

“The Only God Who Can Save Us (From Ourselves):” Kabbalah, Dogmatism, and the Open Economy of Thought

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Recently, at a lecture in Brooklyn, I was asked to clarify my views on Kabbalah, dogmatism and the problem of evil. I am happy to do so here in some detail as my views on these topics are fundamental to my thinking about God, atheism, and intellectual freedom.

I have considered the problem of evil from a Lurianic perspective in *Symbols of the Kabbalah*, in a Chapter entitled “*Kellipot* and *Sitra Achra*, The Kabbalistic Myths of Evil.” There “evil” is discussed in the context of the Lurianic symbols of *Tzimtzum*, *Shevirat ha-Kelim*, *Tikkun ha-Olam*, and the *Sitra Achra* or “Other Side,” and the integral relationship between evil, freedom and knowledge is explored. Here I will expand on certain ideas regarding the relationship between evil and dogmatism that are implicit in the Lurianic symbol of the *Kellipot*; the “husks” which, according to Luria, imprison sparks of divine light that were emanated at the dawn of creation.

According to Luria, the *Sefirot*, the values, vessels or archetypes which comprise the world, were unable to fully contain the divine light that was (and is) poured into them during the process of creation. All ten *sefirotic* vessels overflowed with divine energy, were displaced, and seven of them shattered, their broken shards falling through the metaphysical void, each shard trapping a spark of divine light. These shards, together with the light they imprison, form the *Kellipot*, the “husks” which comprise the *Sitra Achra*, the Other Side, and which penetrate deeply into world of *Assiyah*, the world of “making” or “action” within which we reside. According to Luria, it is our divinely appointed task, through spiritual and ethical action, i.e. the *mitzvot*, to extract (*birur*) the sparks from their husks and to liberate the imprisoned divine energy, so that it can be placed in the service of *Tikkun ha-Olam* (the emendation and restoration of the world). In the meantime, the divine light entrapped within the *Kellipot* lends vitality to the Other Side, thereby sustaining the forces of evil and destructiveness.

What is the significance of divine light entrapped in the husks of the Other Side? We should recall that this light was originally destined to fill vessels which represent intellectual, spiritual, ethical, emotional and aesthetic values, and for this reason we can understand the husks as symbolizing a certain imprisonment of, or rigidity in thought, faith, ethics, emotions and taste. Psychologically, the *Kellipot* lead to *dogmatism* in intellect, and *constriction* in emotion and behavior. In short, the *Kellipot* represent what in recent philosophy has come to known as a “closed economy” i.e. thought, faith, emotion, etc. one that is closed to change in response to dialog and experience. The doctrine of the *Kellipot* symbolizes that such a dogmatic, closed economy is the source and sustenance of much of the destruction generated by humankind. On the other hand,

the process of *Tikkun*, in which divine light is liberated from the *Kellipot*, produces a continual emendation of the world through an open economy of ideas, experience, action and interpretation.

The idea that a religious or spiritual perspective on the world should involve an "open economy" of thought and experience is implicit in the biblical ban against graven images, a ban against limiting the divine to any single representational form. The call to an "open economy" is beautifully expressed in two passages I will quote from the writings of the Lurianic Kabbalah; the first from a contemporary of Isaac Luria, R. Chayyim Vital, and the second from a later Lurianist, R. Moses Chayyim Luzzato:

At every hour of the day the worlds change, and each hour is not the same as the next. If you consider the movements of the constellations and the shifts in their position, how in one moment they are different, and how someone born at a certain time will experience different things than someone born slightly beforehand (you will see) the upper worlds are unlimited in number. You have to come to some kind of intellectual middle ground because a human mind cannot understand it all. With this you'll understand how the worlds change (with) the garments of Ein-sof, and, according to these changes, the statements in *Sefer haZohar* change.¹

Moshe Idel quotes R. Moses Chayyim Luzatto, a later (18th century) expositor of the Lurianic Kabbalah, on the multiplicity of Torah meanings, which are like the many nuances of flame that emerge from a hot coal:

So too is the case with the Torah that is before us, whose words and letters are like a coal...and whoever is preoccupied and busy with it enflames the coals, and from each and every letter a great flame emerges, replete with many nuances, which are the information encoded in this letter...All the letters we see in the Torah point to the twenty-two letters found on high...there are six hundred thousand interpretations to all the Torah, divided between the souls of the six hundred thousand [children of] Israel...This is the reason why though the Torah [as a whole] is infinite, even one of its letters is also infinite, but it is necessary to enflame it and then it will be enflamed, and so too the intellect of man.²

When the intellect of man is enflamed like a burning coal, the *Kellipot* are effectively unknotted, the divine sparks are freed, and the possibility of an infinity of interpretations is achieved. Idel, in his book, *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation*, suggests that the infinite plenitude of meaning which the Kabbalists attribute to the Torah text and the world at large points to an immanent God who is the source and totality of all significance whatsoever, a significance that is embodied in the infinite

¹ Sefer Etz Chayyim, p. 29a.

² R. Moses Chayyim Luzatto, *Qelah Pithei Hokhmah* (Maqor, Jerusalem, 1961). Fol. 2a. Quoted in Idel, M. *Absorbing Perfections* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 97.

interpretability of any text. Such a God, we might say, stands in opposition to all rigid, dogmatic points of view, symbolized in the *Kellipot* and the Other Side.

My own thinking here is influenced by the contemporary French philosopher Jacques Derrida's views on messianism. Derrida writes that a view of the messiah within which it is possible that the messiah can actually come, be realized and be recognized in time, is a view that paradoxically negates the concept of the messiah as an ideal, a justice, and a good that we do not have, but which we expect, hope, and wait for. A messiah that actually comes and is recognized will, of necessity, partake in the finitude, authoritarianism and closed economy of a faith that divides truth from error, and believers from infidels. Similarly, a God, who reveals his (or her) truth to a select group, who can be known in some absolute way, and the knowledge of whom is a condition for personal and world salvation, is a God who closes off possibilities of thought, faith, emotion and behavior, and who ultimately leads one into the dogmatism and rigidity of idolatry. It is an exclusive, parochial, dogmatic view of God and/or truth the produces the Crusades, Pogroms, Hitlers and Al Qaedas of this world. Unfortunately, such a dogmatic view of God is not unheard of amongst various segments of even the Jewish religion, even though Judaism (and the Jewish historical experience) should be understood as providing the light against such dogmatism. The Kabbalistic notion of *Tzimtzum*, *Ein-sof's* withdrawal and concealment from the world, assures that the divine can never be grasped or known with any certainty. For the Kabbalists, divine concealment, is one of God's essential features, as it assures that the thought, quest and debate about ultimates will continue, and will never be closed. A God who is fully revealed is no longer a God who encourages, or even permits, thought and inquiry, and, paradoxically, is in serious danger of becoming a mere idol.

The view that God must be understood in the context of an open economy of thought, follows from the mystical view of God in general, and the Kabbalistic view of God in particular. Mystics the world over have affirmed that the God they experience in states of mystical union and ecstasy is so vast, so all-inclusive as to be undefinable and subject to no attributes whatsoever. Thus "negative theology" the idea that the divine can only be understood through "negative attributes" which define what it is not, has been closely linked to various mystical traditions.

Indeed, the Kabbalists used a variety of negative epistemological terms to make reference to the hidden God; "the concealment of secrecy", "the concealed light", "that which thought cannot contain" *etc.*,³ each of which signifies that this God is somehow beyond human knowledge and comprehension. Of this God, *Sefer Yetzirah* had earlier said "restrain your mouth from speaking and your heart from thinking, and if your heart runs

³ Ibid., p. 89..

let it return to its place".⁴ According to the Kabbalist R. Azriel of Gerona (early 13th century), it is *Ein-Sof's* very infinitude that makes it incomprehensible:

Ein-Sof cannot be an object of thought, let alone of speech, even though there is an indication of it in everything, for there is nothing beyond it. Consequently, there is no letter, no name, no writing, and no word that can comprise it.⁵

While such negative theology has not always dissuaded mystics and even Kabbalists from making more positive assertions about God, it serves as a warning that such assertions are tentative, metaphorical and open to interpretation.

What I am about to say now will be disturbing to some, although properly understood, it should be obvious and indeed, liberating. It is precisely because evil has its origin in the dogmatism and the closed economy of the *Kellipot*, that (a certain understanding of) *God is the source of evil*. This is because behind every dogmatism is a vision of God or gods, one that is dogmatic, exclusive and absolute. In *Sefer ha Bahir* we read "The Blessed Holy One has an attribute that is called Evil."⁶ That attribute, which the Kabbalists associate with the *Sefirah Din* (Judgment) involves a judgment of truth, virtue, faith, etc. that is no longer subject to emendation; in Kabbalistic terms, it is a judgment that is so final, so enmeshed in the *Kellipot*, that it lies beyond the reach of *Tikkun* (*the restoration and emendation that completes both the world and God*). To the extent that one, anyone, believes that he/she has exclusive knowledge of God, or that one system of thought, faith and belief, is the exclusive avenue to the divine, he/she worships an aspect or trait of God that the *Bahir* calls evil. Indeed, the worship of an exclusive God, one that is circumscribed by a closed economy of faith and belief, is *idol worship*, the very idol worship that Abraham presumably shattered when he had a vision of the one, invisible and undefinable God.

One should, in my view, sooner adopt atheism or agnosticism as a system of belief than a religion of dogmatism. Indeed if atheism or agnosticism is an individual's route to an open economy of thought, emotion and action, than becoming such an atheist leads one far closer to the infinite, *Ein-sof*, than aligning oneself with those who proclaim the *absolute truth* of their so-called piety and faith. Unfortunately atheists can be equally dogmatic (if one doubts this one need simply recall the communist regimes of the last century). Nevertheless, there is need for a healthy dose of atheism at the heart of our conception of *Ein-sof*, and it is for this reason, I believe, that the great Kabbalist Azriel

⁴ *Sefer Yetzirah*. I. 8. As translated in Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*. Vol , 1 p 234. Padeh, *The Tree of Life*, p. 58.

⁵ As quoted in Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*. Vol. 1, p. 234.

⁶ Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, p. 149-150 (*Sefer ha-Bahir*, sec. 109). Cf. *Sefer ha-Bahir* sec 109. Book Bahir, Neugroschel trans., p. 82.

can say that *Ein-sof*, "is the principle in which everything hidden and visible meet, and as such the common root of both faith *and unbelief*" (my italics).⁷ In interpreting this aphorism, we should again not underestimate the importance of God's "hiddenness," for it is indeed such hiddenness, concealment and unfathomability that serves as a condition for free thinking. It is *only a God who* is supposedly fully *manifest and known that can become the foundation for a dogmatic system of belief*.

Why then should we not rest with atheism or agnosticism pure and simple? The reason is that in many if not most (but not all) cases atheism or agnosticism blinds one to the spiritual dimension in life, inhibits one from experiencing and expressing awe, reverence, and gratitude for one's life and world, and cuts one off from the possibility of participating in the forms of spiritual life offered by the great religions. Just as it is difficult to have an aesthetic sensibility without turning one's gaze upon objects of aesthetic experience, I believe it is difficult to have a spiritual sensibility without turning one's (inner) gaze on an object of spiritual experience, whether it be called *Ein-sof*, Brahman, the Absolute, the World Soul, or God. It is also, on my view, difficult (though again not impossible) to formulate an atheistic ground for the meaning and purpose of one's existence and one's place in the overall structure of humanity and the world, and conversely, comparatively simple to do so in a theistic context, especially one that is shared by other members of a religious community. On the other hand, if by adopting spirituality and theism one develops an arrogant belief that one is in possession of "the truth" then I would say that atheism or agnosticism is by far the better alternative.

Agnosticism, relativism, and "deconstruction" were all, to my way of thinking, advances in the development of human reason, and under certain guises have, by virtue of limiting human, and in particular religious, ethnic and national arrogance, led to increased tolerance, human rights and respect for the environment. Such ideas are also, to my way of thinking, these ideas are absolutely necessary stages in the development of a fuller "unknowing" conception of the divine. They are Kabbalistically speaking, necessary tools or stages for cracking the husks and liberating the spiritual energy that is entrapped in the dogmatic shells.

Unfortunately, however, an agnostic/relativist/postmodern mindset threatens to leave the individual, community and nation spiritually empty-handed, poised for a crisis of existential and communal meaninglessness. Whenever reason, relativism, open-mindedness, and free-thinking prevail, the dogmatist has his opening, an opening that is itself conditioned by the anxieties regarding death, responsibility and meaninglessness, that are the inevitable consequences of intellectual freedom. The dogmatist is all too ready to close the individual's and community's existential void through a promise of salvation, eternal life, as well as through the participation in a community of the like-minded closed-minded. Against this, the free-thinking relativist can offer only existential angst as an alternative to divine salvation.

⁷ Scholem. Origins of the Kabbalah, pp. 441-2.

The effort to be both an open-minded, free-thinking relativist and a spiritualist, as one sometimes finds amongst "adherents" to the liberal branches of Judaism and Christianity, has not generally proven successful. First, if one is a true free thinker it is very difficult to *adhere* to anything. Second there is something about the orthodox form of life and the thinking it engenders that manages to concentrate a form of spiritual experience in those who do adhere to it, an experience that is generally unavailable to the free-thinker.⁸

What is needed is a deep and committed spiritual outlook that is multiperspectival, respects difference, and is open to change; and a God whose very essence is to be subject to varying interpretations, transformations, and deconstructions. The very being of such a God is determined and made manifest through the full flowering and expression of thought, humanity and nature in each and all of their manifold forms; each idea, each culture, each species, each individual, fully actualized according its particular nisus, (and in all relevant cases critiqued in the marketplace of reason and experience) and contributing to and returning to the spiritual totality which is the soul of the world.

I never tire of quoting the dictum of the Chabad Chasidic Rabbi Arron ha-Levi:

...the essence of His intention is that his *coincidentia* be manifested in concrete reality, that is, that all realities and their levels be revealed in actuality, each detail in itself, and that they nevertheless be unified and joined in their value, that is, that they be revealed as separated essences, and that they nevertheless be unified and joined in their value.⁹

I believe that such a universal God, a God who is realized and completed only when the full garden of earthly species, peoples, cultures and ideas is permitted to bloom, emerges from a deep reflection on the Kabbalistic and Chasidic tradition. It is also, I believe, the God who blossoms forth not only from philosophical reflection, but from mystical experience as well; it is a God that becomes the spiritual arena within which we can address our utmost existential concerns, without turning to a closed economy of thought, feeling and faith. It is such an open, tolerant, infinitely interpretable, transforming God that, to my mind, is *the only God who can save us from ourselves*. All other so-called "Gods;" national Gods, Gods of certain religions and peoples, are in danger of becoming *idols*. This is the simple message of Abraham, but it must be repeated with great force today. The idol Gods of tribes, nations, and religions are divisive and potentially destructive, *unless* they are seen as manifestations of a single essentially unknowable

⁸ I have described this in my paper, Judaism as a Form of Life, in Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought, 23, 4, 1988, pp. 78-89.

⁹ As quoted in Rachel Elior. Chabad: The Contemplative Ascent to God, in Jewish Spirituality: From the Sixteenth Century Revival to the Present, ed. by Arthur Green (New York: Crossroads, 1987), pp. 157-205, p. 167

God, a God who is subject to interpretation, transformation and emendation; who is the province of all and who embraces all peoples, cultures, species, and ideas. It is such a God that must be liberated from the husks of the *Kellipot*, and it is just this liberation that is a fundamental task in our engaging in *Tikkun ha-Olam*.

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