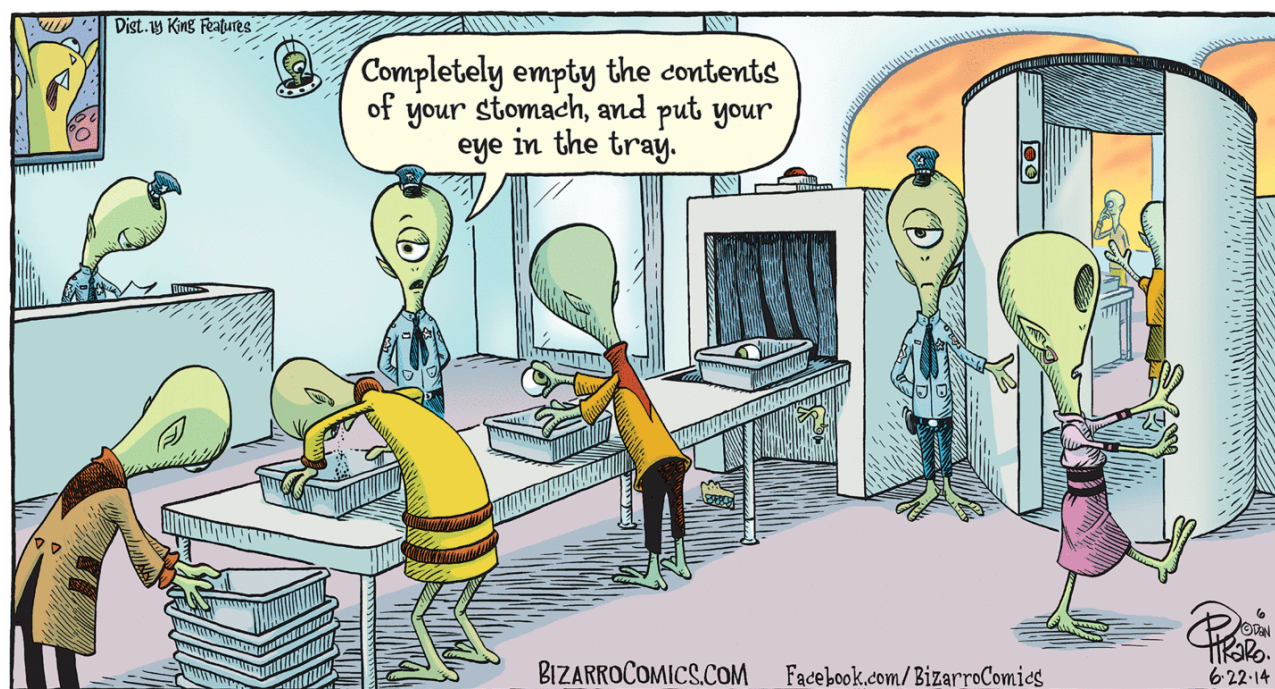


# JUDAISM'S REACTION TO EXTRATERRESTRIAL LIFE

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CONGREGATION B'NAI  
SHALOM OF BUFFALO GROVE

פרשת חיי שרה תשפ"ג

## CULTURAL BACKGROUND

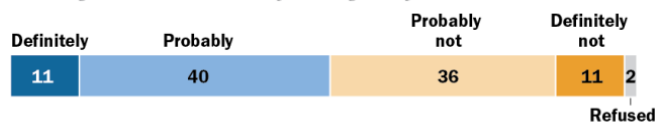
### (1) PEW RESEARCH CENTER

#### Most Americans say intelligent life exists outside Earth and don't see UFOs as a major security threat

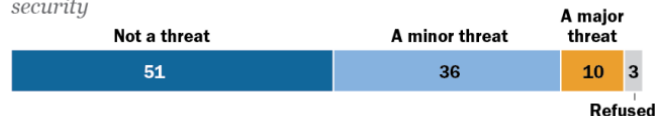
% of U.S. adults who say their best guess is that intelligent life \_\_\_\_ exist on other planets



% of U.S. adults who say that UFOs reported by people in the military are \_\_\_\_ evidence of intelligent life outside Earth



% of U.S. adults who say that UFOs are \_\_\_\_ to U.S. national security

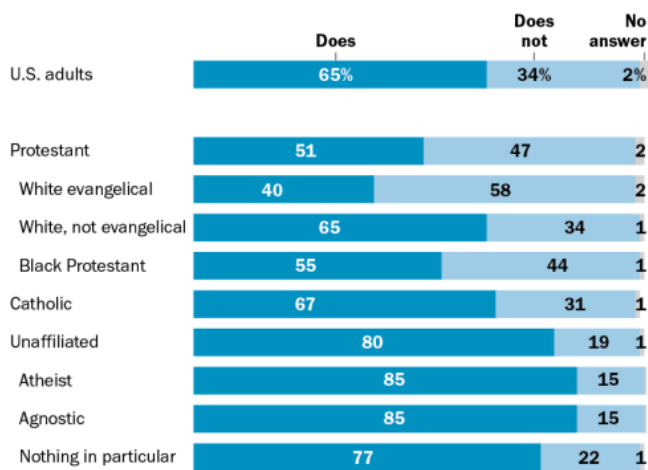


Note: Figures may not sum to 100% due to rounding.  
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 14-24, 2021.

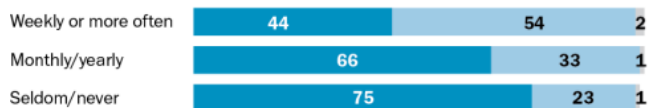
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

#### By several measures, Americans who are more religious are less likely to say there is intelligent life beyond Earth

% of U.S. adults who say their best guess is that intelligent life \_\_\_\_ exist on other planets



Attend religious services ...



Religion is ...



Pray ...



Note: Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding. White and Black adults include those who report being one race and are not Hispanic.  
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 14-24, 2021.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

## HANDLING NEW SCIENTIFIC "DISCOVERIES"

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### (2) MAIMONIDES, GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED 2:25 (12<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY EGYPT)

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We do not reject the Eternity of the Universe because certain passages in Scripture confirm the Creation; for such passages are not more numerous than those in which God is represented as a corporeal being; nor is it impossible or difficult to find for them a suitable interpretation. We might have explained them in the same manner as we did in respect to the Incorporeality of God. We should perhaps have had an easier task in showing that the Scriptural passages referred to are in harmony with the theory of the Eternity of the Universe if we accepted the latter, than we had in explaining the anthropomorphisms in the Bible when we rejected the idea that God is corporeal.

For two reasons, however, we have not done so, and have not accepted the Eternity of the Universe. First, the Incorporeality of God has been demonstrated by proof: those passages in the Bible, which in their literal sense contain statements that can be refuted by proof, must and can be interpreted otherwise. But the Eternity of the Universe has not been proved; a mere argument in favour of a certain theory is not sufficient reason for rejecting the literal meaning of a Biblical text, and explaining it figuratively, when the opposite theory can be supported by an equally good argument.

Secondly, our belief in the Incorporeality of God is not contrary to any of the fundamental principles of our religion: it is not contrary to the words of any prophet. Only ignorant people believe that it is contrary to the teaching of Scripture: but we have shown that this is not the case: on the contrary, Scripture teaches the Incorporeality of God. If we were to accept the Eternity of the Universe as taught by Aristotle, that everything in the Universe is the result of fixed laws, that Nature does not change, and that there is nothing supernatural, we should necessarily be in opposition to the foundation of our religion, we should disbelieve all miracles and signs, and certainly reject all hopes and fears derived from Scripture, unless the miracles are also explained figuratively. The Allegorists amongst the Mohammedans have done this, and have thereby arrived at absurd conclusions. If, however, we accepted the Eternity of the Universe in accordance with the second of the theories which we have expounded above (ch. xxiii.), and assumed, with Plato, that the heavens are likewise transient, we should not be in opposition to the fundamental principles of our religion; this theory would not imply the rejection of miracles, but, on the contrary, would admit them as possible. The Scriptural text might have been explained accordingly, and many expressions might have been found in the Bible and in other writings that would confirm and support this theory. But there is no necessity for this expedient, so long as the theory has not been proved. As there is no proof sufficient to convince us, this theory need not be taken into consideration, nor the other one; we take the text of the Bible literally, and say that it teaches us a truth which we cannot prove; and the miracles are evidence for the correctness of our view.

## JEWISH SPECULATIONS<sup>1</sup>

### (3) TALMUD BAVLI, AVODAH ZARAH 3B

אמר רב יהודה אמר רב שנים עשרה שעות הוי היום שלש הראשונות הקב"ה יושב ועוסק בתורה שניות יושב ודן את כל העולם כולו כיון שרואה שנתחייב עולם כלייה עומד מכסא הדין ויושב על כסא רחמים... ובליילא מאי עביד איבעית אימא מעין יממא ואיבעית אימא רוכב על כרוב קל שלו ושט בשמונה עשר אלף עולמות

Rav Yehuda says that Rav says: There are twelve hours in the day. During the first three, the Holy One, Blessed be He, sits and engages in Torah study. During the second three hours, He sits and judges the entire world. Once He sees that the world has rendered itself liable to destruction, He arises from the throne of judgment and sits on the throne of mercy, and the world is not destroyed... And during the twelve hours of the night, what does God do? If you wish, say that the night is similar to the day. And if you wish, say instead that He rides on his light cherub and flies in eighteen thousand worlds.

### (4) YEHUDA BEN BARZILLAI, COMMENTARY ON SEFER YETZIRAH (11<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY SPAIN)

We must first understand why these 18,000 worlds are not included in the first 12 hours of the day when Hashem judges and provides for our world. For this should include all of the 18,000 worlds. For even an infinite number of worlds, is not impossible for Hashem to judge and provide for all in the blink of an eye...

It is possible to give for this, two explanations. The first one is that our world is more favorable in Hashem's eyes than all the other worlds, since perhaps on these other worlds the Torah was not given, and for this reason Hashem favors our world. Which is why he judges and provides our world first (although Hashem can do everything in the blink of an eye, in order to honor our world he occupies Himself with our world first)...

It is possible that these 18,000 worlds are not inhabited with life which is capable of sin like on our world. Perhaps these creatures are angels and spirits which Hashem created for His Glory, or they are like them and are without sin due to the absence of the evil inclination. Therefore, Hashem judges our world first since it is full of sin, Hashem must forgive us before our world is destroyed because of all the sins.

<sup>1</sup> For extensive discussion of rabbinic views on this topic, see Yossi Roth, *A Study of the Rabbinic Perspective on Life and Living Beyond Earth*, found at <https://hakirah.org/vol27Roth.pdf>.

## (5) HASDAI KRESKAS, OHR HASHEM 4:2 (14<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY SPAIN)

### הדרוש השני

אם אפשר מציאות עולם אחר, או עולמים רבים יחד.

והנה יש פנים מההנאות לכל הצדדין. אם לצד החיוב, יש פנים מההנאות:

מהם, שאין שיהיה, שהנחת העולם, אם שהיתה רצונית או מחיבת, מה המונע שלא יחול הרצון או החיוב בעולם אחר, או עולמות, וזאת זה?  
מהם, כי למה שהתבאר שהנחת העולם רצונית, על צד ההטבה וההנחה; והוא מבאר, שאין שם כילות וצרות עין להיטיב, כל אשר יוסיף בעולמות יוסיף בהטבה; ולזה כבר יתכן, שיהיו בקאן עולמות רבים.

וכאשר היה זה כן, והוא, שכבר התבאר שאין בכל הטענות שזכרנו, אם לצד החיוב ואם לצד השלילה, שיתן האמת בדרוש; ומה שהתבאר מהם הוא אפשויות הרבה לבר; הנה ראוי שלא נרחיק מה שבא בדרש לקצת רז"ל. אמנם בראשון מצ"ן (ג, ב): "מלמד ששט ב"ח אלה עולמות". והכונה בו, שהשגחתו משוטטת בכל העולמות ההם. וזהו מה שזכרנו בדרוש הזה.

The second investigation: Is it possible that there is another world, or many worlds together?

Behold, there are considerations to each side. In favor, there are proofs in favor. Among them: given that the existence of the world is either Willed by Hashem or caused, what could prevent his Will or necessity in a different world or worlds?

Among them: Given that the existence of the world is Willed, by God's generosity and graciousness, and it is clear that there is no stinginess in generosity, such that adding worlds only adds generosity. Thus, it makes sense that there should be many worlds...

[Against]: Among them: The Creator of all existence is One, in the purest sense, and so it would be suitable for that which exists to be one. This is because of the accepted point that a pure One should only create a pure one. It is also because the great perfection of something which exists and is influenced is to resemble that which influences, to the extent possible.

Since it is so that there is no clear argument in favor or against, to find the truth in this investigation, what remains is the possibility of multiple worlds. Thus, it is proper to accept that which some of our sages held.

## (6) SAADIA GAON, EMUNOT V'DE'OT 1<sup>2</sup> (10<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY IRAQ)

ומצאתי המציאה הגמורה כי אין שמים בלתי אלה ולא ארץ כי אם זאת, וכי השמים האלה יש להם תכלית, והארץ הזאת יש לה תכלית

I found that there is no 'heavens' aside from these, and no 'land' aside from this one. Because these heavens and this land have a purpose...

<sup>2</sup> Some scholars dispute that this passage has bearing on the question of extraterrestrial life.

# THEOLOGICAL RAMIFICATIONS

## THE PLACE OF HUMANITY IN THE UNIVERSE

### (7) TEHILLIM 8

(4) When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars which You have established;	(ד) פִּי־אֲרָאָה שְׁמִידָה מַעֲשֵׂה אֶצְבְּעֶיךָ יָרֵחַ וְכּוֹכָבִים אֲשֶׁר כּוֹנְנָתָה:
(5) what is man, that You are mindful of him? And the son of man, that You think of him?	(ה) מָה־אֲנוֹשׁ פִּי־תִזְכְּרֶנּוּ וּבֶן־אָדָם כִּי תִפְקֹדֶנּוּ:
(6) Yet You have made him but little lower than the angels, and have crowned him with glory and honor.	(ו) וַתַּחַסְרֵהוּ מֵעֵט מַלְאָכִים וְכָבוֹד וְהָדָר תַּעֲטֶרֶהוּ:
(7) You have given him dominion over the works of Your hands.	(ז) תַּמְשִׁילֵהוּ בְּמַעֲשֵׂי יָדֶיךָ
You have put all things under His feet:	כָּל שֶׁתָּה תַּחַת־רַגְלָיו:

### (8) RABBI NORMAN LAMM, "THE RELIGIOUS IMPLICATIONS OF EXTRATERRESTRIAL LIFE," TRADITION JOURNAL 7.4, 1965

Here a consideration of celestial grandeur points to man's insignificance; yet man's central worth is salvaged, and proof is adduced from his superiority over terrestrial creatures. What we are given here is not a hesitation, an uncertainty, but a marvelous paradox. Man is both important and insignificant, central and peripheral, worthy and trivial. In the context of the vast cosmos, man shrinks almost into nothingness; in the framework of his own habitation he is supreme, worthy, terribly important. Both are true...

### (9) SAADIA GAON, EMUNOT V'DE'OT 4

אני פותח למאמר הזה הקדמה, שאומר שאף על פי שראינו הברואים רבים, אין ראוי שנהיה נבוכים במכוון מהם, רצוני לומר מי הוא. כי הנה שער טבעי יתבאר לנו בו מי הוא המכוון בכל הברואים, וכאשר נחקור בשער ההוא נמצא המכוון הוא האדם, והוא כי המנהג והבניה משימים כל דבר נכבד באמצע הדברים אשר אינם נכבדים כמוהו, ונתחיל מהקטן שבדברים ונאמר כי הגרגיר ממוצע בתוך כל העליון, והוא שהגרגיר יותר נכבד מהם, כי צמח הצמח ותכונתו ממנו, וכן מה שצומחים ממנו האילנות, אם יהיה הוא המאכל יהיה בתוך הפרי כמו השקד... וראיתי הארץ באמצע השמים והגלגלים סובבים אותה מכל צדדיה, התקיים אצלנו כי המכוון בבריאה הוא בארץ, ואח"כ הסתכלנו בכל חלקיה, וראינו העפר והמים שניהם דומם, ומצאנו הבהמות בלתי מדברים ולא נשאר כי אם האדם, והתברר לנו כי הוא הענין המכוון בלי ספק, ודרשנו הספרים ומצאנו בהם מאמר הבורא, אנכי עשיתי ארץ ואדם עליה בראתי (ישעיה מה). אבל מתחלה התורה ספר כל הברואים, וכאשר השלימם אמר עתה, נעשה אדם (בראשית א). כמי שבונה ארמון ומציעו ומתקנו ואח"כ מביא אליו בעליו.

I open with an introduction to this essay, which says that although we have seen many creatures, we should not be confused by what is intended from them, I mean to say who he is. For the gate of nature make clear to us who is the end of all creatures, and when we explore that gate the end is man, and that is that custom and construction to put everything honorable in the middle of things that are not as honorable, and we will start with the smallest thing and say that the seed is in the center within the leaves because it is more respectable than them, for the plant and its features emanate from it. Also regarding what grow from trees, if it is the food it will be in the middle like the almond...and I saw the earth in the middle of the sky and the planets revolving around it on all sides, it shows us that the end of creation is in the Earth, and then we looked at all its parts, and we saw the dust, and water which are both silent, and we found the animals which don't speak and humans remain. And it became clear to us that he is the deliberate end without a doubt, and we searched the books and found in them the statement of the Creator, "I made land and man on it I created (Isaiah 45). But first the Torah tells of all creation, and when it finishes them it says, "Let us make Man" (Bereishit 1) as one who builds a palace and furnishes it and fixes it and then brings to it its owner.

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### (10) RAMBAM, MOREH NEVUCHIM 3:13

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I consider therefore the following opinion as most correct according to the teaching of the Bible, and best in accordance with the results of philosophy; namely, that the Universe does not exist for man's sake, but that each being exists for its own sake, and not because of some other thing. Thus we believe in the Creation, and yet need not inquire what purpose is served by each species of the existing things, because we assume that G-d created all parts of the Universe by His will; some for their own sake, and some for the sake of other beings, that include their own purpose in themselves. In the same manner as it was the will of G-d that man should exist, so it was His will that the heavens with their stars should exist, that there should be angels, and each of these beings is itself the purpose of its own existence.

### (11) RABBI NORMAN LAMM, "THE RELIGIOUS IMPLICATIONS OF EXTRATERRESTRIAL LIFE," TRADITION JOURNAL 7.4, 1965

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For Maimonides - and this is certainly a viable and reasonable position for contemporary theists - man may not be the purpose of the universe, yet he may have a purpose in the universe. Every species in creation, according to Maimonides, has as its immanent purpose the will of God... The purpose of man's life, therefore, is profoundly religious and very real - and unaffected by the fact that he is not the sole telos for which all else was called into being.

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MORAL AGENCY OF ALIENS

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(12) THE LUBAVITCHER REBBE<sup>3</sup> (20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY, USA)

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Shortly after the first moon landing, the Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, of blessed memory, pointed out that there is support in Torah for the notion that life exists on other planets. Furthermore, we can know something about that life through deduction from what the Torah tells us...

Are these inhabitants intelligent? Intelligence is defined by Torah to mean the capacity to make decisions with free will. Free will is only possible where there is Torah, whereby the Creator offers His creatures more than one possibility and asks that they make the appropriate choice. (Torah includes the laws of Noah, which are given to all human beings.) In other words, just as we are created by the Creator's word, so we are provided free choice by His command to do or not do.

So, if there would be intelligent life elsewhere in the universe, those creatures would have to have Torah. Could they have a different Torah than us? This is not possible, since Torah is truth, and there cannot be two truths.

Could they then have the same Torah as us? This also seems impossible, since the Torah itself describes in detail how the Torah was revealed on this planet, and that account itself has a strong impact on how the Torah is to be fulfilled.

It therefore appears that although it is quite possible there is life on other planets, that life would not be intelligent in a way similar to human life and culture.

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(13) THE RAV, THINKING ALOUD, P. 92 (20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY, USA)

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Q: Would the discovery of alien life be an issue in terms of the Torah view?

A: It is possible that Hashem created other life form on other planets. It is no problem to Yahadus. The reason man likes to think he is the only created Being in the entire universe is because of his egotistical nature. Even the concept of Am HaNivchar may only be relative to our world, our small section of the universe. The Torah is written from the viewpoint of our sun, moon, and stars. It would not detract from our being the Am HaNivchar of this region of space if there are other Am HaNivchar in a distant Galaxy.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/3012/jewish/Is-There-Life-on-Other-Planets.htm](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/3012/jewish/Is-There-Life-on-Other-Planets.htm)

## FURTHER READING

### (14) DAVID TZVI KALMAN, "WHAT WE CAN ALL LEARN FROM HOW JEWISH LAW DEFINES PERSONHOOD IN A.I., ANIMALS, AND ALIENS"<sup>4</sup>

All religions place enormous value on human life. In Judaism, which I study, this value is rooted in the idea that human beings are created in the image of God, which means that our worth is connected to something—exactly what is a matter of intense debate—that is essential to being human. Now, there's a way of interpreting this idea where human beings are only important inasmuch as they are unique, where abilities like reasoning, self-awareness, speech, and creativity are what separate us from other organisms...

This is not a fun game to play because there is no way to win... Beyond that, there's the very real danger that shrinking the meaning of "human" will literally dehumanize people who don't fit into the new definition. If a person's work can be replicated by a machine—or even if we expect that machines will soon replicate it—that work will undoubtedly be afforded less respect; for this one need look no further than Amazon's unironically-named Mechanical Turk. It is for similarly reasons that pro-choice arguments tend to focus on affirming female bodily autonomy rather than denying fetuses their humanity: One of the few philosophers who has advocated for abortion access on the basis of the fetus' lack of cognitive capacity and self-awareness, also explicitly permits certain forms of infanticide.

Jewish thinkers never go down this path at all. For many rabbis, humans are valuable whether or not they are unique; not only could other beings share some of our "essential" human characteristics, but a few actually do. Rather than protectively shrinking from this expanded notion of humanity, rabbis have historically been very open to the idea of nonhuman sentience and have tended to see parallels between humans and nonhumans as an excuse to treat nonhumans better...

The openness to the other life has even extended to life on other planets, which has the potential to radically diminish humanity's sense of its own importance. Both Jewish and Christian thinkers have remained quite open to the possibility of extraterrestrial life, a few even arguing that a well-crafted universe ought to be a lot fuller. "Who will imagine," wrote the medieval poet Jedaiah Bedersi, "that a wise manufacturer would prepare tools worth ten thousand talents to form an iron needle?" While a few modern rabbis—most notably the Lubavitcher Rebbe—have balked at the idea that aliens might have free will or agency, others have fully embraced the idea...

What brings them together is the belief that human value is axiomatic, and that it is precisely because of the unassailability of our value that our instinct should be toward expanding the idea of what is human when we recognize it in others. This idea has a very important corollary: because human value is the basis for valuing these near-humans, the latter can never supersede the former in importance. In other words, this model both allows us to be generous with the idea of humanity while resolving concerns that our own status will become diminished in the process.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://slate.com/technology/2022/07/artificial-intelligence-animals-aliens-personhood-judaism.html>