

## Wonder and Mysticism: Weekend Reader



Never once in my life did I ask God for success or wisdom or power or fame. I asked for wonder, and He gave it to me

-Abraham Joshua Heschel

In the late 15th century, Japanese shogun Ashikaga Yoshimasa (1436-1490), 8th shogun of the Ashikaga shogunate, sent a damaged bowl for repairs. When the bowl was returned, it was mended but ugly and stapled, motivating local craftsmen to try their hand at more elegant styles of repairing

broken objects. And so *kintsugi* was born. *Kintsugi*, literally “golden joinery,” is the Japanese art of repairing broken ceramics with a resin developed to look like solid gold (and often using real gold).

Through *kintsugi*, cracks and breakages do not spell the end of a pot or bowl, rather they set the way for a deeper adornment. As the Jewish bard Leonard Cohen murmured in his epic song “Anthem”:

Forget your perfect offering

There is a crack in everything (there is a crack in everything)

That’s how the light gets in

The *kintsugi* method treats this literally, as cracks birth golden rivers streaming through the broken ceramic. Brokenness is no longer hidden or thrown away; instead, the possibilities and power hidden in the cracks shine in full relief. This is a matter of design – *kintsugi* is related to the broader Japanese value of *wabi sabi*, a world view that emphasizes the impermanence and imperfection that comprise the state of reality. Adorning the very imperfections of this world with gold is a subtle yet powerful choice to live with greater beauty, in spite of it all.

In the twentieth century, our world cracked. Like a simple clay pot, fallen and in pieces, the world shattered. Systems of truth and power, ethics, art, and culture could not stop the atrocities of the 20th century. For many, this was the age of the death of men, with the death toll rising ever higher and higher. Others insisted the world lost even more than the catastrophic loss of life. In the words of Elie Wiesel, “In Auschwitz died, not only man, but also the idea of man.”

An innocence was lost in the 20th century. Facing the catastrophe, humanity now knew uncomfortable truths about what both man and God could do. The act of faith, and particularly the wonder of mysticism, are in many ways built upon a foundation of the kind of innocence now lost.

Where can a people go, a person go, a world go, after the death of innocence? Enter second innocence. Second innocence, or second naivete, is a position that affirms innocence in the face of all the challenges to innocence. Second innocence is the affirmation of innocence, of truth, of beauty, in the aftermath of a broken world. This is the decision to live a life of wonder, even though one knows all the ways that the world may not be filled with wonder.

Why does modernity need mysticism? It is no small coincidence that some of the greatest breakthroughs in the history of Jewish mysticism have occurred in the immediate aftermath of catastrophe. In the wake of the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492, suffering the consequences of the inquisition, the Arizal and a group of his friends, teachers, and students in Safed led an intellectual revolution that profoundly shaped the future of Jewish thought.

In the aftershock of catastrophe, perhaps mysticism is most needed. The mystical impulse is not easily defined, as there are many qualities and aspects to mysticism. Even Jewish mysticism has been practiced and studied in many different matrices. But we can turn to the wealth of words and

ideas within the many mystical texts of the Jewish people to find wisdom and wonder in the modern era. We can look to our mystical thinkers to better appreciate the unseen aspects in a world in which everything is seen, everything is visible.

Rabbi Louis Jacobs invoked the words of English poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning when exploring the mystical impulse. Her words offer a window into what we might hope to see:

Earth's crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God;  
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,  
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries,  
And daub their natural faces unaware  
More and more from the first similitude.

In the past century – and in the past year – we have seen the world aflame. Perhaps it is time to look with wonder at the fire. It is not for nothing that as the world has aged, the mystical tradition has opened up. Texts and philosophies that were once secret, obscure, and impenetrable – esoterica studied only by the most righteous – have been opened up to contemporary readers. Perhaps the rarefied thought of Jewish mysticism has opened up in the modern era – from 1840 until today – specifically to address the needs of our disenchanted world. In a world lacking adornment, in which every crack is seen, we can turn to mysticism to remember that there is something more, under the surface of ourselves, our world, and our religion.