



A Post-Holocaust Perspective on Kabbalah

Hans Jonas: Man Comes to God's Aid

Hans Jonas (1903-1993) was a German- Jewish philosopher who fled Nazi Germany and later taught for many years at the New School in New York, New York.

In this excerpt from *Mortality and Morality: a search for the good after Auschwitz*, Jacob discusses the Lurianic concept of Tzimtzum and God's inability to help Man after "giving himself whole to the becoming world" during the creation.

"And here let us remember that Jewish tradition itself is really not quite so monolithic in the matter of divine sovereignty as official doctrine makes it appear. The mighty undercurrent of the Kabbalah, which Gershom Scholem in our days has brought to light anew, knows about a divine fate bound up with the coming-to-be of a world. There we meet highly original, very unorthodox speculations in whose company mine would not appear so wayward after all. Thus, for example, my myth at bottom only pushes further the idea of the *tzimtzum*, that cosmogonic centerconcept of the Lurianic Kabbalah. *Tzimtzum* means contraction, withdrawal, self-limitation. To make room for the world, the *En-Sof* (Infinite; literally, No-End) of the beginning had to contract himself so that, vacated by him, empty space could expand outside of him: the 'Nothing' in which and from which God could then create the world. Without this retreat into himself, there could be no 'other' outside God, and only his continued holding-himself-in preserves the finite things from losing their separate being again into the divine 'all in all.'

My myth goes farther still. The contraction is total as far as power is concerned; as a whole has the Infinite ceded his power to the finite and thereby wholly delivered his cause into its hands. Does that still leave anything for a relation to God?

Let me answer this question with a last quotation from the earlier writing. By forgoing its own inviolateness, the eternal ground allowed the world to be. To this self-denial all creation owes its existence and with it has received all there is to receive from beyond. Having given himself whole to the becoming world, God has no more to give: it is man's now to give to him. And he may give by seeing to it in the ways of his life that it does not happen or happen too often, and not on his account, that it 'repented the Lord' to have made the world. This may well be the secret of the 'thirty-six righteous ones' whom, according to Jewish lore, the world shall never lack and of whose number in our time were possibly some of those 'just of the nations' I have mentioned before: their guessed-at secret being that, with the superior valency of good over evil, which (we hope) obtains in the noncausal logic of things there, their hidden holiness can outweigh countless guilt, redress the balance of a generation, and secure the peace of the invisible realm."

Source : Hans Jonas, *Mortality and Morality : A search for the good after Auschwitz*, ed. Lawrence Vogel (Northwestern University Press, 1996), and Eric Pace, "Hans Jonas, Influential Philosopher, Is Dead at 89," *The New York Times* (Feb. 6, 1993), available online at: <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/02/06/nyregion/hans-jonas-influential-philosopher-is-dead-at-89.html?pagewanted=2>