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## **ANSELM KIEFER: COLLECTING WHAT IS BROKEN. WORKS FROM THE *CHEVIRAT HA-KELIM* (BREAKING OF THE WESSELS) CYCLE**

Every being owes its existence to what it has received from the spiritual world.<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Anselm Kiefer (a German artist born in 1945) began working on the *Chevirat ha-kelim* (*Breaking of the vessels*) cycle in 1990. It is based on the Kabbalistic theory of Isaac Luria (1534-1572) and Nathan of Gaza (1644-1680). Luria, a mystic and founder of the Orthodox Kabbalah, and Nathan of Gaza are the founders of a Kabbalistic myth that corresponds to the historical experiences of the Jewish people.

This myth focuses on three great symbols: *cimcum* (“shrinking” - i.e., God withdraws himself, through which the world can come into being through emanation), *shevira* (“breaking of the vessels”) and *tikkun olam* (“repair”), the Kabbalistic doctrine of the role of man repairing the world.

Since the mid-1980s, when the artist began to use lead, ash, shellac and clay in his works, his thoughts and works have been related to Jewish culture. The *Chevirat ha-kelim* series of works, which have been shown since 1985 in different places of the world, consists of sculptures, paintings and objects related to the dramatic process of world creation, understood as a cosmic catastrophe.

In Jewish mythology, like in Kiefer's works, shells of clay pots, broken discs, molten lead cards of monumental books and a lead plane with a “crossed” wing are the symbols of destruction. A world marked by a catastrophe requires repair and restoration of original harmony.

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<sup>1</sup> H. Jonas, *Le Concept de Dieu après Auschwitz: une voie juive*, trad. de l'allemand par. Ph. Ivernel, transl. form French E. Jedlińska, Payot&Rivages, Paris 1994, pp. 38-39.

Through this symbolism, Kiefer's works testify, on the one hand, to a melancholic memory that refers to the creation of historical reality (Nazism, Holocaust crimes and their presence in the present). On the other hand, the transmission of his art is linked to the Jewish tradition of faith in the possibility of restoration, of bringing the broken together, and the hope that by working to restore the original order (*tikkun olam*), redemption, reunification and reconciliation will be achieved. This aspect of Kiefer's work applies as much to the ethical relationship as to our interaction with myths and religions which presuppose the metaphysics of reality.

Keywords: Anselm Kiefer, modern art, *Breaking of the Vessels*, Isaak Luria, Kabbalah, destruction, repair, collecting

Anselm Kiefer was born (1945) into the darkness of Germany just as World War II was ending. His early work is a provocation to remember the horror of Nazi Germany. Mary Wells Barron recalls the meaningful words of Kiefer in the late 1980s, in a conversation with Mark Rosenthal:

*I do not identify with Nero or Hitler but I have to re-enact what they did just a little bit in order to understand their madness.*<sup>2</sup>

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The Hebrew language includes one of the most profound concepts found in the vocabulary of the world's languages. This word is TIKKUN – a synthesis of the ideas of order preservation, world renewal after catastrophe, tragic longing for redemption of guilt and forgiveness.

Referring to the Lurianic Kabbalah, which, among other things, includes the position that the world has been abandoned by God, that it has become a space of God's absence (evidenced by constant presence of genocidal wars), Anselm Kiefer focused his art on searching for sources of conflict and attempts to stop them. This daring concept, which disrupts the belief perpetuated in the Judeo-Christian tradition that God is infinite and omnipresent goodness, is expressed in the series of works of the German artist analysing the inquiries of Jewish philosophers and Kabbalists, in which the artist confronts the thought of Isaac Luria as much as that of Gershom Sholem or Marc-Alain Ouaknin,<sup>3</sup> a contemporary scholar in the field of Jewish Kabbalah and Hasidism, an expert in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. Ouaknin sees the world as

<sup>2</sup> M. Wells Barron, *Breaking of the Vessels: Destruction and Creation in the Art of Anselm Kiefer*, <https://aras.org/sites/default/files/docs/00052Barron.pdf> (accessed: 22/06/22).; (ed.) M. Rosenthal, *Anselm Kiefer*, catalogue of an exhibition in the Art Institute of Chicago and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Chicago 1987, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Marc-Alain Ouaknin (born in 1957 in Paris).

an anti-theological space, a space of God's absence.<sup>4</sup> Kiefer's works – transposed by the most important Jewish theological-Kabbalistic-philosophical-ethical attitudes, from Luria through Gershom Scholem, Hans Jonas<sup>5</sup> and Marc-Alain Ouaknin – have the ethical sense and focus our attention on the existence of life after Auschwitz. In his book *Le Concept de Dieu après Auschwitz*, Jonas asks questions about the logic of God's "participation" in the fate of the world, whether it is possible to explain what evil is and, finally, how to reconcile the concept of God with his "consent" to violence, to unprecedented extermination of Jews by the Nazi Germany, to legitimization of mass murders taking place today. Answering the questions above, Jonas gives a harsh answer: the existence of evil should not be linked to faith or a lack of it, guilt and punishment for it. So why Auschwitz? Faithful to his religious beliefs with deep Jewish roots, he asks: *What kind of God would have allowed for this?* Jonas here refers to theodicy – a branch of theology dealing with the contradiction between the belief in God's goodness and omnipotence, and the existence of evil. His idea of *God after Auschwitz*, propounded from the perspective of a Jewish Holocaust survivor, focuses on the concept of God who, in order to be good and intelligible, cannot be omnipotent at the same time.<sup>6</sup> An important point of reference for Jonas's concept is the Hebrew primordial myth that speaks of *God's being in the world, in the pre-human world*, whereby immanence does not imply God's identity with the world. God and the world are separate entities. The emergence of man ends the time of innocence, causing the expansion of knowledge and freedom: every person is responsible for their actions. A human being is entrusted with God's destiny – His return to himself. In creating the world, God abandoned himself. A human, on the other hand, has been entrusted with the task of making it possible for God to return to himself, to regain the space He has lost – the space He has given up, so that the world could come into being and fill the void created outside (outside Him).

Will the divine plan be fulfilled and will God create the world in the nothingness He has created? For Jonas, the end of the myth is the basis for deriving the concept of God as suffering: "*God's relationship with the world*," says the philosopher, "*entails God's suffering initiated at the moment of creation of the*

<sup>4</sup> (ed.) J.-M. Bouhours, *Anselm Kiefer*, Centre Pompidou, 16 December 2015 – 18 April 2016, Paris 2016, p. 29.

<sup>5</sup> See: H. Jonas, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung*, Frankfurt/Main: Insel, 1979; H. Jonas, *Le Concept de Dieu après Auschwitz: une voie juive*, trad. de l'allemand par. Ph. Ivernel, Payot&Rivages, Paris 1994.

<sup>6</sup> See: A. Kłoczowski, *Hans Jonas o boskiej wszechmocy i niemocy Boga*, <https://kultura.onet.pl/fragmrnty-ksiazek/hans-jonas-o-boskiej-wszechmocy-i-niemocy-boga/psh8qo7>. Hans Jonas on God's omnipotence and impotence – excerpts from books (onet.pl) (accessed: 3.3.22); A. Kłoczowski, *Hans Jonas. Idea Boga po Auschwitz*, Krakow 2012, p. 19.

world and, above all, the creation of man.”<sup>7</sup> In an attempt to salvage the idea of God after Auschwitz, Jonas proposes a thesis: God is not omnipotent. Through this construction we can understand what is good and evil, strength and weakness, law and lawlessness, destruction and reconstruction...

If things had happened the way God wished, according to His purpose, the world would have been perfect. The atrocities of Auschwitz, genocides in Africa, Russia's war in Ukraine happening in front of our eyes (24 February 2022) attest to imperfection of the world. Not that we have been abandoned by God, however. “*Every creature owes its existence,*” Jonas argues, “*to those opposites which it received from eternal life.*”<sup>8</sup> According to Jonas, God who “allows evil” is in fact God who cannot act in a different way, because He gave away all His power when He created the world. It is now up to man alone to experience divinity as well as achieve happiness and peace on earth; God after Auschwitz does not perform miracles, does not answer prayers – He has placed our future in us, we are responsible for the form of its realisation: *God has nothing to offer us; now it is man who must give him.*<sup>9</sup>

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According to Jonas, God has not abandoned human beings and has left them free will, freedom to make decisions and choices. In the works of Anselm Kiefer, who has been inspired by Kabbalah, mythology and Jewish mysticism since the 1980s, this concept finds expression in the *Chevirat ha-kelim* (*Breaking of the Vessels*) series. In his early works from the 1960s and 1970s, including *Besatzung* (1969), the *Heroische Sinnbilder* cycle (1969), *Für Genet* (1969), or *Dem unbekanntem Maler* (1983), Kiefer often made direct references to the National Socialist period, confronting his work with the so-called principle of German memory. In these works, the artist performs an act of grief and mourning, confronting History on his own – the artist, against the desire to erase the past, remembering the grimmest period in his nation's history, responds to Nazi rituals. He will return to these themes repeatedly, analysing the tragic phenomenon of the Germans' collective past, the past he did not personally experience. He will reflect on the fate and place of the contemporary artist, and his or her ultimate loneliness in the face of piled-up historical catastrophes.

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<sup>7</sup> H. Jonas, *Le Concept de Dieu après Auschwitz: une voie juive*, op. cit., pp. 38-39.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem.

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These questions are addressed by Anselm Kiefer's series of works *Chevirat ha-kelim*, produced in various versions since the 1980s.<sup>10</sup> Since then, there has been clear evolution in Kiefer's work, as the form of his works has changed. The artist frequently uses such materials as lead, shellac, glass, paint, ash, earth, gravel, charred paper, dried plants and their seeds, straw, hair, and clay vessels. His paintings, sculptures and installations have become monumental, and an iconographic transformation has also taken place. References to great representatives of German literature and art, and heroes of Germanic sagas are replaced by reflections on the essence and meaning of the connection between the Judean tradition and the present day. For several decades, Kiefer has been focusing on Jewish culture: *instead of the Nazi past of Germany, the artist has turned to the treatises of mystics and philosophers*.<sup>11</sup> In the 1990s, the artist began to create objects, installations, sculptures and paintings whose content refers to problems that transcend the "earthly reality". With his art, he penetrates areas separating the individual from the universe. At that time, the works of the German artist turned towards art understood as a cosmogonic act, a process leading to the restoration of the lost unity of the universe.<sup>12</sup> By analysing and reifying issues relating to universal categories in his works, he remains close to the human condition, almost inseparable from it, a human being whose consciousness is formed by memory, history and knowledge of the culture of other nations.

In 1990, Kiefer created one of the first versions of the topic of *Chevirat ha-kelim* undertaken by the artist. The painting-relief, measuring 380 x 250 cm, was made of a lead sheet fixed on a wooden base, glass, sand, ash, shellac, a girl's dress and women's hair. At the top of the painting, a circle is traced in a layer of sand, suggesting a sun disc with the outlines of the zodiac signs visible

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<sup>10</sup> Anselm Kiefer's work *Chevirat ha-kelim*, in various configurations, either as a single installation or a group of works, has been presented at, among others: Galerie Chapelle Saint Sulpétriére Paris (2000), Tel Aviv Museum of Art (2011-2012) and Jewish Museum Berlin (2019-2020).

<sup>11</sup> M. Mencfel, *Sztuka i melancholia. O problemie pamięci w twórczości Anselma Kiefera*, "Artium Quaestiones" 2004, XV, Poznań 2004, p. 186.

<sup>12</sup> See: A. Zweite, *Anselm Kiefer. The High Priestess*, published by Harry N. Abrams, Shelter Island NY 1989; A. Zweite, *Anselm Kiefer, Zweistromland. Mit einem Essay von Armin Zweite*, Köln 1989; M.-L. Bernadac, *Athanos*, in: [https://www.louvre.fr/sites/default/files/medias/medias\\_fichiers/fichiers/pdf/louvre dossier presse anselm kiefer.pdf](https://www.louvre.fr/sites/default/files/medias/medias_fichiers/fichiers/pdf/louvre dossier presse anselm kiefer.pdf) (accessed: 19.4.2020); J.-M. Terrasse, *Anselm Kiefer*, in: *Anselm Kiefer au Louvre*, J.-M. Terrasse, *Frontieres, en nous, hors de nous, nous - Entretien Jean-Marc Terrasse: Anselm Kiefer au Louvre*, edit. du Regard, Paris 2007, pp. 21-22; E. Jedlińska, *Anselm Kiefer at the Louvre Museum and Olafur Eliasson in Versailles: on the narrative space of a work of art*, in: "Art Inquiry", 2020, XXII, pp. 121-141.

around it. The pockets of the dress are filled with gunpowder and the whole painting is covered with ash.<sup>13</sup>

In the same year, 1990, a sculpture with the same title was created. It is a massive bookcase with lead books stacked on its three shelves and plates with the names of the *sefirot* attached to the frames.<sup>14</sup> Pieces of broken glass are inserted between the pages of the books; panes of glass are also scattered around.

In 2000, during the Festival d'Automne at the Chapelle de la Salpêtrière gallery in Paris, Kiefer showed another version of the *Chevirat ha-kelim*, based on an interpretation of the Kabbalistic theory of Isaac Luria (1534-1572) from Safed in the Upper Galilee.<sup>15</sup> [ill. 1]



1. Anselm Kiefer, *Chevirat ha-kelim / The Breaking of the Vessels*, 2000, ashes, canvas on lead, crayon, shellac, clay vessels, clay crusts. Source of copy: (ed.) Jean-Michel Bouhours, *Anselm Kiefer*, catalogue de l'exposition au Centre Pompidou Paris, 16 décembre 2015 au 18 avril 2016, Paris, p. 264.

<sup>13</sup> See: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/artimageslibrary/6217939964/in/photostream/anselm/kiefer/shebirat/ha/Kelim> (accessed: 23.06.22).

<sup>14</sup> Ten divine structures mediate the creation of the world through emanation. Symbolism of the sephiroth in Kiefer's works will be discussed later in this article.

<sup>15</sup> Anselm Kiefer also used the Kabbalistic concept of Isaac Luria in his other works, including an early work relating to Paul Celan's poem *Deathfugue*, created in 1981-1983. In a series entitled *Für Paul Celan*, he expressed his interest in Jewish mysticism; over time, he began to conduct increasingly in-depth studies of Jewish mystics and philosophers. By studying the Old Testament, the Talmud and Kabbalistic writings, following the path of Jewish thinkers as they did, he seeks the sources of human consciousness, shaped by memory and history, whose vehicles are word and writing. See, among others: M. Biro, *Anselm Kiefer and Philosophy of*

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In order to properly interpret the German artist's works, it is necessary to briefly present the Kabbalistic<sup>16</sup> concept of Isaac Luria – one of its most famous reformers.<sup>17</sup> In his interpretations, Luria created the Kabbalistic cosmogony and the science of migration of souls (*gilgul neszamot*), and formulated the principles of practical Kabbalah. He developed the concept of *cimcum* (the act preceding the creation of the world or “withdrawal” of God) and a theory of a cosmic catastrophe (*chevirat-ha-kelim*, or “breaking”) and repairing of the world (*tikkun*). Luria's concept of the world, with its visions of exile and return, death and resurrection, helped to explain such phenomena as the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492 and the Inquisition. It also responded to other historical catastrophes, explained their mystical meaning and purpose, and linked them to the doctrine of the beginning of creation of the world. Events of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries resulted in a momentous transformation in the culture and mystical thought of the Jewish community. Kabbalists of the time turned to reflection on the meaning of the end and the possibility of salvation of the world. In his teachings, Luria explained to his contemporaries the nature of calamities that were affecting them, while offering hope and a sense that everything had a purpose. Luria's Kabbalah – answering the existential questions of the age – found fertile ground and instantly gained worldwide fame.

Marc-Alain Ouaknin writes: “Luria's ideas are essentially a description of certain stages of a philosophy of history that can be described on both a cosmic and an individual level. Luria introduces the fundamental concepts: *cimcum* (“withdrawal”), *chevirat* (“breaking”) and *tikkun* (“repair”).<sup>18</sup>

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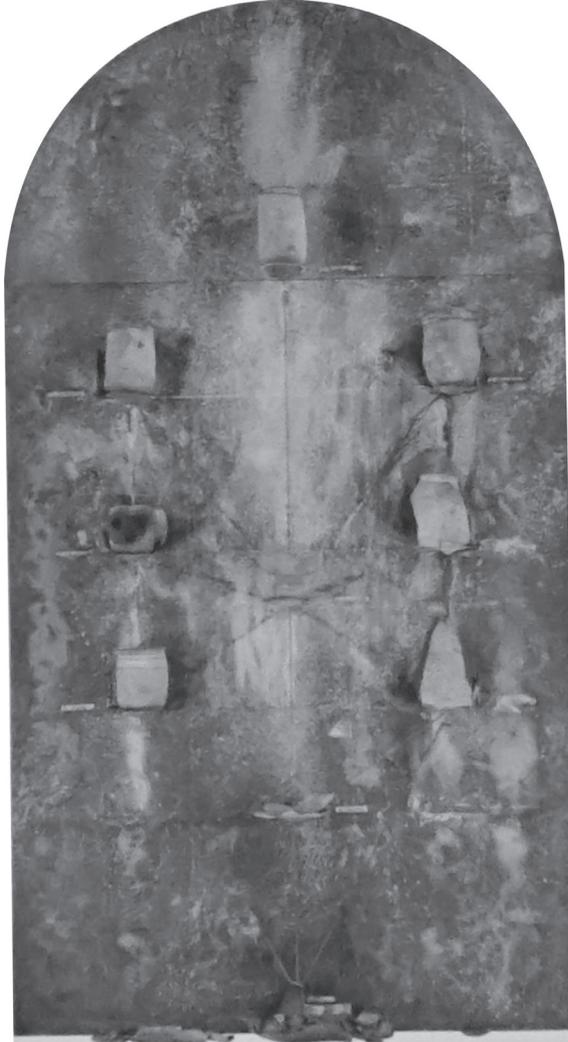
*Martin Heidegger*, Cambridge 1998, p. 97; (ed.) Jean-Michel Bouhours, *Anselm Kiefer*, Centre Pompidou 16 December – 18 April 2016, Paris 2016; (ed.) A. Ehrmann; *Götz Adriani talks to Anselm Kiefer*, in: *Anselm Kiefer für Paul Celan*, Galerie Thadeus Ropac, Salzburg 2005; E. Jedlińska, *Kształty pamięci. Wybrane zagadnienia sztuki współczesnej*, Łódź 2019, p. 162; C. Strasser, *Chevirat Ha-kelim: Le bris des vases et Anselm Kiefer: Chapelle de la Salpêtrière*, Édition du Regard, Paris 2000 et al.

<sup>16</sup> The first Kabbalah scholar was Gershom Scholem. He undertook to describe and clarify the definition of Kabbalah. Literally, kabbalah means “tradition” in which the mystical tendencies of Judaism are reflected. The Hebrew term kabbalah can be translated as “receiving”, “reception” or “transmission”. It is a discursive and speculative system of mystical and especially theosophical thinking concerning the so-called attributes of God, the act of creation of the world, man's place on earth and their relationship to deity, and a description of the experience of man's relationship with God. See: G. Scholem, *Kabala i jej symbolika*, trans. I. Kania, Kraków, 1996; S. Gerschom, *Mistyryzm żydowski i jego główne kierunki*, 2007; G. Scholem, *O mistycznej postaci bóstwa. Z badań nad podstawowymi pojęciami kabaly*, trans. A. Haas, Warsaw 2010.

<sup>17</sup> See: M.-A. Ouaknin, *Tajemnice kabaty*, trans. K. and K. Pruscy, Warsaw 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, p. 190.

These three concepts (Hebr.: *cimcum*, *chewirat* and *tikkun*) are the focus of Anselm Kiefer's current work and the subject of this interpretation of the artist's *Chevirat ha-kelim* series. [ill. 2] According to Luria's reasoning, *cimcum* was the first act of the Creator, which was to shrink, to withdraw "from Himself towards Himself" - this is how emptiness (*chalal ha-panuj*) was created,



2. Anselm Kiefer, *Chevirat ha-kelim / The Breaking of the Vessels*, 2000, ashes, canvas on lead, crayon, shellac, clay vessels, clay crusts. Chapelle de la Salpêtrière, Paris, 2000. Source of copy: catalogue de l'exposition au Centre Pompidou Paris, 16 décembre 2015 au 18 avril 2016, Paris, p. 2018.

through which the world could come into being: *In relation to infinity, it was an infinitesimally small space, but at the moment of creation it constituted the whole of space.*<sup>19</sup> The space abandoned by the Creator from which He disappeared – the space of absence and withdrawal, the place free for every being – was called *olam* (“space”): *Olam is not the world, but the very possibility of existence of the world, of all the worlds.*<sup>20</sup> Luria says that emptiness is the condition for creating the universe. Through its existence, the world could come into being. The second stage of Creation is, according to Lurianic Kabbalah, *chewirat ha-kelim*, or “breaking of the vessels”:

Following the *cimcum*, divine light gushed into the empty space in the form of a ray. It is called *Adam Kadmon* which means “a primeval man”. This is nothing other than the first configuration of the divine light which, from the essence of the *Ejn Sof* (Infinite Being), burst into the space of the *cimcum* not from everywhere, but from one side.<sup>21</sup>

Before God proceeded to create the world, His Divine Essence (Hebr. *Ein-Sof*, literally: “without end” or “infinite”) filled everything. In order to make space for creation, omnipresent God shrank. In the process of creating the world, *Ein-Sof* – expressed in Hebrew as absolute and infinite Fullness – had to perform an act of self-contraction. In this way, the space for creation (the Kabbalistic concept of *cimcum*) could be created. In Luria's concept, this act is the most profound symbol of exile. Thus, God (as *Ein-Sof*), in order for the world to come into existence, had to carve some free space out of His uncreated Being, from which He withdrew.<sup>22</sup> Thus, an infinite abyss was created, or rather it was God who created the infinite abyss – he performed *an act of concentration outwards into Himself*.<sup>23</sup> Into the void thus created, God sent a ray of light to initiate the actual act of creation. The first formation of the divine light that penetrated the *cimcum* space emerged from the eyes and body of *Adam Kadmon*<sup>24</sup> and was encased in clay vessels.<sup>25</sup> These vessels turned out not to be solid enough and got broken. Referring to investigations of Post-Lurian Kabbala-

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem, p. 191.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem, p. 195.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, p. 322.

<sup>23</sup> A. Kamczykcki, *Muzeum Liebeskinda w Berlinie. Żydowski kontekst architektury*, Poznań 2015, p. 107.

<sup>24</sup> *Adam Kadmon* is the first and most important form in which, after *cimcum*, the deity begins to manifest itself. See: G. Scholem, *Mistycyzm żydowski*, op. cit., p. 327.

<sup>25</sup> See: G. Scholem, *Mistycyzm żydowski...*, op. cit., p. 323 and others.

lists, Scholem writes about radiation of the divine essence from which the first being – the first man – was created. A powerful beam of light, which the divine messengers were unable to contain, made the seven lower vessels (sefirot) break under its force. Pieces of the vessels merged with sparks of the divine light and fell into the abyss. Breaking of the vessels is interpreted by Kabbalists as a symbol of a world in a state of disharmony into which evil has entered.

In the second phase of creation, the process of radiating the divine light from Himself took place. Harmony and order in the world were to be ensured through this act of withdrawal and revelation of divine emanation.<sup>26</sup> According to the Kabbalah, a catastrophe occurred already during the first emanation. The creative power of God was revealed in ten *sefirot*. Ten sefirot are ten divine structures, advocating emergence of the world through gradual manifestation of God's essence and comprising various levels of reality. All creation was intended by God to have a perfect form. This was preserved only by three higher *sefirot*. The other ones got broken. Breaking of the vessels (*chewirat ha-kelim*) was a cosmic catastrophe and the cause of imperfection of the world, including God. According to the Kabbalists, we all carry the stigma of that first breaking and pieces of the vessels (Hebr. *chelipot*), which, as Scholem writes, fell into the world, becoming independent as evil.<sup>27</sup>

“Breaking of the vessels” caused chaos, everything shuffled, *became imperfect and flawed*.<sup>28</sup> Each piece landed in a different place, “in exile”: *The divine sparks fell into the world locked in a husk that prevents access to them. Freeing them will be man's task*.<sup>29</sup> The system developed by Luria gave Jews a conviction that misfortunes afflicting them have a hidden meaning, that their fate *is merely a symbol ... of the conflict within the bosom of the Creator*<sup>30</sup> and that all humanity shares it with them.

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Like a mystic-cabbalist, Kiefer reaches out to sacred books in order to understand the meaning of the world's existence and dichotomy of good and evil that governs it. By studying the writings of authorities, following mystical exegesis, at the same time he revolutionizes it; by interpreting the Scriptures, relating their content to the present day, he encounters in it the answer to his own experiences. He invokes God by His new name, the name of contemporaneity.

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<sup>26</sup> Emanation (Hebr. “*acilut*”), according to Kabbalah, is the coming of the universe into existence through the successive manifestation of God.

<sup>27</sup> G. Scholem, *Mistyycyzm żydowski...*, op. cit., p. 328.

<sup>28</sup> M.-A. Ouaknin, *Tajemnice Kabały*, op. cit., p. 194.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem, p. 195.

Gershom Scholem writes: The mystic finds their own experience in the sacred text. It is often impossible to distinguish whether it radiates from the text or whether they bring it into the text. The brilliance of mystical exegesis lies in the great precision with which it dissects the literal text of scripture, turning it into *corpus symbolicum*.<sup>31</sup>

*Tikkun* (or: “repair”, “reparation”), the third Lurianic concept, i.e., collecting broken and lost pieces of vessels, is a symbolic process leading to restoration of the original order. Responsibility for restoring things to their rightful places must be taken by people; they should guard the order of the world, says the Kabbalah. The sparks of light, for which the vessels proved too fragile, were trapped in the world of matter. Freeing them, collecting them, repairing the broken vessels by “giving them back” to God, can restore the state of harmony from before the catastrophe.<sup>32</sup> This act is the goal of the *tikkun* process.

Subsequent Kiefer's works and exhibitions titled *Chevirat ha-kelim*, shown in various locations around the world, continue artist's reflections on the relationship between the Scriptures, Kabbalah, tradition and modernity. In 2000, Saint Salpêtrière gallery presented six paintings-reliefs measuring 9.40 m by 5.10 m, entitled: *Pour Robert Fludd, Tsimsoum (la construction de la lumière), Tikkun, Szekina, Chevirat ha-kelim* [ill. 3] and *L'ordre des anges*. In their



3. Anselm Kiefer, *Chevirat ha-kelim / The Breaking of the Vessels*, 2000, ashes, canvas on lead, crayon, shellac, clay vessels, clay crusts. Chapelle de la Salpêtrière, Paris, 2000. Source of copy: [https://issuu.com/essl\\_museum/docs/anselm\\_kiefer\\_essl\\_museum](https://issuu.com/essl_museum/docs/anselm_kiefer_essl_museum) (5.07.2022)

<sup>31</sup> G. Scholem, *Kabala i jej symbolika*, op. cit., p. 16.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 188.

complex symbolism, the works refer to Luria's theory charting the dramatic process of creating the universe. The German artist's work is made of lead sheeting applied to a wooden base; in the upper part representing the sky, the sheeting is heavily wrinkled and squashed to suggest the moment of shrinking of the Omnipresent, or drawing into Himself – according to Luria's interpretation – to make room for creation (the lower part of the painting). For other objects and “images”, he used broken glass and ash-covered dresses. Stacks of open books with lead pages were laid out on the floor of the chapel. The works are inseparable from the interior of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century chapel<sup>33</sup> as a space for meditation. In the side aisles, there were two lead sculptures: *20 Years of Solitude and Melancholia*. The lead sheets from which the objects were created came from the roof of the Cologne Cathedral destroyed during the war.

Kiefer's painting titled *Tsimtsoum*, [ill. 4] dating from 2000, depicts an infinitely empty landscape; it is an uninhabited, homeless land. Referring to the



4. Anselm Kiefer, *Tsimtsoum / Zim Zum*, 1990, acrylic, emulsion, crayon, shellac, ashes, canvas on lead. Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. Source of copy: <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.71599.html> (5.07.2022).

<sup>33</sup> The hospital chapel of the Saint-Louis de la Salpêtrière hospital in Paris was commissioned by King Louis XIV in 1669. It was to be built by Louis Le Vau; Le Vau died in 1670 and the king entrusted the construction of the chapel to Liberal Bruant. After a long period of abandonment, the chapel became a venue for important artistic events. The chapel is built on the plan of a Greek cross, with four chapels in the arms: St. Vincent's, the Good Shepherd's, Virgin Mary's and St. Genovese's. At the intersection of the four naves, there is the Central Chapel vaulted by an octagonal dome topped by a turret with an oculus.

tradition of landscape painting, where the field of the painting is divided into two parts (the upper one usually depicts a part of the sky, the lower one – the earth), Kiefer emphasises the connection of his art with the art of the masters, on the one hand, and with the traditional imagery of *sacrum* and *profane* spaces, on the other. The earth – an empty place, as yet uninhabited, seems **already** marked by disaster. In the middle of a ploughed field, as if frozen, there is a spill of melting ice (?) – the beginning of a life-giving river. The empty space of the earth and invisible God, whose presence is suggested by jagged “folds” of lead sheets absorbed into the sky, seem to be in a state of tension that occurs in the process of creation.

Marc-Alain Ouaknin writes: “Emptiness is the condition for the creation of the universe, without which it cannot exist.”<sup>34</sup> The part of the sky that fills most of the painting's space seems infinite, without stars or meteors; the sky is transcendent, but it is as “inaccessible” as the earth at the moment of creation. In Kiefer's paintings, the sky and the earth are marked by the stigma of the tragedy that will be / is man's share. The artist has been depicting the motif of the sky and the earth's connection with it since the 1970s, developing this theme in subsequent years: for example, the *Gilgamesh and Enkidu in cedar forest* (*Gilgamesh und Enkidu im Zederwald III*) series from the 1980s, the *Etoiles tombantes painting* (1998) depicting a starry night sky, and the *Athanor* series of paintings (2007).<sup>35</sup> Here, the starry firmament is a symbol of memory and man's connection with *the sacred*. At this point, let us recall the thought of Carl G. Jung: *...the symbols of the Self arise in the depths of the body and they express its materiality as much as the structure of the perceiving consciousness. The symbol is thus a living body, corpus et anima.*<sup>36</sup>

The sky in the *Tsimtsoum* painting is depicted at the moment of the first stage of creation – “lead” sky ripples and withdraws under the force called *Shaddai* by the Kabbalists.<sup>37</sup> The void is filled with infinity. The act of creation must take place. Kabbalists assume that the second phase of *cimcum* took place in the process of creation and the infinite took its abandoned place then, assuming the form of a ray of light energy, from which the worlds were created.

<sup>34</sup> M.-A. Ouaknin, *Tajemnice Kabaty*, op. cit., p. 192.

<sup>35</sup> See: E. Jedlińska, *Anselm Kiefer at the Louvre Museum and Olafur Eliasson in Versailles: on the narrative space of a work of art*, “Art Inquiry” 2020, no. XXII, pp. 124-129.

<sup>36</sup> C. G. Jung, *The collected works of C.G. Jung*, Princeton University Press, New York, 1970, p. 291.

<sup>37</sup> In Lurianic Kabbalism, *szaddaj* means the force coming out of the void itself. In Hebrew, the word *Shaddai* means “enough”. This term is also used as the name of God (*El-Shaddai*), in the sense of the force that forbids the Infinite to return. The void must remain. Cf. Marc-Alain Ouaknin, *Tajemnice Kabaty*, transl. K. and K. Prusey, Warszawa 2006, p. 192.

Ouaknin concludes: “A ray entering the empty space as energy becomes matter, taking the form of ten containers designed to receive and store light (sparks), named *sefirot* by the Kabbalah. The light that created them fills them gradually. (...) The light that thus filled the void will be the basis of the creation of the world.”<sup>38</sup>

In Lurianic Kabbalah, the second stage of creation is called *Chewirat ha-kelim*, or “breaking of the vessels” – the first cosmic catastrophe. The divine light that flashed in the form of a ray was called *Adam Kadmon*. He is the configuration of light, a divine prototype of a man.

Kiefer's work *Chewirat ha-kelim* of 2000, in a version presented in the Saint Salpêtrière chapel in Paris, was placed in the niche of the main altar. Such placement gave particular importance to the representation that speaks of a catastrophe – exile that no longer simply signifies the homelessness of the people of Israel, but homelessness that marks the history of the world to its end. Ouaknin writes: “*Everything that happens to the world is only a consequence of this first, absolute exile.*”<sup>39</sup> On the blue-grey lead background of the painting covered with shellac and ash, eight clay vessels were placed on round metal stands according to the Kabbalistic scheme of the Sephiroth Tree. There are ten divine structures which make up the perfect Sephiroth Tree, mediating the creation of the world through emanation. As we remember, the lower seven of them got broken. Kiefer presented eight clay jugs. Only four of them remained intact, the rest being mere pieces. Three clay jugs placed uppermost are not broken, neither is the vessel of the eighth sephira (*Hod*).<sup>40</sup> Each vessel bears a plate with the name of the corresponding sephira. Pieces of the broken vessels partly remained on the stands and partly fell to the ground.

In 2012 (2 November – 15 April 2012), an exhibition of Kiefer's works opened at the Tel Aviv Museum, under the common title *Chewirat ha-kelim*. [ill. 5] The exhibition included works (sculptures, installations and woodcuts) from the 1980s as well as recent works. The installation-sculpture *Chewirat ha-kelim*, subsequently shown at the Jewish Museum in Berlin (between 2019 and 2020), was constructed from lead sheets, glass and copper wire. It depicts a monumental cabinet for books. Shards of glass have been inserted between their lead pages – frayed, as if scorched, with their spines turned away from the audience. A thick layer of broken glass also lies on the floor, scattered around the “library”, making it impossible to get close to the sculpture. Each

<sup>38</sup> M.-A. Ouaknin, *Tajemnice Kabaly*, op. cit., p. 193.

<sup>39</sup> Ibidem, p. 194.

<sup>40</sup> In Luria's Kabbalah, *Hod* is the female sephira, responsible for creating the awareness of ordered images of the material world.



5. Anselm Kiefer, *Chevirat ha-kelim / The Breaking of the Vessels*, 2011, metal shelves with approx. 40 lead books and broken glass. Courtesy of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. Source of copy: (ed.) Jean-Michel Bouhours, *Anselm Kiefer*, catalogue de l'exposition au Centre Pompidou Paris, 16 décembre 2015 au 18 avril 2016, Paris, pp. 50-51.

<http://artobserved.com/2012/01/go-see-tel-aviv-anselm-kiefer-shevirat-ha-kelim-the-breaking-of-the-vessels-at-tel-aviv-museum-of-art-through-april-30-2012/> (5.07.2022).

of the three shelves of the bookcase has lead plates with the names of the ten sephiroth, which, according to the Lurianic Kabbalah, form a unity and should not be considered separately from the rest. The sephiroth are considered as ten primeval numbers, collectively forming the world. The supreme one, located at the centre of the highest tier of the sefirot system, is called Keter – the “crown”, identified with the unknowable Being of God. Kiefer drew the Sefirot Tree, with an arrangement corresponding to the structures of the right, left and middle sides, from a Kabbalistic diagram. The lowest and last sephiroth is Malchut – the only one representing the feminine aspect to the other sephiroth above it.

When the ten sephiroth work together in dynamic harmony with the male (left side) and female elements united, the world benefits. If, on the other hand, human sin separates Malchut from the other sephiroth and allows the power of evil (Hebr.: *sitra achra*) to take possession of it, misfortunes pour down upon the world.<sup>41</sup>

Anselm Kiefer placed the tenth sephiroth (Malchut) abandoned on a pile of broken glass panes, symbolising here the act of “breaking of the vessels”, thus alluding to the tragedy of Jews during Kristallnacht and also to the memory of the Holocaust.<sup>42</sup> Using metaphors, the artist relates his work to the topicality of past experiences and conflicts, settling accounts with himself in the same way, while attempting to confront History at the same time. Another installation by Kiefer, belonging to the set of works shown as part of the presentation in Tel Aviv, depicts a “broken column” occupying an entire room.

The sculpture-installation was made from broken glass panes, thrown over a pile of destroyed books, as if devastated by fire. At first, a viewer confronted with the scattered sharp pieces of glass may primarily feel threat and danger, but then they may experience the work as a call for restitution. A symbolic evocation of the events of Kristallnacht, the Kabbalistic idea of “broken vessels” (*chewirat ha-kelim*) and the associated suggestions of “repairing the world” (*tikkun olam*) seem to be right interpretation of this sculpture.<sup>43</sup> Its essential aim,

<sup>41</sup> A. Unterman, *Encyklopedia tradycji i legend żydowskich*, Warsaw 1994, pp. 248-249.

<sup>42</sup> Such an interpretation of broken glass is given by L. Saltzman, *Anselm Kiefer and Art after Auschwitz*, Cambridge 1999, p. 36.

<sup>43</sup> See: L. Saltzman, *Anselm Kiefer and Art after Auschwitz*, op. cit., pp. 36-38; A. Kamczycki, *Muzeum Libeskinda w Berlinie. Żydowski kontekst architektury*, Poznań 2015, pp. 190-191; J. Schwartz, *Go See - Tel Aviv: Anselm Kiefer 'Shevirat Ha-Kelim (the breaking of the vessels)' at Tel Aviv Museum of Art through April 30, 2012* in: <http://artobserved.com/2012/01/go-see-tel-aviv-anselm-kiefer-shevirat-ha-kelim-the-breaking-of-the-vessels-at-tel-aviv-museum-of-art-through-april-30-2012/> (accessed: 26.06.22).

however, is not to place past or present tensions at the centre, but to reflect on their cause. The ultimate purpose of Kiefer's work, and of the entire exhibition in Tel Aviv, is to point out the possibility of reconciliation, to visualise continuity of the unity of cultures and abolition of the borders that divide different civilisations. As a representative of German culture, the culture of the architects of the Holocaust, and being conscious of the heritage of his own people, in Israel he showed works through which he asks Jews for reconciliation, forgiveness and reparation (*tikkun*). The creative act, according to Kiefer, can therefore be understood as a process of construction, as described by the Kabbalists. In his search for the essence of memory, the artist turns to the power of collective myth and the memory of history, human and animal spiritual forces, and strives for knowledge beyond rational cognition. An act of repair must take place after this historical "breaking of the vessels", the crack that occurred in Western civilisation (the world which fell prey to evil). The context of the Kabbalah should be treated here as a module around which the formula of the *tikkun olam* process can be worked out. In Kiefer's works, Kabbalah and art have a specific task; on the one hand, they can be an attempt to address the Holocaust (one of the most important topics in his work); on the other hand, as noted above, a pathway towards reconciliation and a request for forgiveness. The act of *tikkun olam*, or the pursuit of restitution and balance, is a process aimed at restoring order – the third essential stage of the cycle formulated by Luria.

Ouaknin writes: "Breaking of the vessels" was a defect to be corrected. Creation – in both its divine and human aspects – requires the initiation of the *tikkun* process. Things must be restored to their proper place and nature. The repair will not happen by itself; humans are responsible for this stage. Man becomes responsible for the history of the world. Lurianic historiography thus becomes an engaged philosophy in which man takes centre stage. God and man become allies in the work of Creation.<sup>44</sup>

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Anselm Kiefer's group of works, which make up the exhibition *Chewirat ha-kelim*, is a particular expression which attempts to analyse the attitudes of contemporary European citizens. Kiefer says that the memory of the crimes of the Holocaust should be present. Seemingly, an act of grief has been performed in Western culture – what was lost has been mourned, appropriate monuments have been erected, guilt has been accounted for... It has seemed that a relatively stable process of "collecting the broken vessels" has been taking place. Howe-

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<sup>44</sup> M.-A. Ouaknin, *Tajemnice Kabały*, op. cit., p. 195.

ver, a shadow of the wings of the Shekhinah – symbolising, among other things, the exile and suffering of Jews in the Lurianic Kabbalah, embodying grief and melancholy – hovers over the delusion of apparent harmony.<sup>45</sup> We should remember that the process of *tikkun olam* is never-ending and essentially utopian, symbolic. With his art, Anselm Kiefer seeks to link the past, present and future, believing that it can fulfil the duty of redemption – just as Gershom Scholem believed in the possibility of “reconstruction” which can happen as much within the framework of science, as in literature, philosophy and art.<sup>46</sup> Referring to the Kabbalistic tradition, the German artist points to negative demonic powers but, at the same time, in doing his work as an artist (*Du bist Maler*)<sup>47</sup>, he focuses our attention on the task of unification and repair, proclaims (in the political-historical dimension) the idea of forgiveness of faults, reconciliation and repair of the world after the Holocaust. By emphasising the importance of memory in the process of creation, Kiefer refers to the tradition of the German Romantic model of remembering which forms the basis of his spiritual and artistic sensibility, thereby making memory the central motif and goal of his art.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> See: E. Jedlińska, *Szechina albo ucieleśnione Imię Boga. Rzeźba Anselma Kiefiera w Hamburger Bahnhof w Berlinie*, “Przegląd Nauk Historycznych” 2006, V, no. 2 (10), pp. 213-224.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. G. Scholem, *Żydzi i Niemcy*, Sejny 2006, pp. 328-329.

<sup>47</sup> Anselm Kiefer, *Du Bist Maler*, 1969, page 220 from the book titled *Du Bist Maler*, ink, original photograph pasted on paper, 25x19x1 cm, privately owned.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. A. Kulbyté, *The Painter as a Prophet turned toward the Past*, “Art Inquiry” 2020, XXII, pp. 39-55.

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## **ANSELM KIEFER: ZEBRAĆ CO ROZBITE. PRACE CYKLU *CHEVIRAT HA-KELIM* (ROZBICIE NACZYŃ) (streszczenie)**

Podstawą tworzenia cyklu prac Anselma Kiefera (niemieckiego artysty urodzonego w 1945 roku) *Chevirat ha-kelim* (*Breaking of the vessels*), rozpoczętego w 1990 roku jest kabalistyczna teoria Izaaka Lurii (1534-1572) oraz Natana z Gazy (1644-1680). Luria - mistyk i twórca ortodoksyjnej kabały i Natan z Gazy są twórcami kabalistycznego mitu odpowiadającego historycznym doświadczeniom narodu żydowskiego. Mit ów koncentruje się na trzech wielkich symbolach: *cimcum* (hebr., „skurczenie”), czyli samowycofanie się Boga, umożliwiające zaistnienie świata drogą emanacji, *szewira* (hebr., „rozbitcie naczyń”) oraz *tikkun olam* (hebr., „naprawa”), czyli kabalistycznej nauce o roli człowieka w naprawie świata. Kiefer od połowy lat 80., gdy artysta zaczął wykorzystywać w swych pracach ołów, popiół, szelak, glinę jego myśl i dzieła odnoszą się do kultury żydowskiej. Prace cyklu *Chevirat ha-kelim*, demonstrowane od 1985 roku w różnych miejscach na świecie (Berlin, Tel Aviv, Paryż, Hobart...), na które (w zmiennych konfiguracjach) składa się zespół rzeźb, obrazów-reliefów, obiektów odnoszących się do dramatycznego procesu tworzenia świata, rozumianego jako kosmiczna katastrofa. Zburzona została harmonia świata, zło usamodzielniało się - tworzy się historia. Akt *Chevirat ha-kelim* jest - wedle wykładni kabalistów - momentem rozbitcia, pęknięcia pierwotnej jedni. Symbolem rozbitcia, tak samo w mitologii żydowskiej, jak w dziełach Kiefera, są skorupy glinianych naczyń, rozbite kawałki szyby, stopione ołowiane karty monumentalnych ksiąg, ołowiany samolot z „przetraconym” skrzydłem. Świat naznaczony katastrofą wymaga naprawy, odkupienia, przywrócenia pierwotnej harmonii. Prace Kiefera, poprzez zawartą w nich symbolikę, z jednej strony są świadectwem pamięci melancholijnej, odnoszonej do określonej rzeczywistości historycznej (nazizm, zbrodnia Holocaustu i ich obecność we współczesności). Z drugiej strony, przekaz jego sztuki wiąże się z żydowską tradycją wiary w możliwość naprawy i odnowy, *zebrania tego, co rozbite* i nadziei, że wraz z podjęciem pracy nad przywróceniem pierwotnego porządku (*tikkun olam*) nastąpi proces odkupienia, scalenia i pojednania. Ten aspekt prac Kiefera odnosi się tak samo do relacji etycznych, jak i do naszych związków z mitami i religiami zakładającymi metafizyczność rzeczywistości.

**Słowa klucze:** Anselm Kiefer, sztuka współczesna, „rozbitcie naczyń”, Izaak Luria, Kabała, zniszczenie, naprawa.

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