

LURIANIC KABBALAH



“Let your house be a house of meeting for the sages and suffer thyself to be covered by the dust of their feet, and drink in their words with thirst.” (Pirkei Avot 1:4)

Isaac Luria (1534 CE – 1572 CE) was born in Jerusalem and raised in Egypt, and after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, he became the most prominent leader of an extraordinary circle of *Kabbalists* that gathered in the town of *Safed* in northern Israel in the sixteenth century. In fact, most of the *Kabbalah* referred to today is *Lurianic Kabbalah*, based upon the insights and teachings of this great scholar. In this last chapter we just want to tie up a few loose ends by going over some concepts of *Lurianic Kabbalah* that we may not have mentioned previously. Enjoy!

Reincarnation

We saw previously that the concept of reincarnation was introduced in the *Bahir* as an explanation for why the good suffer and the wicked prosper during this lifetime. Additionally, reincarnation seems to be related to the cyclic view of time that is found in *Ecclesiastes* where we read “*There is nothing new under the sun*” (*Ecclesiastes 1:9*). What is now has already been before. *Rabbi Isaac Luria*, however, took this doctrine to new heights. He believed, in addition, that the souls or parts of the souls of great individuals could attach themselves to the body of a living person in order to help that person complete their task.

This is similar to the “new age” belief of “walk-ins” that was popular in the nineteen eighties. Nonetheless, notice how this and all the other ideas in this section on *Lurianic Kabbalah* are logical extensions of ideas that appeared during earlier rabbinic periods if not sooner. None of this stuff appeared without prior preparation. There is nothing new under the sun.

Ain Sof

Ain, which means negation or “there is not,” is one of the more esoteric names for *God* in *Kabbalah*. It is essentially a reminder that whatever we can perceive is not the totality that we refer to as *God*. This, also, is not a new idea. The notion that *God* cannot be perceived by man goes back to the beginning of Judaism. Nevertheless, the concept of *Ain* is made more prominent in the *Zohar* and continued in the philosophy of *Isaac Luria*. *Ain Sof* literally means “there is no end,” and it is often translated as “infinity” or “infinite space.” Beyond the finite structure imposed by the *Tree of Life* are *Ain* and *Ain Sof*. Beyond what we can conceive lies that which is referred to by the word *God*.

“If that which is within the Thought cannot be comprehended, how much less the Thought itself! What is within the Thought no one can conceive, much less can one know the Ain Sof, of which no trace can be found and to which thought cannot reach by any means.”

(Zohar I:21a)

Tzimtzum

Tzimtzum means contraction or constriction. In the *Kabbalistic* theory of creation, *God* had to "contract" some of his infinite essence in order to make a space for a finite world to exist. This contraction is known as the "*tzimtzum*," and it is easy to see how this doctrine could be an outgrowth of the teachings that no one can see *God* as well as the verses we've seen earlier that speak of the concealment of *God*. It is also understood today that this concept of *tzimtzum* contains a built-in contradiction. On the one hand, if the *Infinite* did not restrict itself, then everything would be overwhelmed by *God's* totality, but on the other hand we are told that *God's* glory fills the world.

Hence, we can have a simultaneous perception of the world being imperfect and *God's* presence being everywhere. As a result, many contemporary *Kabbalists* see the *tzimtzum* as a cosmic illusion. As it says in the *Zohar*, if our mind did not make the divisions and differentiations between things that it does, then we would immediately be united once again with the *divine unity*.

*“And he said, You can not see my face; for no man shall see me and live.”
(Exodus 33:20)*

*“Rav Huna said: Whatever things you see are but parts of the ways of the Holy One, blessed be He.”
(Genesis Rabbah XII:1)*

*“He has also put a world/eternity/enigma into their heart so that man cannot comprehend what God has done from beginning to end.
(Ecclesiastes 3:11)*

“We have been taught that all this differentiation of the Divine Personality is from our side and relative to our knowledge, and that, above, all is one, all is set in one balance, unvarying and eternal, as it is written: “I the Lord do not change.” (Malachi 3:6).”
(Zohar III: 176a)

“Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.”
(Isaiah 6:3)

Shevirat HaKelim

Shevirat HaKelim means the “*shattering of the vessels,*” and this teaching is a continuation of the doctrine found in *Genesis Rabbah* that *God* created and destroyed other worlds before creating this one. In the *Zohar*, these previous worlds are referred to as the *Kings of Edom*. According to current *Kabbalistic* theory, *God* is the totality of all things, and it is the nature of abundance to want to give. The desire to give immediately created a vessel to receive. However, this vessel initially could ONLY receive, and in an instant it was filled to capacity and shattered. The universe was then reconstituted into vessels that could both give and receive.

As a consequence, our present universe now contains areas of abundance as well as lack, and only through giving can the original balance be restored. This is why charity, giving, and acts of loving kindness are so important. In fact, if it weren't for the *shattering of the vessels*, we would not be able to experience the joy that comes from giving to others.

We might say that this same *shattering of the vessels* also occurs on a personal level. For the first few years of our lives, we take in many perceptions, but the connections between things are few. It takes time to construct a proper perceptual map. However, after perhaps two or three years, a dramatic shift suddenly occurs, and our whole universe becomes reoriented around the development of a personal sense of "I". At the moment that this "I" emerges, the previous, egoless universe is shattered and a new universe emerges in which thoughts and experiences can now be connected with one another.

“R. Tanhuma began: He has made every thing beautiful in its time (Ecclesiastes 3:11). R. Tanhuma continued: The world was created when it was due, and the world was not fit to be created earlier. R. Abbahu said: Hence we learn that the Holy One, blessed be He, went on creating worlds and destroying them until He created these, heaven and earth, and then He said: ‘These please Me and those did not please Me.; R. Phinehas said: ‘The proof of R. Abbahu's statement is: AND GOD SAW EVERY THING WHICH HE HAD MADE AND, BEHOLD, IT WAS VERY GOOD.’”

(Genesis Rabbah IX:3)

“And these are the kings that reigned in the land of Edom, before there reigned any king over the people of Israel.”

(Genesis 36:31)

“He constructed kings, inscribed kings, and conjectured kings, but they could not survive, so that after a time He concealed them. This is the meaning of the verse, ‘And these are the kings that reigned in the land of Edom.’

(Genesis 36:31)”

(Zohar III:135a)

Partzufim

After the shattering of the vessels, the universe was reconstituted into five gestalts known as partzufim. This reconstruction into partzufim is like the description of our world found in Genesis Rabbah (after the destruction of the previous worlds) where the balance between mercy and justice, giving and receiving, is just right. The first partzuf is comprised of Keter and is known as Arikh Anpin, Long Face. The second partzuf is comprised of Chokmah and is known as Abba, Father. The third partzuf is derived from Binah and is known as Ima, Mother. The next partzuf is an amalgam of the next six sefirot - Chesed, Gevurah, Tiferet, Netzach, Hod, and Yesod - and is known as Zer Anpin, Small Face. Finally, Malchut forms the last partzuf and is also known as Nukva, derived from the Hebrew Nekevah for "feminine".

The *partzufim* represent a restructured universe which is now both dynamic and holographic. This new universe is highlighted by connectedness. Every piece is now a part of every other piece. As a result, communication and flow of energy can now occur safely and smoothly. Furthermore, such a flow of energy is absolutely necessary for the health of the universe. At all levels, as soon as the giving stops, deterioration begins. This is just the second law of thermodynamics. We can only preserve the balance if we take what we have been given in life and learn how to give it away to others.

Klippot and *Tikkun Olam*

The *klippot* are coverings that hide the divinity or "holy sparks" that reside within everything that exists. Again, this is reminiscent of passages we saw earlier that spoke of the concealment of God. Some see the *klippot* as dregs left over from the shattering of the vessels, and others see the *klippot* as an evil that hides goodness. Maybe so, but as with everything in *Torah*, the *klippot* have seventy facets from which they may be viewed. One viewpoint is that within each of us is a deep desire to merge back into the infinite oneness of the *Ain Sof*, and that if there were no sort of barrier placed between us and that immensity, we would cease to exist in an instant.

Ultimately, I see these coverings not as an evil but as a gift to help us safely develop as individuals. Nevertheless, all growth eventually involves dropping masks and barriers when the time is right and letting our true self shine through. The true self within something is referred to in *Kabbalah* as a *holy spark*, and the *Zohar* (*Zohar I:156a*) tells us that nothing can exist without having a spark of holiness at its core. The process of removing barriers to release these sparks is known as *tikkun*, correction or repairing. To repair the world at large through good works is *tikkun olam*, and to repair one's individual soul is *tikkun nefesh*.

In our lives we sometimes encounter people whose divinity is not so deeply hidden and we may also encounter places where the holy sparks are covered by a thinner veil. This helps us better understand the concept of holiness of people (a righteous person) and the concept of holiness of place. As a final note, we should mention that the concept of *tikkun olam* also appears in the *Talmud* (*B. Pesachim 88b*). However, in earlier times it essentially meant a course correction “for the public interest.” Nonetheless, that was enough to give a basis for the later mystical understanding of the term that eventually evolved.

The Line

In *Lurianic* thought, *God* must be concealed in order to not overwhelm the created universe. Nonetheless, we do not live by bread alone, and thus, a thin ray or line of divine light penetrates all the layers of creation in order to provide it sustenance. This seems to also reflect earlier doctrines of the hidden light from the first day of creation, and the thread of grace and light that is bestowed upon those who study *Torah*.

“Man does not live by bread only, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord does man live.”

(Deuteronomy 8:3)

“Resh Lakish says, ‘To him who is engaged in the study of the Torah by night, the Holy One extends a thread of grace by day, as it is said, “By day the Lord will command his loving kindness, and in the night his song shall be with me.”’”

(B. Avodah Zarah 3b)

“When the Holy One, blessed be He, created the world, He engraved in the midst of the mysterious, ineffable and most glorious lights, the letters Yod, He, Vau, He, which are in themselves the synthesis of all worlds both above and below. The upper was brought to completion by the influence symbolized by the letter Yod, representing the primordial supernal point which issued from the absolutely hidden and unknowable, the mysterious Limitless (Ain Sof). Out of this unknowable issued a slender thread of light which was itself concealed and invisible, but which yet contained all other lights, and which received vibrations from That which does not vibrate and reflected light from That which diffused it not. This slender light in turn gave birth to another light wherein to disport and to conceal itself; and in this light were woven and fashioned six impressions which are not known save to that slender light when it goes in to hide itself and shine through the other light.”

(Zohar II:126b)

“It is written, ‘And God said, Let there be light, and there was light’ (Genesis 1: 3). Said R. Jose, ‘That light was hidden and kept in store for the righteous in the world to come, as already stated, for it is written, “A light is sown for the righteous” (Psalm 97:11). Thus that light functioned in the world only on the first day of Creation. After that it was hidden away and no longer seen.’ Said R. Judah, ‘Had it been hidden away altogether, the world would not have been able to exist for one moment. But it was only hidden like a seed which generates others, seeds and fruits, and the world is sustained by it. There is not a day that something does not emanate from that light to sustain all things, for it is with this that the Holy One nourishes the world. Moreover, whenever the Torah is studied by night, a little thread of this hidden light steals down and plays upon them that are absorbed in their study, wherefore it is written, “The Lord commands His loving kindness in the daytime, and in the night his song is with me” (Psalm 42:9)”

(Zohar 149a)

The Five Worlds

Many *Kabbalists* speak of four worlds while some speak of five. I prefer the latter view because it fits in more easily with the five dimensions talked about in the *Sefer Yetzirah* (*Sefer Yetzirah* 1:5) and also the doctrine of the five souls that we first encountered in *Midrash Rabbah*.

“R. Simon said, ‘The soul is called by the following five names: ruah, nefesh, neshamah, hayyah, yehidah.’”
(Deuteronomy Rabbah II:37)

Thus, think of our reality as being subdivided into five worlds. As we move from undivided wholeness into the world of distinctions, we begin to divide the wholeness into a series of parts. In particular, we may distinguish five levels or worlds that descend from the spiritual to the material. These worlds are succinctly described below.

Adam Kadmon Primordial Man "*The first man extended from one end of the world to the other*" (B. *Chagigah 12a*). The level of *Adam Kadmon* is beyond what can be known. It is, nevertheless, associated with will since will and intent seem to originate from a level that is beyond thought. It is associated with the *sefirah* of *Keter*.

Atzilut World of Emanation *Atzilut* is derived from a word meaning "nearness". This world is the level of the "aha!" It is the level at which we know things that we have yet to put into words. It is associated with the *sefirah* of *Chokmah*.

Beriyah World of Creation *Beriyah* is the level at which all creativity is given a “name.” It is here that we take the “aha” of the previous level and clothe it in speech and thought. Anytime we are engaged in adding flesh to true creativity, whether it be writing a book or composing a symphony, we are at the level of *Beriyah*. Through the initial part of the creative process, the “aha” moment, we experience “*yesh m'ayin*,” something form nothing. In *Beriyah*, we add a name and structure to that creation. It is associated with the *sefirah* of *Binah*.

Yetzilah World of Formation I like to call *Yetzilah* the world of recycled thoughts and emotions. It is the level at which we further distill and perfect the inspirations born of *Atzilut* and *Beriyah*, but if we are cut off from our creativity, then *Yetzilah* becomes a level at which we just repeat the same old thoughts and emotions. This level is described as "*yesh m'yesh*," the something from something creation through which we refine our initial insight. It is associated with the next six *sefirot* from *Chesed* to *Yesod*.

Asiyah World of Doing *Asiyah* is the world of physical doing. At this level we manifest that which was created in *Atzilut* and *Beriyah* and refined in *Yetzilah*. While our bodies belong to the world of *Asiyah*, the trick is to live creatively and always be connected to the higher worlds. *Asiyah* is associated with the last *sefirah* of *Malchut*.

*“Ten sefirot of constraint. Their measure is ten, and to them there is no end. A profound depth of beginning and a profound depth of end. A profound depth of good and a profound depth of evil. A profound depth of height and a profound depth of below. A profound depth of east and a profound depth of west. A profound depth of north and a profound depth of south. And a unifying Master, God King of Faith, ruler of them all, from a holy dwelling, until forever of forever.”
(Sefer Yetzilah 1:5)*

As a final note, while these different worlds of *Adam Kadmon, Atzilut, Beriyah, Yetzirah, and Asiyah* are said to correspond to the *sefirot*, respectively, of *Keter, Chokmah, Binah, Chesed to Yesod, and Malchut*, I see one problem with this arrangement. Namely, this scheme pairs the *World of Creation, Beriyah*, with *Binah* which is really where formation and structure begin to take place, not where *something from nothing* creation begins.

Thus, I propose the following modification to tradition. For me, *Primordial Man* is really what is experienced at the interface or interaction between *Keter* and *God*. The *World of Emanation* is what is experienced at the point where *Chokmah* interacts with *Keter*. The *World of Creation*, similarly, is the interaction of *Chokmah* with *Binah*. The *World of Formation* is the interaction of *Binah* with the lower six sefirot (*Chesed*, *Gevurah*, *Tiferet*, *Netzach*, *Hod*, and *Yesod*), and lastly, the *World of Doing* is the consequence or result of the interaction of the lower six sefirot with *Malchut*.