precedents that impose liability on individuals or collectives for indirect harm in the public domain or private property. Mayse asserts that “taking the lenient position in the face of current ecological crises is irresponsible and untenable” (Mayse 2019, p. 94). A value-driven framework of indirect causation, such as the *garme* rule, could provide a blueprint for addressing planetary damage driven by multiple agents acting collectively or successively. Ethically, these matters cannot be deferred to the heavenly court alone. When actions threaten socio-economic survival, moral responsibility demands a stricter imposition of liability. Given that the catastrophic consequences of our collective actions are scientifically established and likely foreseeable, and because the tipping point of cumulative damage might have been crossed already, the excuses of both consumer anonymity and the practical constraints of the market economy are no longer viable. Consequently, humanity should be held liable before earthly courts—not only before God alone—for the destruction of our shared planetary domain. The core problem, as Yoreh (2022) points out, is that Halakhah considers environmental protection not as

halakhah le-ma'aseh—as a law that must be practiced—but rather as a voluntary practice that is *lifnim mi-shurat ha-din*—going beyond the letter of the law. This distinction has broad implications for how rabbis make and formulate their decisions, directly affecting how their followers adhere to their rulings. To address the cumulative effects of environmental degradation caused by collective consumption habits and the socioeconomic production of these desired commodities—such as plastic dishes—it is necessary to recognize these actions as directly harmful to humanity—much like the presence of microplastics in the bloodstream. Nevertheless, the sophisticated halakhic reasoning on individual and collective responsibility and legal accountability for negligence found especially within the *Mishnayot* of *Seder Nezikin*, could provide a transformative moral and legal framework for a changing society that transcends the Jewish context. To ensure coexistence on this planet both now and in the future, individual and collective actions must harmonize with the rights of abstract collective entities, such as future generations, the Global South, and arguably nature itself. However, holding corporate actors and even sovereign states legally accountable for the foreseeable and cumulative harm inflicted upon the planetary public domain requires a profound transformation of existing legal systems, which are currently losing their moral authority in the face of climate change. Since planetary destruction transcends national borders, a transnational court or environmental tribunal would offer a promising solution. In this context, halakhic philosophy could serve as an undogmatic inspiration for redefining legal causation in a globally interconnected world. As Scherlinder Dobb writes: “Judaism is generally pro-bounds, pro-regulation, unafraid to enforce restrictions on private property and private profit—the legal arcana in *Seder N[e]zikin* directly buttress the communitarian side in current economic and political debates, such as environmental health or protection of endangered species, which pit private good against public good” (Scherlinder Dobb 2012, p. 198). The following section will examine this inspiring legal framework for environmental damage as offered in these *Mishnayot*.

3.1.2. Principal Categories of Damage and Their Application to Environmental Harm

Maimonides introduces the laws of *Seder Nezikin* by highlighting their preventive and ethical framework: “All of them are concerned with putting an end to acts of injustice and with the prevention of acts causing damage. In order that great care should be taken to avoid causing damage, man is held responsible for every act causing damage deriving from his possessions or caused by an act of his, if only it was possible for him to be cautious and take care not to cause damage” (Maimonides and Pines 1963, p. 555). The Mishnah Bava Kamma identifies four primary categories of damage (*avot nezikin*): the ox (*shor*), the pit or cistern (*bor*), the *maveh* (either a grazing animal or a person), and the fire (*esh*). The first distinction that separates these categories is that both ox and *maveh* have a living spirit, while fire and pit are inanimate. Furthermore, unlike fire, which spreads from one place to another, the pit remains stationary. While the ox and the pit are both the property of a person which do cause damage (*nizkei mamon*), the *maveh* and fire might fall under the category of damage caused by man (*adam ha-mazik*). Across all categories, the owner bears strict responsibility for safeguarding them, and failure to prevent injury, damage, or loss obligates the owner to pay financial restitution.

Under the category of the ox, which serves as the legal paradigm for all damage done by animals or lifeforms, the Mishnah distinguishes between an innocent (*tam*) and a forewarned (*muad*) one. The first three times it causes damage, it is considered innocent and its owner is liable for just half the cost of the damage caused. After the third incident, the ox and its owner are considered to be forewarned (*muad*) and the owner must pay the full cost of the damage. An ox generally remains innocent for five uncouth behaviors that are unforeseeable unless they occur more than three times: goring, pushing, biting, crouching,

and kicking (Mishnah Bava Kamma 1:1, 2:5). Dogs and goats are always considered forewarned for jumping and the owner must take reasonable steps to prevent damage (ibid., 2:3). Other animals are always considered forewarned for damages caused with their “tooth” (*shen*) or “foot” (*regel*). These subcategories of the “ox” refer to foreseeable actions that need to be prevented by the owner with special care. The tooth applies to all actions that the animal derives pleasure from, such as eating, rubbing against a wall, or rolling over. Similarly, the foot refers to damage caused by moving, such as trampling or causing damage with its hair, its load, a rope around its neck, a halter, or the bell. Since an injured person should have expected the animal to move around on the owner’s property or on public ground, the liability of its owner is restricted to areas where the animal was not supposed or expected to walk, primarily on another’s private property. It does not matter in this case whether the animal was sent forth by the owner or went off on its own and caused damage. (Mishnah Bava Kamma 2:1, 2:2; TB Bava Kamma 3a). The subcategory of “ox” for which the animal and its owner are forewarned after three incidents is called “horn” (*keren*). This category includes the aforementioned behavior of goring, which involves pushing, biting, or crouching with unexpected, malicious intent, thereby breaking a utensil, hurting or even killing another animal or human being. (Mishnah Bava Kamma 2:4; TB Bava Kamma 2b). Other than damages caused by foot or tooth, those caused by the ox’s horn impose liability on the owner, even if the incident occurs on public ground (TB Bava Kamma 15b–16a). Man is also always forewarned; no matter if awake or asleep, or if the damage was happening unintentionally or intentionally, they must pay full retribution (ibid., 2:6).

Considering the application of the “ox” for environmental damage, it must be noted that the concept of foreseeability is crucial for imposing liability. Actions that are expected to lead to damage must be prevented by the owner. If such damage occurs on another’s private property, the owner would be liable for the full costs of the damage caused, while on public grounds the owner might be exempt or liable for just half the costs. Whether desertification due to overgrazing, or pollution due to overfertilization, would be liable under these categories depends on whether the farms are private property or if the affected soil is considered to be public property, or whether damage affects areas outside the private property. Another question would be whether the category could be applied to robots and automated machines, which lack to be endowed with living spirit but are the property of certain owners who would be responsible for safeguarding them, especially if they start to move and act on their own. Whether a car could be considered as an ox, rendering its owner liable for its well-known carbon emissions, is questionable. Still, if damage is certain to happen through the common ways an owner’s properties “act,” they are responsible for preventing damage to another’s property or public (atmo-)sphere.

Considering the category of *maveh*, the Talmud records a debate between the Amoraim Shmuel and Rav (both 3rd century). Shmuel considers it to be the ox’s tooth, while Rav insists that it refers to the category of man, and Rav Pappa (4th century) maintains that it is meant to be a subcategory of fire, like a stone, a knife, or a load placed on the top of their owner’s roof and blown away, causing damage, or a subcategory of trampling. After a long discussion, the Talmud concludes that the category applies to all matters of damage done by man, who is always forewarned, like a person who causes damage with their phlegm or spittle. The Mishnah (Bava Kamma 3:2) declares that if one comes to harm because a person poured water in the public domain, the water-pouring person is liable for the damage. Rabbi Oshaya (4th century) teaches thirteen primary categories of damage, adding to the four primary categories those due to borrowing, renting, unpaid and paid bailee, and five types of indemnity: pain, medical costs, loss of livelihood, and humiliation (TB Bava Kamma 3b–4b). The Mishnah adds that man is also liable to pay compensation

for miscarriage caused by them, while being exempt from compensation if an ox caused the miscarriage (Bava Kamma 8:1). Although complex and debatable due to the ambiguity of the category, it could potentially ground liability for all global environmental damage: industrial pollution and toxic dumping, deforestation, overfishing, carbon emissions, and so forth. If human beings are always forewarned, they are accountable for any damages they cause, whether directly or indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally. Yet, this depends on whether we apply strict liability or follow those like Rav Ulla (3rd–4th century CE), who rule negligently and exempt persons even for direct damages, if those occurred under unexpected circumstances (TB Bava Kamma 27b, [Nadel 1991](#), pp. 157–58).

To address harmful negligence or cumulative pollution, [Mayse and Weisberg \(2022, p. 65\)](#) turn to the stationary, harmful object of the category “pit”, which they exemplify as imposing liability “if the guarding device becomes degraded through neglect or insufficient care, or if the protective measures were not strong enough to guard against reasonable incursions.” The subcategory of pit refers to anything immobile and dangerous that was placed in the public realm, like a stone, a knife, or a load, which inflict damage on a person stumbling upon them. Even if they are declared ownerless, the former owner is liable for damages that occurred through them. (TB Bava Kamma 3b). Moreover, the Mishnah states that if an uncovered pit belongs to two partners and the first passes by without covering it, and afterwards the second one passes by and does not cover it either, the second one would be liable. Liability is imposed also if the pit was not covered appropriately (Bava Kamma 5:6). According to [Mayse and Weisberg \(2022, p. 65\)](#), this mishnaic rule suggests that “once-shared responsibility may come to rest entirely upon the shoulders of a partner who is negligent in the face of a looming disaster.” Drawing on a ruling of Rabbi Asher Weiss (born 1953) regarding corporate personhood, they posit that shareholders and investors function as full legal partners within their organizations and are therefore individually liable for any damages perpetrated by their collective entities. (*ibid.*, pp. 65–66). They further suggest that the legal framework of an imperfectly secured pit provides a valuable paradigm for improperly managed industrial waste and hazardous substances and might be directly applied to persistent pollutants like plastics that ravage ecosystems. To mitigate such risks, rabbinic sources mandate that hazardous materials must be decommissioned and discarded in a manner that renders them entirely harmless (*ibid.*, p. 67).

Like the pit, the category of fire does not have a living spirit. But, other than the stationary pit, the fire spreads. Mayse clarifies that while the pit refers to immobile hazards in the public realm, the category of fire “encompasses pollutants that are set in motion by ecological forces and encroach upon the domain of another” ([Mayse 2019](#), p. 82).

The Mishnah states that if one person brings fire and another brings wood, causing the fire to spread, the one who brought the wood is liable for any damage. Conversely, if one brings wood and another fire, the one who brought the fire is liable for any damage caused. If yet another person comes and fans the flame, causing the fire to spread and do damage, the one who fanned it is liable. However, if the wind fans the fire, all persons involved are exempt. But if one sends forth a fire and allows it to escape, they are liable for any resulting damage. A person who kindles a fire that crosses a fence usually high enough (at least four cubits), a public thoroughfare, or a river is exempt from liability. Similarly, when one kindles a fire on their own premises and it spreads beyond a certain distance, they are exempt because they could not anticipate that the fire would spread so far. Rabbi Elazar Ben Azaria (1st century) states that if a fire spreads further than half a kor (around 100 m) until it causes damage, they are exempt. Rabbi Eliezer instead sets the boundary at sixteen cubits (around 10 m) and Rabbi Akiva (both 1st–2nd century) at fifty cubits (around 25 m), while Rav Shimon (2nd century) argues that “everything is according to the fire” (Mishnah Bava Kamma 6:4). The Talmud expands on these different

views concerning liability for a spreading fire. Rav Nahman reports that Rabbah Bar Avuha (both 3rd century) interprets Rabbi Shimon's statement to mean that the strength of the fire must be taken into consideration. If it was a small fire, the initiator is not liable for damage caused at a great distance, whereas, if they started a larger fire, they are liable even if it traveled far. Both Rav Nahman and Rav Yosef (3rd–4th century) quote Rav Yehuda in the name of Rav Shmuel (both 3rd century) as stating that the halakhah (binding Jewish law) follows the opinion of Rabbi Shimon (TB Bava Kamma 61b). Maimonides adds that Rabbi Shimon's comment requires an estimation of the fire's initial size to determine how far it could potentially spread (Maimonides 1223, folio 25b–26a). The juridical reasoning is yet more complicated, since different opinions consider fire to be either categorized as property damage (*nizkei mamon*), akin to an ox, or as direct human damage (*adam ha-mazik*). Following Rabbi Yoḥanan (2nd–3rd century), causing a fire to spread by kindling it without proper safeguarding is legally equivalent to shooting an arrow at a distant target—their fire is akin to their arrow (*isho mishum hitso*). Reish Lakish (3rd century), instead, considers fire to be similar to one's property (*isho mishum mamono*), falling under the category of an ox, which an owner must safeguard or face liability for damages. He contends that fire is not akin to shooting an arrow because an arrow proceeds through direct human force, whereas fire requires the wind to carry it forth from one location to another. Rabbi Yoḥanan instead holds that fire cannot be ruled strictly as private property because property is a tangible substance, whereas fire is not. This conceptual distinction matters in so far as it determines whether the initiator of the fire is also liable for the additional four types of indemnity (TB Bava Kamma 22a–23a). Maimonides reconciles both approaches in cases where fire harms another person: "When a fire spreads and harms a human being and injures him, the person who kindled the fire is liable for the damages, unemployment benefits, medical costs, pain, and embarrassment suffered by the injured party, as if he had personally injured him. Although fire is one of a person's possessions, it is as if he caused him damage with his arrows. If, by contrast, injury to a man is caused by a person's animal or cistern, he is liable for the damages alone" (Maimonides and Touger 1997, p. 148).

The Mishnah further notes that if a spark emerges from under the hammer of a blacksmith and starts a fire that causes damage, the blacksmith is liable (Mishnah Bava Kamma 6:6). Even if a fire is caused indirectly and unintentionally, individuals who bring it about through their actions are liable. The subcategory of fire includes a stone, a knife, or a load which was placed on the top of their owner's roof and fell off from it by means of a common wind, causing damage (TB Bava Kamma 3b). If an ordinary wind causes them to fall and cause damage, the owner is liable; if it was caused by an uncommon wind, they are exempt (Maimonides and Touger 1997, p. 148). Mayse (2019, p. 76) stresses that the "hazardous nature of fire is such that the law assumes that an individual should foresee that the blaze may well be carried along by the wind. One must take the precautions necessary to prevent its escape, and, if every effort is not made, he remains liable for a fire's damage to persons and property." According to him, the category of fire does not only apply to the catastrophic, vast blazes all-over the globe in recent years that came to happen due to negligent behavior of the responsible municipal authorities and private corporations. He underscores that the rabbinic category of fire provides a language to talk about modern environmental pollutants, such as "caustic and toxic chemicals, proven carcinogens and other sorts of harmful waste that carried by the wind, leached into groundwater or otherwise dispersed through the atmosphere" (ibid., p. 78).

The legal framework of the rabbinic jurisprudence provides a highly sophisticated account of liability for damages and injuries inflicted upon others or their belongings. Translating these classical categories to modern environmental harm requires not much creativity at all. While originally formulated within the socio-economic contexts of an

ancient agricultural society and developed during the first few centuries of the Common Era for a dispersed, non-sovereign people, this detailed legal wisdom possesses an inherent conceptual fluidity. Its systematic capacity to adapt to evolving circumstances allows contemporary theorists and legal decision-makers to extend these ancient paradigms, expanding the legal horizon of both international environmental law and Jewish courts themselves. When mapped onto ecological crises, the mishnaic categories of the *avot nezikin* shift from localized torts into macro-level instruments of environmental responsibility. For instance, the category of fire, where an actor releases an agent that is carried by natural forces to damage distant property, can be easily expanded to encompass diffuse, transboundary harms like industrial air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions that damage the global public sphere. Similarly, the category of the pit provides a robust precedent for strict liability regarding immobile hazards, such as toxic dumping. Landfill seepage could be addressed as a hybrid fire-pit, a harmful stationary object that leaks into surrounding ecosystems, degrading soil, rivers, and oceans, while directly endangering adjacent human communities and wildlife. By reimagining the human actor as perpetually forewarned and carrying an ongoing responsibility to safeguard their properties and to anticipate the outcome of their actions, the rabbinic tradition offers a profound legal architecture. It effectively shifts the collective responsibility to the individual who was in a position to prevent damage. Environmental damage is thus not an unfortunate external cost of progress, but an outcome of successive and cumulative individual actions that, when continued, foreseeably damage the planetary public domain and private properties on a global level.

Being “liable by the moral voice of *halakhah*” (Mayse 2019, p. 80) does not merely shift the responsibility onto the executives of multinational fossil fuel corporations. Instead, it holds everyone liable who possesses or uses a hazardous object or entity without taking the utmost care to mitigate any potential harm. Remembering Arendt, we should not consider ourselves to be all guilty, thereby justifying the continued unsustainable consumption and mobility habits. We are not only guilty. We are liable. Although this liability cannot yet be enforced before an earthly court—a legal reality that urgently demands transnational transformation—we nonetheless stand before the Creator, as well as before the vulnerable human communities and diverse lifeforms bearing, currently and in the future, the cost of our irresponsible, egoistic behaviors.

3.1.3. Responsibilities Concerning Shared Living

To address the deep, systemic, postcolonial inequalities that are reflected in the climate crisis—wherein vulnerable global populations disproportionately bear the direct consequences of environmental degradation—the Mishnah Bava Batra offers another legal framework. Rather than viewing property ownership as an absolute right, Bava Batra conceptualizes space through interconnected obligations, establishing legal parameters for shared living that emphasize a mutual duty of protecting neighbors within a single building or shared courtyard, fellow residents within a city, as well as neighboring farmers to one’s own field or enterprise. It mandates, for instance, that a person might not install an oven inside a shared building in the lower story unless there is enough space above it (at least four cubits), or concurrently, one might not install an oven in the upper story unless one plasters the floor thick enough beneath it (at least three handbreadths, around 25 cm) to avoid any damage (Mishnah Bava Batra 2:2). Moving from domestic spaces to broader urban planning, it states that animal carcasses, graves, and tanneries need to be distanced at least fifty cubits from the city (*ibid.*, 2:9), preventing discomfort resulting from malodor or other forms of pollution. Moreover, flax may not be steeped in proximity to vegetables since the resulting water runoff would ruin the neighboring yield (*ibid.*, 2:10).

Upon these paradigms of mutual responsibility, the Talmud expands by analyzing examples of mutual responsibility in shared spaces. It tells the story of a scenario in which two residents share a single building, with one living in the upper story and the other in the lower one. When the lower story begins to collapse, the owner proposes to the neighbor upstairs that they demolish the whole building and rebuild it together. The upper-story resident declines, claiming to live comfortably as it is and asserting to have no obligation to rebuild the other's residence. The owner of the lower story then offers to dismantle and rebuild the structure independently. However, the upper-story neighbor objects, arguing that the renovation would temporarily displace them from their home. When the lower-story owner offers to pay for alternative accommodations during construction, the upper-story resident refuses, since they do not want to bother with moving. When the neighbor downstairs maintains that living in a collapsing apartment is impossible, the neighbor upstairs replies that it is not their problem, suggesting the neighbor crawl in and out of the apartment on their stomach. Evaluating this standoff, Rav Hama (4th century) rules that the owner of the upper story can prevent his downstairs neighbor from rebuilding. However, this ruling is immediately limited, clarifying that it applies only when the beams supporting the second story remain at least ten handbreadths (around 90 cm) above the ground—barely enough space to sit modestly when not being tall. But if the structural decay causes the beams to sink below ten handbreadths, the owner of the lower story can declare that their domestic domain is below ten handbreadths, rendering them no longer bound to support the upper-story's residence and do what is necessary. Moreover, the upper-story resident can prevent the reconstruction only if no prior stipulation was made between them, agreeing to rebuild the house together should it sink. If the parties have originally stipulated that they would jointly rebuild, they are legally bound to dismantle and rebuild the house together (TB Bava Batra 7a).

If this Talmudic paradigm were applied to the postcolonial North–South divide, the collapsing building could serve as a stark allegory for our shared global ecosystem. Western industrialized societies, occupying the historically affluent and comfortable “upper-story” of global capitalism, have long benefited from the economic foundations laid by the Global South, while remaining insulated from the immediate hazards of environmental degradation. However, as climate change causes the “lower-story” to collapse through rising sea levels, desertification, and extreme weather, the Global South can no longer inhabit its domain. The Global North cannot callously dismiss this existential crisis as an isolated problem or expect vulnerable populations to simply endure the unlivable conditions of their compromised environments. Once the ecological ceiling sinks so low that basic human livability is destroyed, absolute property sovereignty must yield to systemic justice. Just as the Talmud obligates the upper-story resident to dismantle their comfort and rebuild the structure that is foundational for its own living standards, wealthy industrialized nations bear a strict trans-historical liability to prevent the collapsing of living spaces in the Global South, and fund adaptation and reconstruction as far as possible. By refusing to let the privileged insulate themselves from the plight of a neighbor whose domain has become unlivable, Bava Batra anticipates an ethics of proximity. If we share a living, we are responsible for each other. The neighbor is there as much as we are. When we witness their suffering, at least when it is becoming unbearable, we have to share the burden, making the life of the other more comfortable, even if it diminishes our own comfort.

Thinking about climate (and other) refugees, who are forced to leave their homes due to floods, draughts, and other unbearable circumstances, and witnessing the militarization of borders since decades, anticipating their rise in number, collective responsibility applies not merely to an abstract environmental crisis that seems to be far away, but concrete faces,

the other human being in their complex personhood, with all their aspirations, needs, and sufferings. To fully comprehend the depth of the moral obligation towards the other, we turn to the philosophical and theological horizons of Emmanuel Levinas and Rabbi Jonathan Sacks.

3.2. Emmanuel Levinas and Rabbi Jonathan Sacks on Responsibility

Rabbi Sacks often notes that the Hebrew word for responsibility—*ahrayiut*—derives from the word for ‘an other’—*aher* (e.g., Sacks 2005, pp. 144, 220). He stresses that “the ethical is never private,” that “responsibility is not something that comes from within but is always a response to something outside us” (ibid., 220). Referring to Levinas, who anchored ethics as first philosophy in the fundamental face-to-face encounter, Rabbi Sacks explores the meaning of the two cherubim. Quite paradoxically for a monotheistic religion that strictly forbids idol worship, these figures were installed on the cover of the Ark of the Covenant within the Holy of Holies, where the tablets and other witnesses of Divine revelation, guidance, and sustenance during the desert wanderings were kept. Importantly, they were facing one another. Between these two cherubim above the ark of the covenant, God spoke to Moses. Sacks emphasizes that “this symbol was so significant that it was deemed by God himself to be sufficient to outweigh the risk of misunderstanding. *God speaks where two persons turn their face to one another* in love, embrace, generosity, and care [...]. God lives in *the between* that joins self to self through an act of covenantal kindness (ibid., p. 54).” For Levinas, the face signifies the primacy and alterity of the other. The other—as another human being in their full existence as a subject—already existed in this world and in ‘my’ proximity before the encounter, before ‘my’ world is shattered by ‘my’ attempt to relate to everything outside of ‘me’ as an object of ‘my’ cognition, comprehension, identifying classification, or thematization. The face resists being turned into a mere object. Instead, it enforces a relation, the beginning of a conversation with one who is other than ‘me.’ In his words: “The metaphysical other is other with an alterity that is not formal, is not the simple reverse of identity, and is not formed out of resistance to the same, but is prior to every initiative, to all imperialism of the same [...]. The relation between the same and the other, metaphysics, is primordially enacted as conversation, where the same, gathered up in its ipseity as an “I,” as a particular existent unique and autochthonous, leaves itself. A relation whose terms do not form a totality can hence be produced within the general economy of being only as proceeding from the I to the other, as a *face to face*, as delineating a distance in depth—that of conversation, of goodness, of Desire—irreducible to the distance the synthetic activity of the understanding establishes between the diverse terms, other with respect to one another, that lend themselves to its synoptic operation (Levinas 1969, pp. 38–39).”

According to an old African friend called Master Pi—speaking of his experience of being treated as an object rather than a subject—the synthetic activity of understanding that takes hold of the other is actually an “overstanding.” The mind likes to conquer and categorize everything it perceives, but the other resists being conquered by thought, to be reduced to the same. The relation that bridges the breach of the totality of thought overstanding everything exterior to oneself—without collapsing the void between the “I” and the other—is conversation, thought as speaking, attending to the other, welcoming, offering an ethical response to their call. For Levinas this is “desire engendering Desire—as goodness and as beyond happiness; [...] production of being as being for the other (ibid., p. 304).” Levinas calls this relation the idea of infinity, because in the ethical movement of consciousness, incited by the face of the Other, this Desire is created as “unassimilable surplus,” as a “beyond.” Responsibility “empties the Ego of its imperialism and egoism,” while confirming “the uniqueness of the Ego (Levinas 2006, p. 33).” The same and the

other are not again collapsed into a totality, a universal order. Aligning with Rabbi Sacks' interpretation of this interpersonal space as the locus of Divine speech, Levinas "call[s] 'religion' the bond that is established between the same and the other without constituting a totality (Levinas 1969, p. 40)." Moreover, the revelation of the face of the other in their direct and full existence as a human subject—a person bearing the countenance of being created in the image, in the likeness of God, endowed with free will and the capacity to create, even though (unlike the Creator) just in the form of shaping matter—does not ask for kindness. The epiphany of the face, representing the other whom I cannot kill, imposes an authority upon the "I" that calls its very selfhood into question, producing a critical attitude. It does not challenge moral freedom itself but spontaneity as the exercise of "reconciling my freedom with the freedom of others." Engendered by the "consciousness of my immorality," the discovery of shame that "I am not innocent spontaneity but usurper and murderer," it calls "the central place the I occupies in the world" into question (ibid., pp. 80–84). Levinas emphasizes that "[t]he will is under the judgment of God when its fear of death is inverted into fear of committing murder (ibid., p. 244)." Following Hermann Cohen, Levinas proposes that the idea of judgment of God is a boundary concept, a limit idea, towards which a moral person strives in their "viril judgment of history, the viril judgement of 'pure reason' (ibid., p. 243)," but he transcends Cohen. Because God sees the invisible, the judgement of God reaches beyond the judgment of history, of all that is visible, graspable. Since the subject is prior to knowledge, it resists or precedes judgment. For Levinas, the judgment of God is thus "produced as judgement itself when it looks at me and accuses me in the face of the Other—whose very epiphany is brought about by this offense suffered, by this status of being stranger, widow, and orphan (ibid., p. 244)." From this it follows that "[j]udgment is pronounced upon me in the measure that it summons me to respond. [...] *The infinity of responsibility denotes not its actual immensity, but a responsibility increasing in the measure that it is assumed; duties become greater in the measure that they are accomplished* (ibid.)." From this responsibility "the ego returned to self, responsible for Others, hostage to everyone, that is, substituted for everyone by its very non-interchangeability, hostage of all the others who, precisely *others*, do not belong to the same genus as the ego because I am responsible for them without concerning myself about their responsibility for me because I am, in the last analysis and from the start, even responsible for that, the ego, I; I am man holding up the universe 'full of things' (Levinas 2006, p. 57)." Levinas saves this humanism by purging the Ego of that subjectivity, the "me" that remains in its very uniqueness exactly because it responds to responsibility as a hostage of all the others "without reposing in their responsibility to me which would allow them to substitute themselves for me (ibid., p. 68)." He emphasizes that in this exposedness to the other, "being consumed for the other," there is no room or rest for the self-sheltered I in its ego-concept. Instead, "proximity is never close enough; as responsible, I am never finished with emptying myself of myself" (Levinas [1975] 1989, pp. 182, 181).

Subjectivity in Levinas' sense does not belong exclusively to oneself, nor does it exist independently. Instead, it exists fundamentally for another, initiated by the awareness of being responsible for another person, who is not merely standing in front of 'me' but "approaches me essentially insofar as I feel myself—insofar as I am—responsible for him (Levinas 1985, p. 96)." He stresses that responsibility is strictly asymmetrical and non-transferable: the responsibility of the other "*is incumbent on me*. It is responsibility that goes beyond what I do. Usually, one is responsible for what one does oneself. I say [...] that responsibility is initially *a for the Other*. This means that I am responsible for his very responsibility (ibid.)." The diachrony of the "being beyond or otherwise than Being"—the idea of the infinite, or the idea of God that Plato called the Good beyond being—is an u-topia in the literal sense of being without place, being outside the absolute, in the gap

where the subject resists ontologization (Levinas 1992, pp. 55–58). This gap, the irreducible distance between the “I” and the Other, the difference between being and non-being, constitutes this u-topia: the bond he calls religion, a knot of infinite responsibility for the Other, the non-site of an ethical entanglement wherein the subject paradoxically finds their place (ibid., pp. 37–38). This entanglement of the “I” with the other precedes both consciousness and freedom. In this infinite responsibility for the Other, the subject is persecuted, taken hostage, accused and made responsible for everything that the other suffers. Only through the other can the “I” be in ‘myself’. The singularity of the “I,” stripped of its ipseity, must bear the blame of the other (ibid., p. 248). As he writes: “This incommensurability with regard to consciousness, emerging as a trace from *I know not where*, is neither the inoffensive relation of knowledge where everything is equivalent nor the indifference of spatial contiguity. It is the summoning of myself to the other (*autrui*), it is a responsibility toward those whom we even do not know (Levinas [1968] 1996, p. 81).” This radical inversion of identity, Levinas calls substitution. He explains: “Responsibility for the other does not wait for the freedom of commitment for the other. Without ever having done anything, I have always been under accusation: I am persecuted. Responsibility is not a return to self but an irremovable and implacable crispation, which the limits of identity cannot contain (ibid., p. 89).” Responsibility precedes freedom (ibid., p. 94). However, the presence of numerous others complicates this ethical relation. Levinas argues that with the appearance of another face, the third party, one must already compare and judge with whom to speak first and to whom to respond. This calculation marks the entry into the realm of politics, rather than ethics. Levinas calls this way “in which I respond to the face that I am not alone in the world with the other,” justice. In contrast to justice, the face constitutes the primary element of ethics. As such, the face is “the foundation of justice,” and engenders—similar to Hermann Cohen’s thought—a continuous striving, “because within justice, we seek a better justice” (Levinas et al. 1988, pp. 174, 175).

Applying Levinas’ radical and infinite responsibility we owe to the other to the climate crisis shifts our perspective from legal accountability for environmental damage to an absolute, inescapable ethical obligation. Thinking about climate refugees, each of them embodies the ultimate Levinasian face: the vulnerability, the suffering of a stranger whose displacement by rising sea levels or droughts accuses us in our privileged world, holding us hostage to attend to their needs regardless of our individual culpability. We are deeply entangled. Not only are our daily lives structurally tied to the unequal processes of exploitation, production, and consumption through which we experience the givenness of our comfortable living as second nature long before our consciousness has matured to reduce its objects to identifying sameness. The bliss of our habitual actions has in its multitude direct consequences for those in vulnerable circumstances due to the unequal relation of power and abuse. As Zoloth notes, the scarcity of precious resources such as water will be the main challenge of the climate crisis. Acknowledging exile as a common human condition, she considers hospitality to be the “first and last moral gesture of our time” (Zoloth 2023, p. 90). She stresses that “the *ethical act*—the recognition that the stranger is thirsty, lost, needing home, in exile—the recognition at the heart of the moral universe—is only made possible when the *political act*, the opening and defense of the well, the sharing of public resources, is possible” (ibid., p. 117). Consequently, she argues that “the issue of climate change needs to be understood as a problem of justice which will require the sharing of resources among a plurality of people, some near, others unseen, others yet unborn” (ibid., p. 119). To confront these challenges, social structures must be created to respond on a global scale.

Furthermore, there is a growing interest in applying Levinas’ ethics to non-human others, such as animals and inanimate natural entities. In a deconstructive reading of

Levinas, Davy questions whether the abstract concept of the face applies exclusively to human beings, criticizing the hierarchical categorization of variant lifeforms, which views plants as entirely lacking self-awareness and animals as lacking a sense of the Other (Davy 2007, p. 43). She argues that “we are obligated to apply non-reducing themes to nonhuman others,” stressing that projecting human prejudices onto non-human others conceptually masks their capacities “to interrupt our all too human discourse on the nature of things” (ibid., pp. 55–56). Asking “[w]ho is the Other in the age of the Anthropocene?,” Antadze argues that the ethical face-to-face-encounter with the Other “makes the Self realize that the Self shares the world with the Other.” According to her, the problem in climate change discourse is that the face of the Other is often hidden, its suffering not witnessed, and its existence unknown, applying the concept of the Unknown Other to Levinasian ethics (Antadze 2019, p. 43). Crucially, she maintains that the incomprehensibility of the Other drives infinite responsibility, thereby aligning absolute alterity with this Unknown Other, concluding that “Levinasian asymmetrical responsibility clearly connects with the climate justice discourse because the responsibility for the Other arises not because of the Other’s power but because of his or her vulnerability and suffering” (ibid., p. 44).

When asked whether animals have faces in an ethical sense, Levinas answered that “ethics extends to all living beings,” but he nevertheless insisted on a fundamental difference between humans and animals. Unlike animals, who exist for themselves in “a struggle for life without ethics,” human beings introduced a radically new orientation into the world: being for the other: that “there is something more important than my life, and that is the life of the other” (Levinas et al. 1988, p. 172). As Herzog (2020) moreover notes, Levinas maintains a highly critical view of nature as such. She writes: “If nature consists of everything that is and wants to be, ethics is about the meaning of something else, which ‘is not,’ and disturbs nature” (Herzog 2020, p. 80). Encounters with absolute alterity and transcendence occur entirely beyond nature, on another level of existence from where thought and freedom descend, revelatory, onto the earthly realm of being. According to her, Levinas fervently rejects the notion that nature possesses any active interest. Being blind to otherness, nature can neither be awakened by transcendence nor redeemed. Rooted in the ever-renewed identity of sameness, nature operates as “a Darwinian struggle that endlessly destroys for the sake of its own survival” (ibid., pp. 84, 81). She underscores that the Other is conceptualized “exterior to all definitions”, suggesting that the pivotal question is not whether we can recognize non-human entities as Other, but whether nature and other creatures can function as ethical subjects, capable of facing the Other (ibid., p. 88). Nonetheless, nature or being can be interrupted at any moment by ethics through acts of mercy, charity—or hospitality—carving out “an *otherwise than nature in nature*” (ibid., p. 94).

While Levinas frames the encounter with the face of the Other as an inescapable epiphany that shatters the ego and calls us to infinite responsibility, Rabbi Sacks grounds responsibility in a covenantal partnership, where responding to the call of the Other becomes the very birthplace of human freedom and hope. At the heart of Rabbi Sacks’ theological vision lies the radical premise of God’s transcendence and the belief “in the reality of otherness,” that God is neither humankind, nor humankind God (Sacks 2009b, p. 82). For Sacks, God is the absolute Other who “creates otherness in love,” serving as “the voice of the other within the self” to remind us that “neither we, nor our desires, nor the group to which we belong, are the measure of all things. There is a higher court than the bar of human reason” (ibid.). Moreover, by discovering the other, we discover ourselves. As Sacks observes through the narrative of the creation of the woman out of Adam’s flesh (Genesis 2.23), Adam pronounces her identity (*ishah*, woman) before he can pronounce his own (*ish*, man). This sequence reveals a profound truth: “*I have to acknowledge the other, before I can truly understand myself.* Not only can I not live alone, I cannot think, know, understand

alone” (Sacks 2009b, pp. 186–87). Similar to Levinas, he anchors the development of the self in a relational response to the Other. In this relation to the Divine Absolute Other and the other human being, Judaism emerges as an “*ethics of responsibility*, the idea that God invites us to become, in the rabbinic phrase, his ‘partners in creation’. The God who created the world in love calls us to create in love. The God who gave us the gift of freedom asks us to use it to honour and enhance the freedom of others. God, the ultimate Other, asks us to reach out to the human other” (Sacks 2005, p. 3). Moreover, for Sacks, Judaism is “God’s perennial question-mark against the conditions of the world” (ibid., p. 26). Rejecting the logic of theodicy that witnessing all injustice in the world, God is either not all good or not all powerful, Sacks underscores that God exists and so does justice but as “*divine justice*—justice from the perspective of one who knows all, sees all, and considers all: the universe as a whole, and time as a whole, which is to say, eternity” (ibid., p. 22). The human being instead is bound to space and time and cannot take this vantage point and if we could do so, Sacks stresses, we would be worse human beings, justifying the injustice in this world. As such, human beings “God has empowered us to seek the justice that is human—not justice from the point of view of the universe and eternity but from the point of view of the fallible, frail, ephemeral, vulnerable beings that we are [...]. *God in making Humanity conferred on us the right and duty to see things from a human point of view* [...]. Making us human, not divine, God calls on us to judge and act within the terms of our humanity. ‘The Torah was not given to ministering angels,’ said the sages. It was given to human beings, and the justice it asks us to fight for is human justice” (ibid., p. 26). This biblical faith, he emphasizes, “demands courage” (ibid., p. 28). We are called to take the courage to change the world, to be responsible for the injustice we are witnessing, and to respond to it with all our might.

As such, Judaism rejects the deterministic despair of Greek tragedy, where human beings are controlled by a fate they can never escape. Judaism, instead, is the religion of freedom and hope, in Sacks’ words “*the voice of hope in the conversation of humankind* [...] *the principled defeat of tragedy in the name of hope*” (Sacks 2009b, pp. 246–47). Crucially, Sacks distinguishes this moral hope from passive optimism. It is hope that “empowers us to take risks, to offer commitment, to give love, to bring new life into the world, to comfort the afflicted, to lift the fallen, to begin great undertakings, to live by our ideals” (Sacks 1997, p. 267). The first step towards this “politics of hope” is the radical internalization of accountability: to locate “responsibility within ourselves” and to acknowledge that “[w]e can change our lives, and we are not alone. We have before us the accumulated wisdom of the ages, we have friends, and there are communities that we can join” (ibid., p. 239). Because morality places social change “at a level at which we, as individuals, can make a difference—in the acts we do and the relationships we create,” it is “the antidote to despair (ibid., p. 265).”

This localized, personal agency finds its structural expression in what Sacks terms “covenantal politics,” which he defines as “a *politics of responsibility*. It is created by an act of commitment. The people undertake to abide by a moral code, pursue a moral vision and create a society built on justice, compassion, and respect for human dignity” (Sacks 2007, p. 123). This politics of responsibility emerged when the concept of God’s transcendence revealed that all social systems are temporary and historically constructed. What God demands from us is not blind obedience but to write history until a just society is realized. Sacks highlights: “The only thing that satisfies the prophetic imagination is a society of free individuals, each respecting the non-negotiable dignity of others, who come together in freedom to pledge themselves to work together to build a gracious, just, and compassionate world. That is our task. God does not do it for us [...]. Instead, the Creator calls on us to create. The Shaper of history summons us to shape history”

(ibid., p. 125). The form of collective organization to realize this mission is the covenantal society. He explains: “Covenantal societies are argumentative societies. What they share, though, is their emphasis on responsibility, personal, mutual, reciprocal, and collective [...]. It is this combination of personal and collective responsibility that gives covenantal societies their energy. They enlist their citizens. They generate ideals. They see us all as co-builders of the social order. That is the egalitarian thrust of the biblical phrase ‘a kingdom of priests’ [...]. A kingdom of priests is one in which all share the burden; all are guardians of the collective conscience. Covenant democratizes responsibility. It creates active citizens. It is a politics of empowerment. It sees society as the home we build together” (ibid., p. 125). Instead of outsourcing responsibility to governments, international institutions, and transnational corporations, it places the responsibility to change this world for the better in every hand of every human being, calling them to organize and build communities. This covenantal politics “is about ‘We, the people,’ bound by a sense of shared belonging and collective responsibility; about strong local communities, active citizens, and the devolution of responsibility. It is about reminding those have more than they need of their responsibilities toward those who have less than they need. It is about ensuring that everyone has a fair chance to make the most of their capacities and their lives” (Sacks 2020, p. 322).

Remembering Hulme’s warning of climate reductionism, Sacks’ emphasis on hope and covenantal politics of responsibility empowers human beings as agents of our fate. Global warming, the destruction of the biosphere, etc., are not an inevitable tragedy or an uncontrollable fate. The discourse on the Anthropocene emphasizes that collective human actions did have a massive impact on the planetary ecosystem. We need to realize that this is a direct product of man-made systems of production and consumption. To change these, we need to realize that it falls within the human domain to correct them. It is simply our responsibility. There is no external force we can wait for to solve our problem. We cannot wait for God. God is waiting for us.

3.3. *The Co-Responsibility of Human Beings and Nature*

For Deep Ecology, the relationship that humans foster with nature must be extended to every living being by acknowledging their inherent rights as part of creation. Yet, this responsibility remains one-sided and does not evoke a reciprocal responsibility from nature towards humanity. As Troster states, “The whole of the biosphere has become ‘a human trust’ and therefore has a moral claim on us, not only for our utilitarian needs but also for its own inherent value. It is necessary to thus expand our ethical circle beyond the human good to the ‘good of things extra-human’ and include in the human good the imperative to care for them” (Troster 2007, pp. 342–43). However, within Judaism, there does exist a concept of a shared, reciprocal responsibility between humans and the natural world.

In defending Judaism against White’s accusations, Kay demonstrates that the Biblical attitude towards nature is by no means one that allows for domination, coercion, and abuse. She argues that within the Hebrew Bible, plants and animals share with human beings the feature of being animated by God’s breath or spirit (*ruah*), possessing a “living soul” (*nefesh hayiah*). Consequently, she contends that “[t]he biblical concept of nature is strongly anthropomorphic” (Kay [1988] 2001, p. 89) and maintains that nature participates in the covenantal relationship with God. Following the flood, God explicitly establishes His covenant not to “curse the earth anymore” for human misdeeds (Gen. 8:21) with “every living creature,” all the animals and “every living thing of the earth” (Gen.9:10). Furthermore, the heavens and the earth are summoned to act as witnesses against the children of Israel, whether they adhere to the commandments or follow their “crooked ways” (Deut. 30:19, 32:1). But, as Rav Soloveitchik stresses, a new relationship between

humans and animals was established after the Flood: humans were permitted to consume meat, and animals were driven to fear humans who “became bloodthirsty and flesh-hungry” (Soloveitchik 2005, p. 34). Yet, the Torah does not seem to be happy with it, “[b]ecause blood is the very essence of life and as such it must be consecrated as a sacrificial offering to God.” As long as the Israelites wandered in the desert, “whoever kill[ed] an animal for non-sacramental purposes [was] guilty of bloodshed, of murder” (ibid., p. 39; Lev. 17:3–4). By applying the term and prohibition of *shefikhut damim* (shedding blood) equally to the slaughter of humans and animals, the biblical narrative conveys a latent commitment to vegetarianism.

Furthermore, the Hebrew Bible outlines a unique, interdependent relationship between human beings and nature. By invoking the natural world as a witness to Israel’s adherence to divine law, Scripture establishes a co-responsibility that highlights their mutual dependence. As Kay notes, choosing life over death, or blessing over the curse (Deut. 30:19), requires keeping the commandments. This choice fosters a relationship wherein humans’ sustainability, having a shelter and enough food, directly depends on fulfilling the obligations that ensure that rain will fall and moisten the earth. She writes: “For a people absolutely and precariously dependent on crops and livestock for survival, choosing a course of behavior believed to incur lion attacks and desertification would indeed be to choose death” (Kay [1988] 2001, p. 100). This principle is formulated in the second part of the *Shema Israel* (Listen, Israel!), the most important daily Jewish prayer: a life-sustaining environment, characterized by rainfall at the right time that enables agricultural products to grow, sustains livestock, and consequently satisfies hunger, is the direct reward for living according to the law. Conversely, choosing death by engaging in idolatry ensures that HaShem will close up “the heavens that there shall not be rain, and the land shall not give forth its produce, that you will perish quickly from upon the good land” (Deut. 11:14–17). Kay stresses that the biblical moral landscape, with its concept of collective divine punishment for transgressions of a few, imposes an immense responsibility upon each individual to adhere to the law’s religious and interpersonal demands. She concludes that “[t]he belief that all human offenses potentially imperil nature is the Bible’s strongest statement about human dominion over the environment” (Kay [1988] 2001, p. 97).

Rav Soloveitchik examines this profound relationship between humans and the earth, noting that an intimate relationship between both is established already in the second chapter of Genesis, where God caused rainfall and creation to flourish only after Adam was created (Gen. 2:5). He concludes that “earth serves man, as long as there was no man, vegetative life did not emerge” (Soloveitchik 2005, p. 53). On the other hand, Adam is tasked to both serve and subdue the earth (Gen. 1:28). He emphasizes that before the fall, a state of harmony existed, a state of cooperation and accord, and of mutual responsiveness between both. After the primordial sin, “that harmony was transformed into tension, concord into conflict, and coexistence into divided existences” (Soloveitchik 2005, p. 53). The nature of work shifted from harmonious partnership into a grueling struggle. The earth is cursed for Adam and Eve’s deed to bring forth thorns and thistles, and by the sweat of their brow do humans need to labor for their sustenance. After Cain’s murder of his brother Abel, his blood was screaming from the earth (Gen. 4:10). Highlighting the earth’s sensitivity to moral failure, Soloveitchik ascribes to her a metaphysical quality (Soloveitchik 2005, p. 55). Scripture notes that “the land was defiled” (Lev. 18:25) because of sexual transgressions, and consequently, the land vomited her inhabitants out. Sin, crime, and murder desecrate the earth, as it is written: “Blood pollutes the land” (Num. 35:33). Soloveitchik notes that when a community rejects divine law, nature becomes hostile, non-cooperative, resisting to subordinate herself to human rule. “With sin,” he writes, “the gap widens. Nature begins to resent the presence of man; in response, man attempts to

subjugate an insurgent and malicious nature. The struggle, once begun, ends in man's defeat [...]. Man is cast out of his environment" (Soloveitchik 2005, p. 56). He proposes a "metaphysical confluence of man and nature [a]s a postulate of Judaism," arguing that this coexistence creates a co-responsibility, where human actions—both their sins and their good deeds—profoundly affect nature, corrupting, defiling, or sanctifying her (ibid., p. 58).

From an Orthodox perspective, the earth's sensitivity to sinful behavior provides a sustained critique of the vast systemic inequalities of the global social structures. Transgressions encompass not only idolatry but also a lack of compassion in treating vulnerable populations, such as the poor, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, denying their rights. At the same time, the earth's allergy serves as a warning against idolatrous nature worship. Although speaking about Israel's adherence to Divine law, it fosters an awareness of planetary interconnectedness, illustrating that humanity, the magnitude of other lifeforms, the earth, and the spiritual realm of the heavens are fundamentally interrelated, underscoring a collective human responsibility to sustain and protect the harmony of Divine order.

4. Conclusions

This article intervenes in the discussion on climate change by emphasizing the man-made character of a global consumer society that is organized around the needs and constraints of the production, distribution, and consumption of consumer goods. In this totality of socialization, responsibility is mainly outsourced to governments and corporations that are unable to change the way the market goes due to their constraints and interests. What is left behind is an abyss of responsibility, a vacuum that paralyzes through the vastness of the challenge, and gives rise to fears, uncertainty, and hopelessness. The aim of this paper was to fill this gap with Jewish thought that would enable the human being to take upon themselves the responsibility to change their behavior individually and to work together collectively to change the way we relate to each other and nature. From the *Mishnayot of Seder Nezikin*, we can learn that we are liable for the damages we cause. This legal responsibility to be in charge of restituting damages caused to other people and their properties could be expanded to environmental damage. Ancient rabbinic voices established precedents to address unintentional, successive, and compulsory damage, providing a legal framework to be activated for modern ecological accountability. Levinas instead situates responsibility not around causal chains to determine financial restitution but directly at the encounter of a person with another. This infinite responsibility that is demanded by the face of the other takes us hostage to attend to the needs and sufferings of the other. This substitution manifests the unexchangeable duty to respond to the call to take responsibility without asking for reciprocity or reward. Responsibility is directed entirely to "me" and it is only "me" who is judged. Although not intended by Levinas, his call to attend to the needs of the other offers a horizon to extend responsibility towards non-human life. Sacks emphasizes that taking the responsibility to mend the world is the task God has delegated to us, to become His active partners in creation, and to shape history in building a just society. He envisions a politics of responsibility, which calls upon us to build strong communities. By shifting the focus from the state to local, covenantal engagement, Sacks argues that change begins when individuals reclaim their moral agency within their families, neighborhoods, faith communities, and networks. Soloveitchik enriches the accounts on collective and individual responsibility towards the other human being with the Biblical concept of co-responsibility between humans and the earth, where the harmony of Divine order between the heavens and the earth depends on the righteousness of humans.

Transforming religion in the Anthropocene would mean anchoring environmental and intergenerational justice as inherent values within its self-conception and conduct. For

Orthodox Judaism, it would require treating environmental crises as an existential threat to humanity's future. Consequently, rabbis must rule accordingly that individual and collective actions causing environmental degradation, such as pollution and desertification, are strictly forbidden as *halakhah le-ma'ase*, even if the harm is indirect or unintentional, or inflicted upon another part of the earth. Such rulings would have direct consequences for individual behavior. Although Orthodox Jews represent a tiny minority globally, the moral vision of Halakhah and Jewish philosophy possesses the potential to influence secular legislation and broader moral conduct. Cultivating a sense of moral accountability—even if solely before the Heavenly Court—alongside an infinite responsibility towards fellow humans, other creatures, nature itself, and future generations, while transforming how we organize collectively within our communities, would undoubtedly contribute to resolving the crisis. Reflecting the moral necessity in the Anthropocene, we must recognize that ecological preservation is inseparable from human justice, and initiate radical, systemic change.

Environmental ethics mainly focuses on the responsibility we owe to the plants, the animals, the biosphere, and nature that suffer from our socio-economic lifestyle. But the climate crisis manifests not only in the destruction of the biosphere and the extinction of many lifeforms. It manifests itself just as much in the suffering of other human beings. Understanding the spheres of the natural and the human as intertwined, this preliminary study focuses on the responsibility for the wellbeing of other human beings. As long as human suffering is ignored or justified, nature will not be respected either. As long as we treat the vulnerability of our fellow human beings as an acceptable price for economic growth, our relationship with the natural world will remain exploitative and predatory. As long as both human beings and nature are reduced to mere resources and means for progress and profit, human life is devalued, and the environment degraded. A true ecological awakening must begin with the recognition that we all are fundamentally and infinitely responsible for the suffering of the other. Only when we stop outsourcing our moral agency and have the courage to take personal and collective responsibility into our hands, organizing decentralized, building strong communities, and reaching out to each other in respect, can we change the course of history.

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