

Summary of Part I

The first part of this essay appeared in the previous issue of this Journal (Spring 1991). Below follows an abridgement of that first section.

For Jews God is absolute Oneness. There is no "two" or "other" which can follow on this One. There is no distance between source and what flows from it. The world is not the location of God. All reality is located within the Divine.

This God can be perceived and known in two ways. One aspect of the divine Self is faceless, unknown and unchanging, beyond the world, a transcendent entity. That is the God of philosophy, the God we posit but do not know. In our time this is the God of astronomy and physics, that ever beyond us kind of God, that which has no limit and no end.

The other aspect of the Divine fills all the worlds; everything in the world is a face of God. This is an everchanging world, the God of birth, death and rebirth. This God is parent, mother and father. It is the God of the Kabbalist.

Our religious task as Jews is to realize that these two aspects of the Divine are one. The abstract God beyond all and One manifest in all forms are one and the same. Thus the centrality of *Shema Israel*.

The way we come to know God is within the world, the God of immanence. We discover our religiosity by seeing God in nature, by the wonder and awe we experience. Further, we encounter God in beauty, in human relationships, in our discovery of the human soul. And yet the deeper within we sense God, the closer we approach transcendence.

Why do I feel that I am an "I" and you are a "you"? What is illusion and what is reality? This is the essential question of religious mysticism. This question, when discussed within Judaism, takes place in the language of Creation, a theme which we have yielded to the scientists during this century. During this period, Jewish theology has had other interests such as revelation, issues of authority and the big questions raised by the Shoah. However we must return urgently to the question of Creation.

Questions of origins and meaning go together. We want to know how we got here, but also why and what is our role. We accept the evolutionary approach advanced by sections of the scientific community which has as its impulse a force that expresses purpose of meaning. This force is described as inherent; it lies within the universe. It strives towards complexity and consciousness and it isn't about the endless struggle of creatures and species against one another. This emerging new tale interests us as Jews because of its harmony. We want the new tale to retain the strengths of the ancient one. *This age cries out for a new religious language that will speak of the underlying unity of all existence, rather than the endless struggle of species against species.*

Jews and Creation are closely connected. Many of our ceremonies tie us to our ancient tale, such as the Kiddush on Friday night. With the closing of the week the Creation cycle had happened to us. We are now witness to the work and rest of the Creator. This is important to our psychic life and affirms our essential humanity. I find myself living an active, symbolic connection with a story of how God created the world in seven days.

Yet in the simple act of making Kiddush I find myself living with a kind of theological crisis. How do I affirm a story that I don't believe? Are we who refuse to abandon either modernity or religious language condemned to live our lives in constant conflict? This is the task of contemporary Jewish theology of Creation.

Now we return to the question of the one and the many. These are two sides of the same reality. One the God of statics; the other, God as change. *The evolver, the evolving, and the evolution are all one.*

Our intuition tells us that stillness precedes motion (as darkness precedes light). It could have been exactly the other way. The way we see it is a matter of the way we think. And it is on this basis that we tell stories. Something within us intuits that the soul of the universe precedes its infinite garments. Thus our tale of Creation can exist in a temporal framework.

God, World, Person: A Jewish Theology of Creation, Part II

By Arthur Green

The language we speak is that of creation, a way of speaking inherited from our most ancient ancestors. The language of creation makes the story sound as though God were "over there" and the world were "over here," God created something "other" than the divine self. For a long time there have been Jewish theologians and philosophers who didn't quite see it that way, but rather spoke the language of creation really meaning emanation. God creates out of the divine self, God as Being flows into being. Or, in terms that might have been considered too radical in earlier times, God becomes the world, God enters into the state of worldliness. The divine takes on the multi-colored garb of Eden. The world becomes the manifestation of the One. The most radical formulation of this idea of "taking on world" or God "becoming" world was the Kabbalistic transformation of a famous formula *yesh me-ayin*, or, in its Latin version, *creatio ex nihilo*. Coming originally from Greek thought, this formulation was widely accepted in the Middle Ages as the "orthodox" view of monotheistic faiths. *Yesh me-ayin*, God created the world "out of nothing". But the Kabbalists read that "nothing" as nothing having a capital "N". The Nothing out of which God created the world was God's own self. It was from the divine inner Nothingness that the world was created; it was the divine "no thing", pure existence beyond specification, that became thing, that became world.

In this theological context to ask, "Why did God create the world?" is to ask a question that is to anthropomorphic, is to ask too fully within the myth. It is what you call in Yiddish a *kasha of a mayse*, an objection to a story. Stories are supposed to exist without intellectual questions to interfere with them. The question which should really be put in our terms is, "Why is reality this way? Why does human consciousness experience itself as separate if deep with in it there lies an intimation of greater oneness? If everything is One on a deeper level, why do we experience life as fragmented and multifaceted, having so many faces instead of one great face?"

The Dialectics of Tsimtsum

To answer this series of questions, we have to get into the dialectics of what Jewish writers call *tsimtsum* and *hipashut* or the divine contraction and the divine flow. This requires a bit of explanation. In discussing creation while holding fast to oneness we cannot but speak the language of paradox. Our theological language will necessarily be paradoxical because creation would indicate separation. If the One had created something "over there", as the artist creates a painting, the "artist" would stand separate from it once the creative act was completed. We don't quite mean creation that way. Creation may be depicted as the first act of divine self-revelation, the One revealing itself through the garb of nature. But this self-revelation takes place through an act of hiding, for the One is now cloaked within the many. This two-sided process, a self-revelation of God which comes about through the hiding or cloaking of God's self, begins in the first moment of creation and is renewed in each moment of existence.

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The God of stillness begins to enter into the dance of motion. The undefined One puts on the coat of many colors. In these the One is seeking, as it were, to enter into a world of infinite variety so that its oneness might be attested to the ultimate degree, going further and further out into greater variety always testing the One. *Only in that garbing does the One sufficiently hide itself so that it might be revealed.*

Within being there is an endless drive for manifestation and a "desire" to be known in ever new and varied forms. We see this drive manifested in all life forms but it really exists beyond what we call life as well. As that force drives ever forward for growth and change, God as process, the Oneness that it bears within it is stretched further and further. Thus the Oneness is renewed in its singularity, as each new form turns out to be nothing but the One all over again. The One renews itself by stretching forth into the many, by pushing itself toward greater outward limits.

The One's Search for the Other

This drive towards self extension, ever testing its own limits is, as it were, the One's search for the other. The inherent tendency toward variety and diversity reaching toward ever more complex forms of life culminates, at least for now, or as far as we know, in the creation of humanity—the crowning achievement in our ancient tale of Creation. Only when a self-conscious human being has emerged, one who can both know the One and insist on separation, has the test of self-extension reached its goal. We humans are the divine helpmate, we are God's *Ezer Kenegdo*, both the partner and the one who stands over against. In the very otherness of our self-conscious mind we serve to confirm the existence of the One.

The fact that procreation throughout the higher forms of life, animal as well as human, requires the partnership of male and female, is, I believe, nature's representation of the search for the other, of longing for fulfillment in union/reunion that lies at the very base of all existence. As the One reaches out for its other, so does it create a world where each living being has to reach out for another in order to complete itself and continue the cycle of life into the next generation. In seeing ourselves as living in need of partnership with another in order to achieve true fulfillment, we represent in human form that search of the eternal One for the other in which it will be fulfilled. This is another way in which we, (here along with the animal kingdom,) are in God's image.

Let me say it a little bit differently. The testimony that God is One requires the presence of another who can bear witness to that oneness. But God has no other, no one to whom to be revealed. Hide and seek does not work as solitaire. There is no one to say, "There you are". The divine One seeks out another for reasons we do not fully understand. That one which is beyond division enters into the universe and into all of this fragmentation in order to find one who can respond to it, and who will thus restore all that fragmentation to wholeness.

The intensity of divine light is so great that it allows for the existence of no other. Were the light of God to be fully revealed, all sense of separate identity would pass away and we wouldn't exist as separate beings at all. But the existence of another is the purpose of this "exercise" that is

human life. And so, we are given the gift of *Tsimtsum*, the hiding of the divine light. We are allowed to exist as separate beings so that we might stand and bear witness to the One. Thus we become individual mortals who struggle and rejoice our way through a transitory life. In order to be God's other, to be the other of the eternal One, we have to be everything the One is not: transitory, corporeal, mortal. God, as it were, seeks both a partner and an opposite in us.

Two Views from the Bible

But do we really want to say that God creates the world in order to create human beings? Haven't we come beyond that stage in our history? That view is there in our tradition of course. Genesis I seems to indicate that. Human beings are created on the afternoon of the sixth day, just ready to go into Shabbat. The Midrash is even stronger on that point. God appears there as someone who creates a wedding feast and sets the table, makes the meal and brings the musicians. Only then does he invite the guests. So God created the whole world and then invited Adam and Eve as though the whole world were made for them. That is one view in our tradition. But is not the only one. Let us look at another account of creation in the Bible, that of the 104th psalm or *Borch Nafshi*, the one we say on *Rosh Hodesh*. This Psalm is a beautiful hymn of God and creation, God the creator of light, the creator of the animal kingdom, and there, right as part of it, "man goes out to his work from day until night;" just like the lions come out of their caves, so man goes out to work. "How great are your works, O Lord", the animal, the human, the birds in the trees, all together all part of the same one. Look at the 148th psalm, where the chorus of "young men and old men and boys and girls" joins together with "clouds and wind and fire and rain", all of them praising God. Here is no radical separation, no sense that all of this is made for human beings. We are all part of a vast universe that praises God.

We Jews have too long neglected the "world" part of this triad. That is one of the great tragedies of Jewish history. We lost that sense of "world" as testament to God. We became the first urbanized people. We were a people who needed to take our civilization, once we were no longer land-rooted, and make it portable.

We know this is so much better in our day when we look at the increased size of the universe. Our ancestors were talking about a world that would be today 5700 years old, of a single world with a *rakia*—plate up on top and a divine ocean on the other side, where God lives in a celestial

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palace. Now we are talking about a universe measured in numbers and terms that we don't begin to comprehend. A very different universe, to be sure, but there is some sense of that vastness already in our traditions. I commend you to the final chapters of the book of Job, one of the magnificent religious documents of all time. Job's God never proves that Job is wrong, that there is divine justice in the world. "Just look at the vastness of the world," he says. "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" And then He goes on to the constellations, the great beasts and all rest. All of these are beyond your comprehension. And before all that wonder Job says, "I regret in dust and ashes," not because there is divine justice but because the world is so magnificent and we are so small a part of it.

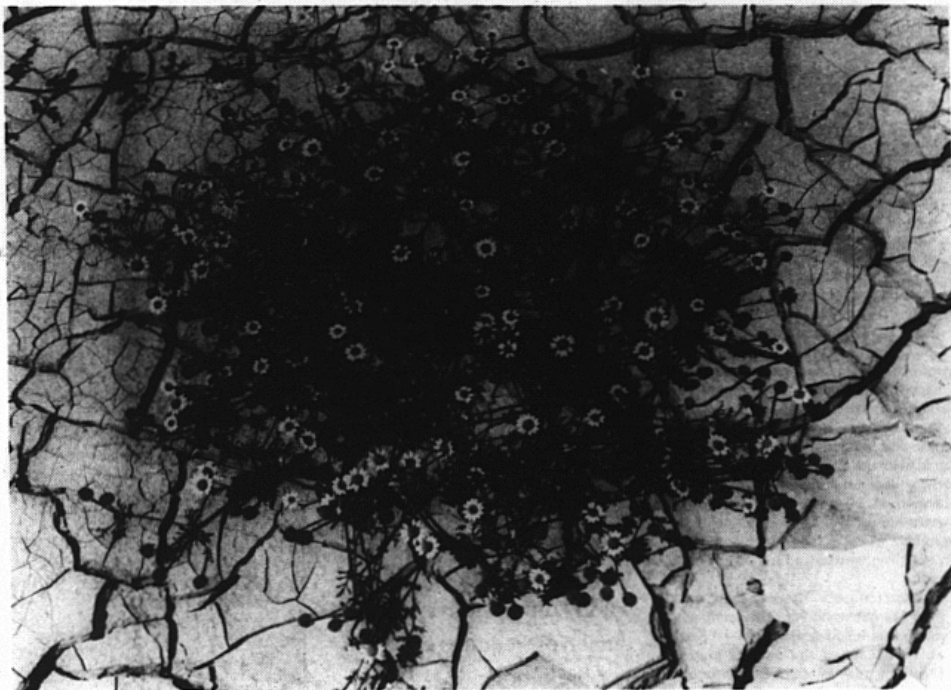
God, World, Person: Restoring the Balance

If that religious consciousness is the apex of our tradition, I believe we urgently need to share it with the world. This will be neither an anthropocentric point of view or a theocentric point of view; it will not follow the Kabbalists in saying that man is the center of the universe, nor will it follow Maimonides in saying that God is the center. It will rather restore balance to the old triad of God, world and person which are all so deeply related to one another. God, world and person.

We Jews have too long neglected the "world" part of this triad. That is one of the great tragedies of Jewish history. We lost that sense of "world" as testament to God. We became the first urbanized people. We were a people who needed to take our civilization, once we were no longer land-rooted, and make it portable. We were the ones who, to paraphrase Heschel, created the "palace in time" because our palace in space was destroyed. We had no more place in the world of space, no more attachment to land except in fantasy and longing. We thus created the literary-intellectual heritage that became Judaism. "Where do you find God?" we asked. You find God in books, you find God in writing commentaries, you find God in studying. The significant relationship is that of God and person, as manifest in Israel. So the triad becomes God, Israel and Torah; God, the Jewish People and the Book. But where then is the "world"? What happened to it? Thus we come to the famous Mishna about the one who interrupts his studying to say "ma naeh ilan ze", how beautiful is that tree; such a person says the Mishna is like one who forfeits his life. He gives up the *hayyeh 'olam* of Torah study for the vain *hayyeh sha'ah* of appreciating God's world.

That Mishna is not the religion of ancient Israel. That is not the religion of the biblical authors who said, "Lift up your eyes to the heavens and see who created these," or who saw all of the trees of the forest dancing before the Lord. If all of the trees of the forest are dancing, why can't we look at them and find God there? That was the tragedy of rabbinic religion. Rabbinic Judaism lost that sense of the divine presence in the natural order, of nature itself attesting to God. There have been Jews since the beginning of this century who have recognized that. Most of them were in the Zionist movement, including Aaron David Gordon and Martin Buber. Buber the young mystic/romantic, finding God in nature as portrayed in his re-creation of the Ba'al Shem Tov, is one with Buber the Zionist, who seeks God in the holy community re-established in the holy land.

Rav Kook also belongs to this group. A rabbi, a deeply religious Jew, he saw the same thing. He understood that Galut had somehow separated the Jew from the earth, the Jewish soul from the body, and as a result created a spiritual *luftmensch* who necessarily had a certain sickness of the soul. We Jews in the Diaspora didn't listen to that, certainly not the religious among us. After all, Zionists were talking



The Arava. Photo by Barbara Gingold. © All rights reserved.

about creating a "new man". The Zionists of the 1920's and the 1930's saw a new Jewish human being beginning to emerge in Eretz Yisrael. That is where one was to go for "self-realization," which really meant self-transformation into this "new man". The Jew of the Diaspora was to be lost and forgotten. They were creating a new generation and a new life for the Jewish people, but we who stayed in the Diaspora weren't part of that. Were we going to teach the religion of *Yidiat Ha-aretz*, knowing and loving the different kinds of stones and wild flowers in the Negev, here in America? That made no sense in our context. We can (and should!) take our kids on trips to Bear Mountain or the Delaware Water Gap, but these places have no "Jewish" roots. Sadly we have seen them as having no Jewish meaning because they weren't Eretz Yisrael.

Fellow Singers in the Chorus of Life

But now we can no longer do that. We realize that the times in which we live call upon us to ask again the most basic of religious questions: "What does it mean to be a religious human being?" And to be a religious human being, we must first say, means that we live in a created world, or we live in a God-infused world. The way we will see that is by going out to nature and opening our religious eyes to it. That will give us a sense of magnificence, of smallness, of humility, and of belonging; an understanding that all of those things go together.

At this time in the history of the human race, or in the history of the world itself, whatever gap once existed between the human world and the natural world, is very rapidly disappearing. The human is now asserting a kind of control over the natural world that is frightening, challenging, and exciting, a new reality in which we have to live. One of the tales of religious humility which we learned from the rabbis tells that God has three keys which He has never given over to the hands of human beings. These three keys are ultimate mysteries: the key to the womb, the key to rain, and the key to the resurrection of the dead. I ask myself now about the current status of these three keys. I see what we human beings are doing to the womb. Are the

keys of the womb wholly in the hands of God any more, what with birth out of test tubes and conception removed from the womb and the wonderful things we are doing with birth and conception? And when I think about the resurrection of the dead, the same thing applies to the end of life. We human beings are now resurrecting the dead, more or less, all of the time. We struggle now to allow the dead to die. As for rain—human control of the weather is, so to speak on the horizon. The keys which are supposed to make us humble, because human beings will never control these things, are now to an awesome degree in human control. Not fully, to be sure. We are still mortal and our humanity is still shaped by our confrontation with that fact. But the nature of birth and aging, of facing mortality and of dying are all in flux.

[Rav Kook] understood that Galut had somehow separated the Jew from the earth, the Jewish soul from the body, and as a result created a spiritual *luftmensch* who necessarily had a certain sickness of the soul.

The same is now true on the level of non-human life and species survival as well. We humans control the survival of species, not only "who will live and who will die", but which species will live and which species will die out. What will we declare "endangered" and decide to protect? Will we spend millions of dollars so that a species of animal or bird will live, whereas another species in another habitat, which doesn't have an active wildlife group, will be destroyed because nobody is protecting it? "Who will live and who will die" is carried out by us on a nearly universal scale. That key has been taken by

human hands. But now it goes still further: the survival of the biosphere itself now in human hands. Whether the whole planet survives in a life-sustaining way will have to do with our deeds in the coming decades.

But I don't want us to come to a recognition of the presence of God in the natural order just out of alarm. I don't want us to say, "Oy, the house is burning" so we have to conveniently create a theology of Creation. The rabbis compare Abraham to the man walking by a burning castle. Seeing the castle on fire, he called out, "Can it be that there is no master of this castle?" And the owner of the castle appeared and said, "I am the lord of the castle". But Heschel, in telling this parable, transformed it into a "castle full of light". Not only did he see it burning, but he saw that it was full of light and radiance. That too is a way of discovering that God is there, not only because it is on fire.

What do we Jews teach in the face of all of this? What do we have to offer in the age of such changes? What will be our theology of "world" in the age where the gulf between God, world and human being is so narrowed. We come into this new period, where creation itself is changing so greatly, still bearing our ancient tale, that tale which sees each creature as a bearer of the divine presence. That tale somehow allows us to see ourselves as fellow creatures with all beings. We are fellow players, if you will, in the great orchestra, or fellow singers in the chorus of life. Each of us is singing our own Hallelujah, but together we make up a chorus of praise to the Creator or to the Core of Life. Only as we learn this will the world survive the onslaught of humanity. Only as we learn this, I dare say, will our humanity survive the onslaught of life in the world. And only as we learn this, will the presence of God shine through the world to enlighten our humanity. Only this level of knowing God will bring us to harmony, allowing us to renew and to continue our vision of oneness. This is the vision which ends, as do our prayers, with the unitive cry: *bayom hahu yehiyeh Hashem ehad u'shmo ehad*—on that day will God be one and the divine name one. ❧



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Towards a Jewish Ecological Paradigm: Essays and Explorations, Part II



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