From the online library at www.worldwisdom.com

Chapter 16

Creation, the Image of God

Leo Schaya

Lift up your eyes on high and see who hath created these? *Isaiah 40:26*

I

The principal aim of tradition in regard to the forms and laws of the cosmos is to connect all things with their first and divine cause and thus show man their true meaning, the sense of his own existence being likewise revealed to him thereby. Now, in the sight of the "One without a second," the whole of existence has no being of its own: it is the expression of the one reality, that is to say the totality of its aspects, manifestable and manifested, in the midst of its very infinity. Things are no more than symbolic "veils" of their divine essence or, in a more immediate sense, of its ontological aspects; these aspects are the eternal archetypes of all that is created.

If one understands creation in this way, it is revealed as a multitude of more or less perfect images of God or of his qualities, as a hierarchy of more or less pure truths leading towards the only truth; for if God is the first origin and highest prototype of creation, he is also its final end as Proverbs (16:4) testifies: "YHVH[1] has made everything for his own purpose."

The only reality cannot do otherwise than work for itself and in itself. But in its pure selfness, it does not act or wish for any; in it nothing whatsoever is determined, there is no distinction between subject and object, cause and effect, a god and a creation. In this non-duality, God rests in himself, nameless, and without any know-

1. The tetragrammaton YHVH represents the sacrosanct name of God in the Jewish tradition. For more than two thousand years the Jews have been forbidden to pronounce this name, and its vocalization is no longer known.

able aspect; it is only on this side of the supreme and superintelligible essence that his knowledge "makes its appearance," which is to say his intelligent and intelligible being, including his causal and efficient will. His being, his knowledge, his will and his action are indivisible aspects of his ontological unity; this unity is not affected by any of his attributes nor by any of his manifestations: the One is what he is, knows himself, through himself, and works in himself for himself without becoming other than himself.

His work is the manifestation of all the aspects of his being in the midst of his being itself. In *Sefirothic* language it is said that *kether*, the supreme principle, sees itself through *hokhmah*, the "wisdom" or first irradiation, in the mirror of *binah*, the "intelligence" or infinite receptivity. In this supreme mirror God contemplates his seven lordly aspects: *hesed*, his "grace"; *din*, his "judgement"; *tifereth*, his "beauty"; *netsah*, his "victory"; *hod*, his "glory"; *yesod*, the cosmic "foundation" or his eternal act; and *malkhuth*, his "kingdom," or immanence. The irradiations of his aspects come together in the last *Sefirah*, *malkhuth*, as in a lower mirror, and there form the multiple picture of what in reality is only one; this image of the infinite and indivisible aspects of the One is the Creation.

All created things emanate from God's being and from his knowledge; they are essentially his ontological and intelligible possibilities, the "sparks" of his light, the "ideas" that spring from his "wisdom" or "thought" like so many spiritual and existential "rays."

> When God designed to create the universe, his thought compassed all worlds at once, and by means of this thought were they all created, as it says, "In wisdom hast thou made them all" (Psalms 104:24). By this thought (*mahshabah*)—which is his wisdom (*hokhmah*)—were this world and the world above created. . . . All were created in one moment (the eternal moment of divine action). And he made this (terrestrial) world corresponding to the world above (the celestial and spiritual worlds which are themselves "pictures" of the infinite world of the *Sefiroth* or supreme archetypes), and everything which is above has its counterpart here below . . . and yet all constitute a unity (because of the causal sequence of all things and their essential identity with the only reality) (*Zohar*, *Shemoth* 20 a).

The knowledge of God is the *alpha* and *omega* of the work of creation. The world is born from the knowledge that God has of himself; and by the knowledge that the world has of God, it is reabsorbed into him. God made everything for this knowledge that

unites to him; all other knowledge is only an ephemeral reflection of it. When the world sees God—through man—it sees its supreme archetype, its own uncreated fullness, and is effaced in its essence, in the infinite. This cognitive and deifying act is the ultimate fulfillment of the creative work; it is for that—for himself—that God created the world.

The knowledge of God does not depend on any science, but all human knowledge depends on it and derives from it. Receptivity alone, face to face with God, is enough, in principle, to obtain the influx of his light in which the spirit can see him. A science, even a revealed science such as cosmology, is only a possible, not an obligatory way of searching for knowledge of God; it is a way which makes it possible to receive the truth through his symbolic "veils," that is through the worlds, on whatever scale. To see the eternal cause in cosmic effects raises a man above the illusions of the phenomenal world and brings him closer to reality. Baal-Shem[2] said:

> At times, man has to learn that there are an indefinite number of firmaments and spheres beyond, and that he himself is located in an insignificant spot on this small earth. But the entire universe is as nothing in the face of God, the Infinite, who brought about the "contraction" and made "room" in himself so that the worlds could be created in it. But although man may understand this with his mind, he is not able to ascend toward the higher worlds; and this is what is meant by: "The Lord appeared to me from afar"—he contemplates God from afar. But if he serves God with all his strength, he actualizes a great power in himself and rises in spirit, and suddenly pierces all the firmaments, and ascends beyond the angels, beyond the celestial "wheels," beyond the Serafim and the "thrones"; and that is the perfect "service."

II

When Baal-Shem says that "God, the infinite, brings about a 'contraction' and makes 'room' in himself where the worlds can be cre-

2. Israel ben Eliezer, called Baal-Shem (Master of the Divine Name), 1700-60, was the greatest Jewish saint of the last centuries. He founded Polish and Ukrainian Hasidism; this term comes from the word *hasid*, the "devout" in regard to God. His movement developed towards the middle of the eighteenth century in Poland and spread into all the Slav countries; in the last century it included nearly four million adepts.

ated," he is alluding to the Kabbalistic doctrine of *tsimtsum*. The term *tsimtsum* can be translated by "contraction," "restriction," "retreat," or "concentration"; it had been used in Jewish esotericism chiefly since Isaac Luria (1534-72) to describe the divine mystery on which creation depends. "The Holy One, blessed be he, withdrew his powerful light from one part of himself, and left a void to serve as 'a place' for cosmic expansion"; it concerns "that part of the divine essence in which the light was weakened to allow the existence of souls, angels and the material worlds."

Through this symbolic language, the Kabbalah, then, tries to express the mysterious genesis of the finite in the midst of the infinite. In reality, God, the absolute One, has no "parts," but an infinity of possibilities, of which only the creatural possibilities have the illusory appearance of separate forms; in themselves, these forms are integrated, as eternal archetypes, in the all-possibility of the One. As for that "part from which the light has been withdrawn" to make room for the "place" of the cosmos, it is nothing other than the receptivity of God that actualizes itself in the midst of his unlimited fullness; this receptivity has a transcendent aspect and an immanent aspect: "above," it is identified with *binah*, the "supreme mother," which is eternally filled with the infinite and luminous emanation of the "father," *hokhmah*; "below," it is *malkhuth*, the "lower mother," or cosmic receptivity of God. The latter absorbs both the influx from the *Sefiroth* of mercy which are luminous and overflowing, and the influx from the *Sefiroth* of rigor which are "dark" or "empty"; that is why, in contrast to *binah*, which is always revealed as filled with the infinite, *malkhuth*, or divine immanence, can take on the appearance of a dark void in the midst of its radiant fullness. Indeed, *binah* is said to be "without all rigor, although rigor emanates from it"; while *malkhuth* receives the emanations of rigor together with those of grace, to produce and dominate the cosmos and hold it in equilibrium through the interpenetration of the two simultaneously opposite and complementary influxes.

Now, the rigor which emanates from *binah* is *din*, "judgment" or universal discernment, the principle of concentration, distinction and limitation; it produces *tsimtsum*, divine "contraction," in the heart of *malkhuth*, the plastic cause. Through the effect of *tsimtsum*, the divine fullness withdraws to a certain extent from the "lower mother," and awakens creative receptivity in her; the latter, when actualized, takes on the aspect of the void or "place of the world,"

ready to receive cosmic manifestation. Then, all created possibilities spring up from the existential seed which is left behind by divine fullness on its withdrawal—as a luminous "residue" (*reshimu*) in the midst of immanent emptiness. Thus, thanks to the divine "contraction" and to the void it brings about in the *shekhinah*, the expansion of the world takes place; and everything living in the immanence of God is a small world created in the image of the macrocosm: it is a void to which life is given by a luminous "residue" of the only reality, by a central and divine "spark" that projects onto it the reflection of some eternal archetype.

The Kabbalah expresses the same cosmogonical process in other symbolic terms as the *pargod* or cosmic "curtain." The *Idra Rabba Kadisha* (the "great and holy assembly," included in the *Zohar*) says of the "Ancient of Ancients" that "he draws a curtain down before him" through which his kingdom begins to take shape. This image and that of the *tsimtsum* not only point to the same truth but from one point of view also complement each other. Thus it can be said that God appears to "withdraw" himself into himself to the extent that he draws down a "curtain" before him. The "curtain" hangs before him like a darkness; and this darkness in reality is nothing other than his cosmic receptivity, which allows his reality to appear through it as a light. But his infinite light appears through the dark veil only in a "weakened," fragmented and limited way, which is the mode of existence of the finite.

God is hidden in everything he creates, somewhat in the way that light is contained in the innumerable reflections that produce a mirage. To go further in this symbolism, it could be said that the desert where the mirage is produced represents the "void" or the "place" of the world made by *tsimtsum*, and the imperceptible screen on which appear the vanishing forms that lead the pilgrim astray represents the *pargod*, which is the "curtain" or "mirror" of the *shekhinah*. In fact, in the face of the "One without a second," creation—the apparition of a "second"—as well as the creative causes themselves, come to appear as existential illusions. That is why the Kabbalah brings in a third idea, in addition to those of *tsimtsum* and *pargod*, to define the nature of creation, namely, *habel*, "vanity," derived from Ecclesiastes (1:2): "Vanity of vanities (*habel habalim*), all is vanity!" The *Zohar* (*Shemoth* 10 b) teaches on this subject:

> King Solomon, in his book (Ecclesiastes), treated of seven "vanities" (*habalim*, lit. "breaths") upon which the world stands, namely the seven (*Sefirothic*) pillars (of universal construction) which sustain the world in (causal) correspondence with (their first created effects) the seven firmaments, which are called respectively *Vilon*, *Rakiya*, *Shehakim*, *Zebul*, *Ma'on*, *Makhon*, *Araboth*. It was concerning them that Solomon said: "Vanity of vanities . . . all is vanity" (*ibid*, 1:1). As there are seven firmaments, with others (existential planes such as the seven earths and seven hells) cleaving to them and issuing from them, so there are seven *habalim* and others emanating from these (and filling all creation), and Solomon in his wisdom referred to them all (as well as to their causes and archetypes, the seven *Sefiroth* of construction).

The Kabbalah does not say that the seven cosmological *Sefiroth* are illusions in themselves, for they represent the creative aspects of one and the same reality; nevertheless, in so far as they project the mirage of an existential multitude in the midst of its undifferentiated unity, they manifest as so many principles of illusion or causal "vanities." But if they are considered outside of their relation with creation, they are integrated into absolute unity. In so far as the One is looking at himself alone, he does not go out of his supreme triunity, *kether-hokhmah-binah*; but when he wishes to contemplate the creative possibilities in himself, he opens his "seven eyes" or "`Sefiroth of construction," projecting all the cosmic "vanities" through their look. "Vanity," according to Ecclesiastes, is to be found "under the sun"—a symbol of the *Sefirah tifereth*, which synthesizes the six active *Sefiroth* of "construction"—and is made upon the earth; now the "earth" is one of the synonyms of *malkhuth*, the receptive and substantial *Sefirah* of cosmic "construction": there alone, in the divine immanence, the mirage of creation is produced, maintained and effaced. "That is why the beginning of Genesis," says the *Tikkune Zohar*:

> is concerned only with the *elohim* (principle of immanence) designating the *shekhinah* (and not with the transcendental principle, YHVH). Everything created, from the *hayoth* and the *serafim* (higher angels) down to the smallest worm on the earth, lives in *elohim* and through *elohim* . . . The creation is the work of the *shekhinah* who takes care of it as a mother cares for her children.

The entire creation is an illusory projection of the transcendental aspects of God into the "mirror" of his immanence. The *Zohar* notes, in fact, that the verb *baro*, "to create," implies the idea

of "creating an illusion." But although the creation is by nature illusory, it contains something of reality; for every reflection of reality, even remote, broken up and transient, necessarily possesses something of its cause. Even if the creation is taken as being pure illusion, that real something which constitutes its essence still cannot be excluded. Illusion itself is not a mere nothingness, for there cannot be any such thing. By its very existence it would no longer be nothing; illusion is a "mixture" of the real and the ephemeral or—in Kabbalistic terminology—of "light" and "darkness."

Creation is made from the "dark void" that God established in the midst of his luminous fullness and which he then filled with his existential reflections. This "dark void" is the "mirror" or plane of cosmic reflection, inherent in the receptivity of the *shekhinah*. Indeed, receptivity is both emptiness and darkness; but while the nature of the void is transparency or translucence, that of darkness is opacity or contraction. Thus, when the creative influx of the *Sefiroth* fills the receptivity of the "lower mother," its emptiness or translucence transmits the divine radiation in all the directions of the cosmos, while its darkness contracts, condenses and becomes substance-enveloping light. In its first and celestial condensation, substance is still subtle and resplendent with the radiation that only lightly veils it; but it becomes opaque and gross in its corporeal and terrestrial solidification, which hides the light from above, as thick clouds mask the sun.

The "vanity" of things consists in this darkness which fleetingly takes on the appearance of substance; however, substance becomes a mirror of truth when the forms it assumes are recognized as the symbolic expressions of the eternal archetypes, which are none other than the divine aspects.

III

The ten fundamental aspects of God, or *Sefiroth*, are manifested at first on the macrocosmic level in the form of ten heavens. The three supreme *Sefiroth*, *kether-hokhmah-binah*, are revealed in the three "heavens of heavens," the triple immanent principle: that is, *shekhinah-metatron-avir*. *Shekhinah* is the immanence of *kether*, the presence of divine reality in the midst of the cosmos. *Metatron*, the manifestation of *hokhmah* and the active aspect of the *shekhinah*, is

the principial form from which all created forms emanate; *avir*, the ether, is a manifestation of binah:[3] it is the passive aspect of *shekhinah*, its cosmic receptivity, which gives birth to every created substance, whether subtle or corporeal. The triple immanent principle, *shekhinah-metatron-avir*, in its undifferentiated unity, constitutes the spiritual and prototypical "world of creation": *olam haberiyah*.

The seven *Sefiroth* of universal construction, *hesed-din-tifereth-netsah-hod-yesod-malkhath*, which emanate from the supreme tri-unity, are the causes and archetypes of the seven created heavens; the latter issue from the three "heavens of heavens," as the constituent degrees of the "world of formation," *olam hayetsirah*. In this world all creatures undergo their first and subtle formation; it is situated beyond space and time, in the indefinite expansion and duration of the supra-terrestrial cosmos. *Olam hayetsirah* is imperceptible to the senses and serves as a dwelling place for souls—before or after they pass through the earth—for angels and for spirits.

Between the seven subtle heavens and the "seven earths" which issue from them, are situated as further manifestations of the *Sefiroth* of construction, the seven degrees of the "lower Eden" or earthly Paradise, inhabited by angels and blessed souls; in this intermediary world there exist also darkened inversions of the heavens, namely the seven hells or abodes of the demons and of the damned.

The corporeal universe comprising the "seven earths," is called the "world of fact," *olam ha' asiyah*; it is conditioned by time, space, the material elements and, from the microcosmic point of view, by sensory perception. The seven earths represent so many different states of our universe; they are described as "seven countries," hierarchically "super-posed and all populated"; one of them, the "higher earth," is our own, which the six others resemble without attaining its perfection; in the same way their inhabitants possess only an incomplete or unbalanced kind of human form. On the other hand, the seven *Sefiroth* of construction—which are also called the "seven days of (principial) creation"—are manifested in time in the following septenaries: the seven days of the week; the seven years forming a "sabbatical" cycle; the seven times seven years between one "Jubilee" and another; the seven thousand years rep-

3. Sometimes *avir* is identified, by metaphysical transposition, with the supreme principle, *kether*; it is the substantial indistinction of the ether which, in this case, serves as a "symbol" of the indeterminateness of the absolute essence.

resenting a great cycle of existence; and the "seven times seven thousand years" ending at the fiftieth millennium, on the "great Jubilee," when the world is reintegrated into the divine principle.[4] Finally, the seven *Sefiroth* of construction determine the six directions of space and their spiritual center, called the "Holy of Holies."

Man is the most perfect image of universal reality in the whole of creation; he is the "incarnated" recapitulation of all the cosmic degrees and of their divine archetypes. Indeed, through his spiritual faculties, psychic virtues and corporeal forms, he represents the most evident symbol of the ten *Sefiroth*, and his integral personality embraces all the worlds: his pure and uncreated being is identified with the *Sefirothic* "world of emanation" (*olam ha' atsiluth*); his spirit, with the prototypical "world of creation" (*olam haberiyah*); his soul with the subtle "world of formation" (*olam hayetsirah*); and his body, with the sensory "world of fact" (*olam ha' asiyah*). The law of man, the ecalogue, is a manifestation of the ten *Sefiroth*, as is the "sacred community" of Israel, which is complete only when ten Jewish men come together.

The human being is the principal "point of intersection" of the *Sefirothic* rays in the midst of the cosmos; through him, the divine riches are revealed in all their spiritual radiance and by the explicit symbolism of thought, word, forms and corporeal gestures. Of all beings, man alone—in his perfect state—is the one being whom God causes to participate fully in his infinite knowledge; and through man's intermediary God brings everything back to himself.

IV

If creation is the image of God, cosmogony operates—just like a reflected projection—by the law of inversion or, more precisely, by inverse analogy. This law derives from the principle of divine "con-

4. When the Kabbalah says that the total duration of the world is fifty thousand years, this figure should be taken as a symbolic expression of the law which constitutes its eternal foundation. This law resides in the mystery of the seven *Sefiroth* of construction, each one of which recapitulates, in its way, the whole. Thus one is faced with a unity of "seven times seven" or forty-nine *Sefirothic* degrees, which are manifested through as many cyclical phases, its total duration being that of the indefinite existence of the cosmos; these forty-nine degrees issue from *binah* and return to it. *Binah*, as their "end," is the "fiftieth" degree, or the supreme and prototypical "Jubilee."

traction," *tsimtsum*; by the effect of this "contraction," the infinite, *en sof*, appears as *nekuda*, the causal "point" or supreme "center" of the finite, and the limits of the finite are extended and take on the appearance of unlimited existence. The "contraction" or first inversion is reflected in the midst of existence itself, with the actualization of a multitude of "central points," each surrounded by an expanse, which serves both as "veil" and "mirror" for its contents. All these "centers" are connected among themselves and with the "supreme Center," by the "middle pillar" or universal axis, which is none other than the creative, regulating and redemptive "ray" of the divine principle. The "spheres of activity," which surround their respective centers, are all the worlds, great and small, together making up the cosmic expanse; whether they appear as worlds properly so called, as beings or as things, each of these spheres constitutes, therefore, the "envelope" or "shell" of such and such a "kernel" or existential point of departure, hierarchically included in the "middle pillar." Finally, as was explained in the last chapter, every "point" representing the center, the immediate principle or prototype of such a world, itself functions as the "field of action" of a higher center, and so on up to the supreme center, which is its own "sphere of activity" embracing all the others.

Thus we are confronted by an indefinite series of existential states, formed by as many "inversions" or exteriorizations of their respective points of departure. We have just seen that all these "points" are co-ordinated, in accordance with the law of causality, in the universal axis, which is the "descent" of the "supreme point" across the center or "heart" of everything; thus, each thing, in spite of its dependence on what is hierarchically above it, contains in its innermost depth the "center of centers," the real presence of God. Every created thing is in its own way a synthesis of the whole of creation, whether in a conscious, developed or seminal mode and it includes in its essence the principle itself. The principle or universal and divine center is not comparable, therefore, to a point or geometric axis, localized in any one place:[5] it is the omnipresent medium.

5. It should be made clear that if the divine immanent center is not "localized" in any one place—because it penetrates all—it nevertheless reveals itself by preference in a sanctified place or being; the latter thereby represents the living expression of the universal center.

Terrestrial man, "last born" of the creation, is the "lower point" where cosmogony stops in its creative inversions and returns toward the "supreme point." When this "inversion of inversions" starts to work in man, it is said that he is seized by *teshubah*, "conversion," "repentance," or the "return" to God; indeed, when man "performs *teshubah*," with all his heart, all his soul, and all his might, he ends by being absorbed into his pure and divine "self" and by integrating—within himself—the whole of existence in the cause. This is given to man by the mystery of his inner and universal person which embraces everything from the terrestrial "world of fact" to the very principle of the "world of emanation"; that is why the voluntary "return" of man to God involves the "return" of all the worlds. "Great is *teshubah*, for it heals the world. Great is *teshubah*, for it reaches the throne of glory. Great is *teshubah*, for it brings about redemption" (*Talmud, Yoma* 86 a).

By his absorption in God, man actualizes universal deliverance in himself and thereby "hastens" cosmic redemption. The latter occurs when the entire multitude of subtle and corporeal manifestations has been exhausted in the midst of the two created worlds. At that moment the "grand Jubilee" takes place, the total and final deliverance;[6] it is the ultimate phase of *tsimtsum*, the "inversion of inversions," which is not only the "contraction" of the corporeal universe, but of the entire cosmic expanse: the "withdrawal" of the whole creation into its uncreated center and principle. Then, every immanent spiritual fight regains its transcendent brightness, and every terrestrial and celestial substance is reabsorbed in the "higher ether" (*avira ilaah*), which is eternally integrated into the infinite essence. Such is the return of the cosmic "image" to divine reality.

6. The definitive reintegration of the cosmos into the principle, which is to be accomplished at the end of "seven times seven millennia" or great cycles of existence, is prefigured by transitory restorations of the paradisal state, which take place every "seventh millennium" or "great Sabbath" of creation. One of these "moments of rest" or transient absorptions of the created into the divine immanence was the cycle of the *Fiat Lux*, the other, that of the adamic Eden; according to tradition, we are now at the dawn of a new cosmic Sabbath, the "Reign of the Messiah."

Creation, the Image of God by Leo Schaya

Features in

Seeing God Everywhere: Essays on Nature and the Sacred
© 2003 World Wisdom, Inc.
Edited by Barry McDonald, Foreword by Philip Zaleski,
Introduction by Satish Kumar.
All Rights Reserved. For Personal Usage Only.
www.worldwisdom.com