

THE UNDERSIDE OF CREATIVE EXPRESSION¹

Sarah Yehudit (Susan) Schneider

Before the creative act which brought our present universe into being, G-d existed in a state of undifferentiated, infinitely potent Light which, figuratively speaking, was equally present at every point of time and space (though time and space, themselves creations, did not yet actually exist.) This Light was so powerful that it negated even the possibility of transitory existence. Form and physicality could not maintain *their* boundaries in the face of it. They would be annihilated by its strength of illumination in the same way that the lights of stars are washed out by the more potent radiance of the sun, or a delicate crystal glass shatters and disintegrates from the impact of water rushing from a fire hose. In creating the physical universe, G-d first, from our perspective, concealed His Infinite Light from a particular area and created a dark womblike vacuum within a surrounding expanse of Light.² Then, into this apparently “empty space” He emanated a “thin” ray of light, the unfolding and dissipation of which is the history and progression of creation as we know it.³

The ordered arrangement of letters within the most holy name of G-d, the Tetragrammaton, actually maps the sequence by which the Creator fashions a physical universe out of this beam of primordial light.⁴ The mechanism at first seems counterintuitive; for it is all accomplished by increasing degrees of self constraint. Strangely, as the Infinite One imposes upon Himself a progressively more severe discipline of concealment and self control, He presses the creative process forward in a reverie of aesthetic expression.⁵

BEFORE THE BEGINNING

G-d as the all encompassing principle of existence, by definition, lacked nothing before creation...except, in some mysterious sense, the actualized experience of giving to another, for there was no “other” upon whom to bestow His gifts. It is this primal-will-to-give-good that inspired the Holy One to create a universe of creatures who would pleasure in receiving His kindness. Since G-d, by definition, is ultimate perfection, this gift of good that He sought to

¹ Punished in: *B'Or HaTorah: Science, the Arts and Problems of Modern life in the Light of Torah: #7*, 1991 [ISBN 965-293-013-X] (Shamir: Jerusalem, Israel). p. 97-105.

² G-d is beyond gender, containing both male and female elements as well as levels of oneness where even the dualities of gender do not exist. The conventions of Kabbala in this respect are based on the anatomical differences between men and women. Therefore, when G-d assumes the role of transcendent, active bestower and outward, extending principle, He is referred to in the masculine. Upon assuming the role of Indwelling Presence and Receptivity, the feminine case is used. This paper focuses primarily on the former, therefore G-d is addressed as He.

³ This description of the creative process, as well as the letter correspondences that follow, are basic Jewish cosmology. For a more thorough treatment of the subject see, *Mystical Concepts in Chassidism* by Rabbi Jacob Immanuel Schochet.

⁴ Actually the alternation of concealment and expression in the creative process is the secret of the ה-ו-ה-ו intertwined with the name ו-ו-ו-ו .

⁵ “In the place of His greatness (which commentators translate as His work of creation), there you find His humility.”

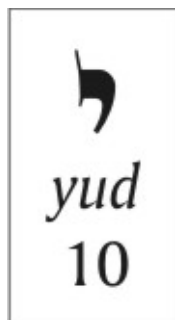
bestow was nothing less than the experience of Himself, of the unadulterated beneficence that is the essence of His being. In other words, G-d created the physical world for purely benevolent reasons: He desired to give of His goodness, which is to say, of Himself.⁶

History begins with this first and most drastic contraction described above. The Infinite One creates (within Himself) a dark space for the existence of worlds. The Hebrew root for “world” (עולם) actually means hidden. *World* (עולם) is, literally, “a place which hides the Presence of G-d.”⁷ This initial occultation of Light is a discontinuous shift, a leap from one extreme to the next. First the light is ever-present, then it disappears altogether. There is no gradual descent from grade to grade. This dark space becomes a womb for creation’s unfolding.

Yet the ray, when first it enters the vacuum, is still of the same overpowering intensity as the surrounding light. It has been reduced in quantity but not in potency. The original problem thus repeats itself, though on a smaller scale. The solution now entails a graduated series of concealments within the beam itself. Each progressive escalation of self restraint causes more fragile and corporeal entities to precipitate into existence. Similarly, when the sun first sets only the more brilliant stars appear in the sky. The others are still overshadowed by the light. Gradually, as the sky darkens, the weaker stars begin to show and soon the sky is filled with them

G-d’s creation of reality (as described in Genesis and explicated in Kabbala) becomes the prototype of all creative expression. Every similar endeavor must follow its precedent, step by step, detail by detail. Based on the principle of correspondence,⁸ the way to perfect our own creative abilities is to apprentice ourselves to the Master Builder, to study His technique and emulate His style. The most holy name of G-d is our primary resource. Concealed in the form and sequence of its letters is the key to creation. Each illustrates a specific phase in the process of constricting light and creating worlds.

“IN THE BEGINNING...”



The letter *yud* recalls the initial moment where “something” precipitates out of “nothing”. From the vast expanse of surrounding consciousness there appears within the void a single, circumscribed point, a seed, which contains the potentiality of all that will unfold from it.

Imagine a dark void within a light filled expanse. Out of the boundary, emerges a letter yud, like a drop, precipitating into the empty space. Its upper tip stays attached to the surrounding light, while its body appears as a single point of light within a pitch black void.

⁶ This is only one of several “reasons” for the ultimately unknowable and superrational decision of the Creator to bring this universe into existence. This particular explanation is discussed by R. Moshe Chaim Luzzato in *The Way of G-d*. Others are mentioned in the last paragraph of this essay.

⁷ World (עולם) and hiddenness (העלם) come from the same root, עלם.

⁸ Zohar, Exodus 20a.

The *yud* as a hieroglyph teaches two ideas. First, its upper tip is an umbilicus which roots the entire odyssey of history in the Infinite light that surrounds the void. Though our universe emanates from this infinite light its consciousness is infinitely greater than anything that we can grasp.

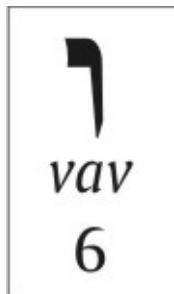
Second the small, seed-like shape of the letter teaches that all began as a single, undifferentiated spark of potential within the mind of G-d. *Yud* corresponds to the faculty of wisdom. This is a specific term for that first flash of insight, the lightening bolt of intuition that, for an instant, illumines the brain. It is purely abstract and singular. At the stage of wisdom and *yud*, even the concept of multiplicity (or even duality) has not yet emerged.

This is the first and most subtle stage of the lights concealment within the ray. It enables finite reality, albeit on its most sublime level, to appear within a Being whose essential definition is Infinity. Thus begins the possibility of separation from G-d. Nevertheless, creation, at this point, has no awareness of itself as an independent entity. Like Piaget's model of human development, the "child" does not at first recognize itself as separate from its source of sustenance, the other's breast.



This upper *hei* represents the second phase when the Divine mind elaborates, in a single and ecstatic vision, all the possibilities inherent within that original dense point of thought. The *hei* as hieroglyph depicts a coordinate plane surrounding a *yud*. It symbolizes this next phase wherein the concept is developed in breadth and depth, with all its implications and applications, constructing a visionary landscape which contributes an expanded context for this original seed idea.

The concealment of light within the beam intensifies this second phase. It is here that G-d hides His all knowingness which creates the possibility of self consciousness and free will. The *yud* and *hei* describe G-d's revelation of Himself to Himself. In these first two phases all has happened only in thought. Although this is the definition of secret (i.e., something known but not shared with another) it is still called revelation relative to what preceded it. An idea, previously dissolved by the Infinite, surrounding light, gets attention, boundary, and definition. All possibilities that will ever emerge into existence throughout the entire course of history, appeared within this original thought as it first arose in the mind of G-d. Yet, at this phase, revelation is only partial. It is G-d's unveiling of Himself to Himself.



This long, straight letter extending from above to below marks the transition from hiddenness to revelation, from thought to speech. The numerical value of *vav* is six, which recalls the six days of creation which describe the evolutionary progression of form, complexity, and consciousness. As G-d calls the universe into being with His commands of "Let there be..." the supernal vision of *hei* dons its first garment of expression, speech. In this stage the perfected vision must submit itself to the laws of process and causality which rule both the psychic and physical planes.

At this third stage of concealment G-d hides His omnipotence and commits to obey the natural laws which He Himself devised to govern the world. He is not intrinsically bound by them and could override the whole system at will. Yet in a primal act of self constraint, He

agrees to the same limitations that He imposes upon His creatures, and to exert His influence according to their laws.⁹

This only affects the way *HaShem's* will unfolds but there is no will that can't be satisfied. A metaphor will clarify. As man's knowledge of the universe expands, so does his ability to manipulate nature to serve his needs. For example, when scientists learned all they could about the law of gravity, they designed an airplane that seemingly defied that very fact. The Architect knows His system inside and out—with all the subtleties, loopholes and idiosyncrasies that Nobel Prize winning physicists are just beginning to discover. He constantly) manipulates the system to serve His original intention of perfecting creation and bestowing good. Though His will is above nature and may even contradict it, yet when He imposes that will upon creation He stays within the letter of the law though it holds no real/intrinsic power over Him. Even the Red Sea was split by “a strong east wind (that blew) all that night and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided.”¹⁰



The final η represents the perfect realization of the Divine vision on the physical plane. In the end of days, when the creative process achieves its completion, this final η will perfectly mirror, in infinite and glorious detail, its supernal prototype, the upper η as it exists within the mind's eye of the Creator. The completion of this process is called the messianic era.

Here G-d conceals His perfection and bears the indignity of appearing defective and inadequate to those who look with their outer senses. Imagine the humiliation of the Creator and the self control required not to “react” when people conclude from the appearance of things that there is no G-d, or that He is not in control of His creation, or is doing a lousy job if he is directing the show. The universe is a “work in progress” which, until complete, will always appear lacking. This is so by definition. There is much to learn from the Creator's willingness to detach from His “image.” He is like a king donning the clothes of a beggar, enduring the contempt heaped upon Him by those who judge from surface appearances in order to teach His subjects to search for inner royalty.

The archetypal masterpiece of creative process follows six stages with progressive states of concealment and self constraint separating each from the next. The sequence can be summarized as follows:

PURPOSE (as it arises within a state of light filled expanse.)

(CONCEALMENT OF ALL-PRESENCE)

PURPOSE (as it appears against a background cleared of extraneous light.)

(CONCEALMENT OF INFINITUDE)

CONCEPT

⁹ “HaShem observes all the *mitzvot*” (*Pesikta*), one of which is the obligation of Jews to abide by the laws of the country that they are residing (or exiled) in. This law is called “*Dina d'malchuta dina.*” And so HaShem abides by the “laws of the land,” i.e., the physical plane.

¹⁰ Exodus 14:21.

(CONCEALMENT OF ALL KNOWINGNESS)

VISION

(CONCEALMENT OF OMNIPOTENCE)

BLUEPRINT

(CONCEALMENT OF PERFECTION)

ENDPRODUCT / IMPLEMENTATION

Clearly then, from the perspective of Divinity, the creative process is characterized more by self constraint than self expression and, given the inviolate principle of correspondence, this must also be so for human beings. It follows that one striving to develop her creative potential should focus on the antipodal elements of the process, the points that require a clearing out of the ego's self absorption and attachment to image. We learn from the Divine model that only an increasingly rigorous discipline of modesty and ego dismantling enables artistic expression that is truly imitative of the Creator.¹¹

HUMAN BEGINNINGS

The Cosmic model of creative process, translated into human terms, looks something like this:

PURPOSE (SPIRITUAL) - Out of the vast expanse of infinite possibilities and potentialities that lie within the heart of every human being, a worthy goal presents itself—one of many that could be chosen as the focus of a person's life for the short or long term. This point of preconception will determine the impact of the project at its final end. If intended as an expression of Divine service—to further creation's perfecting—then it will endure in the long term.¹² Words are not sufficient, here. Only heartfelt, internalized sincerity will do. This moment determines whether success will strengthen ego, thereby creating further separation from G-d, or whether it will dissolve ego, bringing greater union with the Creator. The spiritual potency of an act is directly proportional to its originating intention.¹³

CONCEALMENT OF ALL PRESENCE (BREAKING SYMMETRY) - The life and mind are now cleared of all distractions, even one's most lofty thoughts must go. The goal is a primal, resonating calm that permeates into one's bones and dissolves even the resistance of one's lower nature to spiritual work. Ezekiel alludes to this in his vision when he describes the disturbances of "stormy wind," "great cloud," "fire flashing," and "bright glow" that he had to pass through before the gates of prophesy were opened to him.¹⁴ The measure of a person's success on this level determines the profundity and complexity that she will be able to accommodate within herself at later stages.

¹¹ This is the secret of חֲשָׁמַל (*chashmal*) in Ezekiel's vision ח means silence, contraction and מל means speech, expression; thus teaching this same idea that self limitation must precede self expression.

¹² TB *Eruvin* 41a. Also see R. Nachaman, *Likutei Halachot, Simanei Behayma v'Chaya Tahora*, 4.

¹³ Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, *Likutei Amarim* I, chap. 39 (Brooklyn, New York: Kehot Publication Society).

¹⁴ Ezekiel 1:4.

PURPOSE (PRACTICAL) – (as it appears against a background cleared of extraneous light) - Only the previously selected purpose is allowed to reenter the empty womblike space where it now becomes the sole source of illumination. It has not changed from its original form, but now it is isolated and examined against a high contrast backdrop which provides maximum access and visibility. This becomes the focal point of all that will subsequently unfold.

CONCEALMENT OF INFINITUDE (SPECIALIZATION) – This requires concentration upon the subject at hand in a posture of prayerful acknowledgment that inspiration comes from a place beyond oneself. This is the place to articulate a desire that all be maximally consistent with the Creator's Primal-Will-to-Good.

CONCEPT - Spark of insight. The lightening flash of intuition that, for an instant illumines the brain. If not developed immediately or otherwise impressed upon memory it will recede just as quickly back into the ethers from whence it came.

CONCEALMENT OF ALL KNOWINGNESS - The appropriate response here is “beginners mind.” One should assume an attitude of wonder and humble ignorance about the matter at hand. However much you know, you know nothing in this moment. All preconceived notions must go. There are no assertions, only questions...the knot of thought unfolds and reveals its secrets. This is a time for unconditional receptivity.

VISION - From the many threads of information one constructs an overview which synthesizes the internal elements of the concept and fixes their relationship to external reality.

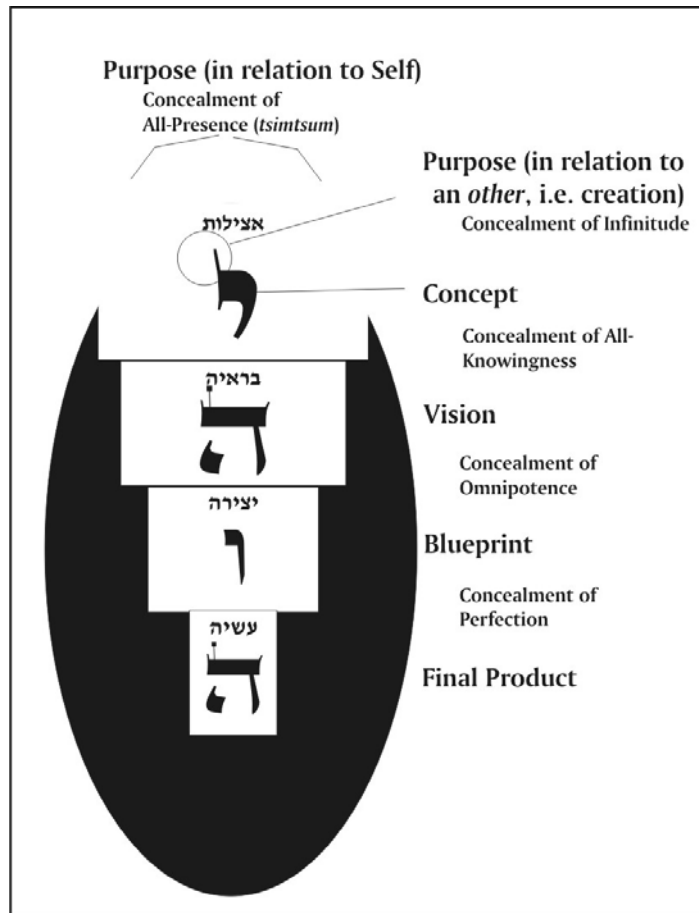
CONCEALMENT OF ALL POWERFULLNESS - It is absolutely critical that one accept the limitations of her chosen medium of expression. Mastery can only come from a previous state of total submission to the realities of both the physical world and the instruments of one's trade. This requires time and energy for study and experimentation. In the end one should know them so deeply that they become extensions of ones very self. A person must also accept the necessity of specialization in the creative process. If he spends time doing this, there's no time for that. If she develops the plan one way, the other options remain unrealized.

PLAN - Methods of procedure, outline, working sketch, blueprint detailing a concrete program of what to do and how to proceed.

CONCEALMENT OF PERFECTION - This requires one to accept that she will fail many times before creating something worthwhile. That he will be rejected. That she may appear an untalented fool to those looking on. That this could go on for years...a lifetime eve. This requires a willingness to put oneself “out there” in spite of the judgments that people inevitably make. And perhaps hardest of all, one must cultivate an ability to accept criticism even from those less enlightened than oneself and to incorporate it gracefully and productively.

IMPLEMENTATION / ENDPRODUCT - Finally, the satisfaction of a job completed and well done...though always there is room for improvement.

Based on this model of creative process, artistic blocks are best understood not as a lack of material for inspiration, but an inability to limit ego at some critical point in the creative process.



CONFUSED BEGINNINGS

Sounds great in theory, but it doesn't fit reality. How is it possible that so many artists succeed in *their* trade with egos obviously intact, if not grossly inflated? First, because the cosmic current of creative flux can be tapped at a less than ultimate level. It is easily short circuited here and one seeking ego gratification can divert the flow to satisfy her own self-serving purposes. Will the creative act derive from the artist's Higher self or arise from an impulse of ego—"A wolf in sheep's clothing" so to speak. As stated previously, this is fixed at the level of purpose. To the extent that a person sincerely intends to use the creative process as a means of dissolving ego and drawing closer in service, then such will be its effect. But if one does not begin from an initial state of ego nullification as expressed through his intention, then he creates "something from something," not "something from nothing" (creation ex nihilo) and the more superficial levels of self are preserved in the process.¹⁵

¹⁵ Moses was the creative instrument through which the Torah was revealed. It is sometimes even called the Five Books of Moses. From a Jewish perspective, the Torah is the most exquisite, potent, and enduring creation in the physical world—the heart of the Jewish people for four thousand years, and the seed of western religions. Tradition teaches that the merit of Moses for which he was chosen as the channel of Torah, was his humility. He is called the most humble of men."

Still, it cannot be coincidence that artists are notoriously temperamental and more characterized by ego than any other profession. This is the exact opposite of what the thesis predicts. However it is the exception which proves the rule. If a person does not relate to his creative expression within a spiritual context, then loss of ego, on any level, becomes very threatening. Yet, the creative process absolutely demands this, whether one likes it or not. It is possible, however, to compensate—to fortify oneself with an armor of ego and thereby secure a safe, enclosed space for creative work. Then he can perform the necessary ritual of ego dismantling behind closed doors—behind triple locked steel doors. This overdevelopment of the outer layers of ego compensates for the vulnerability and insecurity intrinsic to the creative process and the net result is an egotistically appearing person.

WHY BEGINNINGS?

Why did the Infinite One disturb his peaceful equilibrium by introducing a space of cosmic drama and creative flux? Why is the human soul driven by a creative spirit? Why does it delight in a Beethoven symphony or swoon by a Michaelangelo? Is there a net gain in all this? Is anything truly accomplished by creative expression? Does something of it endure eternally? A seemingly innocent question, but tricky when asked of the Creator, for to answer affirmatively would seem to imply some previous lack within the Holy Infinite One. And yet, if not somehow so, then religion collapses into existentialism, only with slightly broadened horizons. Existentialism finds no enduring effect or meaning beyond what one creates within her individual lifetime. Religion would be saying the same thing, only drawing its boundaries at the seven millenniums of this cosmic interlude of creation. Either way there is left an unmistakable taste of despair, meaninglessness and absurdity on the tongue.

Judaism teaches that in the time-to-come, souls will be resurrected into eternal bodies, a clear statement that when all dissolves back into the Infinite Light,¹⁶ these “eternal bodies” will endure as the permanent residue of the Creative act—bodies that can somehow withstand and maintain *their* integrity within that original state of all penetrating, infinitely potent and undifferentiated Light. But what could this possibly mean?

To say that something persists is to imply that within the Creator Himself there is some dynamic, permanently transformative process going on. Of course there are levels of Divinity which transcend this all together and are not touched by even the possibility of change. And of course nothing is ever superadded onto the infinite sum total of the Creator. Consequently, there are two truths about G-d which must be preserved in any theological discussion. These are His infinitude and His perfection. Yet perfect, as commonly applied, describes a static state. There is an endpoint, called perfect, which one does not go beyond, but this becomes a limit which then violates the principle of infinitude. On the other hand, infinite perfection describes a constant state of perfecting but this violates the definition of perfect which allows for no further improvement for one has already reached the penultimate state. This is an irresolvable paradox where both contradictory realities are simultaneously true. Like the

Furthermore, the ultimate act of creative expression, that of reproducing oneself through another human being, happens completely outside one's conscious control and is thereby insulated from the ego's interference. Once the egg and sperm unite, the child unfolds from a more primal influence.

¹⁶ The last of the Thirteen Principles of Jewish Faith as expounded by Rav Moses Maimonides.

wave-particle duality of light, it must be accepted on its own terms. Both are true but at any given moment we deal with one or the other perspective.¹⁷

If one accepts, even for the moment, the notion of perfecting the Perfect, then what does it entail? Applying the principle of correspondence, only this time from below to above, we can study our own subjective experience as participators in the cosmic creative process and gather material that addresses the question. The history of civilization is characterized by expanding awareness . . . bringing consciousness to bear on the entirety of the phenomenal world. Science, psychology, the arts, and even religion are penetrating into every nook and cranny of reality and subjecting all to the light of understanding. It is not enough that something is, or that it works. Rather we must know why and how. There is no peace until every stone is turned.

And what does understanding accomplish? What changes when something is known? It alters the relationship between subject and object by dissolving the existential chasm between them. As man acquires information about the physical world, he gains mastery over it, in which case it becomes an extension of him. He can now use it more efficiently to serve his will which, if he is a religious man, means to serve G-d's will. The object moves from a state of passive, external existence to active service. Its potentiality is unlocked and realized to the ultimate degree.

This seems to be the effect of the creative process both on the human and cosmic scale. By accepting upon oneself the discipline of modesty and self constraint inherent in the creative process, one presses out from within himself the fragrance and the essence of one's innermost potentiality. For a human being this is her Divine soul—the point of G-dliness at the center of every life. One's only access to this priceless treasure is self limitation, whether voluntary or imposed (which becomes one way of understanding the purpose of suffering). That which existed as a hidden potentiality now finds concrete expression in the world. Nothing is added, only unfolded.

For G-d as well, it seems that by actualizing certain potential states there is accomplished a kind of perfecting, but one which does not imply a previous state of lack. For example, to actualize that part of Him that is a wise and benevolent master, He created a kingdom. To actualize that part of Him that is a loving, generous provider, He created a world of receivers. To reveal his essential oneness, he created a seemingly separate consciousness that could transcend itself to the point of recognizing and experiencing that there is nothing but G-d, in spite of all appearances to the contrary. To actualize His All Presence, he brought the Light of His Superconsciousness into the most subterranean depths of His Being.¹⁸ Thus through the discipline of self limitation that underlies the creative process, G-d presses from within Him (so to speak) the outer expression of His own inner potentialities. The “eternal bodies”—those most abstract essences of all that we become—must then be the memory traces (so to speak) of the experience of actualized potential as they persist within the Mind of G-d.

¹⁷ Another way of resolving the paradox, as suggested by Rabbi Yitzchok Ginsburgh, is to say that “Perfection desired that perfection reside within imperfection.”

¹⁸ These are the four levels of understanding G-d's purpose for creating the universe as identified by Rabbi Yitzchok Ginsburgh, סוד ה' ליראיו page 206 (Jerusalem, Israel: Gal Einai Publishers).