

Shattered Vessels, Broken Hearts (Breaking and Entering the New Year)

Elie Wiesel retells a well-known story about Rebbe Baruch of Medzibozh and his grandson:

Rebbe Barukh's grandson, Yehiel, came running into his study, all in tears.

“Yehiel, Yehiel, why are you crying?”

“My friend cheats! It's unfair; he left me all by myself, that's why I am crying.”

“Would you like to tell me about it?”

“Certainly, Grandfather. We played hide-and-seek, and it was my turn to hide and his turn to look for me. But I hid so well that he couldn't find me. So he gave up; he stopped looking. And that's unfair.”

Rebbe Barukh began to caress Yehiel's face, and tears welled up in his eyes. “God too, Yehiel,” he whispered softly, “...God too is unhappy; He is hiding and man is not looking for Him. Do you understand, Yehiel? God is hiding and man is not even searching for Him...”¹

This simple Hasidic story echoes these more poetic verses from Isaiah:

☆ “I said, ‘Here I am, here I am,’ to a nation that did not invoke my name.” (65.1b)

☆ “Because, when I called, you did not answer, when I spoke you would not listen.” (65.12)

Who is hiding from whom?

I spoke a few weeks ago about the young genius, Rabbi Isaac Luria of 16th century Safed. Luria's great achievement was the refashioning of the teaching of Kabbalah to feature three great elements: *tzimtzum*, *shevirat hakelim*, and *tikkun*. Joseph Dan, one of the great modern scholars of Jewish mysticism, describes Luria's idea of *tzimtzum*, the first step in (or a kind of prequel to) creation, the contraction of God in order to make room for creation:

¹ Elie Wiesel, *Four Hasidic Masters and their Struggle Against Melancholy* (Notre Dame, 1978), p. 52-3.

...in order to create, the supreme Godhead, the *En Sof*, had to create an empty space in which the creation could be brought forth...

The *tzimtzum* is the contraction of the Godhead into itself, away from a certain space which was thus emptied (called "*tehiru*," the Aramaic for "empty"). Thus, the first divine action in the history of the evolving cosmos was not a positive one but one of withdrawal: the Godhead had to forsake the *tehiru*, or even to exile itself from it, in order that the process of creation could be initiated. The *tzimtzum*, therefore, though positive in its intention, postulates divine exile as the beginning of all existence. Exile is no longer a human term, relating to the fate of the Jewish people; it is a mysterious process within the Godhead, which began long before the creation of man or of the people of Israel.²

Luria's approach, a kind of mythic conception of cosmic reality, took hold of the imagination of the Jewish people and became part of mainstream Jewish thinking for the next three centuries. It spoke to a people traumatized by the upheaval of the expulsion from Spain, resonated amidst the aftershocks of exile. Exile is not only something that happens to us; it is not simply a punishment for our sins. On the contrary, it is a condition built in to the very structure of reality.

The time of greatest difficulty may be precisely the opportunity for a kind of spiritual *tzimtzum*, a contraction, a turning inward. Just as God "contracted" in order to make space for the world, so we may sometimes need, or be compelled, to withdraw, perhaps even to fall apart, to prepare for what is next.

The idea that the very beginning of God's creative activity was actually a contraction is Luria's original contribution. In Luria's cosmic mythology, what follows the divine *tzimtzum* is catastrophe: the emanations of divine light overflowed and shattered the vessels that had been prepared to contain them. This is called *shevirat hakelim*, the shattering of the vessels.

As Harold Bloom describes *shevirah* in his book, *Kabbalah and Criticism*:

Though some of the light in the shattered vessels returned immediately to God, much of it fell down with the vessels, so as to form the *kelippot* or evil forces of the universe. But these *kelippot* still have pattern or design, as well as sparks-of-light imprisoned within them. Luria appears to believe that all this catastrophe came about because of an original excess of *Din*, a plethora of rigor in God Himself, and it is in the *Sefirah* of *Din* that the smashing-apart begins.

Din, as those who studied Kabbalah together the year before last will remember, is the *Sefirah*, the aspect of the Divine that represents strict judgment. Too much judgment, untempered by *Hesed* – the aspect of Lovingkindness or Mercy, or (what I also think of as) Flexibility – leads to a shattering of the delicate balance of creation.

² Joseph Dan, *Jewish Mysticism and Jewish Ethics* (University of Washington, 1986), p. 94.

Rashi, the greatest of the medieval commentators, pre-dates the development of Kabbalah as a system, and lived almost five centuries before Luria. Yet in Rashi's classic commentary, based largely on earlier rabbinic sources, we find something similar. Rashi does not describe the kind of disastrous smashing that we find in Luria, but he does emphasize those midrashic sources that suggest that God had great difficulty wrestling the cosmos into existence. Things were constantly going wrong and having to be recalibrated, often with immense struggle on God's part.

For Rashi, none of this tells us anything about what is going on within God. Luria, however, dares to push the kabbalistic language about God's inner life further than it had ever gone. As Bloom continues,

Scholem theorizes that Luria saw the whole function of creation as being God's catharsis of Himself, a vast sublimation in which His terrible rigor might find some peace. This is not unlike Freud's extraordinary explanation of why people fall in love, which is to avoid an over-filled inner self....³

The *sefirah* of *Din* – Judgment is also called *Gevurah* – Strength. Luria's notion that this was the location within God for the initial smashing corresponds to the early rabbinic midrash that suggests that God initially wanted to create the world through the divine attribute of justice, but saw that the world would not be able to endure unless justice were balanced with mercy. Indeed, it is to that divine attribute of mercy that we especially appeal during this season of repentance.

All of this is by way of saying that Luria, original and even revolutionary as his system seems, did not get his ideas out of nowhere. Judaism has long had a sense of the difficulty of existence. Contrary to some philosophical ideas of God as a supremely competent engineer who gets everything to run like "clockwork," or a brilliant magician who can, by pronouncing "*Abra Cadabra*" (from the Aramaic "I create by speaking"), God actually struggles, experiments, regrets, refashions, and hopes for the best.

Already I am feeling some relief about myself and my struggles. Can it be that we most reflect the divine image, the *tselem Elohim*, when we are struggling to set things right amidst the chaotic brokenness around us and in us? In our own relationships, is there balance between *Din* and *Hesed*? And if we are to err on one side of the other, let it be toward the side *Hesed*.

And, does God ever change? "For I am the Lord – I have not changed; and you are the children of Jacob – you have not ceased to be." So speaks the prophet Malachi, in a verse [3:6] that speaks of God's steady reliability. In the very next verse, God pleads: "Turn back to Me, and I will turn back to you." Does Malachi contradict himself here? God does not change – but God can turn? God is still God, but we can sense a shift in our relationship. Martin Buber says of God's response to Job out of the whirlwind: "Nothing

³ Harold Bloom, *Kabbalah and Criticism* (NY: Seabury, 1975), p. 41.

is explained, nothing adjusted; wrong has not become right, nor cruelty kindness. Nothing has happened but that man again hears God's address..."⁴ Job does not receive an answer to his question, but he does receive a response: God turns toward him.

In the liturgy of these days we express the hope for something more. The name Elohim is associated by the rabbis with the aspect of God as strict judge; the name Adonai is associated with the aspect of mercy.

When the Holy One, on a judgment day, begins to judge, He ascends the throne of strict judgment, as it is written, "The God of *judgment* (Elohim) has ascended with acclamation." But when the people Israel, standing in judgment, sound the shofar, the Holy One is filled with mercy, and changes to the throne of compassion, as it is written: "The Lord of *compassion* (Adonai) ascends with the shofar blast."⁵

Now please, don't take all of this literally! Neither Rashi, nor Isaac Luria, and certainly not I can tell you who God actually is and how God actually works. We have entered the realm of metaphor. While I would argue that there is nothing more real than a good metaphor, it is also true that the best metaphors are but indications, gestures in the direction of an indescribable reality. But there is in this metaphor of turning much for us to learn – not just about a curious version of cosmology, but about how we are to live in a broken world.

Within us, too, there is both Strength and Kindness, *Gevurah* and *Hesed*, Rigor and Grace. To have *gevurah*, to be a *gibor* – a strong one, a hero – is to overcome the temptation that pulls in the direction of evil. It is to bring to bear our quality of *hesed*, the flexibility that is patient with the shortcomings and faults, of ourselves and of others. When we recognize that the other person is also swimming in a sea of broken fragments, we can begin the turning that combines justice and mercy, and that brings about real change.

Carol Goldbaum, in her d'var Torah a couple of weeks ago, connected the shofar call *shevarim*, the broken notes, to the image of a broken heart seeking forgiveness. This is the same root as the Lurianic *shevirat hakelim*.

✧ *Shin-Veyt-Reysh* a biblical root: breaking, shattering. When Moses saw the golden calf, he threw down the tablet *vay'shaber otam* – and shattered them

✧ Ps. 34:19 tells us that God is near to those who are *nishb'rei lev* – brokenhearted.

✧ The waves that break against the shore are called in Ps. 93:4 *mish'b'rei yam* – breakers of the sea. This psalm portrays God as a mighty ruler, robed in strength, seated above the roaring oceans. It is traditionally recited on Friday morning and again on

⁴ Martin Buber, "God and the World's Evil" from *At the Turning* (rep. Contemporary Jewish thought: A Reader, p. 257)

⁵ Lev.R. 29:3, cited in *Mahzor L'Yamim Nora'im* (RA, 1972), p. 202.

Friday evening – a link between the broken days of labor and the day of wholeness that is Shabbat.

✧ The same word appears in the prayer that Jonah recites in the belly of the fish: “All your breakers and billows swept over me.” (2:4)

✧ The interpretation of a dream is sometimes called “breaking it (open)” (as in Judges 7:15, when the Israelite general, Gideon, hears a dream interpreted (*et shivro*) and understands that he will be victorious).

Does God hide from us inside a dream that we are unable to break open? Are we hidden inside the dream of God? God searches for us, but is unable to break us open enough to turn us again to one another, to raise the divine sparks that animate us.

We live inside a reality of brokenness that includes within it a dream of fullness and completion. That is what we call Redemption, or the Days of the Messiah. That is the dream deep inside of us, the vision of swords beaten into plowshares to which we cling even, or especially, in a time when our government seems to know only how to beat plowshares into swords. To hold fast to the dream of wholeness that is inside the reality of shattering, is to take a stance of resistance to that which is evil and unjust, or against that in ourselves that is merely lazy and indifferent. That is the vision of *Tikkun*, repair or restoration – **change we can believe in** – the third part of Luria’s great cosmic metaphor, about which I hope to speak on Yom Kippur.

But for now, following the spiritual contraction, the *Tzimtzum* of the month of Elul, I begin the new year with this image of that which is broken – in each of us, in all of us collectively, in this beautiful and broken world that God called and wrestled into existence. “True offerings to God,” says the Psalmist, “a *ruach nish’b’rah* – a broken spirit, a broken and crushed heart God will not despise” (51:19). Breaking is the second step: *shevirat hakelim*, shattering the vessels in us that prevent us from turning. When we seek God who seems to be hidden from us, let us remember that God is also seeking us, who are hiding from God and from ourselves. Now is the time to come out to God.

Whatever brokenness you sense in your own life, you are not alone. Life is a struggle, and even God engages in that struggle. The broken and unpolished blasts of the shofar bring to mind all the ragged edges, the tasks uncompleted, the desires of our hearts that exalt us and drag us down and make us human. The ragged edges of our broken hearts can become tools for digging up the sparks of holiness that are buried in creation, so that we may lift them up and return them to their Source, to the One who waits for us, hidden and seeking.