

Ayin: The Concept of Nothingness in Jewish Mysticism

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How can God be defined? It cannot. To define ultimate reality would be to deny and desecrate its infinity. Though language brazenly insists on extending the semantic realm, God escapes its noisy clutches again and again.

The mystics, who celebrate divine ineffability, are quite comfortable with a God who refuses to be trapped by language. Yet even they need to refer to this nameless one—at least to communicate their awareness to others, to express a bit of what they have uncovered. One of their favorite strategies is to call God “Nothing.” We hear this paradoxical divine epithet in the East and the West: Meister Eckhart’s *Nichts*, St. John of the Cross’ *nada*, the Taoist *wu*, and the Buddhist *sunyata* and *mu*. I will focus here on the Jewish mystical concept of *ayin*, “nothingness.” *Ayin* is first found in medieval Kabbalah as a theological concept. Later, in Hasidism, its psychological significance is emphasized and *ayin* becomes a medium for self-transformation.

The word *nothingness* connotes negativity and non-being, but what the mystic means by divine nothingness is that God is greater than any *thing* one can imagine: it is like *no thing*. Since God’s being is incomprehensible and ineffable, the least offensive and most accurate description one can offer is, paradoxically, *nothing*. David ben Abraham ha-Lavan, a fourteenth-century kabbalist, insists that “nothingness [*ayin*] is more existent than all the being [*yesh*] of the world.” David’s mystical Christian contemporaries concur. The Byzantine theologian Gregory Palamas writes, “He is not being, if that which is not God is being.” Meister Eckhart says, “God’s *Nichts* fills the entire world; His something, though, is nowhere.”

I

The kabbalists did not invent this negative style of theology. Philo taught that God is unknowable and indefinable. The Gnostics address the hidden God as

“ineffable, inexpressible, nameable by silence.” Trying to outdo his predecessors, the Alexandrian Gnostic Basilides states that even the word “ineffable” says too much. God “is not even ineffable,” but rather totally “nameless and nonexistent.” Another Gnostic explains this final negation: “Nor is he something that exists, that one could know. But he is something else . . . that is better, whom one cannot know. . . . He has nonbeing existence.” The mystical philosopher Plotinus attacked the Gnostics, but he too maintains that the One surpasses our most basic and cherished categories: “Even being cannot be there.”

John Scotus Erigena, a ninth-century Christian mystic influenced by Plotinus, was perhaps the first to apply the term “nothing” to God. Writing in Latin, he calls God *nihil*, by which he means not the lack but the transcendence of being. Because of “the ineffable, incomprehensible and inaccessible brilliance of the divine goodness . . . it is not improperly called ‘nothing.’” For John, creation out of nothing, *ex nihilo*, means the procession of differentiated being out of divine nothingness. In its essence, the divine is said not to be, but as it proceeds through the primordial causes, it becomes all that is. “Every visible creature can be called a theophany, that is, a divine appearance.” Medieval Christian mystics who speak of divine nothingness, such as Meister Eckhart and Jacob Boehme, are indebted to John Scotus.

The kabbalists may also have been influenced by John Scotus, but their immediate teacher in the field of negative theology was Moses Maimonides. Building on the Islamic philosophers Alfarabi and Avicenna, Maimonides taught that God has nothing in common with any other being. God “exists but not through existence,” he wrote in *Guide for the Perplexed*. In fact, Maimonides developed an entire system of negative attributes and encouraged his readers to discover what God is not:

Know that the description of God . . . by means of negations is the correct description. . . . You come nearer to the apprehension of Him with every increase in the negations regarding Him.

The Jewish mystics adopted Maimonides’ theory of negative attributes, at least as it pertains to the infinite

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nature of God. The thirteenth-century kabbalist Azriel of Gerona notes the similarity between the mystical and philosophical approaches: “The scholars of inquiry [philosophers] agree with the statement that our comprehension is solely by means of ‘no.’”

The very strategy of negation provides a means of indicating the ineffable. Negative attributes carve away all that is false and leave us with a positive sense of nothingness. Here the mystics claim to surpass the philosophers. Joseph Gikatilla exclaims: “How hard they toiled and exerted themselves—those who intended to speak of negation; yet they did not know the site of negation!” *Ayin* is revealed as the only name appropriate to the divine essence.

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This reevaluation of nothingness is bolstered by the intentional misreading of various biblical verses in which the word *ayin* appears. In biblical Hebrew *ayin* can mean “where,” as in Job’s rhetorical question (28:12): “Where [me-*ayin*] is wisdom to be found?” The first kabbalists of the thirteenth century transform this question into a mystical formula: “Wisdom emerges out of nothingness.” Asher ben David writes, “The inner power is called *ayin* because neither thought nor reflection grasps it. Concerning this, Job said, ‘Wisdom emerges out of *ayin*.’” As Bahya ben Asher puts it, the verse should be understood “not as a question but as an announcement.” Refracted through a mystical lens, Job’s question yields its own startling answer. In the words of Joseph Gikatilla,

The depth of primordial being . . . is called *ayin*. . . . If one asks, “What is it?” the answer is, “*Ayin*,” that is, no one can understand anything about it. . . . It is negated of every conception.

The kabbalists identified *ayin* with *keter ‘elyon* (“supernal crown”), the first of the ten *sefirot*, the stages of divine being. Moses de Leon explains this identification and then draws an analogy between divine and human ineffability:

Keter ‘elyon is . . . the totality of all existence, and all have wearied in their search for it. . . . The belt of every wise person is burst by it, for it . . . brings all into being. . . . Anything sealed and concealed, totally unknown to anyone, is called *ayin*, meaning that no one knows anything about it. Similarly, no one knows anything at all about the human soul;

she stands in the status of nothingness, as it is said [Ecclesiastes 3:19]: “The advantage of the human over the beast is *ayin*!” By means of this soul, the human being obtains an advantage over all other creatures and the glory of that which is called *ayin*.

God and the human soul share an infinite, inherent indeterminacy. If the human soul could be defined, it would lose its divine likeness. By our nature, we participate in *ayin*.

II

For the kabbalist, one of the deepest mysteries is the transition from *ayin* to *yesh*, from “nothing” to “something.” Following in the footsteps of John Scotus and others, they have reinterpreted creation *ex nihilo* as emanation from the hidden essence of God. There is a “something” that emerges from “nothing,” but the nothing is brimming with overwhelming divine reality. The something is not a physical object but rather the first ray of divine wisdom, which, as Job indicates, comes into being out of *ayin*. It is the primordial point that initiates the unfolding of God. In the words of the Zohar (1:15a):

The flow broke through and did not break through its aura.

It was not known at all until, under the impact of breaking through, one high and hidden point shone. Beyond that point, nothing is known. So it is called Beginning.

The opening words of Genesis, “In the beginning,” allude to this first point, which is the second *sefiyah*, divine wisdom. Though second, it “appears to be the first” and is called “beginning” because the first *sefiyah*, *ayin*, is unknowable and uncountable. In the words of Moses de Leon, the point is “the beginning of existence.”

When that which is hidden and concealed arouses itself to existence, it produces at first something the size of the point of a needle; afterwards, it produces everything from there. . . . This is the primordial wisdom emerging from *ayin*.

The transition from *ayin* to *yesh* is the decisive act of creation, the real context of Genesis. As time proceeds, nothingness serves as the medium of each transformation, of every birth and death. *Ayin* represents the entirety of potential forms that can inhere in matter, each one “invisible until its moment of innovation,” when it issues as a pool spreading out from a spring. As matter adopts new forms, it passes through *ayin*; thus the world is constantly renewed. In the words of

one kabbalist, "Form is stripped away by the power of *ayin*." In every change, in each gap of existence, the abyss of nothingness is crossed and becomes visible for a fleeting moment.

III

The mystic yearns for this depth of being, this formless source of all form. Though humans "walk in the multiplicity" of the material world, "one who ascends from the forms to the root must gather the multiplicity . . . for the root extends through every form that arises from it at any time. When the forms are destroyed, the root is not destroyed."

Can one know this reality beyond forms? Only by unknowing or, in the words of David ben Judah ha-Hasid, "forgetting":

The Cause of Causes . . . is a place to which forgetting and oblivion pertain. . . . Why? Because concerning all the levels and sources [the *sefirot*], one can search out their reality from the depth of supernatural wisdom. From there it is possible to understand one thing from another. However, concerning the Cause of Causes, there is no aspect anywhere to search or probe; nothing can be known of It, for It is hidden and concealed in the mystery of absolute nothingness. Therefore forgetting pertains to the comprehension of this place. So open your eyes and see this great, awesome secret. Happy is one whose eyes shine from this secret, in this world and the world that is coming!

The *sefirot* are stages of contemplative ascent; each one serves as a focus of mystical search. In tracing the reality of each *sefira*, the mystic uncovers layers of being within himself and throughout the cosmos. However, there is a higher level, a deeper realm, beyond this step-by-step approach. At the ultimate stage the kabbalist no longer differentiates one thing from another. Conceptual thought, with all its distinctions and connections, dissolves. Ezra and Azriel of Gerona call the highest *sefira* "the annihilation of thought" (*afsat ha-mahshavah*): "Thought . . . rises to contemplate its own innerness until its power of comprehension is annihilated." Here the mystic cannot grasp for knowledge; rather, he imbibes from the source to which he is joined. In the words of Isaac the Blind, "The inner, subtle essences can be contemplated only by sucking . . . not by knowing."

Ayin cannot be known. If one searches too eagerly and pursues it, one will be overtaken by it, sucked in by the vortex. Ezra of Gerona warns:

Thought cannot ascend higher than its source [the *sefira* of wisdom]. Whoever dares to contemplate

that to which thought cannot extend or ascend will suffer one of two consequences: either he will confuse his mind and destroy his body or, because of his mental obsession to grasp what he cannot, his soul will ascend and be severed [from the body] and return to her root.

Isaac of Akko balances the positive and negative aspects of the experience of return. He describes *de-vequ* ("cleaving" to God) as "pouring a jug of water into a flowing spring, so that all becomes one," yet he warns his reader not to sink in the ocean of the highest *sefira*: "The endeavor should be to contemplate but to escape drowning. . . . Your soul shall indeed see the divine light and cleave to it while dwelling in her palace."

The mystic is vulnerable. Moreover, she is responsible for the divine emanation. She must ensure that the *sefirot* themselves do not collapse back into nothingness. Through righteous action the human being stimulates and maintains the flow of emanation; wrongdoing, on the other hand, can have disastrous effects: "One who sins returns the attributes to *ayin*, to the primordial world, to their original state of being, and they no longer emanate goodness down to the lower world."

The depths of nothingness are both a lurking danger and a reservoir of power. "Out of the depths I call you, *YHVH*." Mystically understood, this verse from Psalms (130:1) describes a human cry not from one's own state of despair but to the divine depths in which God lies hiding, from which God can be called forth. This is not to deny the reality of human suffering. On the contrary, adversity leads one to appreciate the resources of *ayin*. "Human beings must quickly grasp this *sefira* to secure healing for every trouble and malady, as it is written [Psalm 121:1]: 'I lift up my eyes to the mountains; my help comes from *ayin*.'"

IV

In eighteenth-century Hasidism, the kabbalistic material is recast and psychologized; now the experiential aspect of *ayin* becomes prominent. The emphasis is no longer on the *sefirot*, the inner workings of divinity, but on how to perceive the world mystically and how to transform the ego. Dov Baer, the Maggid ("preacher") of Mezritch, encourages his followers to change *aniy* ("I") into *ayin*, to dissolve the separate ego in nothingness. As we shall see, this is not a destructive but rather a dialectical and ultimately creative process. According to Dov Baer:

One must think of oneself as *ayin* and forget oneself totally. . . . Then one can transcend time, rising to the world of thought, where all is equal: life and

death, ocean and dry land.... Such is not the case when one is attached to the material nature of this world.... If one thinks of oneself as something... God cannot clothe Himself in him, for He is infinite, and no vessel can contain Him, unless one thinks of oneself as *ayin*.

We must shed the illusion that we are separate from God. To defend an independent sense of self is a sign of false pride. True humility involves the consciousness of *ayin*. In the words of Issachar Ber of Zlotshov:

The essence of the worship of God and of all the *mitzvot* is to attain the state of humility, namely... to understand that all one's physical and mental powers and one's essential being are dependent on the divine elements within. One is simply a channel for the divine attributes. One attains such humility through the awe of God's vastness, through realizing that there is no place empty of Him. Then one comes to the state of *ayin*, which is the state of humility... One has no independent self and is contained, as it were, in the Creator.... This is the meaning of the verse [Exodus 3:6]: "Moses hid his face, for he was in awe...." Through his experience of awe, Moses attained the hiding of his face, that is, he perceived no independent self. Everything was part of divinity!

The experience of nothingness does not induce a blank stare; it engenders new mental life through a rhythm of annihilation and thinking. "One [should] turn away from that [prior] object [of thought] totally

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to the place called 'nothingness,' and then a new topic comes to mind. Thus transformation comes about only by passing through nothingness." In the words of one of the Maggid's disciples, "When one attains the level of... gazing at *ayin*, one's intellect is annihilated.... Afterwards, when one returns to the intellect, it is filled with emanation." The creative pool of nothingness is described as the "preconscious" (*qadmut ha-sekhel*), that which precedes, surpasses, and inspires both language and thought. According to Dov Baer:

Thought requires the preconscious, which rouses thought to think. This preconscious cannot be

grasped.... Thought is contained in letters, which are vessels, while the preconscious is beyond the letters, beyond the capacity of the vessels. This is the meaning of: "Wisdom emerges out of nothingness."

The mystic is expected to trace each thought, each word, each material object back to its source in *ayin*. The world no longer appears as essentially distinct from God. In the Habad school of Hasidism acosmism has become a fundamental teaching: "This is the foundation of the entire Torah: that *yesh* [the apparent "somethingness" of the world] be annihilated into *ayin*." "The purpose of the creation of the worlds from *ayin* to *yesh* was that they be transformed from *yesh* to *ayin*." This transformation is realized through contemplative action: "In everything they do, even physical acts such as eating, the righteous raise the holy sparks, from the food or any other object. They thus transform *yesh* to *ayin*."

This mystical perspective is neither nihilistic nor anarchic. Matter is not destroyed or negated, but rather enlivened and revitalized. The awareness that divine energy underlies material existence increases the flow from the source (*ayin*) to its manifestation (*yesh*). Dov Baer explains:

When one gazes at an object, he brings blessing to it. For when one contemplates that object, he knows that it is... really absolutely nothing without divinity permeating it.... By means of this contemplation, one draws greater vitality to that object from divinity, from the source of life, since he binds that thing to absolute *ayin*, from which all beings have been hewn.... On the other hand... if one looks at that object... and makes it into a separate thing... by his look, that thing is cut off from its divine root and vitality.

World, mind, and self dissolve momentarily in *ayin* and then reemerge. *Ayin* is not the goal in itself; it is the moment of transformation from being through nonbeing to new being. The Maggid conveys this thought with the image of the seed that disintegrates before sprouting:

When one sows a single seed, it cannot sprout and produce many seeds until its existence is nullified. Then it is raised to its root and can receive more than a single dimension of its existence. There in its root the seed itself becomes the source of many seeds.

Ayin is the root of all things, and "when one brings anything to its root, one can transform it." "First [each thing] must arrive at the level of *ayin*; only then can it

become something else." Nothingness embraces all potentiality. Every birth and rebirth must navigate the depths of *ayin*, as when a chick emerges from an egg: for a moment "it is neither chick nor egg." As long as the human ego refuses to acknowledge its divine source, it is mistaking its part for the all and laying false claim to that which cannot be grasped. In the words of Menahem Mendel of Kotsk, "The I is a thief in hiding." When this apparently separate self is *ayinized*, the effect is not total extinction, but the emergence of a new form, a more perfectly human image of the divine. Only when "one's existence is nullified . . . is one called 'human.'"

Ayin is a window on the oneness that underlies and undermines the manifold appearance of the world. The ten thousand things we encounter are not as independent or fragmented as they seem. There is an invisible matrix, a swirl that generates and recycles being. One who ventures into this depth must be prepared to surrender what he knows and is, what he knew and was. The ego cannot abide *ayin*; you cannot wallow in nothingness. In *ayin*, for an eternal moment, boundaries disappear. *Ayin's* "no" clears everything away, making room for a new "yes," a new *yesh*.

Our familiar and confining images of God vanish in *ayin*. This "Nichts of the Jews," writes the poet Henry Vaughan, exposes "the naked divinity without a cover." *Ayin* implies the God beyond God, the power that is closer and further than what we call "God." It symbolizes the fullness of being that transcends being itself, "the mysterious palace of *ayin*, in which everything dwells." The reality that animates and surpasses all things cannot be captured or named, but by invoking *ayin* the mystic is able to allude to the infinite, to *alef* the ineffable. □

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