

Wrinkle In Time: Narcissism, Contemporary Psychoanalysis,  
and a 16<sup>th</sup> Century Kabbalistic Myth

By Allen M Siegel, M.D.

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Dedicated to my friend and teacher.

Rabbi Dov Taylor

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A torrent of news reports suggests that narcissism is on the rise. Pundits find proof of this "ominous" calamity in the explosive growth of social media where self-preoccupation assumes that broad trumpeting of once private matters interests the world. These experts find further proof in the reality shows that reveal the private in public and cite the selfie craze as yet another example of the narcissism tsunami. I believe the seeming tsunami is fostered by the technology of today that provides the instant flow of information that once was held close. I suggest that narcissism is broadly misunderstood. The public conversation has yet to adequately parse what "narcissism" actually means beyond the implication that it is obnoxious self-interest.

In this paper I attempt that parsing through an exploration of the work and subsequent theories of two thoughtful men. Separated in time by 500 years, by cultures quite different from each other, and by the differing languages of their respective fields, their sensibilities, observations, and conclusions about narcissism are remarkably similar and can enlighten the current imprecise public conversation.

One man is Rabbi Isaac Lurya (1534 - 1578), a young, 16th century Kabbalistic theologian, known by the honorific acronym as The ARI, (The Holy Rabbi Isaac). The other is Dr. Heinz Kohut (1914 - 1981) a similarly respected 20th century psychoanalyst. Remarkably, these two men shared one set of similarities. Both men were Jews and each lived in the immediate shadow of horrific anti-Semitic atrocities.

While Lurya did not directly experience any atrocities, his parents did. They migrated to Germany following the 15th Century anti-Semitic travails in Spain, Portugal, and Central Europe, Later they continued their migration to Jerusalem where Lurya, in 1534, was born. Although he had not directly experienced the upheavals, he knew of them through his parents and consequently understood the vulnerability and fragmentation of an unwanted people. Kohut, born in Vienna, lived through the early Nazi nightmare and immigrated to America in 1939 where he eventually settled in Chicago. Although he did not identify as a Jew, he was forced to leave his homeland and experienced the fractured vulnerability of all displaced people, in particular the fractured vulnerability of the Jew wandering in a hostile world.

Curiously, and upon reflection, it is of no surprise that the different theories of Lurya and Kohut each deals with issues of fragmentation, healing, and repair of a broken whole. As a psychoanalyst Kohut was concerned about the emotional fragmentation of a broken person and the restoration of emotional wholeness. As a rabbi, Lurya was concerned about the fragmentation of what he considered the "Divine Light" that, in a creation myth of his own, had shattered in the process of the world's creation. His theologic suggestion was that humanity enter a process that would restore the broken Divine to its former perfection,

I speculate that personal experiences of vulnerability, fragmentation, and repair sensitized these two men to the fracture and healing that are central elements in human existence. Each man had the unusual courage to think

beyond the established boundaries of their fields. Lurya had the audacity to create a new version of the biblical creation story. Kohut challenged the then prevailing Freudian notion that humankind was motivated solely by instinctual drives. Through their new theories each man turned their respective worlds on end.

## **Theories**

A word about theory is in order here. A theory is an explanatory lens through which anything, including human behavior can be observed, explained, and understood. Psychoanalysis, for example, is a science with a theory that attempts to explain human thought, feeling, behavior, and motivation. Religions also have explanatory theories that attempt to explain relationships between the universe and the human condition.

Religion, in my thinking, is a metaphoric expression of a culture's collective conscious and non-conscious needs, wishes, values, and life attitudes, articulated in a foundational myth. These myths are theories. They metaphorically explain life's uncertainties, expressed in poetry, art, and story. Some religions have kinder, gentler explanations while others are less generous. The poetry and choreography of a particular religion's rituals, traditions, and values are devoid of meaning to an outsider. Without a libretto-like translation it is impossible to understand its metaphoric code.

Because I am comparing the work of practitioners in two different fields, psychoanalysis and religion, I need to contrast the nature of theory in each field

before I go further. Psychoanalysis, as a science, has an obligation to articulate its theories about the human mind with precision and clarity. Religious theories, on the other hand, speak through metaphor, poetry, and parable. They have no obligation to be precise. In fact, religion can be cryptic and mystical, and often are. Nonetheless, the similarity between the core of Lurya's religious theory about humanity, expressed in his metaphor, and the core of Kohut's theory about the human condition, expressed with his scientific precision, prompted this paper. Whether one looks at the human condition through the explanatory lens of a particular religion or of a particular psychology, an outsider, as I said earlier, cannot possibly grasp their essential elements without a libretto. So now I'll give you brief librettos for the theories of Lurya and Kohut.

Lurya's theory is a creation myth. It differs significantly from the classic creation myth of Genesis. Kohut's psychoanalytic theory, known as the Psychology of the Self, differs significantly from Freud's classical thought about the motivations for human behavior. With these librettos I'll demonstrate the essential similarity of these two men's ideas, despite the vast temporal separation that I call "a wrinkle in time".

### **Lurya's Creation Myth**

To comprehend this myth, as well as any other religious myth, one must suspend disbelief, just as one does when entering a theater. There are three

elements to Lurya's myth: Tsimtsum or contraction; Shevirat Ha-Kelim or The Breaking of the Vessels, and; Tikun or healing.

Lurya began his myth by addressing the paradox of how something, namely the universe, could be created out of nothing; in theological words, "How can God create the world out of nothing if, since God is everywhere, there can be no nothing." For his answer Lurya took advantage of the 3rd Century idea of Tsimtsum, the idea that God can concentrate his essence into a point, known as the Shekhinah, and physically located it in the heart of Solomon's temple. Lurya used the notion of God's plasticity and took creative license to redefine Tsimtsum as God's retreat away from a point. In other words, if God can move toward a point, God can also move away from a point. In Lurya's myth, God abandoned a point within himself and, in moving away from that point within himself, God created a new space, a void, within himself. That new void within God made room for the universe that God was going to create.

So the Universe, once created, exists in a space that is not God but is within God. Said more simply, God stepped back and contracted so that he could create. In Lurya's myth, the cosmic creative process is two-fold. The first part is an act of limitation, of retraction that makes room for the creation of the Universe. The second part, the act of creation itself, concerns God sending out a ray of light from God's essence into the primordial space God created by his retraction. That extruded light from God then flows into Adam, the primordial man. It's interesting to note is that in Lurya's creation myth, Adam is the first emanation of creation rather than the last as in the Genesis creation story. Lurya

put Adam at the center and enhanced humankind's role in creation by making Adam the vehicle by which God creates the rest of the Universe.

To create the universe, Lurya has God's light, called the Shekhinah, burst forth from all of Adam's orifices - eyes, nose, ears, mouth, etc. The Shekhinah just pours out of Adam. However, since Divine creation does involve finite forms and beings, it's ultimately necessary for the light to be caught and preserved. To accomplish this, Lurya has God create special vessels to hold this light. The vessels initially do contain the surge of light that flows from Adam, but suddenly an enormous quantum of light bursts forth with an impact too powerful for even God's vessels to contain. The vessels shatter into an infinite number of pieces that scatter throughout the newly created universe. Each far-flung shard contains a single spark of the Shekhinah.

The fracture of God's vessels create a fascinating theological problem for Lurya. The problem is, "If God is omnipotent, how could his vessels possibly be flawed and incapable of containing the Shekhinah, regardless of the Shekhinah's power?" With this remarkable theological question, Lurya courageously opens the possibility that there is, or could be, an imperfection in God.

This question of a possible imperfection in God touches another vexing theological issue for Lurya that most likely was influenced by Lurya's knowledge of the then recent Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions. It is a potentially heretical question, similar to that prompted by the Holocaust today. It asks, "How can there be evil in the universe if God is good and the origin of creation?" With this question comes its corollary, "Does this mean evil exists within God? "

Lurya cleverly answers these troublesome questions when that the vessels broke because of a flaw in their structure. He explained the flaw with the following simile: just as a small residue of oil or wine is left in a bottle after the bottle's contents have been emptied, – or just as a lingering fragrance remains after a pungent lotion has been emptied from its container, so too, a remnant of God remained in the primordial space left by Tsimtsum. Therefore, a residue of God exists in every aspect of creation, the vessels included and here Lurya demonstrates his remarkable courage, for he dared to imply that part of the Divine contains evil.

Lurya's concept of evil was influenced by Talmudic wisdom. According to the Talmud, evil is the stern judgment, devoid of compassion, that actually is an attribute of the God in the early Torah. Said differently, Lurya defines evil as that part of the world that is devoid of empathy and that notion, evil as judgment without empathy, is astonishingly close to some of Kohut's core ideas.

With the fragmentation of the vessels into countless evil-tinged, spark-containing shards that are now dispersed throughout the Universe, lurya explains how evil in the early God comes to have an existence of its own outside of God. The cataclysmic scattering of the evil-containing shards that contain the perfection of the Divine Light as well, is Lurya's metaphoric explanation of the absence of perfection in the universe that "perfect" God created.

In Lurya's system, the breaking of the vessels suggests a purpose for human existence. In Lurya's theory, human salvation is tied to the task of re-

uniting the broken original whole. Lurya's God is in a process of constant development, with elements of that developmental process allocated to Adam/humanity, God's partner in creation. Lurya's prescription for Adam/humanity's healing of God is to follow the commandments God presented in the Torah for Torah-informed acts performed free the entombed sparks of Shekhinah, enables them to join together for that moment, and in that joining momentarily restores God's integrity. The purpose of Humankind then, according to Lurya's theory, is to restore God's integrity, to heal the Divine. In this way human existence and the Divine are uniquely intertwined, one needs the other. As I've suggested, one context for Lurya's sensitivity to disruption, with its subsequent goal of repair, is the legacy of his family's disruption during a disruptive geopolitical time.

## **Kohut's Psychology of the Self**

Fast-forward 500 years to Vienna 1939. Heinz Kohut, then a neurologist, prepared to immigrate to America to escape the cataclysmic Nazi nightmare, a short time after Freud left for England. He came to Chicago where he undertook training at the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis, based on Freud's theories. Every theory stands on the shoulders of those who came before and Freud's ideas are the shoulders upon which all theories that call themselves psychoanalytic stand. Freud's thinking rested on two sets of ideas; one was

about the mind's form, the other was about the contents of mind that existed inside the form.

The first set ideas concerns form, by which I mean the way something looks. Freud developed two concrete models of the way the mind looked in his theory. He called the first model, developed in 1900, the "Topographic Model" which describes as a layered mind, hence "topography." Here Freud first presented his well-known Systems Conscious, Preconscious, and Unconscious. Freud's second model of the mind, developed in 1923, is the Structural or Tripartite Model, called tripartite because it has three elements, the Ego, Id, and Superego. Freud's models were reified in form and he wrote about them as though they actually existed rather than as concepts. With these two models of the mind's form Freud provided an idea of how he believed the reified mind might work.

However, these forms don't delineate the contents of the mind, issues concerning the mind and the thoughts, feelings, and memories "within" the mind. For his conceptualization of the contents that inhabit the mind Freud reached to the field of Darwinian biology. Freud began with the assertion that humankind belongs to the animal kingdom, is the product of evolution, and therefore is subject to Darwin's Laws of Natural Selection. Darwin asserted that organisms are driven to function in ways that preserve the existence of the self and preserve the existence of the species. Freud deduced that unconscious biological instincts or drives are the chief motivators of human thought, feeling, and behavior. He translated Darwin's preservation of the self into an aggressive

instinct or drive and Darwin's preservation of the species into a sexual instinct or drive.

Freud believed that ever-present unconscious drives are primary motivators, that the sexual and aggressive drives push for forbidden expression in the world and, by doing so, oppose the forces of civilization. Because humankind lives best in an organized society it follows that people must control their basic drives to be able to live within a social order. When people are unable to control their drives then, according to Freud, all manner of symptomatic behaviors as well as inhibitions emerge. Freud's ideas that unconscious forces influence our lives is his great and enduring contribution. His ideas about the "contents" of the mind, however, are open to discussion, although they completely dominated the psychoanalytic scene until the late 1960s and early 1970s when Kohut began to introduce his own ideas.

Kohut, like Lurya, had ideas that deviated from the established cannon. As a core part of his Psychology of the Self, Kohut believed that the primary unconscious motivators for humanity are not Freud's sexual and aggressive drives, but the emotional experience of balance and wholeness. He felt that maintaining the experience of "not falling apart," not fragmenting but existing in a state of emotional balance, is the core unconscious motivator of human experience. Kohut asserted that when people sense, deep within themselves, that they are falling apart they resort to all manner of behavior to keep themselves bolstered and feeling whole. For example, a person suddenly, or even slowly over a period of time, becomes a workaholic and then eventually

becomes emotionally ill. Friends explain the falling apart as the result of overwork; "He worked himself into a dither," they might say. Actually, the explanation for the dither is usually the other way around. The person has been subtly falling apart and turns to work as a life-preserver, a special kind of glue. Extra work might be a helpful distraction for a short time but then it becomes increasingly necessary to work harder and harder as the internal falling to pieces proceeds. Eventually despair overcomes the person since despair cannot be prevented simply through hard work, exercise, trips, addictions, or any of the many desperate supports to which the person might turn.

Kohut's idea about the so-called "contents" of the mind was that narcissism, rather than the drives, is the central player. Narcissism is the psychological phenomenon named for the Greek mythical figure Narcissus, the young man who fell in love with his reflection as he gazed into a pool of clear water. Implied in this ancient image is the familiar pejorative view that, like Narcissus, it is possible for one to get lost in the glow of self-adoration. Kohut, however, saw narcissism as an essential experience of self-love and self-esteem and therefore a complex part of normal, healthy life. He believed that narcissism is neither good nor bad, but simply exists and is outside our awareness as a multi-faceted, non-conscious phenomenon that influences much of what we do, feel, and think about ourselves. Kohut had a non-judgmental perspective that understood narcissism is a part of every person and, over the lifespan, evolves from immature childhood forms to mature forms in adulthood, a different understanding than the usual view that brands all narcissism obnoxious. In

Kohut's theory narcissism is the cohesive glue that keeps a person from falling apart.

In Kohut's theory, narcissism exists in three basic forms; Idealizing, Mirroring, and Kinship narcissism. They all begin in early childhood and, if all goes well in the small child's world, they transform into mature forms of adulthood.

Idealizing Narcissism is the search for something beyond one's self. It begins with the child searching for its nourishing parent and evolves into a life-long search for an attachment to a powerful other. That attachment, when found, creates the internal experience of emotional safety, well-being, and cohesiveness, an uplifted feeling similar to; what a young child feels when lifted up by a strong parent, citizens feel about their heroic leader, and religionists feel about their god. The search for someone to idealize can also extend to something to idealize; a family, a country, a religion, a team; it could even be a set of ideals, like Torah itself. The idealizing form of narcissism provides the feeling experience, "You are great (whatever 'you' might be - person, place or thing) and when I am with you I feel part of you and therefore whole, safe, and even powerful."

While Kohut's first form of narcissism brings a feeling of wholeness through an attachment to a greater "other," the second form of narcissism, Mirroring Narcissism, is a feeling of greatness and grandeur within oneself alone. This experience of "greatness", however, feels hollow without an echo from a valued witness such as a parent, lover, teacher, team, or organization that affirms one's emotional existence and sustains feelings of self-confidence and

well-being. The feeling associated with this form is, "I am great, but I need you to affirm my greatness or else I feel empty." Like the idealizing form of narcissism, the mirroring form has a developmental course that begins in childhood. It has a sense of greatness, grandeur, boundless expansiveness and omnipotence. This sense is, however, fragile and easily changeable, as seen in a little girl who wants the world to witness her perfect pirouette. She is delighted when she has her witness and deflated when her witness is distracted. The mood associated with this experience of grandeur can be fun-filled and joyful when the need for a witness is affirmed, and demanding and terrorizing when that echo is missing. When we see expressions of the immature state of grandiose narcissism in a child we understand both the child's boastful nature as well as the child's fragility and are accepting of each state. However, people find such immature forms of narcissism in an adult obnoxious and it is this immaturity that gives narcissism its bad name. There is a wonderful piece of rabbinic wisdom that acknowledges the two seemingly contradictory sides of the narcissistic coin. It says, "I stand before my God every day with a note in each pocket. In one pocket the note reads, 'For me and me alone was the world created.' In the other pocket the note reads, 'I am nothing but dust and ashes.'"

When things go well in a child's early life narcissism evolves into its mature forms and as a person develops, the self-aggrandizing narcissism transforms into a modulated and contained form of narcissism that moves on to become healthy self-esteem. For example, let's assume that the young pirouetting girl goes on to become a recognized ballerina who dances for many

years and is justifiably proud of her talents and accomplishments. In her later years, when she no longer can dance, she opens a studio that becomes well known and feels healthy pride in her accomplishments. She is not boastful in her thoughts and no one thinks her obnoxious or "too full of herself." As her powers diminish she accepts her "star" time as both teacher and dancer has come to its end, retires without too much angst, and lives with few regrets until her death. In such fortunate people the maturation of grandiosity develops in later life into an acceptance of one's finite nature on earth. Following this realization comes a sad, but comfortable, acceptance of one's transience. Kohut asserted that this acceptance of one's transience is probably the single most important psychological accomplishment one can achieve.

Kinship Narcissism, the third form, is the need to be connected to a group with whom one "fits in" and shares a set of values. It counters the potential for feeling alone and isolated in the world. The experience of belonging in this way enhances the sense of one's self-worth and its feeling quality is, "I belong. I am not alone and lost in this uncertain world."

The three forms of narcissism are in themselves neither good nor bad. They simply are ever present, and exert a powerful influence on human thought feeling and behavior. When the needs associated with these three forms are fulfilled a feeling of wellbeing and balance develops within the person. When not fulfilled the personal experience is one of disappointment, insult, and injury all of which disrupt the sense of emotional wholeness and balance. Feelings that grow out of rejections and injuries, feelings of having lost someone or something of

great import, feelings of not mattering, feelings of not being a part of whatever one considers valuable, and feelings of injured pride to name only a few, were, for Kohut, situations that injure one's narcissism and to varying degree create a sense of falling apart and fragmentation.

We all know stories of good people who have done wrongheaded things and marvel at their astounding "bad judgment" and loss of control. We wonder why and how they could have done those things. Freud's answer to that question would be that the behavior was the outcome of an unconscious dynamic with sex and aggression at its core. Kohut, on the other hand, said that such people are secretly, even unknown to themselves, falling apart for various reasons and resort to their disruptive behaviors in an effort to repair their emotional injury and regain a sense of cohesion.

For Kohut, when these three forms of narcissism are shattered in childhood their associated needs go underground and remain hidden within the person. Similar to the Shekhinah that remains hidden within the scattered shards in Lurya's theory of creation, shattered narcissism remains buried within the person until that person finds a healing milieu, like that in the ambiance of an informed psychotherapy. In such a therapeutic environment the immature narcissism becomes vitalized, sometimes for the first time, and with that vitalization comes the opportunity for repair and further development into mature forms of narcissism. Kohut called the anxiety of "falling into pieces" fragmentation or annihilation anxiety which he asserted is at the core of disrupted

emotional states that fosters the desire for personal repair and restoration of their lost emotional wholeness.

## **Healing**

It's striking to me that Lurya and Kohut, both working in the shadow of horrific personal and societal fracture, were similarly sensitive to the issue of fragmentation and the need for healing that is at the core of each man's theory. Each recognized the same nuanced elements of narcissism as being essential to a healthy life, although each identified those elements in the vastly different languages of their particular theories. Kohut was concerned about healing the broken person. From his training he had the concept that emotional development matures over time and a psychoanalytic language that enabled him to speak with precision about the developmental issues of narcissism. Lurya, the theologian, did not live with the same requirement for precision and did not have a language that enabled him to carefully parse what he saw. It is acceptable for Lurya, the cleric to be cryptic, even mystical in offering his theory to heal a broken universe/Shekhinah/God as a metaphor. As a student of Talmud, Lurya was aware of the Talmudic notion that to save a single soul is to save an entire world and I surmise that for him healing was a bi-directional activity. Healing another was a part of healing oneself. My speculation is that Lurya not only prescribed actions to heal a fragmented Shekhinah but also prescribed healing actions designed to established wholeness in the lives of people, not just the Shekhinah.

Lurya lived a short life, wrote little in the few years he had to develop his theory, and most of what we know of this theory is from his students. His most terse prescription for restoration is simply to "Follow God's commandments." In another report he is said to have spoken a bit more specifically and said that "Study, prayer, and doing good works" were the prescription for healing. This prescription sounds remarkably close to a Talmudic aphorism found in the book, "Sayings of Our Fathers" that says: "On three things does the universe stand: on the study of Torah, on worship, and on acts of loving-kindness."

In what follows I will try to unpack the contents of Lurya's prescription for healing and wholeness using my understanding of Kohut ideas about the same. Though obviously unschooled in psychoanalytic theory, Lurya names and addresses the same forms of narcissism Kohut described 500 years later. We have no way of knowing whether Lurya understood their psychological implications in an articulated way, but he seems to have intuitively addressed them in metaphor, the only form available to him.

I see Lurya's terse prescription for healing the broken Shekhinah as related to Kohut's three forms of narcissism. I see Lurya's prescription to "Study Torah" as being related to Kohut's idealizing form of narcissism, in which the person searches for an attachment to someone or something that feels more powerful than one's self. For Lurya, the study of Torah becomes idealized, is uplifting, sustaining and cherished in itself. This idealized attachment to Torah creates in the person a feeling of wholeness, safety, and borrowed strength.

I see Lurya's prescription to "Do prayer" as being related to Kohut's mirroring form of narcissism. The premise of adult prayer is that there is something beyond oneself. I see here an implication of the transformation of the narcissistic grandeur, expansiveness, and omnipotence of childhood into a humble sense of one's finite nature in the universe. I see a further development and evolution of grandiosity toward the ultimate acceptance of one's transience on earth.

Finally, in Lurya's prescription to "Do acts of kindness" I see a relationship to Kohut's kinship form of narcissism. This evolution of adult narcissism implies a recognition of others' existence and affirms one's kindred membership in the human community. This enhancing transformation can take many inter-relational forms and counters a deadening solipsistic isolation.

## **Conclusion**

Narcissism, from a psychoanalytic perspective, is not on the rise as publically considered. It's is the same as it's always been across the millennia. Two scholars, one a 20<sup>th</sup> Century psychoanalyst, the other a 16th Century Kabbalistic rabbi, share a broad and deep understanding of this aspect of the human condition.

Kohut, the psychoanalyst, was precise and nuanced in his understanding of narcissism as he conceived its evolution from immature forms in childhood to mature forms in adulthood. He asserted that narcissism, neither bad nor good, is

an inescapable phenomenon of human existence and hopefully is evolving in every human being.

Lurya, the rabbi, presented his theological understanding of the development of the universe, and by extension of people, in metaphoric form. As a theologian, he spoke in metaphor without an obligation for precision and concrete explication of his ideas. Despite the radical differences in their modes of conceptualization Kohut and Lurya shared the similar understanding that human existence is fragile and potentially fractured.

Kohut outlined a threefold developmental sequence for narcissism that, when used therapeutically as a guide for treatment can lead to healing, repair and restoration of a broken person. Lurya, addressed the fragility of human existence, and the possibility for its repair, through terse, concrete prescriptions for human behavior. His prescriptions carry a subtle, unarticulated, grasp of the same forms of narcissism that Kohut described in great detail.

In this study we see the uncommon intersection of genius across the ages. While the theories of Lurya and Kohut differ, one in the form of religion and metaphor, the other in the form of psychology and scientific precision, their ideas about the contents of those forms are remarkably similar. The views of both men, separated as they are by differences in historical time and vantage point, supports my conviction, formed over the past 45 years as a psychoanalyst working with fractured patients, that fragmentation and repair is an essential element of the human condition.

