



Etz haChayim, the Lurianic Tree of Life

The Kabbalistic Creation Myth

God destroys in order to create

Isaac Luria (1534-1572), the Ari, wrote very little during his short life. After his death, his leading student began to write down what he remembered of the Ari's teachings.

This student was Chaim Vital, who studied with the Ari during his brief time in Tzfat (Safed). In this excerpt from Etz haChayim (The Tree of Life), Vital describes Luria's theory about the beginning of creation.

In Lurianic Kabbalah, God creates a contraction, a tzimtzum, from which creation begins.

When the supernal emanator wished to create this material universe, it withdrew its presence. At first, Ein Sof (the infinite) filled everything. Now, still, even an inanimate stone is illuminated by it; otherwise the stone could not exist at all—it would disintegrate. The illumination of Ein Sof clothes itself in garment upon garment.

At the beginning of creation, when Ein Sof withdrew its presence all around in every direction, it left a vacuum in the middle, surrounded on all sides by the light of Ein Sof, empty precisely in the middle. The light withdrew like water in a pond displaced by a stone. When a stone is dropped in a pond, the water at that spot does not disappear—it merges with the rest. So the withdrawn light converged beyond, and in the middle remained a vacuum. Then all the opacity and density of judgment within the light of Ein Sof—like a drop in the ocean—was extracted.

Descending into the vacuum, it transformed into an amorphous mass, surrounded in every direction by the light of Ein Sof.

Out of the mass emanated the four worlds: emanation, creation, formation, and actualization. For in its simple desire to realize its intention, the emanator relumined the mass with a ray of the light withdrawn at first—not all the light, because if it had all returned, the original state would have been restored, which was not the intention.

To fashion pottery, the potter first takes an unformed mass of clay and then puts his hand inside to shape it. So the supernal emanator put its hand into the amorphous mass, that is, a ray of light returned from above. As this light began to enter the mass, vessels were formed. From the purest light, Keter; next, Hokhmah; then, Binah, and so on through all ten sefirot. Since Keter was the purest and clearest of all the vessels, it could bear the light within it, but Hokhmah and Binah, though more translucent than those below, were not light Keter. Not having its capacity, their backs broke, and they fell from their position. As the light descended further, six points appeared—six fragments of what had been one point of light. Thus the vessels shattered. Their spiritual essence—the light—ascended back to the mother's womb, while the shattered vessels fell to the world of creation.

When the light emanated once again—regenerated, arrayed anew—it extended only to the end of the world of emanation. "Emanation" denotes this extension of the light of Ein Sof during the time of regeneration. Emanation consists of five visages. These visages are reconfigurations of the points of light, capable now of receiving the light, so that no shattering occur, as at first. Below these visages, the light of Ein Sof appears only through a screen. As when you sit in the shade: though the sun does not shine on you directly, it illuminates the shaded area. In a similar manner, the light of Ein Sof illuminates the world of creation through a screen, indirectly.

Source : *Etz Chayim*, trans. Daniel Matt in *The Essential Kabbalah*.