The Lurianic Metaphors, Creativity and the Structure of Language
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In the Lurianic Kabbalah we are witness to a theosophical account of the world's creation, which at the same time provides a foundation for a theory of human creativity as well as a general model for understanding linguistic significance. By explicating how the symbolic dynamic of the Lurianic Kabbalah accounts for both human creativity and the signification process, we can not only gain insight into human psychology and language, but also deepen our understanding of the Kabbalah and its capacity to reveal the hidden nature of God and the world.

I will begin by providing a general account of the Lurianic theosophy, and then proceed to show how the Lurianic symbols provide the foundation for a theory of human creativity. I will then briefly describe the Kabbalist's views on language, and close by offering a preliminary outline for a Lurianic model of linguistic meaning.[1]

The Lurianic Kabbalah

Isaac Luria (1534-72) was perhaps the greatest of Kabbalistic visionaries. Living and teaching in the mystical community of Safed, which had laready produced such luminaries as Moses Cordovero and Joseph Karo, Luria developed a highly original theosophical system which, though based in the Zohar, introduced a number of symbols that hearkened back to early Gnostic ideas. These symbols were highly determinative for the subsequent course of Jewish mysticism and became the foundation for the Hasidic movement. Luria himself wrote comparatively little, and it is mainly through the works of his disciples, most notably Chayyim Vital (1543-1620) that we are aware of Luria's unique system of thought.

The Lurianic Kabbalah is an extremely complex system of thought[2] that integrates a variety of symbols into what appears, at least on the surface, to be a purely mythological account of the creation and the ultimate destiny of the world. In the following pages I outline the bare essentials of the Lurianic system; describing only that which is necessary in order to comprehend the main points of my subsequent exposition. Those interested in a more detailed account should consult works by Scholem, Tishby, and my own *Symbols of the Kabbalah* and *Kabbalistic Metaphors* (see below).

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[1] I am indebted to Zev bar-Lev for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

[2] Idel has stated "There can be no doubt that Lurianic Kabbalah is one of the most complex intellectual systems ever produced by a Jewish author—indeed, as Gershom Scholem has correctly asserted, by any human mind." See M. Idel, *Messianic Mystics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 170. also, David Biale, "Gershom Scholem's Ten Unhistorical Aphorism in Kabbalah: Text and Commentary", *Modern Judaism,* 5, 1985, pp. 67-93. Scholem's point, however, that the Lurianic Kabbalah is more "hidden and occult" than nearly any other system of thought.

Like previous Kabbalists, Luria begins and ends his theosophical system, with the one, infinite God, who is beyond being, existence and time, yet who contains and sustains within itself all that ever was, will, or could be. This godhead, the Kabbalist's *Ein-sof* (The Infinite, literally "without end") is *Ayin* (nothingness) prior to creation but is potentially and actually the All. *Ein-sof* is the potentiality, source, substance and goal of everything that is, and *Ein' Sof's* "light", the *Or Ein-sof* (Light of the Infinite) is the energy that pervades and sustains the cosmos. However, in order to complete itself as both *Ayin* and *Yesh* (nothing and being) *Ein-sof* must manifest itself in a world. It does so through a paradoxical process by which it negates, withdraws, contracts and conceals its own infinite being, thereby providing an opening or place for finite existence. In an act that Luria termed *Tzimtzum* (concealment and contraction) *Ein-sof* withdraws from a point within itself, yielding the "metaphysical space" for an indefinitely large series of finite, seemingly independent worlds (*ha-olamot*) that are nonetheless dependent upon *Ein-sof* for their substance and continued vitality.

Acts of contraction alternate with emanations of divine light, as the cosmos first comes to consist of *Adam Kadmon*, a Primordial Human, who embodies within itself the archetypal ideas and values out of which the finite world, and in particular, the soul of humanity, are formed. The Kabbalists termed these archetypal ideas and values the ten *Sefirot*, a term that is related to Hebrew roots for "number," "book" and "sapphire," and which came to connote the fundamental dimensions of meaning and value in God, humanity, and the world. The *Sefirot*, which originally exist within *Ein-sof* (as *middot* or divine traits) become the elemental components of the created world. They are, according to Luria, emanated by *Adam Kadmon*, the Primordial Man, and in their original form they are vessels (*Kelim*) for containing the further emanations of the divine, infinite light. These *sefirotic* vessels embody the archetypal values of Will, Wisdom, Understanding, Kindness, Judgment, Beauty, Endurance, Splendour, Foundation, and Kingship, which in the Kabbalah encompass the basic structure of the cosmos.

Luria, followed other Kabbalists in holding that the *Sefirot* are complementary to or perhaps even identical with the *Otiyot Yesod*, the "22 Foundational Letters" of divine speech, which the proto-Kabbalistic, *Sefer Yetzirah*, had held were the building blocks of creation. Luria held that the *Sefirot* are organized into five basic *Olamot* (worlds), each of which contain varying proportions of each of the ten *Sefirot*, as well as into countless lesser worlds and several divine personalities (*Partzufim*) representing masculine and feminine aspects of God. Our world, *Assiyah* (the world of "Making") is the most remote from the infinite God.

Luria was again innovative in his view that because the *Sefirot* as they were originally emanated were disunified and incomplete, they shattered under the impact of the infinite light. This shattering, known as the *Shevirat ha-Kelim* (the Breaking of the Vessels) results in a condition in which all being is in a state of exile (*galut*): everything is out of

place and the lower worlds are riddled with spiritual, moral and psychological contradictions. In addition, the masculine and feminine aspects of the cosmos, which had hitherto been face to face (*panim* a *panim*), are rent apart, turning their backs on one another (*acher* v' *acher*).

Shards from the broken vessels tumble through the metaphysical void (*tehiru*) and in the process capture sparks (*netzotzim*) of divine light, forming husks or shells (**Kellipot**), which are comprised of a lifeless outer shell and divine inner core that is alienated from its source in *Ein-sof*. These husks constitute the dark and evil realm of the *Sitra Achra* (the "Other Side"), but are also the constituents of our actual world.

With the advent of the Breaking of the Vessels, the *Sefirot* immediately begin to reorganize themselves into *Partzufim* (Visages or Personalities), which in archetypal fashion represent the developmental stages of man from birth to old age. The *Partzufim* restore the world by reengaging in conjugal relations. However, this restoration, which is known as *Tikkun ha-Olam* (the restoration and emendation of the World), must be completed by mankind. It is mankind's divinely appointed task to extract (*birur*) and liberate the captured sparks of divine light from their shells, gather them together, and raise them on high, so they may once again rejoin the infinite God, *Ein-sof*. In so doing, mankind completes creation and, in a fashion, gives full actuality to God himself. The restored world of *Tikkun* is the very meaning of creation and the ultimate destiny of the universe. It is only with this restoration and emendation of the world that *Ein-sof*, who had originally been *Ayin* (nothing) is completed and fully becomes itself.

The above, then, is a brief account of the Lurianic Kabbalah; what I will refer to as its "fundamental "myth", or "basic metaphor." I will argue that this myth or metaphor provides the foundation for a theory of human creativity and a model for linguistic significance. In order to assist in the comprehension of these views it will be helpful to restate the Lurianic myth in purely abstract terms (I have placed the Hebrew name of the Lurianic symbol for each abstract stage in parentheses): (1) a primal nothing/being or "Absolute" (*Ayin/Ein-sof*) (2) initiates a contraction or self-negation (*tzimtzum*), which gives rise to (3) an imagined and alienated realm (*ha-olamot*) (4) within which a created, personal subject arises (*Adam Kadmon*). (5) This subject embodies the fundamental structures, ideas and values of both God and the human world (*Sefirot*), However, (6) these *Sefirot* are inherently unstable and deconstruct (*shevirat ha-kelim*), leading to (7) a further alienation of the primal energy from its source (*kellipot, Sitra Achra*) and (8) a rending apart of opposites, resulting in the intellectual, spiritual, and moral antinomies and perplexities of our world. As a result of (9) a spiritual, intellectual, and psychological process (*birur*), (10) the ideas and values of the world are restored in a manner that enables them to structure and contain the primal energy of the Absolute, and complete both God and the world (*tikkun ha-Olam*).

The Nature of the Creative Process

We are now in a position to understand how the Lurianic theosophy is both a theory of human as well as divine creativity. I will later argue, after presenting some more material from the history of Jewish mystical thought, that one can understand the basic metaphors of the Lurianic Kabbalah as outlining the essential form of linguistic creativity and exchange, and, more specifically, providing a model for the significance of each and every linguistic proposition and act. However, I will first examine how the Lurianic system as a whole, in its progression from *Ayin* (Nothing), to *Ein-sof* (the Infinite), *tzimtzum* (Contraction), *Sefirot* (Archetypes/Values), *shevirah* (Breakage), *Kellipot* (Encapsulating "Shells"), *Birur* (extraction) and *tikkun* (Restoration) can be understood as a metaphor for the structure of all creativity, thought and inquiry.

To begin with just as *Ayin*, nothingness, expresses the character of *Ein-sof* prior to creation, nothingness characterizes the human subject in the initial moment of creativity. In this moment, the creating or inquiring intellect is *Ayin*, empty or ignorant, experiencing a *lack* prior to its initiating a creative work or inquiry. In the initial moment when one seeks to create or inquire, one stands before infinite plenum of possibility, which at the same time is an emptiness, lack or void, one that is analogous to, if not identical with the nothingness, *Ayin* which the Kabbalists equate with *Ein-sof*, the infinite God. We should here note that the Zohar equates *Ayin* not only with *Ein-sof*, but also with the highest *Sefirah, Keter*, which it also refers to as desire or will. Prior to creating, one experiences a lack (an *Ayin* or void) and a desire which engenders a will to generate or fulfill.

Paradoxically, however, the first *act* in the creative (or investigative process) is to restrict one's field, i.e. to limit one's creative aspiration or range of inquiry, to narrow the possibilities, and focus on a limited area, in much the same way that, in creating and revealing itself to a world, *Ein-sof* performs an act of *tzimtzum*, contraction, limitation and concealment of its own infinite potential. Having constricted one's field in a human act of *tzimtzum*, one has an initial flash of insight (analogous to the *Or Ein-sof*—the infinite light— bursting forth from the Primordial Man) and selects the values or tools for one's inquiry. In expressing one's initial insight and then creating a "draft" or positing an initial assumption or hypothesis to contain it, one enters a positive moment in the creative process, just as *Ein-sof* enters a positive moment in creation by emanating the value archetypes or *Sefirot*. The *Sefirot*, which are initially rather fragile and disjoint serve as the vessels for containing the divine light, and serve as the elements of creation, which must, however, go through a processes of rupture and emendation before they can fulfill their role. Like these *Sefirot*, which are unable to contain the full emanation of divine energy, one's initial assumptions, insights or ideas are inevitably inadequate to comprehend, express or contain the subject matter of one's creation or inquiry. There is thus a shattering of one's hypothesis, idea, or creation, in much the same manner as the original *Sefirot* were shattered with the "Breaking

of the Vessels" (*Shevirat ha-Kelim*). The result of this shattering is that the energy or notions produced by one's initial efforts are partially obscured and lost to one's endeavor or inquiry, in a manner analogous to the entrapment of the sparks (*netzotzim*) by the shards of the broken vessels which form the "husks" or *Kellipot* that obscure the divine creative light.

Just as the Kabbalists held that humanity is enjoined to extract (*Birur*) sparks of divine light from their "husks," the individual faced with the failure of his initial efforts must proceed to both recover what remains of his initial creative insight and reorganize his work or inquiry in a manner that is more suitable to the subject at hand. This latter process is perfectly analogous to the Lurianic act of *tikkun*, in which the lights recovered from the husks are emended and reorganized as the restored *Sefirot* and *Partzufim* (divine visages) of the World of *Tikkun*, and the process of creation is finally perfected and brought to a close. In Kabbalistic terms, the completed work becomes one piece in the overall re-creation and restoration of the world. However, there is no real end, as the entire process repeats itself *ad infinitum*. Along the way there is a dialectical progression in which an initial lack or creative urge (*Ayin*) surveys a field of infinite possibility (*Ein-sof*), constricts and focuses itself (*tzimtzum*), posits an initial hypothesis or creative effort (*Sefirot*), which proves inadequate to its subject matter and breaks apart (*shevirah*), only to be recovered and revised (*tikkun*). In the process ideas that are initially clearly defined, are torn asunder, and come to include what was originally thought to contradict them or lie outside their scope, thus becoming open to that which they were initially meant to exclude.

Language, the Vehicle of Creation and the Substance of the World

The Lurianic Kabbalah is not on its face primarily a linguistic theory of creation. However, the Jewish tradition in general, and the Kabbalistic tradition in particular, clearly understood divine creativity in linguistic terms, and both the early and later commentators on Luria's system provided linguistic interpretations of the Lurianic symbols. In this and the following sections I explore the role of language in the Kabbalah in general, as well as the linguistic interpretations of the Lurianic symbols that were provided by Luria's followers and the Hasidim. These interpretations provide the basis for my view that the Lurianic system is a model of language.

For many Kabbalists, language was thought to be both the vehicle of creation and the substance of the world. Already in the earliest proto-Kabbalistic work *Sefer Yetzirah* (The Book of Formation) we find a theory of creation in which the universe is said to have been created via the 22 consonant/letters of the Hebrew alphabet. These letters and the ten *Sefirot*, which in *Sefer Yetzirah* constitute a parallel, numerical metaphor for creation, together constitute "the thirty wondrous paths of creation."[3]   For *Sefer Yetzirah* it is the

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[3] *Sefer Yetzirah* 1:1, Aryeh Kaplan, *Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation*, Rev ed. (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, 1997), p. 5.

Otiyot Yesod, the foundational letters, through which God "formed substance out of chaos and made nonexistence into existence."[4]

The idea that language as the vehicle of creation is present in what is generally regarded to be the earliest Kabbalistic text, *Sefer ha-Bahir*,[5] and in an anonymous early Kabbalistic text, "Source of Wisdom," where we find the theory that the world was created through an inscription of divine speech in the Primordial Ether (*Avir Kadmon*). The *locus classicus* of the Kabbalah, the Zohar asserts that it is "the supernal letters that brought into being all the works of the lower world, literally after their own pattern."[6]

The Kabbalists were, of course, simply reflecting biblical and talmudic notions of the world's origins in divine speech. The rabbis had interpreted the early chapters of Genesis to mean that the world was *created* via *ten* divine utterances, and the view ultimately developed that the language of the Torah *sustains* creation as well. The Talmud (*Eruvin*, 13a) records the advice of Rabbi Ishmael to a scribe: "be careful in your work for it is the work of God, if you omit a single letter, or write a letter too many you will destroy the whole world."

Moses Cordovero, who was the leading Safedian Kabbalist prior to Isaac Luria held that the language of the Torah we actually read (and the language that thereby ultimately comprises the world) is the result of transformations in a hidden, primordial language, which is the ultimate "deep structure" of our world, and which transforms itself in each new age. Cordovero held a theory of linguistic/ontological parallelism in which language and the world reciprocally determine one another.

Israel Sarug, an early exponent of the Lurianic Kabbalah, held that the torah, as it was originally conceived in the highest world of *Atziluth*, is comprised of all possible combinations of the 22 consonants of the Hebrew language. This idea is suggestive of both an infinite number of "possible worlds," and, as we shall see below, a type of infinity, which can be denoted as "linguistic space," that is indeed larger than any infinity of the actual or even the possible (i.e. "logical space").[7] According to Sarug, the descent of the letters

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[4] *Sefer Yetzirah* 2:6, ibid., p. 131.

[5] See especially *Sefer ha-Bahir* secs. 11a, 13, 18, 27, 48, and 54. Book Bahir, Joachim Neugroschel trans. In David Meltzer, *The Secret Garden: An Anthology in the Kabbalah* (Barrytown, NY: Stanton Hill, 1998), pp. 49-98; pp. 53-65.

[6] *Zohar* 1:159a; H. Sperling & M. Simon, *The Zohar*. (London: Soncino Press, 1931-4)Vol. 2, p. 111.

[7] The doctrine of "logical space", of which actual existing things are but a mere subset, originates with Ludwig Wittgenstein in *The Tractatus Logico Philosophicus* (D. F. Pears & B. F. McGuinness, trans. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1961). By analogy, "linguistic space" would consist of all possible utterances (or *all possible combinations of letters*), and "possible reality" being only those utterances or combinations of letters that make sense (i.e. say something). The "actual world" would be a subset of these.

through the various lower worlds caused them to take on distinct combinations that yielded holy and angelic names, and finally the Torah itself, which is a blueprint for all of creation. Each world, on Sarug's view, is constructed out of combinations of the primordial letters.[8]

The Hasidim further radicalized the idea of linguistic creation. Schneur Zalman of Lyadi, the first Lubavitcher Rebbe, commenting on the words of the Baal Shem Tov wrote: "For if the letters (which comprise divine speech) were to depart [even] for an instant, God forbid, and return to their source, all the heavens would become naught and absolute nothingness, and it would be as though they had never existed at all, exactly as before the utterance, "Let there be a firmament."[9] Further, Schneur Zalman held, in accord with a suggestion in *Sefer Yetzirah*, that the entire cosmos was created as a result of the substitution, transposition and rearrangement of the "letters" which comprised the ten biblical sayings with which God is described in Genesis as creating the world.

Scholem has pointed out that various Kabbalists and Hasidim held that human speech creates new powers and lights in the world.[10]   On this view, humanity, in its continual combination and recombination of letters (or phonemes and morphemes), is continues the creative process initiated by God.

Language and *Tzimtzum*

Having briefly described some general Kabbalistic views on language and creation, I will now turn to the specifically linguistic interpretations of the symbols of the Lurianic Kabbalah.

Schneur Zalman of Lyadi, the first Lubavitcher rebbe, in his *Shaar Ha Yichud Veemmunah*, proffers a linguistic account of the *tzimtzum*, the divine act through which the infinite G-d, *Ein-sof*, conceals and contracts itself into a world. According to Schneur Zalman, in *tzimtzum Ein-sof* contracts and invests itself in the combinations of letters that comprise the "ten utterances of creation,"[11] i.e. the phrases in the book of Genesis where the world is described as having been created by divine speech (e.g. "And God *said* 'Let there be light' and there was light").   According to Schneur Zalman, the *tzimtzum* operates through the letters' "combinations of combinations, by substitutions and transpositions of

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[8] G. Scholem, "The Meaning of the Torah in Jewish Mysticism" in Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken, 1969), p. 80.
[9]Schneur Zalman, *Shaar Hayichud Vehaemunah*, Chapter 1; Zalman,   Likutei Amarim-Tanya, p. 287.
[10] Ibid., p. 76.

[11]   S. Zalman, *Likutei Amarim-Tanya* (Brooklyn: Kehot, 1981), p. 319 (*Shaar ha Yichud VehaEmunah* 7).

the letters themselves and their numerical values and equivalents".[12] For Schneur Zalman, each substitution and transposition of words and letters involves a contraction and concealment of the divine light and life. According to him, the *Sefirot* or "vessels," which contain the divine light are the five "final" letters in Hebrew, i.e. those whose "roots" always terminate a word, and which cannot be followed by any other letters.[13]

Language, *Shevirah* and *Tikkun*

Luria's interpreters also elaborated a second theosophical symbol, *Shevirat ha-Kelim*, the Breaking of the Vessels, in a linguistic framework. As put by Moses Chayim Luzatto

all the stages of extended Light are also represented by combination of letters. These are the functioning lights from which everything comes into being. Since they were unable to endure the abundance of Light, the combination of letters became disarranged and were severed from each other. They were thus rendered powerless to act and to govern. This is what is meant by their 'shattering'.[14]

On Luzatto's view the Breaking of the Vessels is a shattering or disruption of linguistic coherence and meaning.

The reverse or correction of this process, *tikkun ha-Olam*, the Restoration of the World, involves a re-creation of meaning and significance. According to Luria's student and early expositor, Chayyim Vital, the restored world of *tikkun* will be a world filled with meaning and significance in which the lights that constitute the reconstructed *Sefirot* of *tikkun*, are emanated via the mouth of Adam Kadmon,[15] and are comprised of phonemes and letters. Vital emphasizes that these letters/lights are bound together in significance by being emanated through a "single orifice. [16] According to Vital, as the letters rush out of the mouth of *Adam Kadmon* they strike and bump one another, fusing together and giving birth to the restored vessels. Vital tells us "each letter, as we know, is a dead or meaningless entity, but you put them all together and there is light and significance."[17] For Vital the world prior to *tikkun* (the World of Points) is a formless and essentially meaningless realm

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[12] Ibid.

[13] Zalman, *Likutei Amarim-Tanya*, p. 299 (*Shaar ha Yichud VehaEmunah* 5).

[14] M. Luzzatto *General Principles of the Kabbalah*, trans. Phillip Berg (Jerusalem: Research Centre of Kabbalah, 1970),, p. 64.

[15] In other places Vital says that these lights are emanated from the forehead of *Adam Kadmon*.

[16] The lights and vessels emanated in *tikkun* are completely connected with one another.   They are called *Akudim* (striped or bound together), alluding to Jacob's dream of "striped, spotted and blotched sheep". The Torah uses the word *Akudim* to mean both striped and bound.

[17] Chayyim Vital, *Sefer Ez Chayyim* 2:2, The Breaking of the Vessels. (Translation from working notes of my study of this work with Rabbi Joel Kenney.)

in which the primordial letters are completely separated from one another. It is only after *tikkun* that they are united in significant discourse. When we recall that *tikkun* is driven by the moral, spiritual and intellectual efforts of humankind, we realize that the process of *tikkun* is one through which *humanity renders the world meaningful*.[18]

The Lurianic Theosophy as a Model of Linguistic Meaning

We have seen how the Lurianic "myth" can be understood as a theory of human creativity.[19] In this section I will explore the idea that the Lurianic theosophy is implicit in every act of language, and constitutes the very *form* of writing and speech. See, for example, S. Drob, *Kabbalistic Metaphors*: *Jewish Mystical Themes in Ancient and Modern Thought* (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 2000), I will argue that each time we write or speak we set the Lurianic dynamic in motion.

In the moment just prior to speech or writing, we have said or written nothing, yet the whole universe of discourse is potentially before us. This "moment", prior to any speech or writing, is aptly signified in the Lurianic equation of *Ayin* (nothing) with *Ein-sof* (the infinite). A person takes up a pen and is about to write, or takes a breath and is about to speak. In that moment it is possible for him or her to write or utter virtually anything. Here we should recall *Sefer Yetzirah's* dictum that the permutations of primordial letters potentially constitute all that is or could be: "Twenty-two foundation letters: He engraved them, He carved them, He permuted them, He weighed them, He transformed them, And with them, He depicted all that was formed and all that would be formed."[20]

Imagine, for a moment, that we are approached by a complete stranger, who we perceive is about to open his mouth in speech. Most likely he will utter something routinized and predictable, asking us for the time or for directions to a nearby location. But just possibly he may utter something completely novel, something that we consider to be of poetic beauty or great philosophical moment; he may well say something that has perhaps never been said by anyone before in the history of the universe (he may tell us, for example, that "the Jew's are the acorns of Shakespeare's trees") and say this in any of a number of the

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[18] Here we should also note that in a process that parallels these linguistic events, the *Sefirot* and *Partzufim* (divine personalities), which from another perspective are also said to constitute the cosmos, come to be unified in such a manner that each *Sefirah* is contained within each of the others and each successive *Partzuf* comes to be the "soul" of one of the others.

[19] In previous works I have shown how the Lurianic metaphors are implicit within a variety of myths, philosophies, and theories, including central notions in Hegel, Freud, and Jung, as well as theories of human development (e.g. Piaget) and scientific progress (e.g. Kuhn). [19] These theories have this basic metaphor as their content in part because they are theories *about* the activities of the human mind, and in part because they are the *product* of human cognition, creativity and inquiry.

[20] *Sefer Yetzirah* 2:2, Kaplan, ibid. p. 100.

world's languages. He may say something completely nonsensical—stringing phonemes together that (presently) have no sense in any language. If we think about it for a moment, the person about to speak has before him or her an infinity of great magnitude.

  The number of sentences, paragraphs and discourses that can be constructed in the English, indeed in any language, has to be amongst the largest of infinities, as it would *ipso facto* make reference to and be descriptive of all states, numbers, conditions, interpretations, etc. that could exist in any other infinity. [21] To take one example, a mere numerical infinity is obviously expressible using just a small subset of the propositions available to any English speaker, i.e. those propositions that describe numbers. If we reflect for a moment, the entirety of a language is co-extensive with the entirety of all existing and imaginable states of affairs *and their interpretations*. Now there may be states of affairs, e.g. on worlds in other galaxies, that no one has ever perceived or understood, but at least in principle, these could be described in our language. Putting aside for the moment the question of whether there are states of affairs that are completely inexpressible, it is clear that a person who is about to speak or a writer who is about to write finds him or herself on the threshold of an infinity of such an immense magnitude that one could easily be tempted to say that he or she is on the threshold of the Absolute, in a manner that is analogous, though certainly not identical, to the position of God just prior to his uttering the words that gave rise the world. The speaker on the threshold of speech has thus far uttered *nothing*, yet he or she has before him/her the possibility of all things. [22] In that moment he participates in the dialectic of nothingness and infinity that characterizes *Ein-sof*, the Kabbalists' infinite godhead.[23]

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[21] It may not, however, be the largest of infinities, because while it may include descriptions of non-linguistic acts, things and events, it does not include them in and of themselves. For example, the sum total of everything that can be said or written in every language does not include the complete mental state of an artist prior to commencing a painting, or the painting itself, though it would include descriptions of these things in virtually infinite detail.

[22] One might here be inclined to counter that In the moment before speaking anything can be said, but in point of fact, for the vast majority of us, what we actually do say is governed by a set of tacit rules that drastically limit our possibilities of speech. Indeed, this one reason why many are inclined to say that the genius, and even the *madman* is, much closer to God, than the cleric. What comes out of the mouth of the latter is totally routinized and predictable, whereas what emerges from the mouth of the genius madman is often totally surprising and new. Before speaking, the madman's field is wide open. His or her speech lies outside the boundaries established by the ruling discourse, and for this reason his speech touches upon, what Lacan refers to as the "real," that which has not (yet) been circumscribed and routinized by ordinary linguistic convention). The moment *before* the madman speaks provides us with an intimation of *Ein-sof*, the infinite possibility before God spoke and created the world.

[23] We might suppose that before God said "Let there be light…" he could have said anything. God was on the threshold of speech, and virtually any and every possibility lay open before him, and from these endless possibilities, of worlds that exist or could exist between the extremes of darkness and light, life and death, he chose to speak and form our world. But was He really on the threshold of infinite speech before uttering His biblically recorded words? After all, without creation, what is/was

Once speech or writing has begun, a selection is made, a specific route is taken, untold possibilities are excluded and a limited idea begins to take contract form. In this act, as Schneur Zalman implies, we have a perfectly human parallel to the Lurianic notion of the divine *tzimtzum* or contraction. Such a *tzimtzum* operates throughout the proposition, progressively contracting and specifying its significance, each world excluding whole realms of potential meaning until the period, the punctuation that marks the (temporary) end to the *tzimtzum*, specifies (as much as possible) the proposition's content. Each word, and particularly each mark of punctuation, serves as the vessel for containing and limiting a proposition or other meaningful utterance. Recall that for Schneur Zalman, the *tzimtzum* through which *Ein-sof* contracts and conceals itself and thereby creates the world, operates through the 22 foundational letters (which *Sefer Yetzirah* had held were the basic elements of the cosmos)."[24] According to Schneur Zalman each substitution and transposition of words and letters brings about a contraction and concealment of the light of the infinite God, so that language, is in effect, a process in which an infinite plenum of meaning is constricted, concealed and finitized into a specific meaning. Schneur Zalman implicitly recognizes the importance of punctuation in the linguistic/*tzimtzum* process, suggesting that it is the five Hebrew letters with final forms—which are only found at the end of words and which cannot be followed by any other letters,[25] that have a special role in containing the divine light.

Recall that for Luria, the first product of the divine *tzimtzum* is *Adam Kadmon*, the Primordial Man. With this idea, Luria signals the fact that the contraction of the divine can only reveal finitude and specificity for a knowing human subject. I will have more to say about the role of language in the emergence of the human subject in later sections; here it suffices to point out that is only with speech and writing, and the consequent expression of a point of view that the human subject emerges, one who asserts a proposition, asks a question, issues a command, etc. Just as a-human-subject-in –general (*Adam Kadmon*) emerges with the divine *tzimtzum*, a particular human subject emerges in the process of speaking and writing.

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there for God to say? Indeed, it is only *after creation* that it even make sense to say that "prior to speaking anything can be said," for if there is not yet *any thing* (even any idea) how can one say *anything*. If *Ein-sof* is to be a true infinite, a meaningful infinite, an all inclusive infinite covering every possibility and every actuality, the possibilities and actualities that he is must have somehow been prefigured prior to his choosing to create the world. It is thus not a God prior to creation that can represent *Ein-sof* (the Infinite) in the moment before speech, but only a God (or humanity) contemplating the whole of a vastly infinite created world. We are here reminded of *Sefer Yetzirah's* dictum that "the beginning is wedge within the end," (cite) and the Zoharic view that God Himself, the creator of humanity is, paradoxically, created by human endeavor. (cite)

[24] Ibid.
[25] Zalman, *Likutei Amarim-Tanya*, op. cit., p. 299 (*Shaar ha Yichud VehaEmunah* 5).

As the proposition is completed, a specific content, idea and value is asserted, questioned, commanded etc. Such assertions, questions, or commands obviously, take the form of audible phonemes or letters of written language.[26] This phase in the process of speech or writing is analogous to the emergence of the *Sefirot* in the Lurianic theosophy. The *Sefirot* are, in effect, the content of God's divine speech and writing. Here we should recall that the Kabbalists not only regarded the *Sefirot* to be the content or elements of all creation, but that they typically followed *Sefer Yetzirah* in drawing an equivalence between the *Sefirot* and the 22 foundational letters. *Sefer Yetzirah* had suggested that the very term *Sefirah* is related to root words connected with language: books (*Sepharim*), text (*Sepher*), number (*Sephar*) and communication (*Sippur*).[27] Further, in his classical exposition of the Lurianic Kabbalah, *Sefer Etz Chayyim*, Chayyim Vital held there to be two basic metaphors for the description of celestial events, the form of the human body (which he takes to be the equivalent of the *Sefirot* embodied in the Primordial Man) and the shape of written letters. Vital draws an equivalence between the *Sefirot* and the letters when he writes: "There is yet another way to describe by analogy, which is to depict these higher things through the shape of written letters, for every single letter points to a specific supernal light." [28] For Vital, whatever can be described in terms of the *Sefirot* and *Adam Kadmon* can also be described in terms of the shapes of the Hebrew letters that comprise the divine name. Vital states: "All ten *Sefirot*, including each and every single world, when considered as a whole, are like an aspect of a single Divine Name, YHVH."[29] We can say that Kabbalistically, in positing a specific thought content, value or communication, a linguistic proposition passes from the negative stage of contraction embodied in the *tzimtzum* into the positive linguistic stage of *Sefirot*.

The *Sefirot*, in effect, comprise what is actually written or said, the words on the paper or the speech embodied in sound. Indeed, certain Kabbalists held that the progression of the *Sefirot*, represented the development of thought and speech in the divine and human mind. On their view *Keter* (the highest *Sefirah*, which they equated with *Ayin*, nothingness) represents the will or desire, and *Chochmah*, the concealed representation or thought of that desire. The third *Sefirah*, *Binah* is an internal, inaudible voice, which becomes audible speech only with the sixth Sefirah. *Tiferet*:[30] As put by the Zohar: "If you examine the levels (*Sefirot*) [you will see] that it is Thought, Understanding, Voice and Speech, and all is

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[26] The Kabbalists, in contrast to the Biblical tradition, often, but not always—see below--, placed an emphasis on the written letters as opposed to spoken language.

[27] *Sefer Yetzirah* 1:1, Kaplan, *Sefer Yetzirah*, op. cit., p. 5.

[28] *Sefer Etz Chayyim* 1:1; p. 28, Also see, Menzi and Padeh, *The Tree of Life: Chayim Vital's Introduction to the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1999), p. 54.

[29] *Sefer Etz Chayyim* 1:1; p. 28, Menzi and Padeh, *The Tree of Life*, p. 59.

[30] I. Tishby & F. Lachower *The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts, I, II, & III.* Arranged and rendered into Hebrew. English translation by David Goldstein. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), Vol. I, p. 292.

one, and Thought is the beginning of all... actual thought connected with *Ayin* (*Keter*, will)."[31]

However, what is said cannot be completely delimited, circumscribed or understood; it splinters into an indefinite variety of ambiguities, passes over into its opposites, is displaced and incomplete. We have a human linguistic analog to the next phase in the Lurianic theosophy, the inability of the sefirotic vessels to contain the full measure of divine light and the Breaking of the vessels (*Shevirat ha-Kelim*), the displacement and shattering of the Sefirot, and the dispersal of their broken shards throughout the worlds. .A proposition is understood differently by each of its listeners and is often multivalent and ambiguous even for the speaker or writer him/herself, who finds both that his/her idea cannot be fully specified or contained by letters and or sounds, and that these same letters and sounds, convey far more than he or she originally (consciously) intended to say. The opening to ambiguity, the "sliding of the signifier" is in effect the *breaking open* of the proposition to that which is outside itself. Even before it is completed, the proposition, breaks asunder and becomes alienated in each of the subjectivities who hear or read it, in much the same manner as the shattered sparks from *Adam Kadmon* and the *Sefirot* become alienated in the husks (*Kellipot*) with the Breaking of the vessels. This rupture, in which communication between subjects is blocked, is symbolized in the Lurianic theosophy by the turning on the masculine and feminine aspects of the cosmos (the *Partzufim*), from a position of being face to face (*panim a panim*) to one of being back to back (*acher* v' *acher*). While such a radical rupture in communication may not be the fate of all, or even a majority of propositions, there is always a threat of failure of communication, miscommunication, and over-communication as the proposition overflows and breaks the vessels of letters and speech within which it was originally constricted and contained. As Jacques Derrida has insisted, this potential for rupture is actually part of the very possibility of language itself.

The meaning of the proposition, which was constricted and delimited in an act of articulation and punctuation (*tzimtzum*) must now be restored and emended through acts of interpretation which actually complete the proposition, much as humanity's *tikkun* is said to complete the creation that was begun by God. It is such acts of interpretation that restore communication, and, in Lurianic terms, result in the re-turning of the conjugal "face to face" relations between masculine and feminine divine aspects, the *Partzufim*. (on Kabbalah and interpretation see S. Drob, "The Torah of the Tree of Life: Kabbalistic Reflections on the Hermeneutics of Infinity in Scholem, Idel, Dan, Fine and Tishby".

The ambiguity and temporary loss of significance that is potentially imminent in all propositions is disambiguated and recovered by a reader or listener, who restores, but also

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[31]Zohar, I, 246b. Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, op. cit., Vol. 1, p. 326. Compare Sperling & Simon, *The Zohar*, op. cit., Vol. 2, p. 382.

restructures and emends the proposition via interpretation. Such interpretation reverses the limiting process (*tzimtzum*) by which the proposition was created. In this manner the reader or listener performs an act of *tikkun* (restoration, emendation), which re-expands the original contracted meaning, yielding a myriad of possibilities and associations, potentially connecting the proposition to an entire language and to the infinite plenum of meaning (*Ein-sof*) (and thus nothingness) with which the speaker began.

The Kabbalists were acutely aware of the nearly limitless expansion of significance that is potentiated through acts of understanding and interpretation.[32] The Kabbalist Azulai, for example, held that each time an individual reads a given verse of Torah the combination of its linguistic elements change in response to the call of the moment.[33] Scholem has pointed out that the Kabbalists adopted from the Midrash the idea that every passage, phrase, and letter in the Torah has 70 aspects or faces, corresponding to the 70 nations that were said to inhabit the world, a number which the Zohar regards as symbolizing the inexhaustibility of divine meaning.[34] The Safedian Kabbalists went so far as to hold that there are 600,000 aspects of meaning to the Torah, corresponding to the number of Israelites present at Sinai, and thus to the number of "primordial souls" that are present in each later generation.[35] Certain Kabbalists even held that the Torah itself was originally given as an incoherent scramble of letters and that these letters rearranged themselves in response to historical events. The Lurianic Kabbalist Israel Sarug held that the Torah manifests itself in different ways in different levels of spiritual and material existence, and that at the highest level (the world of "Atziluth") it exists as all possible combinations of Hebrew letters. In this way the Torah is said to correspond to the set of all possible conceptual, and linguistic worlds[36] and, thus, to the limitless possibilities inherent in human writing and speech. [37] Expanding this conception of the Torah, to the whole of language, we might say that as a proposition is understood and interpreted it necessarily breaks asunder into a myriad of interpretive possibilities but ultimately (re)establishes itself within the infinite context of human language and becomes a part of the "great human conversation," ultimately merging with the infinite possibilities of language itself.

We can now see how the writing or utterance of a single proposition necessarily traverses the Kabbalistic dynamic of *Ayin*, *Ein-sof*, *tzimtzum*, *Adam Kadmon*, *Sefirot*, *Shevirah* and *tikkun*. In short we can understand the proposition as being structured by "moments" of emptiness or lack (*Ayin*), infinite possibility (*Ein-sof*), focus and contraction (*tzimtzum*), the emergence of a subject or point of view (*Adam Kadmon*) positing of an

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[32] See Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), Chapter 3" "Text and Interpretation, Infinities in Kabbalah."
[33] Scholem, "On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism,"p. 76.
[34] Midrash, Numbers Rabbah xiii,15, see Scholem "The Meaning of the Torah", op. cit., p. 62.
[35] Scholem, "On the Kabbalah", p. 65. Referring to *Sefer ha-kavvanoth* (Venice, 1620), 536.
[36] Ibid., p. 75.
[37] A similar view regarding the Torah's plasticity is attributed to the founder of the Hasidic movement, Israel Baal Shem Tov, Ibid., p. 76.

initial idea and/or value (*Sefirot*), rupture, dispersal and alienation of significance (*Shevirah*, *Kellipot*), restoration, reinterpretation (*tikkun*) and, ultimately, infinite expansion (return to *Ein-sof*). Each time we write or speak we bring into play the entire process of world creation. Put another way, we might say that the Lurianic "basic metaphor," the dynamic expressed by the Lurianic myths, is not only descriptive of cosmic creation, but is coiled up and contained in the smallest units of significance that are uttered by a speaking human subject.

The Emergence of the "Linguistic Subject"

Our analysis, however, is not yet complete; as promised we can and should say something more about the emergence of the human subject in the context of our Lurianic model of language. Where precisely is the *human subject* in the dynamic we have just described, how does it evolve, and how is that subject is accounted for in the Lurianic myth? After all, propositions don't utter themselves; there is always a subject that is connected to them, either as speaker or listener, writer or reader. Without such subjects, the letters or sounds that constitute a sentence would be dead marks on a page or meaningless vibrations in the air.[38] This is a question of profound significance, one which, I believe, can be

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[38] The question arises if a computer, programmed with the rules of English grammar and sentence construction along with a complete vocabulary that enabled it to adequately generate English [or Hebrew] sentences ever be on the threshold of speech in the way a man is? This is an important philosophical question. Searles and others, c.f. "The Chinese Room Argument." have argued that the computer has simply manipulated signs, and not understood or generated meanings. I would point out that before we would assign the function of language to a computer it would not only have to generate sentences but provide them with interpretations as well, e.g. it would have to be able to say something like the sentence "Walter Payton's seeds from Mars are digging a hole to china" (which I am fairly certain has never before in the history of the universe been written or uttered) is from a proposed movie script about a 22nd century man named after a 20th century football player, who purchases a lemon that was grown on Mars and that unbeknownst to him was implanted with seeds, that when disposed of, sprout into Martians who develop an underground colony on earth and conspire to take over the world. The computer would have to, as I have just done, create this interpretation spontaneously, without, for example, having it "canned" in its memory banks, *and* it would have to be able to generate an indefinitely large number of alternative interpretations of the same sentence and link them to whole realms of knowledge, feeling and culture. It would have to do all of these things, without being subject to the arguments of the Chinese Room, i.e. that it was just flashing sentences according to programmed instructions without really understanding them - i.e. in the same way that a non-speaker of Chinese, inside a room filled with manuals, might appropriately responded to Chinese questions by following a "response program" but who could not thereby be said to understand Chinese. (In Kabbalistic terms, in order to be a comprehending subject of language, a computer would have to participate in *Ayin, Ein-sof, tzimtzum, Sefirot, Shevirah* and tikkun, i.e. select from an infinitude of possibility, and then expand upon, and in effect re-infinitize, what was selected through analysis and interpretation).

answered, in part, through an analysis of the emergence of the linguistic/psychological subject in the context of the Lurianic metaphors.[39]

The Kabbalists were themselves concerned with the emerging subject in their consideration of the development of God's "I". For example, during the 13th century there emerged among many Kabbalists, a theory of how the *Sefirot* progressively reveal the identity of God.[40] This theory was based on an esoteric reading of the first words of the book of Genesis: *Bereshit bara Elohim* (In the beginning God created...). These words were interpreted to make mystical reference to the Infinite's creation of His own subjectivity, via the transformation from the nothingness (*Ayin*) of the first *Sefirah*, *Keter*, to the individuated selfhood (*Ani*, or "I") of the final *Sefirah*, *Malchut*.   The explanation involves an analysis of the emergence of a grammatically hidden subject (in Hebrew the subject of a verb is often hidden or understood in the conjugation of the verb itself) and the emergence of the divine "I" ("ANI") through a rearrangement of the letters in the Hebrew root for nothingness "AIN."[41]

When a man or a woman opens his or her mouth to begin speaking we assume that we are not before a computer generating sentences according to a linguistic program but rather before a thinking sentient being who can not only generate propositions but provide us with and/or understand many alternative interpretations of what he or she is about to say. We thus see that the whole question of interpretation is actually already written into the "threshold of speech," into the Ayin/Ein-sof dialectic.   This is a beautiful example of how *tikkun* is already a part of and the very completion of *Ein-sof*.   Consider: God's creation/threshold before divine speech and man's: how much greater is God's? Which is an example of which?

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[39] S. Drob, *Symbols of the Kabblah: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 2000) Chapter 5, S. Drob, *Kabbalistic Metaphors: Jewish Mystical Themes in Ancient and Modern Thought* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 2000), Chapter 7.

[40] Scholem, *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), p. 110.

[41] As described in my *Symbols of the Kabbalah* "It is a property of the Hebrew language that the subject of a verb (I, You, He) is most often hidden (and as such is simply "understood') in the conjugation of the verb itself. In the opening passage of Genesis the verb form "*bara*" (he created) contains the subject "he" (here equivalent to "God") in a "hidden", non-explicit manner. The Kabbalists equated this hidden "he" in the verb *bara* with the first *Sefirah, Keter*, which as the hidden Primal Will does not yet explicitly involve a differentiated divine "he" or self. The Kabbalists typically equate the second *Sefirah*, *Chochmah* with *reshit*, the "beginning" or primal point of creation, and the third *Sefirah*, *Binah*, is equated with *Elohim*, one of the names of God. In the Kabbalistic reading of the first words of Genesis, *Bereshit bara Elohim* becomes a complete sentence with *Elohim* as its object. *Bereshit* ("through *reshit*"--the second *Sefirah*) *bara* (he--the first *Sefirah*-- created) *Elohim* (God, the third *Sefirah*).

With the creation of this third *Sefirah*, God has begun to become an individuated being (*Elohim*), but he is still not the "Thou" who man addresses in prayer. This, according to the Kabbalists, does not occur until the advent of the sixth *Sefirah*, *Tiferet* which, in harmonizing God's kindness and judgment, is equated with the most exalted name of God, the tetragrammatton, YHVH. Still, even this "thou" is not the full achievement of God's selfhood. This does not occur until the

Without resorting to this kind of esotercism, I will briefly explore how the emergence of a human subject with the utterance of a proposition can readily be accounted for in the Lurianic scheme.

The primal subject is *Ayin*, nothingness. As philosophers such as Sartre have argued, human subjectivity, because of its capacity to alter its perspective and focus itself on any and all things, is, unlike all other beings (which have determinate identities), *no-thing*. As no-thing, the subject is nothing in-itself, yet free to posit and desire anything. In the moment before speech, at a time of lack and desire, the human subject is both *Ayin* and everything, not yet individuated or defined, yet open to infinite possibilities. This undefined subject is purely "transcendental", meaning that it is not (yet) yours, mine or that of any specific individual, but is rather *subjectivity per se*. However, with first breath of speech, and the contraction of infinite possibility into an arena of focused interest, a primordial subject emerges. For the Kabbalist's this initial subject is the Primordial Man, *Adam Kadmon*, who encompasses all humanity through the emanation of the letters and *Sefirot*, but who carries little, if any mark of individuality. It is only with the contraction of possibility via the *tzimtzum*, and emergence of specific thoughts and values, i.e. when we hear what a specific man or woman has to say, that an individual ego emerges. This subject, which corresponds to the stage of the *Sefirot*, is a superficial, uncomplicated ego; one that has yet to be broken, complicated or misunderstood. As we have seen, such a simple subject or ego cannot endure, as it is immediately destined to be misinterpreted, and alienated from its own words. In this moment we have arrived at the stage of the "broken subject," which corresponds to the Lurianic *Shevirah*, or "Breaking of the Vessels."   What was once a straightforward communication is now broken into and obscured by manifold (mis)understandings in the minds of other subjects, as well as (in what essentially amounts to the same thing[42]) in the individual's unconscious.

An "unconscious subject," emerges, corresponding to the Lurianic stages of *Sitra Achra* (the "Other side') and the *Kellipot* (the "husks"), the stage in which the divine light is

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emanation of the final *Sefirah*, *Malchut*, which the Kabbalists equated with the divine "I", according to the formula "Nothingness changes into I".   The highest *Sefirah*, *Keter*, is equated by the Kabbalists with *Ayin*, "nothing" (in Hebrew spelled AYN). They affirm that through the emanation of the *Sefirot*, the hidden "he" of *bara* (the *Sefirah Keter*) is transformed into the manifest "I" of *Malchut*. All of this occurs via a transformation of the letters within AYN (nothing), which when rearranged as ANY, form the personal pronoun, I. The creation of the world is the manifestation of God's selfhood, the emergence of an "I" or self out of a primal nothingness or will.   This individuation process is mediated through "relatedness", symbolized by the "thou" of Tiferet/YHVH. *Ein-sof* thus becomes a personal God through his relationship with humankind.

[42] The unconscious meanings of one's words involve not only one's identifications with *others* (parents, authority, etc.) but also significances that one's words carry simply by being the word's of an *other's* (i.e. society's) language.

entrapped and obscured by the shards of the broken *sefirotic* vessels. It is only when one's words become a part of a dialog with others, and one's meanings are restored, emended and expanded both for others and for oneself that a more comprehensive manifold or rational subject emerges. This stage corresponds to the Lurianic process of *Birur* (extraction of the divine sparks from the husks), and the reconstruction of the *Sefirot* in the World of *Tikkun*. With the expansion of one's consciousness afforded by a fuller comprehension of the multiple significance of one's words, we are again afforded a glimpse into the infinite, and an opportunity to transcend one's individual point of view in favor of a perspective based in a wider humanity and God. The rational, manifold subject thus returns to the infinitude of *Ein-sof* and the no-thingness (freedom) of *Ayin*, but in the process, after having said something significant, the individual has now traversed a portion of the world, raised a spark, and completed a piece of creation.