

Holy Relationship

By Mordechai Gafni

Because we are created in the image of God, when we look for guidance on how to shatter the boundary of self and create relationship we should turn to the creative process of the divine. The mystery of Creation is that God emerges Out of divine aloneness to create an other who is not God.

How does God create space for an other? The Jewish mystics' answer is tzimtzum--by the act of contraction, withdrawal. In early mystical sources, particularly talmudic mysticism, God is understood to contract all of his light, as it were, to one point--and from that point the world is created. This idea finds expression, for example, in the midrashic passage that describes God as contracting his light to the point of space between the two cherubs in the tabernacle. From that point--which is the point, according to the biblical story, from which the divine voice issues--the world is created.

The early kabbalist Isaac Luria, however, understands withdrawal not as being contraction into an intensified point but rather as meaning God's actual withdrawal from an area to leave behind an empty space--a space apparently devoid of God. It is from that place of emptiness that the world was created.

I would suggest that these competing images of Creation are not exclusive, as is usually assumed in scholarship, but paradoxical and complementary. Moments of fullness, presence, certainty, and selfishness are necessary for the creation of anything, including relationships, and are expressed by the talmudic understanding of creation as the intensification of presence--God contracts presence to one point and from that point Creation outflows. At the same time, however, there is a second prerequisite to Creation, and that is emptiness. Just as, in the kabbalists' understanding, God is portrayed as emptying himself of self in an act of radical selflessness, Creation is understood to emerge not from the certainty of presence but from the radical uncertainty of absence.

The creation of a new idea (which is itself a small world) takes place in a similar way, according to R. Nachman. In an elliptical passage, Nachman writes, "And this is the meaning of the Mishnah--all my life I was raised among (bein) the sages and I found nothing was better than silence." The literal translation of the Hebrew word "hem," however, does not mean "among the sages" but, rather, "between the sages." And between the sages there is the empty space, which separates them from each other.

Nachman continues, "Through conflict the empty space is created and in that empty space the creation of worlds takes place." New ideas are created by a unique dialectic of presence and absence, certainty and uncertainty. Conflict emerges from each side's radical certainty as to the correctness of their position. In the empty space created by conflict, however, one must be prepared to move into silence--the place where the sure voices of conflict are quieted and holy listening becomes the order of the day. In that silence uncertainty is allowed to enter.

It is this dialectical balance between certainty and uncertainty that is the root of all creation. Without entering the empty space, no relationship can be created. Without holding firmly to

the fullness of my position--which is a reflection of my uniqueness as an individual--no creation can take place.

In the human realm as well, selfishness and uncertainty dance with the fullness of presence, self, and certainty to generate the holiness of new insight and depth. Mordechai Lainer of Ishbitz (an eighteenth-century Hasidic master) moves us a step in this direction by linking intellectual creativity and intimate connections between men and women. He does so esoterically--by solving a textual difficulty.

The textual difficulty occurs in the second chapter of the book of Genesis, where Adam searches for an appropriate existential and sexual partner. Such an appropriate partner, the text says, must be "a helpmate against him." The obvious difficulty in the text is how one can be both a "helpmate" and "against him." Lainer solves the difficulty by referring us to the Talmud's Tractate Baba Metzia 64a, which tells the tragic story of the meeting, relationship, and death of Rabbi Yochanan and Reish Lakish. An exposition of this text is not necessary here; what interests me is the way, with this reference, Lamer ties together two areas--that of intimate relationship between man and woman and the process of intellectual spiritual creativity between teacher and disciple.

Taking as our starting point Lainer's identification of relational intimacy with intellectual creativity, we may now take note of two distinct moments in sexuality: one is the moment of "helpmate" and the second is the moment of "against him." "Helpmate" is a moment of radical giving, of selflessness. I resolve my own uncertainty through the sacrifice of withdrawal, giving myself up to the other and seeking to please my partner, not myself. This is a tzimtzum-contraction--moment.

There is, however, a second moment, completely different from the first but no less central, which is an integral part of every intimate relationship. This is the moment where I do not give up self but instead move to satisfy self. In this moment, when I move towards my own satisfaction I am not absent but radically present. This is a reflection of the second moment in the kabbalistic understanding of tzimtzum: "the intensification of presence."

Sexual intimacy with a partner is always a mixture between holy masturbation and holy love. Clearly, being with a partner who is intent only on themselves makes for an unsatisfactory sexual relationship. At the same time, if one engages in sexuality in which one only receives from the partner--without the partner withdrawing into themselves--then, again, the sexual experience is not honest and therefore not holy, healthy, or satisfying. There must be a moment in sexuality in which we turn into ourselves, not in the usual sense of withdrawal, but in the sense of intensification of presence--and in which we rejoice in being privileged to witness our partner doing the same. A partner who only gives but who is unwilling to reveal their holy selfishness is dishonest and ultimately unsatisfying.

The ultimate paradox is that these selfish and unselfish moments--the understanding of tzimtzum withdrawal either as the radical absence in which we give to the other or as the radical presence in which we contract into self--are each transformed into the other. This is the holy magic of relationship. In the act of full giving--giving to oneself and giving up oneself to the other--the giver ultimately finds himself.

The idea of self being an ineradicable moment in sexuality is captured beautifully in a midrashic passage. The Midrash comments on the verse from Psalms, "I was formed in sin, my mother conceived me in sin." The Midrash identifies the sin of conception as being the

moment of self-involvement in sexuality. The word "sin" here does not mean sin in the formal legal or even moral sense. Rather, it refers to the masturbatory moment which exists in every sexual partnership. This self-involved moment expresses itself at the end of intimacy when, in the colorful language of the Midrash, each person turns their face away from their partner. This is the physical expression of the moment of distance, which exists even when the lovers are sexually enmeshed. This separation, in which each side faces a different direction, creates an empty space between them. In this empty space--paradoxically--the relationship is created. It allows each side to retain the integrity of self that allows for willful union.

The empty space represents both forms of withdrawal, of *tzimtzum*. Each partner has withdrawn into their own place. And yet each side affirms the other's right to space. It is a time of full affirmation of other.

It therefore comes as no surprise that the divine voice heard by the prophet in the ultimate act of self-creation, the achievement of prophecy, comes from the *bein hacruvim*--the space between the cherubs. In Jewish texts cherubs symbolize the sensual relationship between the male and female principles. The space between the cherubs, like the space between the sages, partakes of the void out of which the world was formed. In the void that the mystics called, in Hebrew, *bein*--the void that is completely empty--holy spiritual intuition arises. It arises from the place between (also *bein*) which, as we have seen, is a strange combination of radical absence and radical presence.

The void, with its dialectic of intense presence and absence, is an ineradicable feature of holy reality. Its embrace--be it in the realm of sexuality, creativity, or intellectual or spiritual growth--is a precondition for spiritual health.

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