CHAPTER TEN
LURIANIC CREATION MYTHS
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While myth in general is a narrative of origins, the interiorised myth of the Lurianic Cabala concerns the origins of the representation of the self, the origins of consciousness and self-knowledge. The aim of the cabalists is to investigate the nature and structure of the soul and its place in the world; their primary concern is with the emergence of the divine creativity and the relation of man to God, and the question of the origin of the external world is secondary.

The Lurianic account of creation is found principally in two myths, the contraction of the deity, taken from earlier cabalistic sources, and the breaking of the vessels which is unique to the Lurianic Cabala. In the Lurianic corpus; the first act of the creation was the contraction of the deity, leaving an empty space for the creation of the world. The catastrophic failure of the first attempt at creation is represented in the Lurianic Cabala as the shattering of the vessels which were intended to contain the divine light, but instead broke and were destroyed during the process of creation. As they emerged the lights of the emanation gradually become differentiated from the infinite and each other. The process of differentiation involved the division of the lights themselves into interior lights and exterior vessels intended to contain the lights as they evolved into discrete entities, to prevent their dissolution and return to the infinite. However, when the light entered the vessels, the vessels were unable to contain the light and shattered.

3 The writings of the Lurianic corpus are comprised of the teachings of the Cabalist R. Isaac Luria (1534–1572) preserved and collected by his disciples after his death.
The difficulties of the creation involving the transition from the infinite to the finite are revealed in the impossibility of the containment of the lights of the infinite even in its own vessels. The paradoxical nature of the divine revelation and the incommensurability of the divine and the human are revealed in the Lurianic doctrines of the contraction of the deity and the breaking of the vessels. The revelation of the roots of evil, formerly quiescent within the deity, in the course of the process of creation explains the failure of the first emanation and the need for the subsequent restoration of the emergent emanation. These conceptions also determine man’s place in the cosmos and his relation to the drama of the revelation of the self-revelation of the deity.

The Content of the Contraction

The act of creation in the Lurianic corpus principally concerns the arising and tempering of the opposites, good and evil, referred to in cabalistic terminology as the judgements and mercies of the deity. The origin of evil is placed within the deity itself. The origin of evil is placed within the deity itself, as a result of the contraction the roots of evil, quiescent within the infinite, were concentrated and revealed. The most radical formulation of the Lurianic contraction is that it occurred in order to purify the deity from the sources of judgements that were present in the divine thought in potentia and were revealed in the process of creation, which is thereby conceived as a process of catharsis of the deity. Haim Vital describes the first contraction in these terms in the Tree of Life.

The aim of the contraction was to reveal the roots of the judgements. The aim of the emanation was to purify the worlds emanating from the mixed nature of the deity, which included within itself both judgements and mercies:

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1 The myth of the breaking of the vessels, although unique to the Lurianic Cabala, is developed from earlier cabalistic sources which state that the primordial worlds destroyed by the deity according to the midrash in Genesis Raba 3,9 represent a stage in the creation prior to the purification of the thought of the deity which was not sustained but immediately destroyed. For the sources of this conception see Idel, ‘The Evil Thought of the Deity’, Tabbīz 41 (1980) pp. 356–364 (Hebrew).


3 Tree of Life, Jerusalem 1910, 1,1,2.