

The face of - the deep.

Darkness, deep, de – ee***void*** ... thus, more or less, is how it begins, and the created something hardly has anything to hold onto, apart from nothing. The wind's hovering above it all – only it can give a certain validation of possible meaning to all that is not there in that initiatory moment. The hovering darkness is the only light in the moment before creation, the *khora* of Plato, or in Jaques Derrida's interpretation, the space where separation ***difference*** comes about and where the creation of actuality, of a world, is made possible.¹

In the parallel commentary to the Biblical text of creation, as in other traditions, the deep is the place of water in the sublunary realm, before separation into upper and lower, and where darkness subsists before it is separated from light. The face of the deep, for Samuel Ibn-Tibbon, for example, is darkness, because the water can no longer receive light.² In research into religions and in philology it is customary to connect the name *tehom* (Hebrew for deep) to *Tiamat*, the feminine divinity in the early Babylonian epic, from whose corpse sky and earth were created, but it does not seem that her monstrous face is intended by the expression “the face of the deep”.

Religious belief posits for the believer the aim of a leap into the abyss, into the gap that cannot be bridged, into the religious paradox, as the only possible bridge over

¹ See ***Plato's*** *Timmaeus* <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1572>; see also John D. Caputo, 2006. "Before Creation: Derrida's Memory of God". *Mosaic* 39:3 (September), 91-102.

See Gad Freudenthal, 2008. Samuel Ibn Tibbon's Avicennian Theory of an Eternal World. *Aleph*: ² *Historical Studies in Science and Judaism* 8: 41-129

unfathomable depths. Similarly, it seems that every system of thought – and moreover, every artistic viewpoint – puts forward its way of bridging what by its nature cannot be bridged. In the midrash, the Song of Ascents from the Book of Psalms, is presented as David's way of coming to terms with the recognition that the whole world is poised like a clay vessel at the mouth of the abyss, and that poetry is the way to create the fine balance that allows it to continue to exist. All these methods have always attached a warning about fictitious bridges over the deep, bridges that place those who walk on them in danger of being swallowed up in darkness. So for example H. N. Bialik warns those who tread fictitious paths:

What is there to be astonished about? About that feeling of security, and that occurrence of wind that accompanies the human in his or her speech, as if in expressing her thought or her feeling, she actually brings it over the still waters and by way of a bridge of iron, having no idea just how she is weakening that bridge of words, how deep and dark the opening below her is and just how much of a miracle there is in every step taken in peace.³

Similarly, Gershom Scholem, who in his famous letter of 1926 warned his friend Franz Rozensweig, that the powers hidden in the holy tongue would soon rise up against speakers of modern Hebrew:

***Is it not true that almost all of us live with this language over a volcano

.H.N. Bialik, 1915. *Revelment and Concealment in Language*. Trans from Hebrew by Mark Joseph³

with the false security of the blind. Must not we or those who came after us stumble into the abyss when we fail to see again? And nobody can know whether the sacrifice of those who perish will suffice to close the hole and avoid the plunge into the abyss.***

“...Is it not true that almost all of us live with this language over a volcano with the false security of the blind? Must not we or those who came after us stumble into the abyss when we fail to see again? And nobody can know whether the sacrifice of those who perish will suffice to close the hole and avoid the plunge into the abyss.”⁴

Whether according to Bialik or to Scholem, the whole “guilt” of speakers of modern Hebrew is their sense of security that the language they speak, and write, can make them safe in face of the yawning abyss at their feet. This abyss is composed of layered meanings, unfathomable layer upon layer. The way to extricate oneself from the everpresent danger of the abyss, as well as in the most dangerous moment of confronting it – is, according to Scholem, seeing.

The warnings about the danger of blindness emphasize above all the importance of clear vision, and an exact gaze: one who looks into profundity and dredges up an image from pitch darkness, faces from the pit, can walk without fear, and is carried on the water’s surface; and

Gershom Scholem to Franz Rozenzweig, 26 December 1926. In William Cutter, 1990. "Ghostly Hebrew,"⁴ Ghostly Speech: Scholem to Rosenzweig, 1926". *Prooftexts* 10:3, 413-433. 431-432, n. 11

nevertheless, if one is to walk over this darkness, she must first deal with being afraid, perhaps the strongest of fears (those of an individual and those of the culture) – fear of the dark, of unfathomable depth, that contains in its confusion both light and dark, good and evil, upper and lower – *tehomophobia*:⁵ the terror of facing the undefined, the multivalent, the uncontrolled rise of the contents of the abyss.

”He who fights with monsters,” warns Nietzsche, “might take care lest he thereby becomes a monster. And when you gaze long into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you.”⁶ The gaze that comes from the dead of night, from the unfathomable depths, is the unerring source of fears. It is enough for us to stand now and again at the edge of the abyss, to completely lose grip, even without looking in. Yet even this is a place of concealment. “And darkness was upon the face of the deep”.⁷ This and more; one can read the second sentence of Genesis as a condition: only if we look into the abyss and its torment and see faces there, will “a wind from G-d [move] over the surface of the waters.”

The faces that emerge from the abyss are precisely not the ones that we would have liked to present. This is not the image that we would have wanted to show, express or represent; these faces don't have a clear look or unequivocal expression; sometimes they don't even have a clear gender identity, age, belonging. These faces have a pre-Genesis tendency, a strange mixture of ugliness and beauty, femininity and other gender possibilities, shy inwardness and blooming ostentation. The faces rise from the depth as if they have jettisoned any obligation to the essential form of a face, and in particular in relation to the closest reflection – I – they present personal identity as an unresolved question, without fear of the darkened deep from which it gathers irresolution.

See Catherine Keller, 2003. *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*. London: Routledge .⁵
(Friedrich Nietzsche, 1886. Beyond Good and Evil (Aphorism 146)⁶
http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Beyond_Good_and_Evil#Aphorism_146

⁷ “And what of the face of the deep? It could have said darkness over the deep [...] darkness has not got a face, that is to say the abyss is the face of darkness (*Sefer Hapliah [The Wonder]*)
http://www.hebrew.grimoar.cz/anonym/sefer_ha-pelija.htm(Hebrew).