

Presentation on Erich Neumann and his book:  
*The Roots of Jewish Consciousness*<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

This two-part work, *The Roots of Jewish Consciousness* was not published in Neumann's lifetime, and he had no intention of publishing it. Instead, he used it as resource material for his other books and lectures. While this was his only full-length work on Jewish history and religious/spiritual development, it was here that he conceived some of the central concepts he later expanded on, such as the ego-Self axis, the archetype of the Great Mother, and recollectivization—or losing one's ego and becoming part of a collective. Neumann's other work on a Jewish subject is *Jacob and Esau: On the Collective Symbolism of the Brother Motif*.

He began work on *The Roots of Jewish Consciousness* after he fled Berlin in 1933 for Palestine with his family while he stopped off in Zurich for six months to analyze with Jung. He finishing the first part in 1940 and the second part in early 1945. As a secular Jew, his focus at the time was on finding his own roots in his new land, reclaiming himself as a Jew and

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<sup>1</sup> Material in this lecture is from, Furlotti, N. (2023). *Eternal Echoes: Erich Neumann's timeless relevance to consciousness, creativity, and evil*. Ashville, NC: Chiron Publications.

establishing himself as a Jungian analyst—exploring the world through these two lenses. His interest was on humanity's relation to God, revelation, consciousness, and good and evil. His anticipated 3<sup>rd</sup> part, which was to deal with the psychological understanding of this material, was never completed, although, glimpses of the material that would have gone into that part are seen in other writings of his.

After the reality of the horrors that had transpired in Germany emerged at the end of the war, Neumann ceased working on this subject. He wanted to move into psychology and remove himself from the incredible trauma. He was not interested in publishing it because as he told his good friend, Gustav Dreifuss, a Jungian analyst in Israel, his background as a secular Jew who grew up in Germany was not sufficient to publish this material on Judaism. He had relied on the work of Martin Buber, who wrote in German, for much of his source material, not Gersham Scholem or others who wrote in Hebrew, and could not read original Hebrew source material.

At 28, a new immigrant in Palestine, amidst the increasing horror and evil in the world, Neumann had descended into an introversion in his new land and wrote to anchor himself and re-discover his Jewish roots. Part of this process included understanding the changing nature of life that includes

good and evil. In a December 5, 1938 letter to Jung Neumann described his new project, which had been discussed with Jung in 1933-1934:

In the first part, I want to present how in Jewish antiquity the principle of direct revelation was valued, and how it stood in productive dialogue with the strong dependence of the people on earth and reality. The law as a secularization of the traumatic experience of exile, whereby, in the seeming acceptance of theocratic prophetism, the earth-principle asserted itself to the exclusion of direct revelation. Apocalypse, eschatological messianism (primitive Christianity). Gnosticism, as the emergence of the direct inner revelation that had been suppressed into a sideline. This is as far as I have gotten in the first draft.

He then described the second part:

After a short chapter on the repression of direct revelation in the Talmud and the counter-movement in Kabbalah, there follows, as a comprehensive chapter, Hasidism. Religious renaissance of Judaism with the individual as a central phenomenon, but in collective constraint, through the enduring acceptance of the Law as a confining cage for direct revelation. (A course on this is already prepared in note form.) Assimilation and emancipation as a necessary de-collectivization of Jewish consciousness. Uprooting and the loss of memory.

Finally, he described his plan for the third part that he never completed, which is unfortunate because it sounds so interesting and pertinent:

On the problem of the modern Jew. Using dream and fantasy material to illustrate the historic-collective connections. Reemergence of direct revelation, but now in the individual, in direct connection first with individuation and second with the collective problem of revelation in Judaism. Emergence of the earthly dimension as the location of revelation today—the converse of where the problem was located in

Jewish antiquity—in a tension of opposites with the “spirit” principle that seems to hinder revelation. That is, while the revelation principle used to stand opposed to the pagan earth-principle, now it arises positively paired with a strong Near Eastern Gnostic and pagan symbolism, in a strong tension of opposites with the Law. (Jung, Neumann, 2015, pp. 141; alt. trans from Briefe J-N, pp 189f)

The third part is found as a profound influence in his later writings as he connected these understandings with the Jungian psychological process of individuation. As his grasp of Jewish history developed, his focus moved to the individual grounded on the earth with direct access to the divine and revelation emerging upward from the unconscious, as opposed to coming from the spirit down to the individual, as in earlier times. Neumann demonstrated his preference for prophesy over the priesthood as he moved into his second part on Hasidism.

One of his most poignant concepts has to do with good and evil, about which he wrote in his book, *Depth Psychology and the New Ethic*, and which emerged in many of his other writings. As Ann Lammers points out in Volume One of *The Roots of Jewish Consciousness*, “The unity of good and evil in God is a recurring theme in Hebrew scripture and Jewish tradition...as quoted in Isaiah 45:7, “I form the light, and create darkness; I make peace, and create evil; I am the LORD, that does these things” (Neumann, 2019a, p. xxxii). Jung has also quoted this passage from the Bible.

While both men struggled with the reality of evil, each saw it somewhat differently as discussed in their correspondence. Neumann believed the ego had a greater share of moral responsibility for the transformation of evil, to redeem evil, while Jung felt evil was unconscious and ever-present, in other words, “evil just happens to him like misfortune” (Jung-Neumann Correspondence, 2015, p. 325). The best we can do is try to remain conscious of it, to know what choices we are making. The goal in alchemy is to see clearly, including the shadow or darkness, and to allow a transformation in one’s viewpoint and behavior—this results in increased consciousness. The ego becomes important here for its stability in light of the choices it must make, leading Neumann to his concept of the ego-Self axis. In this book, he used this concept in relation to the YHWH-earth tension, as the infinite versus the finite. He went on to give greater definition to this concept: the Self may displace the ego-complex but at the same time remain connected to it, creating the I-Thou relationship—that Martin Buber is so famous for—the ego and Self, I and God.

### **Neumann’s Introduction to Roots**

Tracing the mythical and historical world across cultures and religions, we can follow the development of the diversity of ideas leading to the evolution of human consciousness over time. As a means of

understanding the commonalities and differences, Neumann drew from Jung the concept of archetypal symbolism common to all humanity, though appearing in different ways. These unconscious images exert a formative influence on the conscious attitudes of individuals. Nevertheless, there is great variation in the way this universal human heritage is expressed.

Neumann turned his focus specifically to Jewish culture, which goes far back in history and was surrounded by a multiplicity of conflicting ideas and alternative religions as it developed. When he wrote this book during WWII, the Jewish situation had become catastrophic. The Jews had assimilated into the Western world even though it maintained a strong bias against the Old Testament and, consequently, heightened anti-Semitic aggression against the Jews for the belief that they had Jesus killed, among other beliefs. At this time Christianity itself was meeting its pre-Christian, pagan roots through Gnosticism, Zoroastrianism, Near-Eastern religions and those that preceded the rise of consciousness and rationality. This movement clashed with the rootless and homeless Jew.

A review of history allows one to review the problem of the ancient Jew and what persists in the modern Jew from this past, “The set of problems, as far as it is rooted in the Jewish collective unconscious, requires an in-depth study of the basic problems and contents affecting Jewish

existence and its history” (Neumann, 2019a, p. 7). This problem is seen in the relationship between the unconscious and consciousness and how revelation developed from early Jewish culture up to today. Neumann led us through the two great historical epochs giving us the background leading to the modern Jew.

The first epoch in Jewish history represented the opposition between YHWH and the powers of nature—the YHWH-earth tension. This period includes the apocalyptic writers and the psychic transformation that resulted from the destruction of the second temple. Christianity emerged later in this period as did Gnosticism. The second epoch Neumann writes about includes Hasidism, which was established in the late eighteenth-century and was a new approach to Judaism.

Neumann’s proposed third section would have focused on the existential problem of the modern Jew. Neumann pointed out that while Jewish character differs from those in ancient times, Judaism remained almost unchanged. This created a conflict and inner catastrophe for Neumann:

The plight of modern Jews— who like all modern humans lack direction, yet find themselves caught up in an age shaken to its foundations by catastrophes, lacking historical continuity, and plunged into a bottomless sociological pit—compels us to try to reconnect with the past in our own way” (2019a, p. 9).

Neumann does this by reading a wide-ranging collection of Jewish texts with different interpretations, although not in Hebrew. He studied diverse conceptions of history as well as observing the stories of the individual. His extensive lists of texts are listed in his bibliographies. Through his study, he attempted to reveal psychological attitudes, forms of psychic behaviors, and views of life related to the unconscious problem of modern Jews in his time. Neumann's hoped was to find a way forward, shedding light on this dark path.

### **Introduction to Volume Two**

Erich Neumann wrote and finished the second volume, *The Roots of Jewish Consciousness: Hasidism* in 1945, as news of the horrors of Nazi death camps and Jewish liberation were being widely released. He put this work aside and did not continue with his formerly proposed part three that would have integrated this material with psychology. He did, though, write four papers on the importance of consciousness in the experience of depth psychology, integrating his material with Jungian depth psychology. As seen in these papers, Neumann sought to understand human development, the nature of good and evil, masculine and feminine, and the path towards spiritual and psychological wholeness. To this end, Neumann's primary resource was Martin Buber's writings and understanding of Hasidism and Kabbalah, among others.



The chapter in this part, “Life in this World,” describing the paradox of good and evil as both being contained in God—that good can be attributed to evil events— was removed from the text for unknown reasons. Perhaps it was too difficult to include in the wake of the Holocaust. The writing was not as refined as the other chapters. Perhaps while in process he sent it to others to read and comment on, and for unknown reasons did not include it in his fair/final copy. It is understandable that this idea of good coming from evil would be very difficult for him given what had happened to the Jews. Neumann did include many of the other themes and insights, such as ego-Self axis and the paradoxical unity of good and evil, from *The Roots of Jewish Consciousness* into later books he completed and published after the war: *Depth Psychology and a New Ethic* and *Origins and History of Consciousness*.

### **On The Structure of the World as Inwardness**

Neumann offered a depth-psychological interpretation of the historical development of the Jewish person’s psychic structure, leading from the disintegration of the Jewish collective, the destruction of the second temple and the exile, the inward focused/introverted/meditative attitude of the individual coalesced into the spiritual movement of Hasidism. Its focus was on the original Kabbalistic and Hasidic principle of creation, *tzimtzum* or

God's self-contraction, and its continuing affirmation by humanity. Because of his love, God contracted himself so that his brilliance could be received by humans. Through this process, every individual is unique and strives to bring his character to perfection, influencing others and the collective to achieve the same ends, "Based on the tension produced by the ineradicable difference between God and humankind, these opposites begin to be synthesized, to thereby confer on humanity an ever-greater depth and an increasingly stronger capacity for illumination" (Neumann, 2019b, p. 6). Yet, while humans remain imperfect, the coming of the messiah is delayed.

The tzaddikim are the wise teachers, "the doctors of the soul" (Neumann, 2019b, p.8) who hold the individual's divine vessel that receives the revelation of the teachings, allowing the messianic development of the soul. Through this process, the hidden sparks of light found everywhere are redeemed by the souls to which they belong:

His task not as being an advocate, but as awakening the central activity of the individual and leading him to that layer from which the individual's religious autonomy creatively breaks through. The tzaddik must help the individual to conduct his never-ending conversation with the divine in his own voice — not the borrowed voice of the tzaddik. (2019b, p. 10)

The human becomes the redemptive bridge between divinity and the world, through individuation and wholeness. Holding the opposites in consciousness, results in creative rebirth out of nothingness. No one is

considered perfect or has achieved divine wholeness until he or she has resolved the opposites of masculine and feminine, heaven above and the earth below:

Only if a single eye of humanity could be formed from the immense number of human individualities, in their endlessly varied capacity for experience, might that unified eye alone recognize the hidden light of the world diamond. Only such a unified humanity would be the partner for a self-revealing world.  
(Neumann, 2019b, p.16)

It is interesting that Neumann, in this quote, referred to the single eye of humanity, similar to the single eye of God that opened in his forehead in his vision of the ape-man looking into the abyss (\*vision is at the end of the paper). Neumann processed this material personally and deeply. This description leads to the concept of the “actualizing of messianism” (Neumann, 2019b, p. 18) which refers to the turning away from the future to the present, from the outside to the inside where messianism is a stage in the individual’s development—to realize one’s Elijah soul. Everything relies on human choice. The key here is that everyone, ie. collective humanity, must reach this stage, not just a few. Neumann discusses the concepts of the Kabbalah, the Sefirot of the tree of life, containing the Holy sparks, which influenced Hasidism, including the soul, the *sekel* meaning wisdom, insight and understanding, as an organ of the transpersonal associated with Neshama or reason and consciousness (Neumann, 2019b, p.26).

The problem of evil is prominent in the Kabbala. If there is no evil, there would be no good for they are opposite sides of each other. But what is evil?

The problem of evil is many sided. Whether evil is seen as overflowing from the judging and punishing power, where it exists as a counter hierarchy of impurity, fed by human sin, whether it is said to be the vestige of primordial worlds that existed before our world, and thus represents the husks of the world tree, whether evil is seen as waste products of the world organism or as the distancing of the creature from the divine, each of these views can be understood by depth psychology, because within the psyche each of these aspects is experienced as evil, and as real. (Neumann, 2019b, p.30)

As evil confronts good, humans have the ability to reject evil and choose good instead—a victory for good. It is related to the problem of Lilith—the shadow of the repressed mother-archetype, the demonic seducer—and the tension between YHWH and the earth. Yet, it is evil that creates the energetic tension between the opposites, creating motivation in the unconscious to develop a differentiating consciousness. Because the sparks exist in everything, God participates along with the individual in the transformation of evil: “The point is not simply that God also exists in uncleanness, but that he is especially there. For: The holiest sparks exist on the lowest levels” (Neumann, 2019b, p. 46-47).

### **On The Transformation of Souls**

Neumann offers an essential understanding of Hasidism and what it derived from Kabbalah, whose system of meaning he described in detail and compared to the symbolic level in depth psychology. The theory of redemption of humans and the world, through the reclamation of sparks of light in the human soul vessel, understands divinity as nothingness or Wisdom. The redemption is an inner revelation from the unconscious:

Revelation is a kindling, inflammatory process, in which the human soul and the spark of that thing that is pregnant with revelation unite, collide, and procreate. The spark's will to be redeemed, and the soul's to redeem, are two matching and cross-fertilizing directions in the world's dynamic...nothing is perfect that is not simultaneously masculine and feminine.  
(Neumann, 2019b, p. 60)

The sparks transform themselves becoming more transparent, and in the process change the individual and the world.

The path of introversion/meditation progresses through the four stages of the world, i.e., mineral, vegetable, animal, and human, and through the ten sefirot of the Kabbalah. Each sefirah is an archetype with its own unique energy. The image of the human being is projected onto the sefirotic world in the form of the higher, primordial human, Adam Kadmon, who sits in Tiferet, the king or sun, at the center of the tree of life.

It is here that all opposites are brought together, along with the three parts of the soul, Neshama—rational soul, ruach—wind and spirit, and nefesh—

blood, life, and earth, and where words and meaning find expression in divinity. Adam Kadmon unites with his opposite, the Shekhinah, the feminine aspect of God, and the union is represented psychologically as the Self. “The Self is a result of the connection of ruach, with nefesh and neshama. That is, it results from individuation within the human being, as a process leading to wholeness” (Neumann, 2019b, p. 83).

This wholeness is manifested through the *tzaddik*, the wise individual who supports the central task of “working on God’s human form” (2019b, p. 85).

### **On Life in this World**

Contrasts are made between Hasidism and Jewish intellectualism and the rabbinical ideal of knowledge. Hasidism is movement as seen in, “one who walks, opposed to the safe and rigid path of knowledge and its righteousness” (Neumann, 2019b, p. 90). It values a passion for life, change, and constant renewal. Some of its concepts are: the divine sparks are found at the lowest levels; joy shows a closeness to God and leads to goodness; there is holiness in the simplicity of belief. One of Neumann’s ideas that stands out was his observation that polar opposition of masculine and feminine changed in Kabbalah and Hasidism, becoming strikingly similar to Jungian psychology’s developments understanding the masculine and feminine/anima and animus duality. This is also seen, more broadly, in

gender ideas today. “It is clear that the inwardness of the male is female, and the inwardness of the female is male” (Neumann, 2019b, p. 130).

Previously, even in the Kabbalah, marriage was seen as the union of two sexual polarities to form a hermaphroditic, transindividual being, which still consist in two persons. In contrast, when the parts of the soul are united, this process is introjected within one individual. Here, based on the model of Adam Kadmon, male and female combine within one individual to form a whole. This means, however, that a new image of the human being begins to constellate itself, one no longer centered on polarized sexuality, but instead on Adam Kadmon’s hermaphroditic character. (2019b, p. 97)

In Hasidism, humans, always moving and changing, can repent their wrong actions and thoughts and turn towards holiness. “Actualization places the individual at the center of destiny, for the world and for God” (Neumann, 2019b, p. 103). It is up to humans to choose the right path. The experience of evil is unavoidable, but through human choice goodness may be revealed and one may become more conscious. As an integral part of this world, it is vitally important to accept it for what it is. “The whole world is pregnant with revelation, waiting to become visible and reveal its inner, hidden light.” (2019b, p.112) The tzaddik, as the whole human being, is the template for what others aspire to become.

### **On The Human Being and the New Image of God**

Aspects of the tzaddik are examined, from his hiddenness from the world and therefore, closeness to God and nothingness, to later views of his

becoming an inflated mana-personality. The tzaddik oversees the world and assists humans in recognizing and redeeming their inner soul sparks.

He has realized his universal human core, as the Self represented by Adam Kadmon as Tiferet in the world. He has traversed the three developmental stages of the world: of ego, mother, and father; and the three ages: of youth, middle age, and old age. Having done so, he reclaimed his own light, the soul, and the Self as wholeness. These ages correspond to the three souls: nefesh, ruach, and neshama.

In Hasidism as in individuation, through spiritual development, the focus shifts from the ego to the Self as unity and wholeness at the center of the personality. All opposites coalesce into the whole, including good and evil, as YHWH is both good and evil. Hasidism and Gnosticism are compared. While both advocate redeeming divine sparks, in Hasidism the task is up to humans to make the world holy by bringing the immanence and wisdom of God, the Shekhinah, into the world. The human being is where divine power unfolds, the bridge between the world and God, transforming all three and releasing God's grace into the world. Gnosticism, on the other hand, takes sparks out of the world up to God.

### **On Hasidism and the Birth of the Modern Jew**



The prevailing mysteries of the Near East before and at the time of early Christianity concerned the dying and resurrecting son-deities and the incarnate god. Both these themes were united in the concept of Christ. Judaism expressed these mysteries as the introversion of the messiah, a unifying symbol of heaven and earth, which Christianity then concretized in the historical form of the figure of Jesus as the Christ, the center of the redemptive event. In response, Judaism recollectivized itself, ie. returning to its belief in dogma and rabbinism. This path was reversed with the introduction of Kabbalah and Hasidism, which included belief in outer redemption through the tzaddikim, and in inner redemption and wholeness through the inner messiah figure of Adam Kadmon. The history of individual destiny replaced the collective history of the world. The later decline of Hasidism resulted in a return to rabbinism. Loss of collective memory of Jewish psychic roots and assimilation into the Western world has influenced the psychology of modern Jews. This loss of connection to the deep collective layer created a blindness that also obscured the activation of a gruesome and primal fire of destruction. These losses have left the modern Jew in a state of neurosis, in fear of this dangerous shadow residing in the unconscious.

In the symbol of Adam Kadmon, as the Self, the aspect of wholeness, Neumann explored and solidified his thinking about ethics and morality as presented in his book, *Depth Psychology and the New Ethic*:

Adam Kadmon's demand that every individual actualize his unrepeatable wholeness, with the result that tradition and the certainty of knowledge becomes relative. The relativizing of ethical values—pure and impure, good and evil, knowing and unknowing—is expressed in the principle of 'good uncertainty.' And the tradition of 'the merits of the fathers' is also abolished, for what is needed is one's own light and the new revelation. At the same time, the principle of reward and punishment, which supports morality, is also abolished because repentance, the transformation of human beings, which may and must occur at any time, creates an ever-new relationship between humanity and God, consciousness and the unconscious.”  
(2019b, p. 167)

The book ends with further discussion of the modern Jew in Neumann's time, and the decline of Hasidism with its memory loss and regression back to the rationalism of rabbinism. There were no restraints to the process of Jews assimilating into and secularizing in 19th century Europe:

The grand delusion, which would lead Jews, especially in the twentieth century, to the brink of absolute despair, is also symptomatic of a loss of their own instinctive foundation. Only the passionate longing to have finally reached the shores of a peaceful and unbarbaric world explains the terrible blindness with which the Jews hurled themselves into the deadly light of deception by the west, a light that, in the annihilation of European Jewry, became a gruesome beacon for the victory of the primal fire, which nothing human has tamed.  
(Neumann, 2019b, p. 178)

## **Conclusion**

As Neumann descended into his study of his roots in Judaism from the historical past to his present in his new land of Palestine, we see the development of his ideas on certain themes that repeat over his lifetime of work. At the end of the war, he moved away from religious study to focus on topics such as ethics, the nature of evil, consciousness, the stages of life from a depth psychological perspective for the masculine and the feminine, and the nature of creativity.

**\*Neumann's profound vision of the apeman**

I seemed to be commissioned to kill the apeman in the profound primal hole. As I approached him, he was hanging, by night, sleeping on the cross above the abyss, but his—crooked—single eye was staring into the depths of this abyss. While it at first seemed that I was supposed to blind him, I all of a sudden grasped his 'innocence', his dependence on the single eye of the godhead, which was experiencing the depths through him, which was a human eye. Then, very abridged, I sank down opposite this single eye, jumped into the abyss, but was caught by the Godhead, which carried me on the 'wings of his heart'. After that, this single eye opposite the apeman closed and it opened on my forehead. (Bit difficult to write this, but what should one do.)