

How the Ari Created a Myth and Transformed Judaism

by Howard Schwartz

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For many modern Jews, the term *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) has become a code-phrase synonymous with social and environmental action. It is linked to a call for healing the ills of the world. Indeed, *tikkun olam* has become the defining purpose of much of modern Jewish life. What many of those who use this term do not know is that this idea is rooted in the last great myth infused into Jewish tradition, a cosmological myth created in the sixteenth century by the great Jewish mystic, Rabbi Isaac Luria of Safed, known as the Ari (1534-1572). Here the term “myth” refers to a people’s sacred stories about origins, deities, ancestors and heroes.

The Myth of the Shattering of the Vessels

How is it that a concept rooted in medieval Jewish mysticism has so endeared itself to contemporary Jews? In order to understand this unlikely development, let us first consider the myth itself, known as “The Shattering of the Vessels” (*shevirat ha-kelim*).

At the beginning of time, God’s presence filled the universe. When God decided to bring this world into being, to make room for creation, He first drew in His breath, contracting Himself. From that contraction darkness was created. And when God said, “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3), the light that came into being filled the darkness, and ten holy vessels came forth, each filled with primordial light.

In this way God sent forth those ten vessels, like a fleet of ships, each carrying its cargo of light. Had they all arrived intact, the world would have been perfect. But the vessels were too fragile to contain such a powerful, divine light. They broke open, split asunder, and all the holy sparks were scattered like sand, like seeds, like stars. Those sparks fell everywhere, but more fell on the Holy Land than anywhere else.

That is why we were created — to gather the sparks, no matter where they are hidden. God created the world so that the descendents of Jacob could raise up the holy sparks. That is why there have been so many exiles — to release the holy sparks from the servitude of captivity. In this way the Jewish people will sift all the holy sparks from the four corners of the earth.

And when enough holy sparks have been gathered, the broken vessels will be restored, and *tikkun olam*, the repair of the world, awaited so long, will finally be complete. Therefore it should be the aim of everyone to raise these sparks from wherever they are imprisoned and to elevate them to holiness by the power of their soul.

Sources of the Myth

In most religious traditions, myths were created anonymously in ancient times. By the time that Homer wrote *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* 3,000 years ago, most Greeks had already ceased to believe in the pantheon of Greek gods, and they merely existed to serve as a literary backdrop to Homer's narrative. But not only did mythic development continue in Judaism until the late middle ages, we even know the name and teachings of the creator of a myth that has become central to modern Jewish life. How did the Ari arrive at this myth, which is at the core of his teachings? A closer examination of it will reveal that it is both a remarkable example of the synthesis of existing Jewish traditions and an act of creative genius.

While the Ari did not invent the term *tikkun olam*, he transformed its meaning, and created the underlying myth that defines it. The term is first found in the Mishnah, dating from the second century CE, where it means "guarding the established order." The term is also found in the third section of the *Aleinu* prayer, dating from the talmudic era, where it means "perfecting the world under the rule of God." Maimonides in the twelfth century expanded its meaning. He defined it as an approach to the rulings and customs of the rabbis that is intended "to strengthen the religion and order the world." The Ari's myth changed the meaning of the term again, so that it now refers to his all-inclusive myth, which begins with the creation of the world and ends with the messianic era, known as "the End of Days."

There are three stages of the Ari's myth, and all three stages find likely sources in the Bible. So too did he draw on many other existing myths, scattered throughout the Bible, rabbinic texts, and kabbalistic teachings. The first stage, that of the contraction of God, describes how, at the beginning of time, God's presence filled the universe. Therefore there was no room for creation, and God had to contract Himself (a process known as *tzimtzum*) in order to create a space for creation. Why did the Ari assume that God's presence took space? This is revealed in the biblical episode in which God tells Moses to build a tent of meeting. But when Moses attempts to enter it, he is unable to do so: "A cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the presence of God filled the Tabernacle, and Moses was not able to enter into the tent of meeting" (Exodus 40:34-35). Implicit in the Ari's understanding of *tzimtzum* is a covenant between God and the future creations he made possible by contracting Himself.

The second stage, that of the shattering of the vessels, may have been inspired by the biblical account of Moses throwing down and breaking the first tablets of the law (Exod. 32:19), which, like the holy vessels, were crafted by God on high. So too is there a biblical passage about scattered sparks, found in Ezekiel 10:2, where fiery coals from the Temple altar are scattered by some angelic figures over the city of Jerusalem: "Fill your hands with glowing coals from among the cherubs, and scatter them over the city." This passage manages to work in the scattering, the sparks, the concentration of sparks on the Holy Land (especially Jerusalem), and the holiness of the sparks, since they come from the altar.

The shattering of the vessels also strongly echoes a well-known midrash about prior worlds that God is said to have brought into being and then destroyed. This myth is based on a verse from

Isaiah, “For, behold! I am creating a new heaven and a new earth” (Isa. 65:17). It states that God created and destroyed many worlds before this one, until God created this world and declared, “This one pleases me, those did not.” The twentieth-century rabbi, Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, who died in the Warsaw ghetto, directly links the Ari’s myth to the prior worlds:

At the time of creation, God created worlds and destroyed them. The worlds that were created and those that were destroyed were the shattered vessels that God had sent forth. Out of those broken vessels God created the present universe.

Although the myth of prior worlds strongly influenced the Ari’s myth, the greatest influence derives from kabbalistic teachings about the ten *sefirot*. According to this alternate creation myth, God is said to have brought the world into being in a series of ten emanations, making it possible for God, a purely spiritual being, to manifest the world we inhabit. Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira said of this process of emanation, “In his wondrous hidden way, God contracted His light again and again until physical bodies were created. Thus the world is but an emanation of His light.” Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel described this process as “the inner life of God.” Note that just as there are ten sefirot, so does the Ari’s myth describe ten vessels. In this way the Ari manages to integrate elements of the myth in Genesis about the creation of light with the sefirotic myth of emanation, while creating a new creation myth of his own.

The Story of the Light

The light inside the vessels that shattered has a whole rabbinic history in itself.

It finds its source in a beautiful midrash about the light created on the first day. Here the ancient rabbis noticed an apparent contradiction between Genesis 1:3, where God says, “Let there be light,” and the fourth day of creation, when God created the sun, the moon, and the stars (Gen. 1:16-18). If God did not create the sun until the fourth day, they asked, what was the light of the first day? The rabbis identified it as a primordial light, and there is much rabbinic speculation about where it came from. Some describe it as the light of paradise, while others say it was created when God wrapped Himself in a garment of light, as found in Psalms 104:2.

What happened to this light? God withdrew it from the world, and it became known as the *or ha-ganuz*, the hidden light. Some say it was taken back into paradise when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. The *Zohar*, the central text of Jewish mysticism, dating from the thirteenth century, says that this light was hidden in the Torah, and that whenever anyone studies the Torah with great concentration, a ray of that primordial light will come forth and enlighten them. In another beautiful myth, God is said to have put a bit of that primordial light into a glowing stone, and given it as a gift to Adam and Eve when they were expelled from Eden, as a reminder of all they had lost. This initiates a series of rabbinic legends about how this glowing jewel was passed down, reaching Noah and later Abraham, among others.

How to Gather the Sparks

The third and final stage of the Ari's myth, that of gathering the sparks, may have been inspired by the biblical account of the Israelites gathering the manna that fell from heaven: "The Israelites did so, some gathering much, some little" (Exod. 16:17). Just as the manna fell from heaven to nourish the people's bodies, so the holy sparks are intended to nourish their souls. But how are these mysterious, elusive sparks gathered? The Ari explained that whenever the Torah was studied or one of the commandments of the law fulfilled, some of the holy sparks were raised up. Here, too, the Ari's explanation is revolutionary. Until the time of the Ari, the reason for God's commandments was never provided. And if a student asked, "How do we know this?" the standard rabbinic reply was "We know this from Moses at Mount Sinai." Now, for the first time, the Ari proposed that there was a purpose to the *mitzvot*, the commandments, beyond serving God's will. Studying the Torah, observing the law, healing the ills of the world, or performing good deeds all made it possible to gather the sparks, and thus fulfill the great mitzvah of tikkun olam. As Rabbi Hayim Tirer of Chernovitz put it, "The Jewish people must make a mighty effort to return these sparks to the Creator."

The Original Error — or Birth

There are profound theological implications to the Ari's myth. It implies that a cosmic error, the shattering of the vessels, took place long before the creation of humans. Thus it shifts responsibility for the fallen state of existence from Adam and Eve to God. This development underscores the daring of the Ari's myth, as does his teaching that God created the people of Israel in order to repair the worlds above and below.

However, while most traditional commentaries on Lurianic kabbalah regard the shattering of the vessels as a cosmic catastrophe, some modern commentators, especially women, note that the sefirotic process of contraction resembles birth pangs, and that, from another perspective, the breaking of the vessels can be viewed as a birth process of the universe, not unlike the Big Bang. Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, whose teachings draw on those of the Ari, regards this as a legitimate interpretation, appropriate to our own age.

A close examination of this new myth reveals that it is bookmarked by two major mythic traditions in Judaism — creation and the messianic era. Just as the shattering of the vessels is a new creation myth, describing how God made space for creation and then brought this world into being, so too does it recast the requirements for bringing about the messianic era that was expected to initiate a transformation of existence, a kind of return to the Garden of Eden.

A Human Task and Capability

However, it is important to note that the Ari's teachings make a significant change in the messianic myth. Traditionally, the arrival of the messianic era will not take place until God decides that the time is right. According to the Ari's myth, however, this depends on the progress made in gathering the sparks, an undertaking that individuals can accomplish on their own. Thus each generation has the challenge and opportunity to repair the world sufficiently to restore it to its

original glory. And this repair includes the worlds both above and below, which, the *Zohar* says, are equally in need of repair.

The startling notion that there is a rent in heaven finds its source in a myth found in the *Zohar*. Here it is said that when God permitted the Temple in Jerusalem to be destroyed, God's Bride, known as the *Shekhinah*, confronted God, and declared that she was leaving Him until the Temple, her home in this world, was rebuilt. Until then, the *Shekhinah* chose to go into exile with her children, the children of Israel. So it is that one of the most important purposes of gathering the sparks is, amazingly, to heal heaven and restore God's bride to Him.

The Ari's teachings, known as Lurianic kabbalah, became the leading school of kabbalah, deeply influencing Sephardic and Hasidic kabbalists. In their commentaries, they sometimes embellished the Ari's myth. The Hasidic master, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Rimanov, for example, stated, "When the task of gathering the sparks nears completion, God will hasten the arrival of the final redemption by Himself collecting what remains of the holy sparks that went astray." These additions to the Ari's myth are evidence of the continued myth-making process in Judaism.

A Myth for the Scattered and Isolated

It is important to recognize the historical context of the Ari's myth. He lived in the sixteenth century, not long after the Spanish expulsion of the Jews in 1492. The Jews of Spain were forced to find new lands, and they settled throughout the world, especially in the Balkans and the Middle East. Jews who had been part of Spain's advanced culture and developed cities now had to find a way to survive under far more difficult conditions. Until they learned of the Ari's myth, these exiles found themselves isolated and unhappy in far-flung places. The myth changed this by offering an explanation about why God had sent them there — it was their destiny to do holy work, to raise up the holy sparks that had fallen on these distant lands. Suddenly they found that they had a purpose, where before they had an exile. Thus the myth of the Ari transformed their perception of their fate. Is it any wonder that within a year it had spread throughout the Jewish world?

As for the Jews who lived in the land of Israel, especially in Jerusalem, they were regarded as abundantly blessed, since more of the holy sparks were said to have fallen there than anywhere else, and all those sparks made the holy land holy. Note that the myth of the scattered sparks provides an intrinsic reason for the holiness of the land of Israel, independent of the chronicles and covenants of Genesis.

The Myth Today

Although most modern Jews are unaware of the mythic context out of which *tikkun olam* emerged, the concept itself continues to enchant and energize us. We look at the world around us and see that it is deeply in need of repair, and we are still able to hear the ancient calling that tells us that we must take responsibility for it ourselves, that each of us must do our own part in our own time.

Just as it is possible to draw a line directly from the biblical injunction “Justice, justice shall you pursue”(Deut. 16:20) to Jeffersonian democracy, so too can a direct line be drawn from tikkun olam to the modern social action and environmental movements. Together, justice and repairing the world are the watchwords for the present generation.

The rabbis inhabited a world that defined itself as the people of Israel, no matter where they were scattered. Because of the many covenants of God with Israel, especially the giving of the Torah, it was natural for the Ari to view Israel as having a singular destiny. But in our own time we should be able to read this myth in a more universal sense, about God having created all of humanity to gather the sparks. The goal, to restore the world, is obviously critical for future survival. It can only be fulfilled if all of humanity collaborates on this endeavor. Just as the Ari’s myth still resonates in our own time, his message also has universal meaning. We can only conclude that the Ari was a rare genius who understood the need for a guiding myth for the Jewish people, and created it out of pieces of other Jewish myths, which he fit together into a single, seamless, unifying myth.

Indeed, it may be best for us to think of the Ari’s myth as a conceptual system like Einstein’s theory of relativity. Einstein expresses his “myth” in equations and the Ari through Torah exegesis, reading the myth into the text. Just as we really can’t visualize what Einstein puts in his equations, so we really can’t visualize *zimzum* or emanation or sefirot, but we can recognize the comprehensive intentions of the Ari to unify all of Jewish teachings into one all-inclusive myth.

There is a famous Hasidic tale, “Lighting a Fire,” about a ritual the Baal Shem Tov performed out in a forest, lighting a fire and reciting a prayer he created for that occasion, which saved the people in a time of great danger. Subsequent generations lost the details of that ritual and the place it had been performed and the words of the prayer, but they still had the story, and that was enough. Most of us are only dimly aware of the arcane kabbalistic meaning of the Ari’s cosmology, of the theory that both heaven and earth are in need of repair, and that we must seek out and raise up the holy sparks that will make it possible for us restore the worlds above and below. But we have retained the knowledge that it is incumbent on us to take responsibility for the world we inhabit, and that we must do all that we can to repair it, for ourselves and our children and future generations. And, like the Hasidic tale of the lost ritual, what we have retained of the meaning of tikkun olam is enough.

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