CREATION AND THE LIMITATIONS OF THE CREATOR

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Theology in depth calls for an answer to a dilemma: the act of Creation, the fact of Creation, the result of Creation, ineluctably limit the Creator. God emerges not Omnipotent, not Almighty. Not for lack of power, God forbid, but precisely because among His powers is the power to create – and to limit even Himself.

Here is God's dilemma: before Creation, God is King. In our daily prayer of *Adon Olam* we say: "Master of the World Who was King before any creature was created, and after all is ended, He will be King alone, Awesome." He occupied and, after Creation is over, will occupy all space and all time. Clearly, the poet of *Adon Olam* perceived the irony of Creation limiting the Creator, which is why he feels it necessary to emphasize what is apparently obvious.

The Divine problem was: What kind of King is it Who has no subject and no realm? Only after the creation of Man can He be called "King!" This act gave God kingship, through service to the Lord, sanctification and magnification of the Name of the Master. In order to have a world, creatures, and Man who will make Him King, God must limit Himself in power and even in space. In order to enjoy His Creation, He has to run the risk of being disappointed at times, pained, and even grieved by His Creation. Man was given the power to rebel against Him. In the very Kaddish, our doxology of glorification, we elevate Him in eight different ways – blessed, praised, beautiful, exalted, raised, adored, glorified, flattered, be the Name of the Holy One blessed be He.

Yet even here we intrude a strange phrase: "He and His name are above all benedictions, songs, praises and consolations [*v'nehemata*]." Now, we know that God consoles us, like a mother consoling a child: *Be consoled, be consoled, My People, says your God* (Isa. 40:1) But why do we, His creatures,

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offer condolences to God? What consolations can we offer Him? In Rokeach's *Commentary on the Order of Prayer* (39: Kaddish, col. 248) it says:

> *V'nehemata* [we console] with reference to what is said in the first chapter of [Tractate] Berachot 3a, "Woe is to Me, that I have destroyed My House". Therefore, we say it in Aramaic [in the Kaddish] so that the angels of service will not understand, and say, "How can [mere man's] consolation be relevant to the Shekhinah?!"

There is a mystical attempt to solve the dilemma involved in Creation from the point of view of space. In the Kabbalah there is a doctrine of *tzimtzum* [contraction]. If there is to be a physical creation, there has to be a physical space for it. So God limited His Omnipresence in all of space, and leaves room for a universe to be created and be amenable to existence within it. The Lord of Space (signified by the appellation *Ha'Makom*) practiced *tzimtzum,* self-limitation. But *tzimtzum* brings its rewards. Before Creation, God is like an artist who has not created his work of art, or like a composer with an unfinished symphony in his head, or an architect with only a vision of his master edifice. God evidently was not satisfied with only His blueprint for Creation, His pre-existent Torah. Only after Creation can the Creator derive satisfaction from His Creation, as the Bible tells us: *And God saw all He had made and behold it was very good* (Gen. 1:31).

It is not only in *tzimtzum* that God limited Himself. He limited Himself in three other ways; through free will, nature, and logic.

1. God is a Creator Who wants as much of Himself as possible in Man, His primary creature. He created him in His own image by *granting Man free will,* one of the attributes of Divinity. If man's free will is really free, that freedom limits the omnipotence of God. It is no diminution of His power in the ultimate sense, because it is only by His own free will that free will was granted to Man. This has been compared to the ambassador of a king who is given authority to act on his behalf. The derived power of the ambassador does not limit the residual power of his king, because his ambassadorial power is only delegated by virtue of the higher power of the one who bestowed it.

Does free will compromise God's omniscience as well? Since He knows what decision the human will make, how can that decision be freely made? This has been discussed at length by Jewish philosophers. In the view of Has-

dai Crescas, as summarized by Isaac Husik, free will is limited to internal reaction to events rather than to actual freedom to act.

> Crescas embraces the other horn of the dilemma. God's omniscience must be maintained in all its rigor. It is absurd to suppose that the first universal and absolute cause should be ignorant of anything pertaining to its effects. Is man then not free? Has he no choice at all, no freedom in the determination of his conduct? . . . Crescas's answer is a compromise. Determinism is not fatalism. It does not mean that a given person is preordained from eternity to act in a given way . . . The only solution is that the act of will is in a sense contingent, in a sense determined. It is contingent in respect to itself, it is determined by its cause . . . . Effort is not in vain, for effort itself is a cause.[1]

On the other hand, Ralbag [Gersonides] in his *Book of the Wars of the Lord* (III:106) preserved full human freedom of will by limiting God's knowledge of the future, when that future involves human choice between good and evil.

> God knows all that is determined by the celestial bodies. But as man's freedom may annul their determination, He knows them only as possibilities. To affirm that God knows the possible only as possible does not detract from His supreme intelligence.

Maimonides, in his Laws of Repentance 5:5, cuts the Gordian knot by insisting unequivocally:

> But we must know without doubt that man's actions are in man's power and the Almighty does not pull him and does not decree for him to do anything. And this is not only because of the tradition of the religion, but we know this based on clear proofs from wisdom.

2. The second limitation placed upon the Creator comes from nature and its laws. Tradition knows of the principle *olam k'minhago noheg* [the universe runs according to its own laws]. Jewish theology assumes that God created natural laws together with Nature. Once these are established by God, even He does not interfere with them. Against this kind of thinking, the sages could explain miracles, which ostensibly do interfere with natural law, as having been provided for in advance of Creation. Thus even miracles are part of natural law.

3. The third limitation that God graciously placed upon Himself is to share aspects of logic in the Divine realm with earthly man. Man was granted reason to apply logical progression to evident or convincing cause and effect, deduction and induction, and the like, so that life in His Creation can proceed. It is a secondary irony that His Creation required Him to place this limitation on Himself. But He has reserved the Omnipotence and Omniscience of the logic of events that are inexplicable to us. In the words of Maimonides (Laws of Repentance 5:5):

> For man cannot see Me and live, so man cannot fathom the mind of the Creator. This is what the prophet meant when he said, *For My thoughts are not your thoughts, and My ways are not your ways.* Since this is so, we do not have the power to know how the Almighty knows all the creatures and their actions.

We often acknowledge this limitation on us. For example, at a funeral a frequent theme is: "We cannot fathom the reasoning, the logic, behind this death. Human logic cannot tell us the necessity of it. But, we believe there is a logic, not apprehendable by us, behind it."

These limitations upon God's omnipotence, which are the inevitable results of the act of Creation, lead to the possibilities of man consoling God, as alluded to in the Kaddish. Indeed, Man can even argue with God and even "overcome" Him in debate, spiritual struggle, or prayer. Our father Jacob wrestled with God and prevailed: *You have contended with God and have overcome,* says his adversary (Gen. 32:29). In the Talmud, the Sages have God saying proudly, "My children have triumphed over Me, have triumphed indeed" (Bava Metzia 59b).

Perhaps, then, it is correct to say that the limitations upon God and the limitations upon man are not be seen as weaknesses, but as challenges – for the former, patience, and for the latter, steadfastness.

NOTES

1. Isaac Husik, *A History of Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1946) p. 396.