

Theism Versus Pantheism in Jewish Mystical Experience

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The Jewish theist experiences God primarily if not solely in the sacred time, place or word. The pan-en-theist, by contrast, may discover God in the world at large and in himself.

Any religious tradition in which the belief in one supreme and unrivalled God occupies a central place is faced by a series of problems surrounding that 'oneness'. There seem to be, in the history of monotheistic faiths, only a limited number of ways in which models explicating the one God and His relationship to the world can be constructed. In this paper we shall examine the clash between two such models in the context of Medieval Jewish mysticism, better known as the Kabbalah.

What makes the Jewish attempt to grapple with the problems monotheism poses interesting is the lack of a body of Jewish dogma laying down the matrix within which orthodox theology must operate. There is, however, an assumption that any portrayal of God must be made in monotheistic terms. The primary problem which Judaism faces in this area, therefore, is: given the monotheistic assumptions of faith, what range of meaning may be ascribed to the oneness of God, and at what point does an interpretation of monotheism pass beyond the limits set by such meaning.

The Jewish mystical tradition may be seen, in part at least, as the consequence of a drive to give symbolic, theosophical cohesion to the

living and often overpowering experience of the mystic himself. The mystical theologian has to remain true to his own insight, but also, qua orthodox believer, to interpret that insight within the framework of God's oneness. Both the drive to find meaning and the restraints of faith set up in Judaism, as in many other religious/mystical traditions, a creative tension which makes the investigation of mystical theology so fruitful for the student of religion.

Two Trends in pre-16th century Kabbalah

The main concept dominating Jewish mysticism till the late 16th century was the doctrine, or doctrines, of emanation. This was expressed in the idea that the Godhead, Ein Sof, unlimited, unqualified, and unchangeable, brought the world about by a process of emanation out of His own being. The essential structure of these emanations, known as *sefirot*, is tenfold in nature, and through them the whole of reality, including the human sphere, is constituted. These emanations take place primarily within the world of the divine, but are also seen as operative in constituting lower levels of reality including that of the created world itself.

It is true that in the many subtle formulations of this doctrine of emanation amongst the Medieval Jewish mystics, the over-simplified equation: 'The created world is simply the Godhead at the terminal point of its emanation' is avoided. Nevertheless the mere fact that what was interpreted in exoteric Judaism as a biblical teaching of *creatio ex nihilo*, should become in esoteric Judaism a doctrine of emanation, is instructive. Creation from nothing is a teaching of total discontinuity: God brings a world into being which has no connection with the ontology of the pre-creation moment. The nothing is a real nothing, and the world a totally new, discontinuous element. Creator-God-theism thus posits a created world dependent on but separate from the deity. It is wedded to an ontological dualism, a dualism not of equals, but of two unequal components: a creator God and a created universe.

Such a dualism is faced by the need to relate the world back to God and does so primarily through the notion of revelation. The divine Wisdom, the Logos, the Torah, all act in different ways as bridges across the dualistic gulf. Man can come into relationship with the creator God through the revealed word of that God transmitted, according to Jewish teaching, by the prophets and in Scripture as also through divinely ordained modes of worship, sacrifice, prayer etc.

What is problematical about this model for the Jewish mystic is that his experience of the divine seems to posit alternative points of contact between man and God. He does indeed value the revelation of the prophetic past as such a point of contact, but he needs to conceptualize his own ongoing experience of the divine in mystical encounter. Pre-Medieval forms of Jewish mysticism contained little theosophical speculation and were mainly concerned with the hazards of the mys-

tical journey into the realms of the divine and the vision of the divine throne at its goal. Already inherent in them, however, was a theological position, developed in the later Kabbalah, which contrasted sharply with the strict dualism of exoteric theism and the absolute gap posited by the latter between God and the world.

With the teachings on emanation a new framework was introduced which allowed for the contact between man and God because the transition from the latter to the former was at most only relatively discontinuous. These emanations constitute four distinct but connected planes of existence from the realm of the Godhead down to the lowest level which includes, or in some versions is identical with, the created world. These four levels or worlds of emanation are clearly formulated, for what seems the first time, in a terse kabbalistic treatise ascribed to the 13th or 14th centuries, *Masekhet Atzilut*, which associates them with the four letters of the tetragrammaton. They may well have the purpose of providing an element of discontinuity between divine and mundane existence, but this discontinuity is ultimately one of degree only.

Although there is considerable divergence of opinion amongst kabbalists as to whether it is God's essence or merely the flow of divine power which is emanated, the consequences of both views is an inherence of God in the created world. To the eye of the mystic which penetrates the clothing of worldly appearances this divine substratum is revealed. In the words of the *Zohar*: "Although there is separation, when one contemplates the matter everything emerges as one." (1.241a).

This tendency towards pantheism does not imply that the world is identical with God, but that the former is somehow continuous with, and thus at its basic level of reality part of, the divine. It is therefore best to describe it as *pan-en-theism*, i.e. all is in God.

An emanating God and an emanated world do not of themselves infringe the monotheistic demand for the oneness of God. To the strict theist, however, this doctrine seems to come dangerously close to identifying the multiplicity of objects in the world with God, and thus to be preaching idolatry. The doctrine also seems to imply that the lowest and most despicable objects are in some sense divine, an implication found distinctly unpalatable by some theologians. Pan-en-theism is, furthermore, at variance with some of the theistic assumptions about religious life built into Judaism. Theistic dualism sees aspects of the world as sacred, as manifestations within the world of a transcendent deity and the divine will. A pan-en-theistic model, positing a divine substratum behind all that is, seems to negate any ultimate division between sacred and profane.

These objections to pan-en-theism and to its practical consequences were expressed by more than one theologian and even by kabbalists who subscribed to a more theistic Kabbalah. Above all, the feeling that

the ground might be cut from under the ritual and moral distinctions so central to Judaism, thus leading to anti-nomianism, was uppermost in the minds of the critics of the pan-en-theistic model.

Lurianic Kabbalah and the Renewal of Theism

In the late 16th century a new theistic turn was given to the Kabbalah by the teachings of Isaac Luria. Among the innovations which Luria introduced into Jewish mysticism was the concept of God's self-withdrawal into Himself prior to the emanatory process. This divine self-withdrawal, known as *tzimtzum* (lit. "contraction"), was necessary for there to be a vacant space not, as it were, filled with God, in which the world or worlds could come into being. The doctrine implies a sharp distinction between the Godhead and the world formed in the vacuum brought about by God's *tzimtzum*. Although God emanates His light into this vacuum in a complicated process of emanation, the fact that the vacuum is drained of God's essence means that in Himself God is not continuous with the universe. Earlier theism had posited the gap between God and the world in the *creatio ex nihilo*, whereas Luria posits it prior to the whole process of emanation.

Lurianic theosophy soon came to dominate Jewish mystical thought in the 17th and 18th centuries, but the tension between theism and pan-en-theism reasserted itself precisely in the different interpretations given to the Lurianic teaching. The theistic mystics saw the primordial self-withdrawal of the Godhead as a real act, indicating an absolute division between the divine Being itself, and the universe which is under the guidance of divine Providence. Thus Immanuel Chai Ricchi (1688-1743) writes:

"It seems more reasonable to assume that it (i.e. *tzimtzum*) is meant literally, and that it is Providence that fills the place of the *tzimtzum* . . . than to say that it is not literal and to diminish the divine glory by positing that God's essence is found amongst us even in unfitting places. For it is not a diminution of honour to say that the king perceives dirt out of the window, . . . as it is . . . if we say that the king himself is inside the dirt" /1/.

This realistic interpretation was found unacceptable by some kabbalists on the grounds that it was theologically impossible to conceive of the unchanging, spiritual Godhead physically withdrawing Himself into Himself. It was furthermore nonsensical to talk of physical withdrawal prior to the creation of space. The *tzimtzum* must be meant non-literally and parabolically. One of the critics of the realist interpretation even uses against it the idea often found in pre-Lurianic teaching that 'there is no place free from Him' /2/.

There were kabbalists who were not satisfied with stating the non-literal interpretation of *tzimtzum*; they went further in relating the self-withdrawal of God to refer to the hiding of the full light of His Being so that the world should appear as a separate existent. In fact, however, the separate reality of the universe is only an appearance, clothing or masking the divine. This idea in all its variations simply brings us full-circle to a renewed pan-en-theism or a cosmic position. It was particularly amongst the Hasidic mystics of 18th and 19th century Eastern Europe that such an interpretation of *tzimtzum* was favoured. It represented the theological background for their assumption that the mystic could uncover or find God in every aspect of life, and not merely within the realm of the sacred.

The opponents of Hasidic teaching, like earlier opponents of pan-en-theistic trends in the Kabbalah, took a more rigidly theistic view. They emphasized that the approach to God has to take place only through the sacred, in this case the study of the Torah, ritually prescribed prayer, and the performance of the commandments. Chaim of Volozhin, one of the leading anti-Hasidic kabbalists, accepts in a compromise formula spanning both theism and pan-en-theism, that from the point of view of the unchanging Godhead there is indeed no *tzimtzum*, and thus no world. From the point of view of man, however, the self-withdrawal of the Godhead has to be accepted as real, and consequently the world has to be seen in all its differentiated variety as divided into sacred and profane. As he puts it: "Although truly from His side . . . He fills everything with total equality . . . everything being a simple unity as exactly before creation; we, however, are not able and not permitted to enter into thinking this thought" /3/.

Chaim of Volozhin's solution of the competing claims of the two models of God's unity is to concede the pan-en-theistic case in theory, whilst emphasizing that in practice we must adopt a straightforwardly theistic stance. We cannot relate to the unthinkable immanence of God in a world which ultimately does not exist for Him, we can only relate to the transcendent deity from within a world which does exist for us, and from our perspective God can only be known through His self-revelation in the Torah /4/.

This formulation of practical theistic dualism, since we cannot think the unthinkable and conceive of reality from the divine viewpoint, is the furthest anti-Hasidic Kabbalah is prepared to go in its concession to pan-en-theism. Chaim of Volozhin's teacher, the Gaon Elijah of Vilna, himself adopts a more literalistic, anti-pan-en-theistic stance on the self-withdrawal of God. He writes:

"It is known that just as He is infinite so is His will . . . the worlds, however, are finite, and subject to quantification. He therefore contracted His will in creating the worlds, and this is *tzimtzum* . . . The idea that he contracted His Providence and Will

. . . means that He removed Himself entirely and then emanated a small particularized Providence. He did not remove His Will leaving behind a small amount, because it is impossible to talk about a part of the Godhead, for such a part would also be infinite . . .

The light of the Godhead is equidistant on all sides (in the *tzimtzum*) for from the aspect of the supernal will everything is equivalent, and there is no differentiation between one matter and another /5/”

The difference between master and pupil here is in the element of reality to be attached to an understanding of *tzimtzum*. The master, Elijah of Vilna, emphasizes that the self-withdrawal of the Godhead is literal and total, whereas the pupil, Chaim of Volozhin, concedes that from the viewpoint of God there is no withdrawal at all.

The Hasidic mystics, by contrast, struggled to give the *tzimtzum* doctrine an interpretation consonant with their stand that God may be found in all aspects of reality. In a parable told by the founder of Hasidism, Israel Baal Shem Tov, and recorded by his pupils in slightly different versions, this appears clearly:

“I heard the following parable from my master”, writes Israel’s disciple Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye. “There was a king who through the power of magical deception made several barriers and walls, one within the other, to surround the king. In all the gates of these walls he commanded that money be strewn, in order to see the zeal and desire of the citizens . . . to come to the king. Some returned home after receiving money at the gate of the outermost wall, some at the second gate, some at the third gate etc. . . . There were, however, a small number in whose hearts there was no desire for material wealth, only a desire to come into the king’s presence. After many exertions when they came to the king they saw that in fact there were no walls or barriers, but that everything had been a magical deception.

The parable means that the great, mighty and awesome (divine) king . . . hides within several barriers and walls of iron . . . But men of knowledge, who know that all these barriers and walls of iron and all the garments and coverings are really the very essence of His blessed essence, since there is no place devoid of Him, (realize) that there is in fact no hiding at all”/6/.

Although the point of the parable is not to state a doctrine of mystical theology but to encourage the devotee to find God despite the obstacles in his path, the pan-en-theistic implications are apparent.

Among succeeding generations of Hasidic teachers the theosophical position is more explicitly stated. In the writings of Dov Baer of Mezeritch, the Baal Shem Tov's successor, the *tzimtzum* is seen as an act of love on the part of God enabling man to believe that he constitutes a separate reality, for if the divine light were not hidden there could not even be the semblance of a world. In Dov Baer's words, God "surrounds all worlds, fills all worlds, and is the place of all worlds . . . He needed, as it were, to contract His light in order to shine His light to each one according to his ability to receive and bear it" /7/.

Dov Baer's pupil, Schneur Zalman of Liadi, and the Chabad school of mysticism which he founded moved the Hasidic discussion of *tzimtzum* onto a more strictly theosophical level. Schneur Zalman differentiates between the unknowable and unchanging Godhead which transcends and surrounds all reality, and the immanentist aspect of God which fills all reality, being contracted and clothed within it. The *tzimtzum* is thus applicable not to the infinite Godhead as such, but refers to the clothing of the divine light and life-force within the created world. It is to the latter that man must relate in finding God within the world, and in unravelling the *tzimtzum* by uncovering the divine /8/.

What is happening here is that the theistic dualism between God and the world is replaced by a pan-en-theistic dualism within the divine itself between the transcendent and immanent aspects of the Godhead. At least one Chabad mystic, Aaron Horowitz of Starosselje, tries to go beyond this dualism to a position where he posits that it is man's perception which creates this dualism by accepting the reality of the world. Man's task is to pass beyond this dualism to a contemplation of the divine unity /9/.

The Hasidic interpretation of *tzimtzum* took a number of other directions, which also emphasized the pan-en-theistic trend. The great grandson of Israel Baal Shem Tov, Nachman of Batslav, saw the self-withdrawal of God to be referring to the paradoxical nature of existence which was beyond the grasp of man's understanding. On the one hand God must be everywhere, even within idols, though we may not be able to find Him there, for without the life-giving divine force nothing can exist even for a moment. On the other hand if God is indeed everywhere there is no vacuum created by the divine *tzimtzum* in which a world can exist, and thus no separate world at all, only God.

When man tries to reflect on reality a point comes when his questioning confronts this paradox. If his questions can be answered then he would be finding God in the vacuum, in which case there is no world and no questioner. The doctrine of *tzimtzum* thus points to a gap, a lacuna, in man's ability to grasp the underlying nature of reality. If man does not face up to the gap and its paradox, he will inevitably be led into

heresy. Only a faith based on an acceptance of the paradox can bridge this gap, and intellectual understanding must await the messianic age /10/.

A somewhat different and novel pantheistic interpretation is given to the subject of the divine unity by a later Hasidic master, Joseph Mordecai Leiner of Izbica, in the 19th century. He maintains that a true understanding of the supposedly vacant space in which the world is located will see only the divine Will there. All of man's acts are in fact acts of God, for there is no room for a human freedom which could be other than the will of God. Even the sin of Adam, the first man, in eating the fruit of the tree in the Garden of Eden was in fact an expression of the divine Will. Man does not comprehend how this can be so, and Leiner may be interpreted as maintaining that the *tzimtzum* refers to the illusion of free, independent action on man's part /11/.

It will be seen from the foregoing that both theism and pan-en-theism are deeply rooted in Jewish theology and particularly in Jewish mysticism. In struggling with the notion of divine unity, the 'oneness' of God, thinkers of both trends find themselves generating a dualism of their own. They are also caught up in the limitations which their models imply either for the meaning of religious language and the literalness of its application to a spiritual Godhead or for the practical consequences in terms of religious behaviour.

Behind the theosophy one can detect essential differences in the view of religious experience. The Jewish theist experiences God primarily, if not solely, in the sacred, sanctified time, place or word. The pan-en-theist, by contrast, allows for a wider area of man's encounter with God who may be discovered in the world and in man himself.

End Notes

1. Yosher Levav 7, quoted in M. Teitelbaum, "Harav mi-Ladi", Warsaw, 1913. Bk. II, p. 50.
2. Joseph Ergas, 1685 - 1730, in Shomer Emunim II. Quoted in Teitelbaum, *op. cit.*, II, 48.
3. Nefesh ha-Chaim 3:5.
4. The differences between Volozhin's standpoint and the more pan-en-theistic views of the Hasidic master Schneur Zalman of Liadi, despite the overt similarity of their language, is brought out in W. Wurtzberger's article on the former in L. Jung (ed.), *Guardians of our Heritage*, New York, 1958, pp. 203f, and in N. Lamm, *Faith and Doubt*, New York, 1971, ch. 2, and *Torah Lishmah*,

Jerusalem, 1972, pp. 70 - 72. Lamm does not refer to the earlier work of Wurtzberger, although he makes substantially the same point in greater detail.

5. Likutei Ha-Gra at the end of his commentary on the Sifra de-Tzeniuta, the section dealing with 'Sod ha-Tzimtzum'.
6. Ben Perat Yoseph, Sermon for Shabbat Ha-Gadol, 5525.
7. Maggid Devarav le-Yaacov. New York, 1972. Kehot edition, p.59.
8. Cf. his Shaar ha-Yichud va-ha-Emunah, ch. 7.
9. Cf. L. Jacobs, *Seeker of Unity*. London, 1966.
10. Cf. Likkutei Moharan I:64.
11. Cf. the article of J. Weiss in F. Baer Jubilee Volume, 1961, pp. 447 - 453.