

Birth in the Pardes

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Wandering through Anat Betzer's extensive, intricate **Pardes**,¹ and reading Ruth Kara-Ivanov Kaniel's book *Human Throes: Birth in Kabbalah and Psychoanalysis*, thoughts about spiritual as well as creative human birth emanated from my psychoanalyst's brush. Three possible perceptions of birth came to mind, which may also project on the process of artistic creation: birth as an event of the individual, birth as assimilation of two, and birth as a fruitful conjunction of three. These thoughts ultimately incarnated as a short psychoanalytic *Midrash*, based on the Kabbalistic story of the Pardes.

Birth as an Event of the Individual

One of the phantasies² accompanying us in life is the illusion that at birth we emerged into the world like Venus rising from the sea. The essential beneficial unity—where "there is no such thing as an infant... without maternal care," as

¹ Literally an orchard, a garden, a Paradise. In rabbinic Judaism, the term **Pardes** refers to a unique exegetic approach to the biblical text in Torah study; it is an acronym of the four methods of Scriptural interpretation: Pshat (literal), Remez (allegorical), Drash (homiletical), and Sod (mystical or esoteric).

² Psychoanalyst Melanie Klein suggested the spelling **phantasy**, to distinguish the unconscious phantasy from fantasy that signifies daydreaming; see Susan Isaacs, "The Nature and Function of Phantasy," *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 29 (1948), pp. 73–97.

maintained by psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott³—creates the illusion of individuality precisely while covered in such nurturing delicacy, so that the infant need not be aware of the presence of the *other*, the mother. This is also how the relationship between man and God is described in the Kabbalah, since God, too, is perceived—as Kara-Ivanov Kaniel explains in her book— "as one who makes the illusion of finite existence possible alongside the infinite divine being; or, in the words of Baal Hatanya (Shneur Zalman of Liadi), God offers us the illusion that 'we are a thing in itself.'" Kara-Ivanov Kaniel further elaborates: "According to Lurianic Kabbalah, God 'contracted' and withdrew Himself to make room for the creation of man, just as the mother conceals her needs and presence to sustain the infant and grant him freedom."⁴ Using psychoanalyst Michael Balint's imagery, the analyst "should be willing to carry the patient [...] like water carries the swimmer or the earth carries the walker."⁵ In Kabbalistic and Chassidic ritual, the moment of birth is perceived as "a state of total renewal, as an entity not yet realized. [...] It is the Crown (*Keter*), a nothingness that contains all that exists." Furthermore, "The true servant of God is the fetus, whose being embodies all that is yet to come but has not yet been."⁶

³ D.W. Winnicott, "The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship," *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 41 (1960), p. 587.

⁴ Ruth Kara-Ivanov Kaniel, *Human Throes: Birth in Kabbalah and Psychoanalysis* (Jerusalem: Carmel Press and Shalom Hartman Institute, 2018), p. 83 [Hebrew].

⁵ Michael Balint, *The Basic Fault: Therapeutic Aspects of Regression* [1968] (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1979), p. 167.

⁶ Biti Roi, "Birth in Kabbalistic and Chassidic Ritual," in Kara-Ivanov Kaniel, *Human Throes*, p. 409 [Hebrew].

It is, thus, a potential in itself, and as such, has great significance. On the one hand, it carries a total, innate, pre-formative creative power. In real existential terms, it indicates an eruption, which, in the ninth chapter of Kara-Ivanov Kaniel's book—"Redemption as Birth and Birth as Redemption"—is described (after the Zohar) as Exodus: "It is an eruption, a breaking forth from the womb of the world, from the great big, dangerous sea, the Red [Heb. *adom*] Sea which alludes to blood (*dam*) and law (*dinim*). All these represent a necessary, inevitable formative trauma. It is an eruption akin to a catastrophic transformation, capable of effecting reparation [*tikkun*]."⁷ Childbirth is tantamount to that traumatic departure (Exodus), being both grand and intimidating at the same time. It is not accidental that it has an elusive quality—barely touching, barely erupting—because it holds onto the end of another umbilical cord, which involves a parthenogenetic phantasy of "asexual (virgin) reproduction." In the spirit of Klein's psychoanalysis, it is tied, to my mind, with the infant's phantasy of getting rid of his mother and father as those who precede him, to burst forth and away from them as those who hold the keys to his existence, as his debtors.

Throughout his life a person is condemned to carry the burden of birth, bestowed upon him as an ambivalent gift, like a millstone around his neck. It imbues him with existential grief, and yet—he is in awe. The rage must be subdued, the desire to get rid must be curbed, for he depends on his birth parents and on the *other* until his dying day. The phantasy of the parthenogenetic infant, who is imprinted with the existential code of its various

⁷ Kara-Ivanov Kaniel, *Human Throes*, p. 376.

incarnations, is dangerous but uplifting due to the delightful murderousness with which the baby rids itself of the womb, turning into ample water, whereupon he no longer needs to know it.

The artist, too, strives to create a world from the nothingness of the blank canvas, in an act of creation between herself and her work which is unique and miraculous, and at the same time—holds onto the navel of all art. Anat Betzer does not run away from her debt, nor does she hide it; on the contrary: her paintings overflow with multiple images, borrowed from the vast corpus of art history. The great mother is alive and kicking in her works, in terms of the images embedded in them as well as their rendition. In her paintings, one may identify derivatives from the work of Caspar David Friedrich, Caravaggio, etc., a combination of different painterly languages and precedents, from which she extracts a new, unique, and harmonious moment.

Birth as Assimilation of Two

The perception of the infant as assimilated in paradise, in the womb, in the Great Mother of dreams, shifts us from the individual to the couple; this, however, does not concern fruitful mating, but a wide range of possibilities: penetrations, intrusions, invasions, fusions, assimilations in the great light, in a longed for or lost paradise. Such descriptions are found in both Kabbalistic myths and psychoanalytic case studies—descriptions of the infantile desire to forcibly enter the mother's body as a universe, and surround himself with it, a phantasy which is accompanied by claustrophobia—fear of the claustrum closing in on him. In this context, the "aesthetic conflict," as described by

psychoanalyst Donald Meltzer, comes to mind,⁸ whose essence is the infant facing the mysterious mother. The greater her beauty is for him, the greater the pain of his separateness from her; carrying a part which does not belong to him, she is enigmatic: at once exciting and deterring. Interestingly, art repeatedly confronts the adult with the "aesthetic conflict"—just like the mysterious mother: it is beautiful, enigmatic, and exciting, and at the same time—overwhelming and threatening.

The baby strives to close this gap, to reunite with the mother, to join her anew (or ostensibly anew, since there has never been a union without perils, not even in the womb). It is a phantasised union of complementation into one perfect totality, that needs no pairing or movement since it is, in itself, pairing in eternal movement. This has diverse manifestations in psychoanalysis, in the Jewish scriptures, and in culture, whether the "combined parental couple";⁹ the Siamese twins in the Sages' and Kabbalistic depiction of the creation of the ancient androgynous; or the image of Adam and Eve not only as a couple attached back-to-back, "double-faced" (i.e., as complementing the two aspects into one whole), but also as twins who became spouses (namely, an incestuous union that perversely eliminates the distance and the prohibitions, restrictions, and partiality). This "couple" is not an autarkic individual as in the first model, but a sacred union of male and female inseparably enmeshed.

⁸ Donald Meltzer, "Aesthetic Conflict: Its Place and Development," in Donald Meltzer and Meg Harris Williams, *The Apprehension of Beauty: The Role of Aesthetic Conflict in Development, Art, and Violence* (Perthshire: Clunie Press, 1988).

⁹ Melanie Klein, *The Psycho-Analysis of Children* (London: Hogarth Press, the International Psycho-Analytical Library, 1932), p. 391.

Many of Betzer's paintings (especially the early ones) feature separated pairs. The same images (house, forest, tree) are portrayed, over and over, "back-to-back," similar but different, connected but disparate. The works in the later series *Locus Amoenus*, are conscious, overly designed, and intentionally differentiated from the conceptual painting. This is particularly conspicuous in the series of roosters, which are decorative-static, yet, set as individuals, pairs, and trios in different postures, they create an uncanny (*unheimlich*) display of liveliness and stasis, togetherness and solitude. Betzer thus juxtaposes the primordial moment of unification and assimilation in Paradise, with the moment of traumatic separation and awareness of its inevitability.

Birth as a Fruitful Conjunction of Three

Many of Betzer's works seem as though they were drawn directly from Kabbalistic images associated with the third kind of birth—the kidding doe, the serpent, the dragon, the eagle, and the crows—which is essentially founded on two that become three, as in the birth of all living creatures. One of the most beautiful Kabbalistic tales in Kara-Ivanov Kaniel's book is the myth of the "constricted" doe—an image of redemption as birth: the doe has difficulty giving birth because her womb is too narrow, and she nearly dies. Kara-Ivanov Kaniel proposes "looking at the doe's 'constricted' condition during kidding."¹⁰ But then, in a description from Bava Batra (16a), a serpent (and in

¹⁰ Kara-Ivanov Kaniel, *Human Throes*, p. 372.

another version a dragon) is sent forth, biting her at the opening of the "womb," and when she relaxes—the kid emerges.

Something in a mother who smothers her offspring inside her must die, must let go, for the kid to be delivered. The doe is likened to both the son—the people of Israel, pressed in her womb, bleating to get out, and to the birth-giving mother, who is torn, rescuing him from her straits. But these would not have occurred had it not been for the third, which is always regarded as the *Sitra Achra* (the Other Side), the evil other, because it separates the mother from the newborn. It disallows the first phantasy described above, of a newborn who is unaware of the existence of a mother or a parental couple giving birth to him. Nor does it allow for the second phantasy, of a mother and child enmeshed or of a baby eternally assimilated in a uterine paradise, in full control and delightful exclusivity. Paradoxically, it is the *Sitra Achra* that rescues both the mother and the fetus—and metaphorically also the artist and the work of art. It delivers them with blessed violence from their messianic phantasies in favor of the world of partialness and pain, in which three exist and are thus condemned to feel forever excluded and competing, threatened but also enriched in the three-dimensional game where movement spawns life.

It is not accidental that birth is described in the Book of Zohar by a sequence of triads, as observed by Kara-Ivanov Kaniel: "The Zohar, in discussing the Trumah portion, draws an analogy between three lights created on the first day and the three elements and phases of which the world and man were created. The first light is associated, according to the Zohar, with the sefirah of Hesed (kindness), of which it is said 'Let there be light'; the

second light, in which the darkness and the Sitra Achra are embedded, represents Din (Judgment), of which it is said 'Let there be darkness'; finally, the light of the sefirah of Tiferet (beauty, glory) was created, which differentiates between and balances the first two lights, as it is said, 'and God divided the light from the darkness'.¹¹ From there Kara-Ivanov Kaniel goes on to the three elements from which man was created—light, water, and firmament—which correspond with the three aforesaid emanations.

Betzer's paintings surrender an unusual treatment of light. Deviating from the cliché of the harsh Israeli light, she seeks to create a new, near-fantastic light that stands in contrast to her realistic imagery. Perhaps because of this light, her paintings sometimes call moments of Creation to mind, from which a refined, primal, inner light emanates. Even in her paintings of darkness, which depict a grove or a nocturnal forest, a primal glow bursts forth—such as in the painting featuring a house planted in the heart of a dark forest. In addition to the radiant sky above, the house itself glows in the painting like a star in the depths of the forest's womb.

The infant's process of formation is likewise broken down by the Zohar into three phases: first, the baby's creation from the Upper Light, which corresponds with the paternal seed (like the creative concept sown in the artist's consciousness); secondly, it is joined by the water, which is the maternal moisturizing substance (like the paints in the artist's hand) and the beginning of the body's shape; and finally, when the body takes shape, the baby's form is conjoined by the substance referred to as firmament, which

¹¹ Ibid., p. 129.

furnishes it with a contour and a portrait (like the work of art itself). Another myth, similar to the myth of the doe,¹² describes a mother crouching to give birth on a mountaintop (Heb. *har*) (as befitting a pregnant woman, *hara*). She wishes to abort (drop) the offspring to its death, but God sends a dragon, or an eagle, or crow forth, that saves the newborn from the cruelty of the aborting mother. Similarly, in Betzer's works, which are rife with fowl, the danger of destroying, staining, and irony always hovers, like the impulse to abort/drop the newborn from the heights of inspiration into the abyss of the cruel reality.

There is a reversal or an acknowledgement of complexity here: the ostensibly good birth-giving mother is also dangerous—and the father, the third element, the separator, is also the savior and the one who enables birth, not into an abyss but to life—a life outlined by border, partialness, and burden, which is nevertheless epitomized by creation and rectification (*tikkun*). As in Kleinian thought,¹³ in the Kabbalah, too, the unconscious phantasy is directed at reparation of the weak, dangerous parent. "It is the act of raising one's eyes to the heavens that creates and reinstates/repairs divinity," Kara-Ivanov Kaniel writes. The purpose of Kabbalistic worship is "the constitution of the mother as such, transforming her from a question of crisis to an answer."¹⁴

¹² Ibid., p. 391.

¹³ Melanie Klein, "Mourning and its Relation to Manic-Depressive States" [1940], in *Melanie Klein: Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works 1921–1945* (London: Vintage, 2011), pp. 344–369; Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms" [1946] in *Melanie Klein: Envy and Gratitude and Other Works 1946–1963* (London: Vintage, 2011), pp. 1–24.

¹⁴ Kara-Ivanov Kaniel, *Human Throes*, p. 165.

Perhaps, metaphorically, this is also one of the goals of the work of art. Many of Betzer's paintings seem to emerge from a rift, for which language and aesthetic power serve as a cure. Betzer herself attested to this in a 2018 interview: "The exhibition is about pain, about a broken heart and forced maturation. [...] I went through dramatic experiences in recent years. [...] I get up in the morning with a brush in hand, start working and paint until nightfall. I live inside my art 24 hours a day. There is a great deal of loneliness there as well as great pleasure. In a way, I have built a paradise for myself."¹⁵

The Kaddish, into which I delved through Dana Amir's book *Kaddish on Light and Darkness*,¹⁶ is a powerful cultural imperative: a Jew in mourning, who has just lost the one closest to him, is commanded to recite a prayer, thereby learning that his words still have a generating power in the world; that he is capable of offering praise in the exalted spheres of the holy and pure. At the same time, the occasion delivers him from the helplessness experienced in the face of loss, and through his tears, gives him a glimpse into freedom, creation, reparation and healing (*tikkun*) on the horizon of his existence.

Psychoanalyst Thomas Ogden wrote about the artist's "art of mourning" following Jorge Luis Borges' writing after his father's death,¹⁷ and I followed him in writing about "the reader's art of mourning,"¹⁸ where through

¹⁵ Betzer interviewed by Anat Barzilay, "Dirty Beauty: Anat Betzer stains clean flower paintings in circles and pop songs, *Calcalist*, 12 November 2018 [Hebrew].

¹⁶ Dana Amir, *Kaddish on Light and Darkness* (Ramat Gan: Afik, 2019) [Hebrew].

¹⁷ Thomas H. Ogden, "Borges and the Art of Mourning," *Psychoanalytic Dialogue*, 10:1 (2000), pp. 65–88.

¹⁸ Merav Roth, *A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Reading Literature: Reading the Reader* (London & New York: Routledge, 2020).

the reading process he can mourn his own world as well. The work of art, too, joins the vital psychological act of "the art of mourning"—when the work processes, digests, comforts, and creates a new reality in the face of the constraints and instead of all that was lost and will be lost. Betzer adorns her botanical and zoological paradise with "disturbances" and "stains," thus enabling herself and us, via the "viewer's art of mourning," to lament the lost paradise while creating it anew.

Venus rising from the sea and the baby unified with its mother do not repair the mother, because they do not acknowledge her separateness, hence her vulnerability, but rather wish to alienate her as a threat, phantasizing control through her elimination or through a unified assimilation into her. Only a consciousness that mourns the eternal distance from the womb and the mother can replace the manic solutions with productive longing and creative reparation. This requires the third element, which allows for perspective and enables seeing the wounded object; this, in turn, constitutes creativity from the urge for reparation, which, according to Melanie Klein, is an innate urge.¹⁹ In this context, one is reminded of Etty Hillesum, the unique, creative girl who wrote the Holocaust diary *An Interrupted Life*, in which she expressed her desire to treat and heal the God in her heart currently bruised and weak, being absent from the hearts of the people who turn their backs on Him in their suffering. The ability to heal God gave her meaning, value, love of life, and optimism in the absolute inferno.²⁰

¹⁹ Klein, "Mourning and its Relation to Manic-Depressive States."

²⁰ See Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life: The Diaries, 1941–1943, and Letters from Westerbork*, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans (New York: Henry Holt, 1996).

The Mother's Body as Pardes

Following the stroll through the mythical Pardes in Betzer's works and in Kara-Ivanov Kaniel's Pardesic book—both dizzying in their richness, inviting one to mumble "Water! Water!" in view of their dazzling images—I was reminded of the four men who entered the Pardes: Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Acher (Ben Abuyah), and R. Akiba. "R. Akiba said to them: When ye arrive at the stones of pure marble, say not, water, water! For it is said (Ps 101:7): 'He that speaketh falsehood shall not be established before mine eyes'."²¹ Ben Azzai cast a look and died, because he entered with too much zeal—that is, overzealousness killed him;²² the second, Ben Zoma, gazed and was harmed, i.e. lost his sanity and became demented, according to the Midrash—and in our context, one is reminded of the enchantment with the mother as a loss of the sense of reality; the third, Acher (Elisha ben Abuyah), who was experienced and charismatic, wise and knowledgeable, "cut down the plantings" (or "mutilated the shoots," in other translations)—meaning that he cast doubt, apostatized, rebelled, and even swept others after him.²³ In contrast to those three, only R. Akiba entered in peace and departed unhurt.

²¹ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Hagigah, 14b.

²² It is interesting to note that according to the Midrash, Ben Azzai chose not to have children due to his love for the Torah, namely—he preferred a dyad of two without the third.

²³ According to Zohar commentaries described by Kara-Ivanov Kaniel, the term "cut down the plantings" is interpreted as a split between the spouses and their distancing from one another, while the plantings stand for a fruitful union—as occurs in Betzer's botanical paintings; see Kara-Ivanov Kaniel, *Human Throes*, p. 85.

My engagement with the different perceptions of birth made me think of the four who entered the Pardes as four positions of the human infant: Ben Abuyah is like one facet of the psychological birth, striving to break out and seek an independent path, thus risking loss of connection with his origins. Ben Azzai is tantamount to that aspect of the baby afraid of the mother as dangerous and deadly, or the one who seeks his death in her, sacrificing his life for the sanctification of the mother—in motherdom, so to speak—while Ben Zoma is akin to the aspect that loses its mind in his two-dimensional enchantment vis-à-vis the mother's abundance, as one who loses the sense of reality, imagining water where disillusioned sight would have seen marble. Both are lost in the desire for an irreplaceable dyadic unity. In contrast, the baby, likened to R. Akiba, can run and return, race back and forth, be nourished and born, time and again.

Thus, a new *Midrash* was spawned in me: the Pardes as the mother's body, and its four visitors as paradigmatic representations of each psychological birth: the infant's relation to the mother's Pardes, the artist's relation to her artistic birth, and the viewer's relation to her newly born artwork. These possibilities are mutually exclusive but also mutually sustaining. All that remains is to reconsider the mythical images in Betzer's creative Pardes, and to be born from them in multiple forms.