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A KABBALISTIC VIEW OF THE WORLD

MAN—THE SOUL THAT SUSTAINS THE WORLD

The first person ever was created as a solitary male-female being.¹ God initially avoided creating Adam and Eve as separate beings to send us an important message: each and every one of us has individual responsibility for the entire universe as if they were the only human in the world.²

If God gave us this responsibility, He must have given us the capacity to implement this as well, and hence the Torah tells us that when God created man: “And God blew into man the soul of life and man became a living spirit.”³ The verse does not say that the soul became a living spirit *in* man.⁴ Rather, it says that man himself became the living spirit. Through the soul of life that was in him, man became a living soul sustaining the world.⁵ Man became the central point that would draw all the other threads of reality together.

1 Genesis 2:21–22.

2 Talmud, Tractate *Sanhedrin* 37a; *Rashi*, *ibid.*

3 Genesis 2:7.

4 That would have read *va'yehi ba'adam*—ויהי באדם. Instead, it is written *va'yehi ha'adam*—ויהי האדם.

5 Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, *Nefesh Hachaim* 1:4.

The universe of spirituality extends far beyond what the eye can see. All that we can sense is but a small part of this. The spiritual universe is composed of four worlds, each layered one atop the other, topped by huge expanses of spirituality.⁶

PARALLEL WORLDS

In the Kabbalistic literature, the world we inhabit is called the World of Action. In ascending order, it is followed by the World of Formation, the World of Creation, and the World of Emanation.⁷ These worlds are parallels of each other.⁸ Each one replicates the other at a higher spiritual level and level of completeness.⁹ Each world above the other reflects an increasing amount of God's light.

When God said, "Let us make man," He was calling on all of the cosmos to join in and contribute their power and potential into this one being.

God hides Himself in all these worlds, but at different levels. God manifests His Will at a very high level, which then descends throughout all the worlds. Each level of descent brings about an increased level of hiddenness.¹⁰ Our world, the World of Action, receives God's light in a significantly hidden form, yet it is only because of this thick mask that our world could be created and impurities are allowed to exist.¹¹

These worlds are also linked; an action in one world ripples into those above and below it.¹² The filtering of God's light is an example of how

6 This level of spirituality is called *adam ha'kadmon*. *Nefesh Hachaim*, *ibid.*, chap. 14, states that we cannot conceive of anything above the World of Emanation.

7 *Pardes Rimonim* 16:1. In Hebrew, these four worlds are called *Olam Hamaaseh* (עולם המעשה), *Olam Hayetzirah* (עולם היצירה), *Olam Habriah* (עולם הבריאה), and *Olam Haatzilut* (עולם האצילות).

8 The names of these worlds are based on the verse in Isaiah (43:7): "Everything that is called by name and for my honor, I have created, formed, and even made," where "honor" refers to the highest world, and "made" refers to the lowest world.

9 Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, *Nefesh Hachaim* 1:6.

10 Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Tanya* 3:6. This phenomenon is known as "chaining down." Just like a chain is linked, with each link entering the one below it, so too, the bottom of each world enters into the top of the world below it.

11 *Ibid.*

12 *Ramchal, Derech Hashem* 1:5:2, 5.

this works moving downwards. But it also works in the opposite direction. When we make a choice in our World of Action, the effects of those choices soar upwards and affect all the worlds above. The smallest action on earth filters all the way up to the highest spiritual levels.

This structure allows man to take his place as the center of the creation. It explains how we—seemingly an insignificant speck in the cosmos—are the primary movers and shakers of the universe.¹³

MAN—A MINI-WORLD

The soul is a complex entity which contains five levels. These are (in ascending order) the *nefesh*, *ruach*, *neshamah*, *chayah*, and *yechidah*.¹⁴ The top two souls are not contained within the body but are rather connected to it.¹⁵ The higher parts of man's soul are way above the spiritual level of the angels.¹⁶

Each one of the four lower souls is connected with one of the four ascending worlds of spirituality, as depicted in the table below.¹⁷ The fifth and highest level of the soul, the *yechidah*, exists on a plane that is an absolute unity, the Fifth World, known as *adam ha'kadmoni* or Primordial Man.

SOULS	WORLDS
<i>Yechidah</i>	Primordial Man
<i>Chayah</i>	Emanation
<i>Neshamah</i>	Creation
<i>Ruach</i>	Formation
<i>Nefesh</i>	Action

The parallels between the five souls and the five worlds prompt the Kabbalists to declare man to be the Mini-World, while the world outside

13 Ibid. 1:5:2.

14 *Derech Hashem* 3:1:4 (end).

15 Both these souls live in spiritual planes that are so high that each soul is not clearly differentiated from the unity of souls at this level.

16 These operate mainly on the level of the second world from the bottom, *Olam Hayetzirah*.

17 *Zohar* 2:94b.

of man is called the Big World. These two worlds—the Mini-World and the Big World—parallel each other.¹⁸

Man contains the full range of material and spiritual gradations within him. Man is therefore a replica of the world external to him, or the Big World.¹⁹ The German philosopher Immanuel Kant once said: “Two things fill the mind with ever-new and increasing admiration and awe the more often and steadily we reflect upon them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.” According to Judaism, these are two reflections of the same reality. We have an entire world within ourselves with all five levels that we see outside of ourselves. It means that we can find within ourselves a point that can connect with any level of spirituality outside of ourselves. We will see the significance of this below.

Man is a mini-world, and all the forces that are found within him parallel the forces that are found in the big world outside of him.

Here is how this unfolded in the creation:

When God created man, He “appealed” to all the elements of the universe to contribute their power and potential into this one being.²⁰ All these elements are represented within him. Our spirituality extends through all of reality. Because of this, we have the power to pull all the spiritual threads of the universe together, for there is always a point within ourselves that we can connect with and hence elevate the Big World beyond ourselves.²¹ Nothing is out of our reach.

This is the deeper message of Jacob’s dream of the ladder. Jacob saw angels climbing up and down on a ladder stretching from the earth to heaven. This ladder is man’s ladder. We are the soul of the world.²² Our human impulse to innovate lies in our sense that this is true.

18 Ibid., p. 100a.

19 Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, *Ruach Chaim on Ethics of Our Fathers* 5:1.

20 Ibid.

21 *Nefesh Hachaim* 1:6.

22 *Zohar, Parashat Naso* 123b; see *Ruach Chaim*, *ibid.*

MAN COMPLETES THE WORLD

As Jews, we stand for certain things. One of them is that all the threads of our messy history are being combined under the surface to reveal, at some stage in the future, God's grand vision. For now, God is hidden below the surface. This, which is referred to as His hidden Face (*hester panav*), is the source of all deficiency. Thus, the resolution to this is the revelation of God, known as the shining of His Face (*hearat panim*).²³

Why did God do this? Because He deliberately created our world incomplete²⁴ so that we could complete the world and become partners with God in the creation itself.²⁵

As the soul of the world, it is man's responsibility to turn the world into a receptacle fitting to receive God's presence, known as the *Shechinah*.²⁶ We are tasked with creating an environment on earth

*God gave man
the power and the
mandate to be able
to complete the world
that He had begun.*

where God will feel at home, so to speak. We thereby control the amount of Godliness that is revealed in this world.²⁷ God's redemptive power is under the guardianship of man.

In what is known as *tikkun ha'olam*—the fixing of the world—we take God's deliberately fractured world and fix it.²⁸ God empowered us with all that we need to do this. Embedded in the giving of the Torah is the spiritual power necessary to do the job.²⁹

This partnership allows us to have an unusually intimate relationship with God. Instead of being like a poor person receiving a handout, we

23 *Ramchal, Klalei Maamar Hachochmah, klal aleph.*

24 This is known from one of the names of God, *Sha-dai*, which means, "the One who told the world to stop" (*Mi She'amar Le'Olamo 'Dai*). This means that God did not let the world reach the ultimate state of perfection but rather stopped it in the middle, leaving it to man to do the final fixing of the world.

25 *Ramchal, Daat Tevunot* 158 (p. 188). The *Zohar* (1:5) points out that the word *ami* (my nation) is spelled the same as the word *imi* (with me), i.e., My nation is with me as my partner.

26 *Tanya*, chap. 36.

27 *Ibid.*

28 It is also known as the *tikkun ha'klali*—"the general fixing."

29 *Daat Tevunot* 158 (p. 170).

are able to sit across the table with God, so to speak, as a fellow contributor to the world.³⁰

This is the ultimate parenting model: nurturance of the child to make his own unique contribution to the world. How disappointing it is if we remain a perpetual child for God to look after, refusing to grow up and become fully what we are meant to and have the power to be!³¹

A remarkable encounter between a Roman General and a great rabbi illustrates this. Turnus Rufus, a Roman General, once asked Rabbi Akiva, “Whose deeds are greater, God’s or man’s?” Surprisingly, Rabbi Akiva answered that man’s deeds are greater. Rabbi Akiva showed Turnus Rufus some wheat, indicating that while God created the wheat, it is inedible in its raw form. We cannot eat it in the form that God made it! For wheat to be useful, we have to reap it, grind it into flour, and bake the flour into bread. God could have created a world where wheat stalks grew ready-to-use flour or even loaves of bread, but He didn’t so that we can make our contribution to the world. Then Rabbi Akiva gave a second example: A newborn male has an extra piece of foreskin on its organ that we remove through circumcision. If God wanted the male human to be circumcised, why was he not born that way? God created the male deliberately deficient to empower man with completing His creation.³²

THE RADICAL JEWISH AGENDA

Alfred North Whitehead stated that, “It is the business of the future to be dangerous...The major advances in civilizations...all but wreck the societies in which they occur.”³³ Indeed, civilizations rise, peak, and fade into so much dust, as Mark Twain pointed out.³⁴ But there is a line that goes through history that has an exceptionally optimistic ending.

30 Ibid., p. 188, based on the Talmud *Yerushalmi*, Tractate *Peah* 1:3, which states: “Not like one who eats from food that is not his own, who is embarrassed to look in the face of he [who gives him the handout].”

31 Based on a written communication from Mrs. Yehudit Leah Feld.

32 *Midrash Tanchuma*, Leviticus, *Parashat Tazria* 5.

33 Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*.

34 Mark Twain, “Concerning the Jews,” *Harper’s Magazine*, March 1898.

Jews have a radical optimistic vision that sees the healing and completion of the world as built on the cumulative efforts of humankind.

When God finished the creation, the Torah says, “*Va’yechulu*—and He completed” the heavens and the earth.³⁵ This word, *va’yechulu*, comes from the word *kli*, a vessel or utensil. This allows for another interpretation of the verse: “And God turned the world into a vessel”—a vessel for man to use and complete. Hence, the Sages say, “A person who recites *Va’yechulu* on Friday night is considered as if he were a partner with God in the work of creation.”³⁶ Such is the spiritual grandeur of man!

Each individual and each generation has its own unique contribution to the *tikkun ha’klali*—the general fixing of the world.³⁷ Each day, mankind is assigned to complete one aspect of the total *tikkun*.³⁸ God, our partner, takes all these contributions and weaves them into a fabric that reveals the complete picture of creation.³⁹ When complete, the Messianic Era will dawn. Woven into the whole, every aspect produces a new sustenance, each contributing to a revelation of God’s glory.⁴⁰ The hues and rays of light all recombine to produce a pure white light as the entire creation moves over to eternity.

35 Genesis 2:1. *Chizkuni*, *ibid.*, shows how this means that God created the entire cosmos.

36 Talmud, Tractate *Shabbat* 119b. The Gemara brings a proof for this: As it is stated: “And the heavens and the earth were finished [*va’yechulu*].” Do not read it as, “were finished [*va’yechulu*]”; rather as, “they finished [*va’yechalu*].” It is considered as though the Holy One, blessed be He, and the individual who says this become partners and completed the work together.

37 *Daat Tevunot* 128.

38 *Rashash*, introduction to *Nahar Shalom*.

39 *Daat Tevunot*, *ibid.*

40 *Ibid.*