

Tzimtzum, a Review

Dedicated to the memory of my dear father Shlomo (Willy) ben Yehudah Ungar's first yahrzeit.





*I have also seen some very strange things in the words of some contemporary kabbalists who explain things deeply. They say that all of existence is only an illusion and appearance, and does not truly exist. This is to say that the *ein sof* didn't change at all in itself and its necessary true existence and it is now still exactly the same as it was before creation, and there is no space empty of Him, as is known (see *Nefesh Ha-Chaim Shuar* 3). Therefore they said that in truth there is no reality to existence at all, and all the worlds are only an illusion and appearance, just as it says in the verse "in the hands of the prophets I will appear" (*Hoshea* 12: 11). They said that the world and humanity have no real existence, and their entire reality is only an appearance. We perceive ourselves as if we are in a world, and we perceive ourselves with our senses, and we perceive the world with our senses. It turns out [according to this opinion] that all of existence of humanity and the world is only a perception and not in true reality, for it is impossible for anything to exist in true reality, since He fills all the worlds....*

How strange and bitter is it to say such a thing. Wise to us from such an opinion. They don't think and they don't see that with such opinions they are destroying the truth of the entire Torah.

Rav Shlomo Eliyashiv

Definitions:¹

The ***tzimtzum*** or ***tsimtsum*** (Hebrew: צמצום "contraction/constriction/condensation") is a term used in the Lurianic Kabbalah to explain Isaac Luria's doctrine that God began the process of creation by "contracting" his *Ohr Ein Sof* (infinite light) in order to allow for a "conceptual space" in which finite and seemingly independent realms could exist. This primordial initial contraction, forming a *halal hapanuy* "vacant space" (חלל הפנוי) into which new creative light could beam, is denoted by general reference to the *tzimtzum*.

In Kabbalistic interpretation, *tzimtzum* gives rise to the paradox of simultaneous divine presence and absence within the vacuum and resultant Creation. Various approaches exist then, within Orthodoxy, as to how the paradox may be resolved, and as to the nature of *tzimtzum* itself.

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tzimtzum>

Then, those who out of their poor choice are totally uninvolved with Torah 'descend to the abyss while alive'⁴⁵⁰ 'and have driven themselves away from attaching to the heritage of the servants of God'⁴⁵¹ who cleave to God and His Torah and 'are cut off from the land of life,'⁴⁵² God forbid [this is] at the very least in this world, if not also in all of the worlds, whose holiness and light have also been diminished and lowered as a result of these sins for which they are culpable with their lives and 'almost turn their feet'⁴⁵³ to destruction, God forbid, as per Chazal: All the while that people disassociate themselves with the Torah, God seeks to destroy the world.⁴⁵⁴ "for the pillars of the world are God's and upon them He set the world" – pillars refers to Torah Sages. ... Every day Angels of Destruction are sent by God to totally destroy the world and if it weren't for the prayer and study halls where Torah Sages sit and involve themselves with words of Torah, they would immediately destroy the entire world.⁴⁵⁵ Refer there. With all this, [the worlds] are still able to exist through [the efforts of] 'the survivors who God calls'⁴⁵⁶ who involve themselves in the Holy Torah day and night such that they do not totally return to a state of null and void, God forbid. However, if the world were, God forbid, completely void, even literally for one moment, of involvement and analysis of the Chosen People with the Holy Torah then all the worlds would immediately be destroyed and totally cease to be, God forbid. Notwithstanding, even a single talented Jew alone has the ability to cause the establishment and continuation of all the worlds and the Creation in its entirety by his involvement with and analysis of the Holy Torah for its sake, as per Chazal: Whoever is involved with Torah for its sake. ... R. Yochanan says he even protects the entire world

– Chaim of Volozhin

The Disclosure of Concealment:

Simsum in the Thought of Rabbi Shlomo Elyashiv Simsum in Lurianic Kabbalah

Joey Rozenfeld writes:²

Of the ideas that Lurianic Kabbalah has (re)introduced¹, *simsum*- commonly defined as the withdrawal or the concealment of God for the sake of creation- has enjoyed the most extensive explication and interpretation. Due in large part to Scholem's vision of *simsum* as both a cosmological myth that explains the possibility of "the world existing at all if there is nothing besides *Ein Sof*, the infinite Deity that is all and fills all"² as well as a highly innovative historiographical trope that sees the initial movement within the depths of the Divine as "a voluntary restraint and limitation ...a ruthlessness towards Himself, for He exiled Himself from boundless infinity to a more concentrated infinity. There is a profound inward Galut, not the Galut of one of the creatures but of God Himself"³, *simsum* may be viewed as the paradigm of Lurianic Kabbalah's interpretational fecundity with analyses expressed in fields from comparative theology to literary criticism.

According to the general interpretations of *simsum*, Lurianic Kabbalah describes the initial movement within the undifferentiated and infinite light of the Divine as an act of withdrawal⁴. Prior to the initial opening in which the other-than-God could exist, the fullness of the Divine Plenum (*Ein-Sof*) prevented the capacity of any being other-than-God. In order to create a space in which otherness could take root, God performed an act of self-contraction through which a vacant space, or void (*halal ha-panui*) could form. This place, devoid of presence can now serve as a potential space for the eventual unfolding of existence. This withdrawal or concealment of God's unlimited presence is concurrently the disclosure of God's delimitation. The eventual unfolding of existence is therefore predicated on the absence, or concealment of Godly presence. *Simsum*, however, is more than an absolute withdrawal or concealment; it is paradoxically the

²https://www.academia.edu/44725206/The_Disclosure_of_Concealment_Tzimtzum_in_the_Thought_of_Rabbi_Shloomo_Elyashiv

¹ On the concept of *simsum* in pre-Lurianic Kabbalah, see Moshe Idel, "On the Concept of Zimzum in Kabbalah and Its Research", in *Lurianic Kabbalah*, eds. Rachel Elior, Yehuda Liebes (Magnes Press, 1992), pp. 59-112.

² G. Scholem, *Kabbalah* (Dorset Press, 1987), pp. 129.

³ G. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (Schocken Books, 1971), pp. 44.

⁴ See R. Hayim Vital, *Eitz Hayim*, 1:1; *Mevo Shearim* 1:1:1. For an overview of *tzimtzum* and its various interpretations, both literal and nonliteral see T. Ross, "Two Interpretations of *Tzimtzum*: R. Hayim of Volozhin and R. Shneur Zalman of Liady", *Mehakrei Yerushalayim* 2 (1982), pp.152-169; S. Magid, "Origin and Overcoming the Beginning: *Zimzum* as a Trope of Reading in Post-Lurianic Kabbalah", in *Beginning/Again: Toward a Hermeneutics of Jewish Texts*, ed. A. Cohen and S. Magid, (New York: Seven Bridges, 2002), pp. 163-214

mode in which God allows his presence to be revealed. This dialectical sway between concealment (*he'elam*) and disclosure (*gillui*); or egression (*hitpathtut*) and regression (*hitalqut*) takes place within and as the initial caesura of being and as such represents the constitutive process through which the eventual concatenation of existence will unfold. As a primary process through which all eventual stages of creation must be viewed, the *simsun* becomes both an isolated event within the cosmological drama as well as the formative opening that must be taken into account with each successive event. As such the proper interpretation of the *simsun* process amongst Lurianic and post-Lurianic Kabbalists became an essential question whose answer preceded and founded the whole of the Lurianic system.

While there are significant differences amongst R. Issac Luria's students as to what the *simsun* process actually was; the main mode of discussion in post-Lurianic Kabbalah has not been the proper description of *simsun*, but rather the proper interpretation of a preexisting concept. In other words, the discourse surrounding *simsun* is not the description of an ambiguous concept, but rather the clarification of a concepts proper meaning. As the initial act of withdrawal/concealment for the sake of enabling/allowing the creation of the worlds, *simsun* represents the giving of space for the other-than-God. By removing or concealing His infinite light, God gave space for the eventual unfolding of the world- from the most spiritual to the most physical qualities- as well as temporal process of past-present-future that constitutes pre-human, human and post-human history. As the "entry of God into Himself...that leaves room, so to speak, for the creative processes to come into play" the *simsun* enables, as well as constitutes everything that takes place afterwards. Therefor the proper interpretation of *simsun* amongst post Lurianic-Kabbalists was much more than just the clarification of one particular idea within a system, it became the Archimedean point that defined everything that would come after⁵.

Literal (*ki-pshuto*) and Allegorical (*lav ki-pshuto*)

The main point of contention amongst post-Lurianic Kabbalists was whether the *simsun* was to be interpreted literally, as the withdrawal of God's infinite essence; or figuratively, as the occlusion and concealment of God's infinite presence. According to the general interpretation, those Kabbalists that proposed a literal reading (*ki-peshuto*) of the *simsun* act saw the withdrawal of the Divine as an actual event constituting the ontological nature of a reality separate and void of the infinite essence who's original presence prevented its very disclosure. The Kabbalists proposing a figurative reading (*lav ki-peshuto*) of *simsun*, on the other hand, saw in it a necessary act of occlusion wherein the all consuming light of the infinite was concealed so as to allow the epistemological (mis)recognition of existence as separate and other than God. While these two paths of

⁵ See Yosef Avivi, *Kabbalat HaAri* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2008) Vol. 3, pp. 1051; 1071

interpretation eventually extended into differing views regarding the nature of existence, the literal versus figurative approach to *simsum* underwent its first significant stage in the texts of two post-Lurianic Kabbalists, R. Yosef Ergas (1685-1730) and R. Immanuel Hai Ricchi (1688-1743). Responding to Ricchi's comments in his work *Yosher Leivav* which calls for a literal reading of the *simsum* act, Ergas in his *Shomer Emunim* vehemently rejects the *simsum ki-peshuto* doctrine on account of its heretical underpinnings, namely the implied corporality of a God who can be delimited within, or outside of Euclidean space. Continuing the thread of discourse, the highly polemical dissent between the Hassidic interpretation of the Lurianic corpus, championed by R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1812) and Mitnagdic, or Lithuanian Kabbalah advocated by R. Elijah ben Solomon of Vilna (1720-1797) has been said to center around the proper interpretation of *simsum*. While R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi called for a non-literal interpretation, wherein *simsum* represents a dialectical play of disclosure and concealment resulting in the occlusion of the light of the Divine within the psyche of the created subject⁶; the stance projected⁷ onto the Vilna Gaon was a literal view of *simsum* where God Himself is actually removed from existence maintaining a willful connection through the particulars of Divine providence.

These differing accounts of the *simsum* act- namely, the literal removal of Divine essence from the plane of immanent reality or the figurative occlusion of Divine presence (*ohv*) resulting in the epistemological limitation of created subjects- constitute vastly differing conceptions regarding the nature of perceivable reality as well as Gods interaction with the other-than-God. The figurative interpretation of *simsum* promotes a certain acosmic, or panentheistic view of reality wherein the apparent separation between Creator and created is the result of a temporary concealment of the Divine light that fills (*mimaleh*) and surrounds existence (*soveiv*). The *simsum* act enables the occlusion necessary for created subjects to function under the epistemological fallacy of a world separate and apart from the infinite and annihilating presence of the Creator. As such, any demarcations that serve to separate and distinguish between God and not-God, holy and profane, are provisional in nature bearing no impact on the ontological reality of Gods infinity. The literal interpretation of *simsum*, however, risks "contradicting the principles of faith" for the sake of maintaining reality as a separate, yet highly influenced existence. Emphasizing the transcendent essence of God that remains after the contraction and

⁶ Regarding R. Shneur Zalman and the Habad interpretation of *simsum* as a paradoxical play of concealment and disclosure, see Elliot Wolfson, *Open Secret* (Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. ; Rachel Elijior, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God: The Kabbalistic Theosophy of Habad Hasidism* (State University of New York, 1992), pp. 79-93.

⁷ The ambiguity surrounding the actual stance of the Vilna Gaon regarding *simsum* will be discussed below. Scholem, commenting on the various interpretations of *simsum* was aware of the questionable veracity of the interpretation projected- in the psychoanalytic sense- unto the Gaon, "In the *Tanya* Shneur Zalman maintained that the Gaon of Vilna mistakenly took *simsum* literally, but it is an open question if he was justified in interpreting the Gaon's teachings in this way" (G. Scholem, *Kabbalah* (Dorset Press, 1987), pp. 135).

removal of divine immanence, the literalists view *simsun* as the absolute withdrawal of divinity that results in a voided space in which the divine essence is ontologically absent.

The Gaon of Vilna, R. Elyashiv and the Literal Reading of *simsun*

In the echo of R. Elijah ben Solomon of Vilna's excommunication of Hassidism- an event whose historical significance outweighs the textual evidence of its own inception- various accounts of reasoning have been projected unto the lacuna left by the Gaon of Vilna⁸. Of the more accepted arguments⁹, R. Elijah was seen as espousing a literal interpretation of *simsun* resulting in an immanent reality devoid of the Divine essence (*atzmut*); in contradistinction to the Hassidic interpretation of Lurianic Kabbalah wherein *simsun* was read in a strictly figurative manner¹⁰. Following the line of argument proposed by R. Immanuel Hai Ricchi, R. Elijah is said to have seen the figurative interpretation of *simsun* akin to a form of acosmic pantheism and as such a transgression of certain fundamentals of Jewish doctrine hinted to in the verse "and the earth is filled with His glory"¹¹. While this assumption has been challenged by the subsequent interpretations of Lithuanian Kabbalah- namely R. Hayyim of Volozhin, R. Menahem Mendel of Shklov and R. Issac Haver- it has nevertheless remained a significant point of debate within the discourse of *simsun*.

For those who wished to uphold the strict theological boundary separating R. Elijah from Hassidism, it was R. Shlomo Elyashiv's interpretation of *simsun* that proved most fecund. As a link within the chain of Lithuanian Kabbalah, the *Leshem* was seen as an authoritative interpreter of R. Elijah's Kabbalistic project and as such his comments on *simsun* were seen as reifying the true opinion of the Vilna Gaon. Commenting on *simsun* as it appears in *Eitz-Hayyim*, R. Elyashiv writes:

"With regards to the *simsun*, there is a lengthy discussion in *Shomer Emunim* to prove that is figurative (*lo k'pshuto*), however, we have nothing but the words of the Arizal that we have shown to prove that the *simsun* was literal".

In the same text, commenting on R. Immanuel Hai Ricchi's stance vis-à-vis R. Yosef Ergas, R. Elyashiv maintains his position of interpreting *simsun* literally, "So too with regards to the *simsun*, for it is as its intended meaning and literal depiction (*k'mashma we-k'pshuto*)". By interpreting *simsun* literally, the *Leshem* has been read as supporting the thesis that the Vilna Gaon saw the *simsun* act as a literal withdrawal resulting in a

⁸ See E. Stern, *The Genius: Elijah of Vilna and the Making of Modern Judaism* (Yale University Press, 2013), pp. 85-104

⁹ See A. Nadler, *The Faith of the Mithnagdim: Rabbinic Responses to Hasidic Rapture* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 29-50

¹⁰ See R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Likkutei Amarim, Tanya* (Kehot, 2004), pp. 165-166

¹¹ See T. Einfeld, *Torat Ha-Gra we-Mishnat Ha-Hassidut: Elu we-Elu Divrei Elokim Hayyim* (Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 2010), pp. 183-192

reality ontologically separate from God's infinite essence¹². As such, the true mitnagdic view of *simsun* and the consequent unfolding of existence was viewed in sharp contradistinction to the Hassidic, and figurative reading of *simsun* that resulted in a sort of acosmic pantheism. What remains to be shown, however, is that while R. Elyashiv explicitly interprets *simsun* literally, his reading of the Divine withdrawal is significantly more complex than previously noted. Far from depicting the literal withdrawal of Divine essence from the plane of reality as attributed to the Vilna Gaon; R. Elyashiv presents a paradoxical view of *simsun* wherein concealment and disclosure act in unison resulting in space that is both space and not-space, present and absent. As described in the previous chapter, R. Elyashiv's treatment of *simsun* adheres to his reading of Lurianic Kabbalah, wherein the literal nature of the Arizal's metaphors are literal in their existence (*metziut*) as well as irreducibly metaphoric in the essence (*mahut*). With his unique mode of Kabbalistic hermeneutics, the *Leshem* depicts *simsun* as an act of disclosure that paradoxically limits the unlimited, carving a space for creation that is both separate and unified with the infinite. When read in full, R. Elyashiv's treatment of *simsun* results in a view of existence that is vastly different than the purported view of R. Elijah that it has been claimed to support¹³. Furthermore, R. Elyashiv's reading calls into question the general binary of literal/figurative that has marked previous discussions surrounding *simsun*. While he does ascribe to it a literal sense (*k'pshuto*) aligned with his general hermeneutic; R. Elyashiv reads the *simsun* as the preoriginal opening of discourse and as such it remains beyond the economy of literal sense and figurative meaning. Vastly different than a materialistic interpretation of a literal event, the *simsun* represents the unrepresentable origin that constitutes the beginning. Irreducibly metaphoric the primordial *mashal* of *simsun* becomes literal in its absolute remainder.

The Coordinates of *simsun*

For R. Elyashiv the significance of *simsun* can be understood as operating at three separate, yet corresponding points within the Lurianic system. Firstly, the initial act of *simsun* represents the limit from which the disclosure of God begins and at which the contemplation of God ends¹⁴. Everything that can be said about the relationship between Creator and created is posterior to the initial opening through which God discloses

¹² See T. Ross, "Two Interpretations of Tzimtzum: R. Hayim of Volozhin and R. Shneur Zalman of Liady", *Mehakrei Yerushalayim* 2 (1982), p. 153; B. Naor, *Kana'uteh de-Pinhas* (Monsey: Orot, 2013) p. 8; 20; Mordechai Pachter, "Circles and Straightness: A History of an Idea (From Lurianic Kabbalah to the Teachings of Rav Kook)," in Mordechai Pachter, *Roots of Faith and Devequt: Studies in the History of Kabbalistic Ideas* (Cherub Press, 2004), 131-185.

¹³ See R. Shuchat, "Peirush ha-Gra mi-Vilna le-Mishnat Hasidim: Mashal ve-Nimshal be-Kitvei ha-Ari" in *Kabbalah* 3 (1998), pp. 270-276; E. Peleg, "More on R. Shlomo Elyashiv's Polemic against "Kabbalists in our Generation" in *Daat* 79-80 (2015), pp. 183-201. Regarding the inattentive reading of R. Elyashiv's treatment of *simsun*, see R. Shuchat, "Thoughts on Lithuanian Kabbalah: A Study in the Lurianic Concept of Igulim and Yosher" in *Daat* 79-80 (2015), p. 27 fn. 90 where he references his hitherto unpublished essay titled "Simsun k'Peshuto: Bein R. Immanuel Hai li-R. Shlomo Elyashiv".

¹⁴ LS"V, *Hakdamot u-Shearim, Shaar Alef, Pereq Beit*, p.

Himself as a thematizable idea. Representing the originary “will that has arisen to create the world”, *simum* marks the boundary between what cannot be thought and the thinkable order of concatenation (*sefer ha-hishtalsh'lut*) that manifests in created reality. Each stage of disclosure is thus bound to operate within the space of revelation, always already after the essential concealment of the Divine essence. In this sense, R. Elyashiv maintains and protects the apophatic nature of Kabbalistic thought where everything that can be thought is ontologically removed from that which remains unthinkable. Thus even the highest aspect of Divinity, the light of the infinite (*ohr ein sof*) is considered a stage of disclosure infinitely removed from the unthinkable “essence of God” (*atzmuto yitbarach*)¹⁵. It is both impossible and prohibited¹⁶ to think the unthinkable, to name that which can never be named, and as such all discourse is contained within the finite space that is disclosed in and through the originary *simum*. It is important to note that for R. Elyashiv this originary *simum* is not affixed to any particular point within the order of concatenation; rather, it is the Archimedean point that moves along the borders of discourse always maintaining its role as the originary act of disclosure and thus the boundary of contemplation. Whether the apex of the Kabbalistic system is the *simum* that results in the primordial Anthropos (*adam kadmon*) in the writings of R. Hayyim Vital, or the *simum* that results in the primordial torah (*torah kedumah*) within the world of the garment (*olam ha-malbush*) in the writings of R. Yisrael Sarug, the originary *simum* remains the limit at which thought dissolves into the unthinkable.

The second manifestation is the *simum* that is discussed by R. Hayyim Vital at the beginning of *Eitz-Hayyim*¹⁷ referred to by R. Elyashiv as the “world-of-*simum*”¹⁸. This act of Divine contraction represents the transition from the worlds of the infinite (*olamot ein-sof*) to the worlds of limitation (*gevul*), specifically *Adam Kadmon* and its primary purpose, the world of emanation (*atzilut*). This *simum* act is the primary source of discourse regarding the first movement of God from infinite (*ein-sof*) into finite, and thus graspable reality. In contradistinction to the originary *simum* that points towards “the originary disclosure of the infinite from within its truthful and concealed simplicity”

¹⁵ Regarding the revelatory status of *ein-sof* as a secondary infinitude, see *Hakdamot u-Shearim...*

¹⁶ Regarding the prohibition on contemplating that which cannot be contemplated, see R. Shlomo Elyashiv, *Sefer ha-Blurim* (Barzani, 2012), pp. 13; *Iggerot Baal ha-Leshem*, no.1, in M. Shatz, *Maayan Moshe* (2010), pp. 240, “For someone who stands outside of existence in the space of its negation, they are capable of grasping existence, and this is the reason for the disallowance of contemplating *Eln Sof*, as *Eln Sof* represents the unlimited and the unending, and there is nothing outside of it, therefore it is impossible to contemplate, for contemplation itself posits that he who contemplates is removed from it (*Eln Sof*) heaven-forbid, and with regards to *Eln Sof* there is nothing outside of it”.

¹⁷ R. Hayyim Vital, *Eit- Hayyim, Shaar 1, Anaf 2*, p.11. (footnote here regarding *olam ha-malbush*, essay about *leshem simsum* in *shaar haponeh kadim*)

¹⁸ The term “*olam ha-simum*” is used to describe the second stage of disclosure within the fivefold chain-of-being comprised of “the world of the infinite” (*Ein-sof*), “the world of *simum*”, “the world of *adam kadmon*”, “the world of emanation” (*atzilut*) and “the world(s) of separation” comprised of the triadic constellation of “creation, formation and actualization” (*beriyah, yetzirah, asiyah*) see LS^v, *Hakdamot u-Shearim, Shaar Zayin, Pereq Beit*, p.

and of which “we have no permission to speak about or contemplate whatsoever”¹⁹; the “world-of-*simsum*” describes the contraction of a secondary infinitude that is simultaneously a finite revelation (*gilui d’gevul*) relative to the absolute infinity of the Divine essence and an infinite concealment (*he’elem d’ein-sof*) relative to the order of concatenation. The *simsum* described at this level is the contraction of the infinite light (*ohr ein-sof*) that reveals the vacant space (*halal ha-panui*) in which the worlds of unity (*adam kadmon, atzilut*) and the secondary worlds of separation (*briyah, yetzira, asiya*) will eventually unfold. As the revealed source of thinkable existence described in Lurianic Kabbalah, the correct interpretation of the first *simsum* is a fundamental key in properly understanding the Lurianic system.

The third utilization of *simsum* differs from the first two in that it reveals a process as opposed to an event²⁰. Describing the order of concatenation and the dynamics of its unfolding, R. Elyashiv echoes the Lurianic idea positing that each anterior level in the chain-of-being is the aspect of infinity vis-à-vis the subsequent and posterior level. As such, with each and every stage of Divine revelation, the space rooted in the *halal ha-panui* that stood ready to receive existence becomes saturated, no longer capable of receiving anything other than that which fills it. The act of revelation, the outward movement wherein the latent stage of potency is disclosed overtly is termed *hitpathtut*, or egression. Each egression of Divine light subsumes the space that serves as its receptacle (*kli*) thus leaving no space for the subsequent stages of revelation necessary for the full manifestation of existence. To enable the disclosure of the ensuing stage of revelation, the current egression of the Divine light must be removed from the potential space it currently fills through an act of *hitalqut*, or regression. These “two tendencies of perpetual ebb and flow”²¹ form the dialectical process that operates at each and every stage of Divine disclosure, at both the general as well as particular level ad infinitum²². While the regressive stage (*hitalqut*) of this dialectic represents the actual movement of withdrawal synonymous with *simsum*, it is the concomitant interplay of egression and regression that form the paradoxical process of *simsum* that is at once an act of

¹⁹ *Hokdamot u-Shearim, Shaar Wav, Pereq Alef*, p. 91

²⁰ For an in-depth treatment regarding this manifestation of *simsum*, see A. Fraenkel, *Nefesh HaTzimtzum: Volume 2* (Urim Publications, 2015), pp. 39-56

²¹ G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Schocken, 1978), p. 136

²² *Ibid.* Scholem states that “Throughout this process the two tendencies of perpetual ebb and flow- the Kabbalists speak of *hitpathtuth*, egression and *hitalthkut*, regression- continue to act and react upon each other.” In a note on this text Scholem directs the reader to R. Chaim Vital’s *Eitz Chaim* and adds that “This fundamental idea has been made the basis of the great Kabbalistic system propounded in Solomon Eliassov’s magnum opus *Sefer Leshem Shevo v-Achloma*. The third volume (Jerusalem 1924) called *Klalei Hitpathtuth v-Hitalthkut*.” (p. 404n56).

concealment as well as disclosure. It is this third description that constitutes and informs R. Elyashiv's unique understanding of *simum*. While the first two depictions of *simum* present an event that takes place at a particular point in the order of concatenation; the third represents the process and mechanism that constitute the event(s) of *simum*. The perpetual *hitpathtut* and *hitalqut* of *simum* forms a system of dynamic repetition masking its own internal difference that results in the full disclosure of creation from within the infinite depths of Divine concealment.

The Disclosure of Concealment

To grasp the novelty in R. Elyashiv's theory of *simum*, it must be read against the common interpretation attributed to the literalist view (*k'pshuto*). As an act of withdrawal, the *simum* process enables creation by removing the infinite light (*ohr ein sof*) from the potential space of existence thus disclosing a voided space (*halal ha-panui*) of absence. The emptiness that remains after the withdrawal serves as the void that stands ready to receive the influx of the infinite ray of light (*kav ein-sof*) that refills the void in a newly limited and measured way. Stated in a linear way, the primordial fullness of the Divine Plenum is emptied, giving way to the empty void which is then filled with a potent yet limited expression of Divine fullness. Having gained an independent identity in and through the absence of the annihilating presence of the infinite²³, the void (*halal*)

²³ See R. Hayyim Vital, *Eitz- Hayyim, Shaar 1, Anaf 3*, p.14 where R. Vital questions the necessity of a full removal of *ohr ein-sof* prior to the disclosure of the infinite ray (*kav*) that refills the void in a potent yet measured way. According to R. Vital, the measure of light that comprises the *kav* should have been left over during the removal of the excess light, negating the process of initial removal and subsequent disclosure from the outset. However, in order so that the vessels (*keilim*) associated with the *kav ha-middah* that are produced in the absence of the infinite light maintain an independent existence, their evolution must proceed from a prior emptiness, free from the annihilating light of the infinite. Translated onto a psychological register, the triadic process of dependency, separation and independency is akin to the Winnicottian process describing the subjective development of the child marked by the transition from a state of illusion through the potential space formed by the mothers withdrawal, see D. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (Routledge, 2005), pp.....For R. Elyashiv, this formulation by R. Hayyim Vital hints towards the paradoxical nature of *simum* wherein the infinite conceals itself through itself resulting in a diminution of its essence in and through its own assertion, symbolized by the Rabbinic phrase often applied to the *simum* by earlier Kabbalists (see R. Menahem Azarya of Pano, *Yonat Eilam* (?), no. 1), "*k'hadein kamtza d'lewishei minei u-bei*" (Genesis Rabbah, 21:5), roughly translated as "the locust whose garment comes from within itself", see *Drushei Olam ha-Tohu*....According to R. Elyashiv the paradoxical process in which the garment that serves to conceal is part and parcel of that which is being concealed and thus an aspect of disclosure displays the method wherein the vessels (*keilim*) are formed, an act of limitation and as such an internal repetition of the original act of *simum*. Echoing the Kabbalistic axiom positing that any light (*ohr*) removed from its original space leaves a residual trace (*roshem*) in its vacancy, R. Elyashiv views the vessels- the constricting limit- not as an independent entity formed in a vacuum, but rather, the irreducible remainder that remains in the absence of its source. In other words, the limit that is disclosed through the concealment of the unlimited is nothing but the unlimited disclosing itself as limit. Deconstructing the binary between light (*ohr*) and vessel (*klf*), the vessel is nothing but residual light, condensed into a compact cluster of "thickened" light that appears, and serves as a limiting vessel. This process, explicitly described by R. Hayyim Vital in *Eitz-Hayyim, Shaar ha-Akudim* (?) as the formation of the first vessel in the(non)material "bounded

and the order of concatenation that fills it now exist ontologically separated from the infinite light. Predicated on its emptying power, *simsun* removes that which was present resulting in the absence of Divine light within the demarcated space of the void. Thus *simsun* has been seen as an act of negation that makes room for a subsequent affirmation of presence; a withdrawing for the sake expression. The notion of the Divine withholding itself by contracting into itself has influenced the general theories of *simsun* which generally describe an act of negative removal for the sake of positive disclosure.

For R. Elyashiv the assumption that *simsun* results in a vacant space of emptiness is theologically as well as philosophically untenable. As we will see, the reasoning that R. Elyashiv employs to defend his literal interpretation of *simsun* is the same reasoning used to question the simplistic reading in which an act of withdrawal results in a space of absence devoid of Divinity. Regarding the description of the void as “primordial air” (*avir kadmon*), R. Elyashiv writes²⁴:

“The *simsun* is like air (*avir*) and empty space within which the totality of the worlds are made and found, and it is therefore referred to as *avir ha-kadmon*, for it is like a void and removed air (*halal we-avir panui*) that precedes all existence...However, this space is not actually (*mamesh*) removed in the aspect of emptiness (*reikani*) and absence (*he'edar*) heaven forbid, for there is no emptiness whatsoever as the holy R. Yosef Giktalia writes in his *Ginat Egoz*, that there is no emptiness or absence...”

Here we have the first paradoxical statement regarding the *simsun*. On the one hand it results in an empty space, absent of the annihilating light of the infinite whose presence would prevent the existence of anything other-than-God; on the other, this space is only the “aspect of emptiness” where presence, as opposed to absence still reigns. This reading of the “empty space” that is not empty is rooted in both the ontological as well as textual world of R. Elyashiv. As a faithful interpreter of Lurianic Kabbalah, R. Elyashiv was keenly aware as to the transgressive nature of applying metaphysical speculation unto the Lurianic system. In attempting to clarify the often contradictory texts of the system, R. Elyashiv always tethers his speculative hermeneutics to the text itself, stating that “the words of the Arizal are like all words of Torah that are not written as they should be read” (*asher lo kemo sh'niktavu nikrauh*). Commenting on R. Hayyim Vital's explication of *simsun* in the name of the Arizal, R. Elyashiv writes²⁵:

“However, we need to understand the Arizal's promise to clarify the necessity of the *simsun*, have we not already described in full that the entire aspect of the *simsun* was to make space for the entirety of the worlds; furthermore, regarding the Arizal's claim that the *simsun* is the root of all thickness and vessels, this also seems difficult to understand, for he has already stated that the *simsun* is an empty and vacant void (*halal panui we-reikani*), and if that is the case it [*simsun*] is absolute absence devoid of any thickness whatsoever.”

world”, is read by R. Elyashiv as a subtle hint towards the logic inherent in every *simsun* wherein the vessel (limit, *simsun* etc.) is nothing but the light (unlimited, infinite etc.) that it appears to remove.

²⁴ LS“V, *Hakdamot u-Shearim, Shaar Hei, Pereq 1*, p. 82; *Sefer Ha-Klalim, Klal Yud, Pereq 1*, p. 113

²⁵ LS“V,

If the *simsun* results in an “empty and vacant void”, the promise to further clarify appears unnecessary. Furthermore, the notion that the vessels (*keilim*) are somehow rooted in a “thickness” that comes into being through the *simsun* implies a presence in the place of absence. These textual discrepancies lead R. Elyashiv to read the void as something other than simply empty.

Plenitude of Absence

Faced with the contradictory need for a space that is at once both filled and empty, R. Elyashiv describes a third category, the excluded middle that allows for the simultaneous existence of a void that is both empty and full; empty in its disclosure and full in its concealment. Reiterating the general misinterpretation of the *halal ha-panui* as a vacant and empty space R. Elyashiv writes²⁶:

“The intention is not that the space below is left empty and removed entirely, for there is never absolute absence (*he'edar kehlati*) in any space, just as there has never, nor will there be absolute absence at any time...Rather the aspect of *simsun* is, in and of itself, an existence as well, meaning, it is in the aspect of a particular power (*koah prati*) that darkens and conceals the light as it limits it, like the partition (*mesah*) that stands in front of the light... And when the light which is the aspect of *ein-sof* and thus removed from any distinction of limit is removed and returned upwards...there is a disclosure and emanation of a singular particular power that darkens and conceals the light that stands before it, and it places distance upon it (*we-notein harhaka elav*) as this power is drawn and spreads throughout the potential space for all of existence, darkening and separating the light that rose upwards. Regarding this is it said (Psalms 18:12), “He made darkness his hiding place, His canopy around Him”, for it is placed in front of the light as a partition and curtain before him...This power’s (*koah*) measurement and expansion is called void (*halal*) and empty space (*makom pansu*), as it is the space for the eventual existence that will be created afterwards, and it is the void of the *simsun* in which all existence is created.”

In contradistinction to the general theory of *simsun* in which the infinite light undergoes a negative withdrawal in order to disclose a vacant space, R. Elyashiv describes an affirmative act of disclosure in which a concealing “power” is revealed in order to “darken” and “distance” the annihilating presence of the infinite. The light “which is the aspect of *ein-sof*” is not removed but rather veiled in and through a “particular power” emanating from the very same light it comes to conceal. Expressed on a philosophical register, the limitation of the infinite takes place through the affirmation of limit as opposed to the negation of the limitless. No longer seen as an empty space devoid of any existence, the “void and empty space” is filled with a presence that appears as absence. As an “existence” that lacks any qualitative measure, the *simsun* serves as an affirmative negating power that “spreads throughout” the potential space of all subsequent existence.

The Dialectical Standstill of Disclosure and Concealment

²⁶ LS^v, *Hakdamot u-Shearim, Shaar Vav, Pereq Beit*, pp. 94-95

Describing the *simsun* as an act of disclosure and emanation, R. Elyashiv appears to situate himself within the tradition that equates the concealment (*he'elam*) of the infinite with its disclosure (*gillui*); however, there is an important distinction between previous traditions and what he describes as “the deep and frightening secret” of *simsun*. For R. Elyashiv the revelatory nature of *simsun* is not due to the limitation of the infinite inherent in every transition from concealment into disclosure; rather the “concealing power” acts as a veil upon the infinite light that remains in its original place. Meaning, the *simsun* is not predicated on the diminution of the infinite but rather the impossible covering of the infinite by a particular power that is disclosed from within the infinite itself. The infinite is not lessened or negated, it exists within and underneath the finite and “particular power” whose purpose is to make the infinite appear as absent. This concealing power that is disclosed from within the infinite Godhead achieves the necessary *simsun* through a series of similar yet distinct processes, what R. Elyashiv terms “darkening”, “concealing” and “distancing”. Operating at the transitional stage between the worlds-of-the-infinite (*olamot d'ain-sof*) and the world of emanation (*atzilut*), the *simsun* takes place anterior to any thematizable or positivistic assertions regarding the existence (*metziut*) or essence (*mahut*) of God. The annihilating light-of-the-infinite prevents any description or name from being applied to God, as the act of naming indicates a certain graspability of that which is named. To initiate the gradual procession from the unnamable through the nameless to the name, a darkening power was disclosed to cover the unbearable lightness that permeated all potential space. In line with the philosophical and mystical tradition that views darkness as a creative power as opposed to the privation of light, R. Elyashiv describes a darkness whose essence is affirmative, a darkness that actively conceals as opposed to a darkness that negates. The same inverted logic applies to the concealing capacity of *simsun* as well. As an affirmative act of revelation, the limit that is disclosed paradoxically conceals the prior effulgence that prevented the disclosure of anything other than itself. Meaning, that while the general theory of *simsun* is predicated on the impossibility of any revelation within the fullness of the infinite light (*ohr ein-sof*) and the subsequent necessity of the withdrawal or removal of that light, R. Elyashiv describes the disclosure of an additional power within the impossible space that is already saturated. Regarding the “distancing” power inherent in the *simsun*, we find the assertion of measurement that opens unto differentiation through the “distancing” of one thing from the other, a process associated with the Divine quality of potent strength (*gevurot*). Being that the infinite light is necessarily devoid of any limitation and thus undifferentiated in its appearance, the *simsun* imposes “the power of limitation (*koah gevuli*) that serves as the limit, end, measure and boundary (*ha-gevul weha-kitzva ha-geva midah weha-tehum*)²⁷” that demarcates the expression of the infinite light, thus paradoxically limiting the unlimited. Distinct from the general workings of difference wherein one thing is separated from the

²⁷ LS"V, *Helek ha-Biurim, Iggulim v-Yosher*, 2:13, pp. 24-25

other through the imposition of spacing, or the negation of a prior unity where everything is every-other-thing; the difference caused by *simum* is an affirmative assertion of boundary that in no way crases the previous unboundedness. In the undifferentiated light of the infinite there is no space for limit and thus any conceptual thought regarding the infinite. To make space for the eventual worlds that represent the other-than-God, a differentiating power must be introduced so that the edges separating one thing from the other may now speak the language of difference. Translated onto the philosophical register, difference as a positive assertion onto the undifferentiated is “no longer between two things²⁸” rather “difference of nature is itself a thing” that “is no longer simply a concept, but rather the possibility of conceptuality, of a conceptual process and system in general²⁹”.

The Paradox of *simum*

It is clear that for R. Elyashiv each stage of the *simum* process is marked by a certain contradictory logic. On the one hand the limit that is imposed on the unlimited must perform the necessary concealment so as to enable the disclosure of the other-than-God; but in denying any actual absence or emptiness within the Divine Pleroma, the measure enacted through the *simum* must ultimately fail in its intended purpose. In other words, the *simum* is tasked with introducing difference into the undifferentiated light-of-the-infinite without negating the unity that negates all difference. This logic wherein the *simum* conceals without removing the infinite light, thus providing an imaginal space devoid of any ontological existence may adhere to the vision of reality as an epistemological fallacy advocated by the non-literal interpretation of *simum*; but for R. Elyashiv- the defender of *simum ki-peshuto*- this thinking appears irreconcilable with his stated interpretation. Furthermore, if the *simum* is to allow the coming into being of a “space (*makom*) for the eventual existence that will be created afterwards”, a space that must, theoretically, be emptied of any prior effulgence, then the assertion of an affirmative power presents a contradiction to the concept of space. The disclosure of this concealing power remains an affirmative revelation from within the recesses of the infinite and thus prevents the manifestation of space that must be predicated on absence of the infinite. Aware of the contradictory logic inherent in his presentation of *simum* as literal, thus maintaining the ontological reality of existence predicated on the actual diminution of the infinite, and the affirmative nature of *simum* as a “particular power” that is disclosed from within the infinite itself, R. Elyashiv attempts to textually present the impossible paradox that results in a space that is at once real and unreal, both because neither and neither because both.

²⁸ G. Deleuze, “Review of Jean Hyppolite, *Logic and Existence*”, in J. Hyppolite, *Logic and Existence* (Albany State University Press, 1997), p.195

²⁹ J. Derrida, “Difference”, in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago University Press, 1982), p. 11

The Potential Limit

In defining the void of *simsum* as a place that is both space and not-space, absent and present, R. Elyashiv draws from earlier Kabbalistic sources, namely the philosophical mysticism of R. Azriel of Gerona as refracted in the works of R. Meir ibn Gabbai. Posing as an interlocutor questioning the doctrine of the ten *sefirot* as opposed to a direct relationship with the infinite cause, R. Azriel posits that for the infinite to be wholly infinite it must contain within itself the potentiality of finitude. Cautiously aware of the theological ramifications of situating the infinite as finite, a conceptual transgression tantamount to denial (*kefira*), R. Azriel describes the finite capacity within the infinite as the “potential of limit within the unlimited” (*koah bi-gevul mi-bli gevul*) that is actualized in and as the *sefirot* which serve as “the potential to make present limited existence”. For R. Elyashiv the necessary fullness of the infinite produces finitude through a concealing power that manifests as the “limit and measure, that after the *simsum* within His essential light becomes the root of potential for all subsequent limitations that are also, only the affirmation of Him Himself (*hinei hu gam kein rak hu atzmo*)”, a description that he attributes to the teaching of R. Azriel³⁰. What R. Azriel calls the potential of limit (*koah ha-gevul*) is for R. Elyashiv the disclosure of concealment that is at once both an aspect of the infinite as well as the inception of finitude. Stressing the inseparable unity that exists between the limited and the unlimited, R. Elyashiv describes the dialectical sway of disclosure and concealment within the infinite wherein “that which vis-a-vis our perspective is disclosure, is for Him (*etzlo*) the aspect of concealment³¹”. However, for this concealing power to enact the necessary limitation required by *simsum*, this concealment must become manifest in and of itself, separate and “newly created” (*mehudash*) from within the infinite light. Here we come upon the greatest difficulty in clarifying R. Elyashiv’s approach to *simsum*, what he refers to as the “wondrous power³²” (*koah nifla*) of *simsum*. On the one hand this concealing power is an affirmative disclosure of “the essential power of darkness that darkens and conceals each light as it limits it, as well as the power of thickness (*koah ha-aviyut*)” that serves as “the root for each aspect of body and vessel and the root of all matter (*homer*) and physicality (*geshem*)³³”, and thus a determinate form of difference that breaks up the totality of the undifferentiated light of the infinite through a series of specific actions such as “distancing”, “darkening” and “concealing”. On the other hand, this concealing power is nothing but a reassertion of the infinite itself thus erasing any potential demarcations that would be enacted through an actual manifestation of finite limitation. As an aspect of the

³⁰ LS”V, *Sefer ha-Klalim*,

³¹ R. Shlomo Elyashiv, “Iggerot R. Shlomo Elyahiv”, 3, in R. M. Shatz, *Maayan Moshe*

³² LS”V, *Sefer ha-Klalim, Klal Esser, Anaf Alef*, p. 113

³³ LS”V, *Helek Biurim Igullim v-Yosher*. 2:13, pp. 24-25

infinite this power “in and of itself has no revelation whatsoever, and it is quite literally (*mamash*) the aspect of absence... for it itself is the opposite of existence and through the darkening and concealing power within it, it negates all existence from itself, as well as negating any distinction of any power from within its concealed quality (*ve-hu sholel gam kein m'li-havhin bo shum koah m'tehunotav ha-ne'elamim bo*)”. Thus we are faced with contradictory postulations regarding *simum*; it is at once something and nothing, real and unreal. It is disclosed and thus distinct from the infinite, as well as the impossible folding of the infinite upon itself, concealing itself through nothing other than itself.

Space and Non-space

Describing the contradictory nature of *simum*, R. Elyashiv writes³⁴:

“However, regarding the essential power of the *simum* in and of itself, devoid of anything upon which to utilize its power, it is impossible to demarcate anything within it, as it is impossible to stand upon what it is, for in its essence it negates and defers all things. Its existence and qualities are like two opposites in a singular entity (*k'shnei haphakin bi-noseh ehad*), this is what the Arizal meant when he stated that it [*simum*] is void, empty and removed air, for in truth no existence can be applied to its essence. However, it is a power that intensifies and connects to all existence, causing the production of the forms of existence and their limit. Since in truth it [*simum*] is a power of potency and strength, albeit concealed as described above, the Arizal referred to it as air (*avir*), for air is not absence as it is known, rather the opposite is true—it is the vitality of all life.”

Here we find an explicit description of the *simum* paradox. On the one hand the power disclosed from within the infinite is a “potency and strength” that “intensifies and connects all existence”; while on the other “no existence can be applied to its essence”. As a literal process the *simum* must exist as an affirmative expression of Divine power that “defers” the prior plenitude thus “causing the production of forms” through which the order of concatenation may unfold. As the fundamental process through which the production of space is initiated, however, the *simum* must “negate” all presence through its concealing power that results in the “void and empty” space. Faced with the paradox of an event whose active form of affirmation must yield the intended effect of negation, R. Elyashiv utilizes the traditional mystical trope of “*shnei haphakim bi-noseh ehad*”³⁵, the coincidence of opposites. The impossible balance being struck is the simultaneity of a disclosure of the infinite that paradoxically forms finite space without negating either the unlimited nature of infinite light, or the limitedness of the void. The dialectical sway of disclosure and concealment is held at a standstill, without the “presence” of the infinite, or the “absence” of the void annulling the other, thus disclosing a middle path that is neither space nor non-space, but rather “air”. Utilizing a theme culled from the

³⁴ LS^v *IHelek ha-Biurim, Igullim v-Yosher* 2:13, pp. 24-25

³⁵ See LS^v, *Sefer ha-Klalim, Klal Beit, Anaf Gimmel, Ot Hei*, pp. 36; *Sefer ha-Klalim, Klal Yud-Heit, Anaf Zayin*, p. 218

Kabbalistic system of R. Israel Sarug, R. Elyashiv refers to the *simum* and its subsequent void as primordial air (*avir kadmon*)³⁶. As a presence that discloses itself as absence, devoid of any qualitative traits aside from its own essential quality, air serves as a worthy metaphor for the a power that is at once present and absent. Unbounded in its fullness, air fills without filling, invisible in its appearing³⁷. Always without identifiable traits, air is the “vitality of all life” whose presence is felt only in its active participation within being. Air exists as an affirmative presence yet appears as nothing, passively awaiting the active existent to enroot itself within her emptiness.

Simum and Khora

As a receptacle that stands to receive all subsequent existence the “air” of *simum* brings to mind the Platonic concept of the *khora*. For Plato the *khora* represents the undefinable “place” or “site” in which the origins of spatiality begin. Serving as an invisible bridge between the infinite realm of the intelligible and the finite space of the sensible, *khora* is a kind of “pure permeability, infinitely transformable, inherently open to the specificities of whatever concrete it brings into existence...with no features of its own. Seeped in paradox, its quality is to be quality-less, its defining characteristic that it lacks any defining feature³⁸”. Like the *khora*, the void of *simum* “somehow in a puzzling way participates in intelligibility yet is distinct from the intelligible; it is also distinct from the material world insofar as it is invisible and formless...It dazzles the logic of non-contradiction, it insinuates itself between the oppositional terms, in the impossible no-man’s land of the excluded middle”. A theoretical space “which is eternal and indestructible, which provides a position for everything that comes to be, and which is apprehended without the senses by a sort of spurious reasoning that is hard to believe in³⁹”, *khora*, like the *simum* is both present and absent, affirming subsequent spatiality through its negative presence. For R. Elyashiv the *simum* acts without acting, creating nothing but the space in which activity may unfold. However, once the activity of existence unfolds within the emptiness of the void, the void is revealed retroactively as having been the matrix that enabled the active movement of existence. As long as *simum* stands alone it is nothing; however, once the order of concatenation unfolds the nothing of the *simum* is revealed to be the nonground upon which the ground of being is situated. Explicitly aware of this paradoxical sway between the inaction of nothing and the action of something inherent in *simum*, R. Elyashiv writes⁴⁰:

³⁶ LS^v, *Hakdamot u-Shearim, Shaar Hei, Pereq Alef*, pp. 82

³⁷ See *Forgetting of Air...*

³⁸ Elizabeth Grosz, “Women, Chora, dwelling” in *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (Routledge, 1995), pp. 112

³⁹ Plato, 1977: 71-72 ?

⁴⁰ LS^v, *Hakdamot u-Shearim, Shaar Vav, Pereq Beit*, pp. 94-95

“The *simsom* itself, however, that is the power that conceals and limits the light in and of itself, in truth, has done nothing whatsoever as-of-yet, for in and of itself it is the aspect of hylic potential (*koah hiuli*) that stands prepared to receive any form (*tzurah*), but in and of itself it shows no form whatsoever, and it cannot be classified as existing (*ve-aino nofel alav sheim metziut klal*). In fact it seems to be the reverse, for it appears that it is the opposite of existence (*hipuch ha-metziut*), as the initial existence rose up and was removed and this [*simsom*] now stands in front darkening and concealing it, and no other existence has yet to take its place.”

The affirmative concealment is devoid of “form” and measure, a literal nothing that “appears as the opposite of existence” deferring any presence through its non-present presence devoid of any qualitative classification. As the in-between that bifurcates the unlimited infiniteness of the Divine and the measurable limit of creation the void of *simsom* is “the abstract spacing, place itself, the place of absolute exteriority⁴¹” that is both empty and full, full in its emptiness. Literally speaking the *simsom* “cannot be classified as existing” until the active power of revelation is disclosed within it, retroactively activating the concealed power that enabled the very existence of all subsequent revelation. Describing the delayed effects of the *simsom* and the transition from potential limitation into actual limit, R. Elyashiv writes⁴²:

“The quality of the thickening power that works through condensation and contraction, it only exists when there is something to rule over. This applies to all the powers concealed within it, none of them are revealed without some aspect over which it rules and through which it can disclose its power (*hinei ein gilui lahem eleh rak al eizeh noseh sh'sholeit alav u-megaleh et kohotav bo*).”

The *simsom*- which can properly be described as a “something which is not a thing⁴³” that appears as “an apparently empty space – even though it is no doubt not emptiness”- serves as the preoriginal opening that stands to “receive so as to give place to all the determinations” that unfold in her, within the empty presence of her air. Like *khora*, the *simsom* presents herself as emptiness becoming “nothing other than the sum or the process of what has been inscribed on her”. Not unlike the mythic images of the “mother” or the “nurse” ascribed to the *khora*, *simsom* operates like a womb which prior to its impregnation stands silently in her potentiality, only to disclosed retroactively as the ground of being. As R. Elyashiv writes, *simsom* is like “the aspect of the womb of the mother needed for the fetus that stands to be born from her⁴⁴”, the feminine principle that while “appearing as an emptied and vacant void” contains within herself “a wondrous power (*koah niflah*)” that “joins that which has egressed into it, influencing it, creating from both of them a single and complete action resulting in a new existence (*metziut hadash*)”.

⁴¹ Derrida, Faith and Knowledge....

⁴² Biurim (24-25) igv"y 2:13

⁴³ Derrida, Khora 103

⁴⁴ Klalim 10:1 (113)

Beyond Literal or Figurative

Returning back to the beginning, we stated that while R. Elyashiv- following R. Immanuel Hai Ricchi- reads the *simsum* in a literal way (*k'peshuto*), his approach differs from the commonly held interpretation attributed to the Vilna Gaon in which the infinite (*ein-sof*) removes (*ne'etak*) itself leaving an ontological space devoid of Divine presence. As the preoriginal beginning that both forms and constitutes the subsequent order of concatenation, the proper interpretation of *simsum* and the literal/figurative debate that ensued can be read- in the spirit of Rabbinic hermeneutics, namely the detail (*prat*) that informs the general (*klal*)- as a particular that informs the entirety of the Lurianic system. Therefore, R. Elyashiv's specific treatment of *simsum* may be viewed as a proof-text for his particular mode of Kabbalistic hermeneutics. For R. Elyashiv the *simsum* is literal in that it represents an unrepresentable origin and as such it can only be grasped in the materiality of its symbolic depiction. Like all processes and events within the world-of-emanation (*atzilut*) and above, the simple (*pashut*) symbolic depiction is the closest we come as well as the farthest we go with regards to apprehending the essence (*ha'sagat ha-mahut*) of that which transpires beyond being⁴⁵. The actual movements of *simsum*, the mechanisms through which the transition between infinity and finitude take place, these remain inaccessible beyond the simple fact of their ontological existence; the "how", "why" and "what", however remain concealed in their essence that transcends the binary of literal and figurative. Like the *khora*, *simsum* "goes beyond or falls short of the polarity of metaphorical sense versus proper sense...it exceeds the polarity"⁴⁶. Taken at its irreducible intended meaning, the *simsum* exists hyper-literally as the inception of being; but as the index for R. Elyashiv's hermeneutics, its literal existence posits nothing as to the actual manifestations of the *simsum* event.

For R. Elyashiv, the literal nature (*k'peshuto*) of *simsum* does not result in a voided space ontologically removed from the infinite presence of the Divine, a theosophical worldview attributed to the literalists; nor does it imply a merely apparent space stemming from the temporary occlusion of the Divine light often attributed to a figurative (*lav k'peshuto*) reading. Like the *simsum* that opens unto being, existence is marked by the same (non)logic in which opposites simultaneously unite in their difference, resulting in the third path of the excluded middle wherein existence (*metziut*)

⁴⁵ See E. Wolfson, "Beautiful Maiden without Eyes: *Peshat* and *Sod* in Zoharic Hermeneutics", in *Luminal Darkness: Imaginal Gleanings from Zoharic Literature* (One World, 2007), pp. 75-82; E. Wolfson, *Language, Eros and Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 232

⁴⁶ J. Derrida, "Khora", in *On the Name* (Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 92

is both separate from and unified with the infinite presence of *Ein-sof*. At times, stressing the ontological nature of a reality separated from its Infinite source, R. Elyashiv positively asserts the process through which the limit (*gevul*) manifests as an independent existence beyond its undefined potentiality within the unlimited (*bli gevul*). At other times however, he defines the limit- a general term representative of the entire order of concatenation- as “the thickness (*aviyut*) which is from the infinite light itself and which remains united with the remainder (*tamzit*) and residuc (*roshem*) of the light forever⁴⁷”; a revelation that is impossibly both separate and a part of the originary light of the Infinite. The Infinite presence as infinite remains indivisible and as such any “remainder” or “residue” must be comprised of the same qualities as its source, thus negating any limit or boundary that serves to contain it. The order of concatenation (*sefer ha-hishtalshlut*) that serves to measure and rectify (*m'takein*) the Infinite light through a complex system of vessels (*keilim*), partitions (*mesach*) and configurations (*partzufim*) is a literal system that undoes itself from within itself, an absolute system whose essential framework is nothing but the unlimited that it comes to limit. Throughout R. Elyashiv writings one finds the impulse towards positivistic descriptions of the chain-of-being as a complex system of fractal iterations that exist ontologically and independently from the unlimited, yet transcendent presence of the Infinite. This impulse, however, is repeatedly assaulted by the hyper-immanency of the Infinite (*Ein-sof*) that maintains, controls and theoretically erases the absolute existence of anything other than Itself. Unwilling to posit the absolute existence of a world wholly separate from the infinite presence of the Divine, R. Elyashiv presents a vision of reality that is both something and nothing, finite and infinite at once. Describing the contingent nature of existence without negating its independent nature, R. Elyashiv- commenting on R. Hayyim Vital's emphasis on the *simsum* and the middle-point of the Infinite- writes⁴⁸:

“This is stressed in order to teach and secure in our hearts, that even though we find the entirety of existence embodied within vessels, limits and measurements, comprising the existence of the natural world and order (*metziut v-han'ha'agat ha-tevah*), nevertheless, the light of the Infinite surrounds them from all sides. They are founded and contingent only on the light of the Infinite. As a result, the limit, measure and entirety of nature (*tevah*) lack any absolute foundation whatsoever (*yesod heh'lati*), devoid of any individual control (*shli'ta atzmutit*). Rather, they are entirely contingent His will (*retzono*)...For the entirety of existence is contingent only within the light of the Infinite.”

⁴⁷ LS^v, *Hakdamot u-Shearim, Shaar Beit, Pereq Alef*, p. 33

⁴⁸ LS^v, *Helek ha-Burim, Iggulim v-Yosher*, 2:18, p. 28; LS^v, *Hakdamot u-Shearim, Shaar Daled, Pereq Hei*, p. 73; LS^v, *Sefer ha-Klalim, Klal Beit, Anaf Gimmel*, p.



Metaphoric Literality:

Rabbi Shlomo Elyashiv and Lurianic Kabbalah

Joey Rozenfeld writes:³

³ https://www.academia.edu/44725229/Metaphoric_Literality_Rabbi_Shlomo_Elyashiv_and_Lurianic_Kabbalah

Mamesh, Kivyahol.

Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Tanya*, 1:2

Hayyim of Volozhyn, *Nefesh HaHayyim*, 4

All these parables really set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and we know that already. But the cares we have to struggle with every day: that is a different matter.

Concerning this a man once said: Why such reluctance? If you only followed the parables you yourselves would become parables and with that rid yourself of all your daily cares.

Another said: I bet that this is also a parable.

The first said: You have won.

The second said: But unfortunately only in parable.

The first said: No, in reality: in parable you have lost.

Franz Kafka, *On Parables*

When R. Issac Luria (1534-1572) known as the Arizal, developed his theosophical system often referred to as Kabbalat Ha-Ari or Lurianic Mysticism, he

initiated a revolution within the Jewish mystical tradition. In the margins of his predecessor and teacher R. Moshe Cordovero (1522-1570) and through a highly innovative form of Zoharic hermeneutics, the Arizal established a radical approach to the ancient theories of Jewish cosmology (*tzimtzum*, *shevirat ha-keilim*), theurgy (*kaavanot*) and eschatology (*tikkun*). Codified by his various disciples, primarily R. Chaim Vital (1542-1620) and R. Yisrael Sarug (1590-1610), the Lurianic system took form in the work *Eitz-Chaim* and the eight volumes of collected teachings known as *Shemoneh-Shearim*¹. After the Arizal's passing, it was generally agreed upon that the Lurianic corpus should, and would remain a closed system, one in which novelty and creativity from future scholars was discouraged and even prohibited². Once codified, Lurianic Kabbalah subsequently became widely accepted, forming a sacred textual matrix whose influence on various trends within Jewish history is nearly unprecedented³.

As a mystical doctrine that describes the origins as well as the telos of a transcendent creator and the movement of history, the "intensely dramatic" Lurianic Kabbalah contains a complex and integrated theurgical and psychological system wherein the individual is tasked with self-actualization through religious ritual now endowed with mystical significance. Through a series of catastrophic beginnings the embodied soul finds itself thrown into the coarser realms of existence that comprise our material world. In order so that the broken realm of this-worldliness may rectify and elevate itself back to its primordial source of perfection, the Lurianic subject is tasked with the "restoration of the ideal" which forms both "the original aim of creation" and "the secret purpose of existence" (scholem mt 268). Formed in the image of the supernal realms, the individual

¹ On the formulation of the Lurianic corpus, see Yosef Avivi, *Kabbalat HaAri* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2008), three volumes.

² See Rav Chaim Vital, *Hakdamah li-Shaar HaHakdamot*, printed in R. Chaim Vital Sefer Eitz Chaim (Jerusalem, 1985), 5-24; Louis Jacobs, *Turn Aside From Evil and do Good: An Introduction and a Way to the Tree of Life* (London: Littman Library, 1995).

³ See Lawrence Fine, *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos: Isaac Luria and His Kabbalistic Fellowship* (Stanford University Press, 2003); Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Schocken, 1970)244-206; Isiah Tishby, *Torat HaRah ve-Klippah bi-Kabbalat Ha-Ari* (Hebrew University, 1962), 21-52; Shaul Magid, *From Metaphysics to Midrash: Myth, History, and the Interpretation of Scripture in Lurianic Kabbala* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 16-33.

serves as mediator between the spiritually refined worlds and the “fiendish nether-worlds of evil”. On a whole Lurianic Kabbalah attempts to describe and demarcate the architectonics of the Godhead as it manifests itself through and within the hierarchical unfolding of existence; and the practical role the individual plays within this cosmological drama.

In tracing the transition of the Divine from nothingness into something, Lurianic Kabbalah describes the triadic movement of *Tzimtzum*, *Shevira* and *Tikkun*, or contraction, shattering and restoration. According to Luria the inception of beings potential is within the undifferentiated light of *Ein Sof* wherein difference is negated by the infinite Nothing. To allow the play of difference in which something can come to be, Luria defines the initial movement within the undifferentiated and infinite light of the Divine as an act of *tzimtzum*, roughly defined as either withdrawal or contraction. Prior to the initial opening in which the other-than-God could exist, the fullness of the Divine plenum prevented the capacity of any being other-than-God. In order to create a space in which otherness could take root, God performed an act of self-contraction through which a vacant space (*chalal ha-panui*), or void could form. This space, devoid of presence could now serve as a potential space for the eventual unfolding of existence. This withdrawal or concealment of God’s unlimited presence is concurrently the disclosure of God’s delimitation. The eventual unfolding of existence is therefore predicated on the absence, or concealment of Godly presence. The next stage described in Lurianic Kabbalah, the shattering of the vessels (*shevirat ha-keilim*) symbolizes the traumatic collapsing of the initial structure of reality. After the *tzimtzum* through which the vacant space was disclosed, a ray (*kav*) of Infinite light (*ohr ein-sof*) was reintroduced into the *chalal ha-panui*. The divine potency of the *kav* was too concentrated and thus the other-than-God could not sustain an individualized existence. To affect the necessary grounds for creation, a dynamic-equilibrium of divine disclosure and concealment was established. The instrument for the disclosure of divinity is referred to as lights (*orot*) while the mechanisms of divine concealment are referred to as vessels (*keilim*). The *orot* invest themselves within the *keilim* and the *keilim* reveal the *orot* in a paradoxical act of concealment for the sake of disclosure. With the initial investiture of the *orot* within the *keilim* the overabundance of divinity within the lights exceeded their containment, thus

shattering the vessels. As a result, the broken remnants of the vessels fell into the potential space in which the concatenation of worlds would eventually unfold. Prior to the shattering of the vessels, the initial structure of reality existed within the realm of emanation (*Atzilut*), a liminal space that serves to bridge the worlds-of-the-infinite (*Olamot Ein-Sof*) and the finite worlds wherein the other-than-God can manifest. As a result of the shattering the fragments of the *keilim* fell to what would eventually become the realm of separation comprised of the triadic world of creation (*Briah*), formation (*Yetzirah*) and action (*Asiyah*) that depict a procession of simulacrum. These worlds of separation- with physical existence being the nethermost region-are comprised of the fragmented vessels that fell from the world of *Atzilut*. Thus, devoid of divinity these worlds of separation represent the “world of destruction and death” in which the husks of impurity (*klippot*) come to be. However, according to Lurianic Kabbalah, due to the divine properties of *orot*, their initial investiture within the *keilim* left traces of light within the broken remnants of the vessels thus retaining a covert connection between the worlds of separation and divine vitality. For Luria these traces (*Roshem*) or sparks (*Nitzotzot*) of light are engaged in a paradoxical process in which their exile and entrapment within the worlds of separation serves to enliven those same worlds so that they may eventually be rectified and elevated back into their initial source in *Atzilut*. After the shattering of the vessels and the ensuing world of chaos (*Tohu*) and separation, it arose within the recesses of the Divine Will to repair the world of *Atzilut* with a series of configurations (*Partzufim*) through which the delicate balance of *orot* and *keilim* was restored. These highly integrated *partzufim*; the ancient days (*Atik Yomin*); the long face (*Arik Anpin*); the supernal father (*Abba Illah*); the supernal mother (*Immah Illah*); the small face (*Zeir Anpin*) and its feminine counterpart (*Nukvah d'Zeir Anpin*) form the newly restored world of *Atzilut* or, as it is referred to in Lurianic Kabbalah, the world of restoration (*Olam HaTikkun*). Formed at the inception of historical creation, human beings are tasked with retaining and adding to the world of restoration by engaging and refining the coarse nature of the worlds of separation. With a particular emphasis on *Asiyah*, the worlds of separation become the field in which the individual is tasked with the third stage of the Lurianic drama, namely the act of human restoration (*Tikkun*). Through ritual acts and theurgical contemplation the Lurianic subject refines and elevates

the fallen fragments thus redeeming the traces of divine light and enabling their return back towards *Atzilut*. As a result of this human effort the individual adds and maintains the world of restoration that was formed through an act of Divine grace.

Arranged through the interrelation of the newly formed *partzufim* the world of *Atzilut* becomes the interface between the Lurianic subject and the realm of Divine Nothingness. With access to the infinite Nothingness barred, the individual is called to engage ritual acts from within the worlds of separation in order to stimulate the configurations of *Atzilut*, which in turn drawforth vitality (*hiyut*) and effulgence (*shefa*) from the realm of *Ein-Sof*. The *partzufim* of *Atzilut* serve as conduits through which the Lurianic subject may reach beyond being thus paradoxically bridging the gap separating Nothingness (*Ayin*) and something (*Yesh*) while maintaining their difference. With its unique role in joining that which cannot be joined the world of *Atzilut* is depicted as being both nothing and something. Meaning, as a container for the infinite, the world of *Atzilut* is nothing other than the Divine Nothing that enlivens it; yet simultaneously the interdependent lights and vessels that comprise the *partzufim* represent the something through which the worlds of separation interact. This paradoxical state of nothing that is something is captured by the author of the *Tikkunei Zohar* with the phrase, “*ihu v'hiyuhu had,ihu v'garmeihu had b'hon*, He and His vitality are one, He and His causations are one”⁴. In the world of *Atzilut* “*ihu*” or the ungraspable essence, “*hiyuhu*” divine vitality as manifested in *orot* and “*garmeihu*” the *keilim* that serve to conceal the *ohr*, are unified.

As a form of Jewish mysticism in which the monotheistic belief in a singular and unified creator is the driving force, Lurianic Kabbalah traces the fine line between the incorporeal and imageless God of the Bible and the imaginal anthropomorphization of God as depicted through the humanized *partzufim*. Through his attempt to depict the invisible while maintaining the invisibility of the Divine, Luria describes a highly complex system of finite configurations that somehow remain separate yet incorporated within the infinite.

With the general acceptance of Lurianic Kabbalah within the context of Jewish mystical thought the question that arose with subsequent generations was whether the Lurianic system was meant as a figurative, or metaphorical (*mashal*) framework to be

⁴ *Tiqqunei Zohar*, Intorduction, 3b; See also R. Hayyim Vital, *Eitz Hayyim*, 42:4.

interpreted in a process of demetaphorization; or as a literal system in which the various configurations and anthropomorphizations were to be seen as actual mechanisms of the divine⁵. Are the Lurianic symbols a representation of the things themselves, a literal depiction of that which cannot be depicted; or are they figurative tropes whose meaning exceeds the symbolic casing, waiting to be discarded by the adept capable of revealing their true meaning (*nimshal*). This question can be understood within a philosophical register as well, namely, do the symbols depicted by Luria serve as figurative images which the individual must move through and beyond towards the ungraspable space of *Ein-Sof*, thus relegating their function to epistemological tropes which the Lurianic subject must deconstruct to properly grasp the essential meaning; or are these symbols self-contained depictions of an ontological real by which the individual may observe the movement of the divine.

Though the distinction between a figurative/metaphorical and literal interpretation of Lurianic Kabbalah has been subject to various treatments- both traditional and scholarly⁶- the approach of R. Shlomo Elyashiv, hitherto unanalyzed, is unique in its contextual framework as well as its highly polemical nature⁷. Elyashiv, who has

⁵ Regarding the nature of the Kabbalistic symbol see Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Schocken, 1978), 20-28; Susan Handelman, *Fragments of Redemption* (Indiana University Press, 1991), 102-116; Boaz Huss, "Hag'darat ha-Samal shel R. Yosef Gikktali we-Gilgulo bi-Safrut ha-Kabbalah" in *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* (12, 1995), 157-176; Avraham Elkayam, "Bein Referentialism li-Bitzuah: Shtei Gishot bi-Havanat ha-Samal ha-Kabbali bi-Sefer "Maarechet Elokut"; ;

⁶ For a comprehensive overview of the varying positions within the literal/figurative debate see Yaakov Moshe Hillel, *Ad Ha-Gal Ha-Zeh* (Ahavat Shalom, 2004), 97-132. While most discussions on the figurative/metaphoric nature of Lurianic Kabbalah are centered around *tzimtzum* and its (non)literality, the logic and considerations may be applied to the entire Lurianic project as well, see Shaul Magid, "Origin and Overcoming the Beginning: *Zimzum* as a Trope of Reading in Post-Lurianic Kabbalah", in *Beginning/Again: Toward a Hermeneutics of Jewish Texts*, ed. A. Cohen and S. Magid, (Seven Bridges, 2002); Tamar Ross, "Two Interpretations to the Doctrine of *Tzimtzum*", in *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* (2, 1982). Rachel Elior, "Ha-Zika ha-Metaphoric Bein ha-El li-Adam we-Retzifuta Shel ha-Mamashut ha-Chezyonit bi-Kabbalat ha-Ari" in *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* (10, 1993), 47-57.

⁷ Eliezer Baumgarten has discussed Elyashiv's engagement in the literal/figurative discussion as a voice espousing a quasi-literal approach, albeit parenthetically, see Eliezer Baumgarten. "History and Historiography in the Doctrine of R. Shlomo Elyashiv," (MA thesis, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 2006), 25-39; E. Baumgarten, "R. Menahem Mendel of Shklov and Interpretation of the Symbol Within The Students of The Gr" in *The Eighteenth Century*", in *The Students of The Gr" in The Land of Israel* (Mihlalat Efrat, 2011), 33-51. Generally speaking Elyashiv's complex view of the literal/figurative nature of Lurianic Kabbalah has been overly simplified as strictly literal due, in part, to his adherence to the Vilna Gaon's school of Kabbalistic interpretation which was viewed as espousing a demetaphorization of

traditionally been seen as a literalist aggressively fighting the proclivity of “certain thinkers⁸” in his generation to interpret Lurianic Kabbalah as a series of figurative metaphors (*mashal*) in need of demetaphorization (*nimshal*), advocates for a literal, antimetaphoric reading in which the Lurianic symbols depict the ontological reality of *Atzilut*. What remains to be shown, however, is that Elyashiv’s literalist interpretation is far from a simple foreclosure on the metaphoricity at play within the Lurianic system. For Elyashiv the binary opposition between literality and figurativeness must be overcome in order so that a third path in which a metaphoric literality can be disclosed. In my reading of Elyashiv’s critique of a strictly figurative interpretation I attempt to show a latent metaphoricity that informs his literalist approach wherein Lurianic symbols may be viewed as literal only in so far as they are metaphorical depictions of that which cannot be depicted⁹. While true that Elyashiv viewed the strict figurative interpretations as transgressing the vital belief in the ontic reality of the *partzufim* described in Lurianic Kabbalah; the interdiction against the corporealization (*hagshama*) of God, and thus the

Lurianic symbols to reveal the *nimshal*, see the letter of R. Avraham Simha of Stislov, nephew of R. Hayyim of Volozhin regarding the Gra’s statement on R. Moshe Hayyim Luzzato, “that he understood the *nimshal* of the Lurianic writings (as the Gra stated that the Lurianic writings are entirely metaphor alone).”, printed in R. Moshe Hayyim Luzzato, *Daat Tevunot ve-Sefer ha-Klalim* (Freidlander, 1997), 235-236; Mordechai Pachter, “Kabbalat ha-Gra Through the Lens of Two Traditions”, in *Ha-Gra u-Beit Midrasho* (Ramat Gan, 2002), 119-136; Shaul Magid, “Deconstructing the Mystical: The Anti-Mystical Kabbalism in Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin’s *Nefesh-Ha-Hayyim*”, in *The Jewish Journal of Thought and Philosophy* (Vol. 9), 21-27. As this chapter will show, Elyashiv was aware of the attempt by certain students of the Gra to situate his Kabbalistic hermeneutics within the strictly figurative camp.

⁸ There have been numerous opinions with regards to which “kabbalist” Elyashiv was focusing his critique. While some (Sussman, Shocket, Naor) have claimed that the Leshem’s polemic was directly leveled against a Hassidic interpretation of Lurianic Kabbalah; others have claimed that it was towards Mithnagdim themselves, either R. Hayyim Volozziner (Pachter) or R. Yitzhak Issac Haver (Baumgarten, Shilo). Some have suggested, albeit mistakenly that Elyashiv’s critique was leveled towards the Lithuanian ethicist R. Yosef Leiv Bloch of Telz (Chriqui). It is this author’s opinion that the Leshem’s polemic and critique was directed towards R. Naftali Herz ha-Levi Weidenbaum of Jaffa as seen explicitly in the correspondence between the two, printed in Moshe Schatz, *Maayan Moshe* (Jerusalem, 2013), 254-273.

⁹ My thinking in this regard is influenced by Elliot R. Wolfson’s approach to the metaphoricity of Kabbalistic hermeneutics, see for example Elliot R. Wolfson, *A Dream Interpreted Within a Dream: Oneiropoiesis and the Prism of Imagination* (New York: Zone Books, 2011), 199-203; “Suffering Eros and Textual Incarnation: A Kristevian Reading of Kabbalistic Poetics”, in *Toward a Theology of Eros: Transfiguring Passion at the Limits of Discipline*, ed. V. Burrus and C. Keller (Fordham University Press, 2006), 341-365.

kataphatic impulse inherent within a purely literalist interpretation consistently informed his unique path of Kabbalistic hermeneutics¹⁰.

To properly express his literalist view, Elyashiv utilizes the thought of R. Moshe Hayyim Luzzato as his interlocutor¹¹. Typically, RaMHaL's Kabbalistic hermeneutics are perceived as espousing a strictly figurative/metaphorical approach in which Lurianic symbols were seen as products of prophetic vision (*hazon ha-nevuah*) conjured in the imagination of the prophet (*bi-yad ha-neviim edameh*)¹². For the *Leshem* this mode of interpretation points towards the purely metaphorical nature of Lurianic symbols. Similar to prophetic visions that were beheld in a state of imaginal unconsciousness only to be interpreted afterwards; Lurianic symbols serve as metaphorical tropes pointing beyond themselves towards a latent meaning that can only be disclosed through the process of demetaphorization. After praising Luzzato and distinguishing the written works of RaMHaL from their modern adaptations, Elyashiv continues with his critique of the figurative approach,

"Nevertheless I will state here: all the expansive interpretation that RaMHaL has applied to the words of the *Zohar* and *Arizal* through the [notion] of *hazon ha-nevuah* and the verse *bi-yad ha-neviim edameh*, and heaped upon them visions and imaginings, this does not sit well with me at all, for no one from the earlier generations (*rishonim*) nor the later generations (*ahronim*) has said this, and the words of the *Zohar* and *Arizal* cannot support his [RaMHaL] interpretation at all...to the point that they have taken

¹⁰ Elyashiv's Kabbalistic system is marked by a strict adherence to the Negative theological impulse as espoused by Maimonides, see for example *Leshem Shevo v-Achlama: Hakdamot u-Shearim*, 9, s.v *we-hinei*; 218, s.v *we-dah*; *Leshem Shevo v-Achlama: Drushei Olam HaTohu*, 1:163, s.v *u-bi'yoteir*. All references to *Sifrei Leshem Shevo we-Achlama* are based on the Barzani editions of the texts. Elyashiv saw in Maimonides's negative theology a precursor and prerequisite to the proper understanding of Lurianic Kabbalah wherein the apophatic negation remains in spite of the kataphatic depiction of God's investiture within finite existence, see Alan Brill, "Auxillary to *Hokhmah*: The Writings of the Vilna Gaon and Philosophic Terminology" in *Ha-Gra u-Beit Midrasho* (Ramat Gan, 2002), 21 fn.37. Regarding the Maimonidean approach to the hermeneutics of secrecy and its influence of Kabbalistic hermeneutics, a transference that can be applied to Elyashiv's path as well, see Elliot R. Wolfson, "Beneath the Wings of the Great Eagle: Maimonides and Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah," in Görges K. Hasselhoff and Otfried Fraisse, eds., *Moses Maimonides (1138-1204): His Religious, Scientific, and Philosophical Wirkungsgeschichte in Different Cultural Contexts* (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2004), 209-237.

¹¹ *Leshem Shevo v-Achlama: Drushei Olam HaTohu*, 1:162, s.v *we-hinini*

¹² On Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto and his figurative approach to the Lurianic system, see Jonathan Garb, *Kabbalist in the Heart of the Storm: Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2014; Hebrew), 174-185; Mordechai Chriqui, *Rehev Yisrael: Kabbalat R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto* (Machon Ramchal, 1995), 285-330.

the lofty secrets, the holy of holies in their elevated heights, and drawn them (? *Machnis* or *machnim*) into the circularity and procession of this-worldly (*olam ha-zeh*) governance, as if to say nothing exists above, heaven forbid, other than the procession of governance that they have grasped according to their knowledge. Heaven forbid that anyone that carries the name of Israel (*shem yisrael*) should think these thoughts; these [thoughts] are the path of those philosophizing intellects removed from the light of Kabbalah.¹³

In viewing the Lurianic symbols as a cluster of metaphor whose referential ground lay beyond the symbol, RaMHaL approaches the *partzufim* as figurative tropes that stand in for the true significance of these symbols, namely, the various forms of divine and historical governance (*hanhagot*)¹⁴. Like the Aristotelian conception of metaphorical speech where “metaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else”¹⁵, the names applied to the figurative *partzufim* signify the literal and perceptible modes of divine governance as they manifest in this-worldliness (*olam ha-zeh*). For RaMHaL the subjective experience of divine *hanhagot* is transferred into the Lurianic symbol which now serves as a stand in for the literal content and experience¹⁶. By minimizing the *partzufim* to overdetermined metaphors, Elyashiv finds the non-literalists guilty of denying the ontic reality of *atzilut*, a transgressive thought tantamount to denial, or in his language,

¹³ *Leshem Shevo v-Achlama: Drushei Olam HaTohu*, 1:162-163, s.v. *we-hineini*

¹⁴ It is important to note that while Elyashiv denies the significance of a strictly figurative reading of the Lurianic system in which the demetaphorization of the symbols is the main goal of the Kabbalist; he does leave space for imaginative hermeneutics wherein the reader may enhance the historical meaning within the literal symbol. This becomes apparent as the reader encounters the second volume of *Drushei Olam HaTohu* in which Elyashiv's project is conspicuously similar to the Kabbalistic interpretations of Luzzatto. This figurative reading, however, must be read in and through Elyashiv's clarification of his own system of interpretation, what I have termed metaphoric-literality in the first volume of *Drushei Olam HaTohu*. See the correspondence between Elyashiv and Hertz printed in M. Schatz, *Maayan Moshe* (Jerusalem, 2013), 244-245.

¹⁵ For an overview of the Aristotelian theory of metaphor and its subsequent interpretations see Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor* (University of Toronto Press, 1974), 24-27; 259-272.

¹⁶ This reading wherein Luzzatto's Kabbalistic hermeneutics remain strictly metaphorical to the point of denying any ontic literality is Elyashiv's interpretation of “those interpreters who delve too deeply in the RaMHaL”. Luzzatto's approach does allow for a literal interpretation of Lurianic symbols without denying the emphasis on a figurative understanding; see Moshe Schatz, *Maayan Moshe* (Jerusalem, 2013), 73-75; R. Yaakov Moshe Harlop, *Mei Marom: Al Shemoneh Perakim l'Rambam* (Beit Zevul, 1981), 176-177. Assuming that both Elyashiv and Luzzatto understand the Lurianic system as existing on a quasi-literal level, they split with regards to the function and ontology of metaphor. While Luzzatto adheres to the rhetorical theory of metaphor wherein meaning is transferred from the literal to the figurative, endowing the figure with the qualities and traits of the literal; Elyashiv, as we will show, advocates for a new model of metaphor wherein the literal and figurative coalesce in their difference.

“The great transgression involved in stating that the entirety of existence is not an absolute existence at all. This is tantamount to the denial of everything, heaven forbid, because according to their words, where (*ayeih*) is the truth of the entire *torah* that only exists from the *tzimtzum* and below, and where is the name *Y-H-V-H* whose disclosure is in *atzilut* alone.¹⁷”

Elsewhere Elyashiv uses harsher language in describing the errancy of such an interpretive stance,

“Heaven forbid that one should entertain the thought and state that these are metaphors alone, for one who says this, in my eyes they are denying the entirety of Kabbalah, heaven forbid, and it is worthy to react towards them even more than the reaction of holy individuals towards the intellectuals (*hokrim*) who have removed various biblical stories from their plain meaning, for they have only touched the veracity of those particular stories, while those who claim that the words of the *Arizal* are simply metaphorical, they are denying the entirety of Kabbalah, as all the words of the *Arizal* that we have before us, they themselves are the words of the *Zohar* in the *Idrot* and *Sifra de-Tzniuta*, and so it is with the words of *Shir ha-Shirim* as she is the holy of holies, and so too numerous verses in the *Torah* that Moses received from the mouth of His strength (*mi-pi ha-gevurah*); all of these words are considered the concealed *Torah* and the disclosure of the name *Y-H-V-H* and all the names and appellations that grow from it, for they comprise the light and revelation of His blessed name that is disclosed from within his essential concealment, and from the infinite light (*ohr ein-sof*) to be revealed in all the emanations (*ne'etzalim*), that is, the world of *atzilut* in general, which is disclosed through the being and existence of the worlds of *by"ta* and their governance, as it is known.¹⁸”

In response to what he saw as a misunderstanding and misappropriation of Lurianic Kabbalah by those who “delved into these explanations beyond what RaMHaL himself intended” and whose metaphorical interpretations “do not amount to the wisdom of Kabbalah whatsoever”, Elyashiv reaffirms the literality of these symbols, “With regard to all of these aspects themselves, there is no metaphor at all, rather they exist truly with everything that is said and taught regarding them, without figurative speech or saying otherwise, and without any alternative intention.¹⁹” By confirming the ontic reality of the *partzufim* of *atzilut*, Elyashiv accomplishes two goals; rectifying what he sees as subversive heresy inherent within RaMHaL’s approach, and a return to Lurianic Kabbalah’s original project. As we will see, these two facets of Elyashiv’s hermeneutical endeavor split when discussing the inherent metaphoricity at play within his literalist interpretation.

Clarifying his approach towards the *partzufim* of *atzilut*, Elyashiv writes:

¹⁷ *Leshem Shevo v-Achlama: Drushei Olam HaTohu*, 1: 165, s.v *we-harei lanu*

¹⁸ *Leshem Shevo v-Achlama: Biurim*, 1: 10-11, s.v *we-halila*

¹⁹ *Leshem Shevo v-Achlama: Drushei Olam HaTohu*, 1: 165

“Now, all of these aspects are negated from the Creator in all manners of negation, however, in *atzilut* all of these aspects are there in actuality. Rather, they exist in their relative orientation accordant to *atzilut* that is loftier and removed from the existence of *briah*, *yetzira* and *asiyah* (*by"á*). There is no one within the entirety of *by"á* who can grasp the essence or form of *atzilut* as it is, as there is no equivalence between *atzilut* and *by"á* beyond the proper names alone...Nevertheless we see from all of this that the world of *atzilut* is a world comprised of all the particulars that are present in the worlds of *by"á*...However, their existence and essence is ungraspable to beings...Nevertheless, everything that exists within the lower (*takton*) is equivilant to the higher (*elyon*). For the higher is the root that contains the potential of each and every particular existent that exists in the lower, in all their quantity and quality, their shape, image and color. However, relative to the lower, all that exists within the higher is thought of as the potential root alone. But, in the existence of the higher itself there exists absolutely, in all its quality and quantity, its image and its shape, in all its particularity exactly like the lower. Except, each [level] according to its relative orientation. And so it is with *atzilut*, as she is the root of *by"á* in its entirety, and all that is manifest in the branch and fruit exists within the root as well. This is the aspect of the *shi'ur komah* and the *partzufim* that are mentioned in *atzilut*. For they are exactly as they are in *by"á*, except that in *atzilut* they are accordant with their relative orientation there, of which no being may understand or grasp.^{20*}

Affirming the literality of the configurations within *atzilut*, Elyashiv is showing the ontic reality of the Lurianic symbols. Within the same passage, however, the literal affirmation is revised regarding the Lurianic subject's apperception of these symbols. Through a particularly distinct form of Kabbalistic perspectivism²¹, Elyashiv maintains the literal existence of the *partzufim* within *atzilut* while simultaneously denying any possibility of “understanding” or “grasping” those very *partzufim*. Paradoxically these configurations remain “unknowable and ungraspable, neither their demarcation nor their manifoldness; neither their time nor their space; neither their essential qualities nor their formal properties; neither their descriptive color nor shape²²” while forming the “true and actual reality” that comprises the world of *atzilut*. The foreclosure on grasping the nature of *atzilut* stems not from an epistemological limit in which the known exceeds the capacity of the knower to know, but rather an ontological demarcation barring the subject access to *atzilut*. As Elyashiv writes,

²⁰ *Leshem Shevo v-Achlama: Drushei Olam HaTohu*, 1:161-162

²¹ This mode of Kabbalistic perspectivism, or *klal ha-arhin* as it is expressed in the writings of R. Shalom Sharabi, is an example of Elyashiv's vast utilization of Rashash's school of Kabbalah. See chapter... “The Whole is in the Part: Ontological Individuation in the Leshem and Rashash.”

²² *Leshem Shevo v-Achlama: Biurim*, 1:13

"It is impossible for any being to grasp anything of *atzilut*, particularly the aspects discussed in the *Zohar* and *Ariza"l*, how they are or what they are at all, as it is written, "*ki lo yireini ha-adam w-hai*". This is not the result of the individual's unworthiness, for if it was [the result of this] the holy One blessed be He would not have withheld this from Moses. Rather, the intention here is that it is not possible (*sh-lo efshar*), and while for Him, may His name be blessed nothing is too wondrous; this [grasping of *atzilut*] is beyond the laws of creation. Meaning, it is impossible accordant with the laws of creation for the creature to grasp the creator.²³"

Meaning, the inability to comprehend the true nature of these configurations is not contingent on the subject's capacity to comprehend, rather, it results from the irreducible distance separating beings from the source of being itself. Essentially barred from the subject, the realm of *atzilut* is at once unknowable, yet known in its unknowability²⁴. Attentive to the paradoxical logic at play wherein the *partzufim* of *atzilut* represent an ontic reality through which the divine infinitude (*ein sof*) discloses itself, while remaining inherently unknowable, and thus metaphorical and unreal, Elyashiv writes:

"However, the wisdom of Kabbalah given to Moses at Sinai teaches us that the truth of all of these aspects (*inyanim*) exist devoid of any image or pictorial depiction whatsoever, rather, it is concealed from us in all manners of concealment how they are, or what they are; all of this is enough to remove all the difficulties that befall the words of the *Arizal* and the *Zohar* regarding the nature of the descriptions and this-worldly happenings that are depicted in *atzilut* and above, even though (*af al-pi*) that from *atzilut* and beyond everything is absolute divinity removed from all these aspects entirely. However, the truth is that all the diminutions and lack that exist in these aspects, and everything that is forbidden to affix to divinity, they are not there at all, and He may His name be blessed is removed from them entirely, nevertheless (*v-im kol zeh*) all of these aspects exist there, precisely (*mamash*) in such a way that all the concepts and movements of the body are essentially negated, devoid of any description, shape or image whatsoever. Now, while at first glance these words are two oppositional postulates within a singular theme (*k-shnei haphahim bi-nosei ehad*), nevertheless, since the essence of *atzilut* is concealed in all manners of concealment (*ne'elam bi-tahlit ha-he'elam*), it is quite possible that there should exist there all of these things (*devarim*) in such a manner of concealment that negates all difficulties (*kushiyot*), and all of the investigations (*hakirot*) that arise in this, they have no place there, for there [*atzilut*] all of these things and descriptions are precisely themselves (*atzmam mamash*), so too with all the aspects that are spoken of in the *Zohar* and *Arizal*, they exist there in their entirety and truthfulness devoid of any picture, heaven forbid, without posing a contradiction (*stirah*) to the simple unity (*ahduto ha-peshuta*) of His blessed name; yet

²³ *Leshem Shevo v-Achlama: Drushei Olam HaTohu*, 1: 165-166

²⁴ See Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Schoken, 1978), 272-273; Scholem, *Kabbalah* (Dorset Press, 1974), 102-103.

(*elah*) it is concealed from us in all manners of concealment how they are and what they are...and all the words of *Arizal* [exist] in such an essential concealment (*mehut ne'elam*) as this, bereft of all description or image, without shape or color, absolutely devoid of any bodily conception entirely, this is what we mean when constantly say that He, may His name be blessed, He is concealed in all manners of concealment... no creature is capable of comprehending *atzilut* whatsoever, how all of these aspects of the *shi'ur komah* as described in the *Torah* and the words of the *Zohar* and *Arizal* exist there devoid of any depiction, image or shape whatsoever; and there is no metaphoricity nor exaggeration whatsoever regarding these aspects, nor are they the aspect of prophetic imagination (*maareh ha-nevuah*) alone, rather, they [*partzufim*] all exist precisely (*mamash*) as their intended meaning and literalness while [remaining] concealed in all manners of concealment how they are or what they are, as there is no true comprehension (*musag amitit*) of these aspects except to Him, may His name be blessed, alone...[after all of this] it is clear to us that the *Arizal* did not say that these are metaphors nor products of prophetic imagination whatsoever. ...Rather he [*Arizal*] said that they are subtle lights of utter spirituality (*orot dakim bi-tachlit ha-ruhaniyut*) in their incomprehensibility. Nevertheless, what we find is that they are precisely as their intended meaning and literalness (*k'mashmum w-pshutan mamash*), as it is described in *Eitz Hayyim* and the other writings of the *Arizal*.²⁵

From this text it is clear that Elyashiv is aware of the mutual exclusivity at play between these two postulates. On the one hand, Lurianic symbols are literal mechanisms of divinity and as such they exist absolutely as they are depicted and written. On the other hand, these symbols must remain ontologically incomprehensible, and thus metaphorical, as they represent the realm of *atzilut* wherein the finite descriptions and depictions of the divine are effaced through the divine infinity that negates the literality of the finite symbols. For Elyashiv, the configurations of *atzilut* represent an unavoidable paradox²⁶. If the reader sees them as metaphorical tropes standing in for a proper, albeit more refined vision, then the Lurianic system is degraded to an imaginal scene perceived within the particular psyche of one individual²⁷. The *partzufim*, devoid of any ontic reality, are relegated to the role of rhetorical tropes whose manifest form must be shed in order to reveal the latent meaning that lay beyond the symbols. If, however, the configurations are taken as literal descriptions of divinity devoid of any

²⁵ *Leshem Shevo v-Achlama: Blurim*, 1: 9-11

²⁶ This paradox is described by Elyashiv, borrowing from the *Zohar* (2: 162b), as *raza di'mihimnuta*, see *Leshem Shevo v-Achlama: Drushei Olam HaTohu*, 2: 136

²⁷ This critique of a purely metaphoric interpretation of Lurianic symbols is expressed in the writings of R. Zadok Rabinowitz of Lublin, *Kuntreis Sefer ha-Zikronot* (Jerusalem, 2001), 18-21.

metaphoricity or figure-of-speech, then the Lurianic system is guilty of depicting that which cannot be depicted²⁸.

In defining his approach wherein the Lurianic symbols are taken as literal and real configurations within the world of *atzilut*, Elyashiv counters the corporealization inherent in such a stance by renouncing that which has been affirmed within the same utterance²⁹. Each statement that seeks to affirm the literal existence of the various *partzufim* must be read simultaneously and against Elyashiv's apophatic "saying" in which the literalist "said"³⁰ is written under erasure³¹ to maintain the unbridgeable gap between the individual and the divine as manifest in *Atzilut*. As a result of his incessant apophatic unsaying of the kataphatic said within his literalist approach, Elyashiv carves a space where the Lurianic symbols must be seen as literal depictions of that which cannot be depicted and thus metaphorical in their attempt to visualize the invisible. Thus after his critique of the strictly metaphorical approach to Lurianic symbols, Elyashiv describes the quasi-metaphoricity essential to our understanding of these very symbols:

"Regarding what is written in various places, that all of these aspects in *atzilut* are metaphorical. The intention is with regards to our comprehension of these aspects, as there is certainly no relation or imagination whatsoever regarding their true existence (*metziutum ha-amiti*) nor our grasp or comprehension of them. As stated above regarding the relation of the soul (*neshamah*) in the body (*guf*), that even though the soul is surely within us, nevertheless we cannot grasp its essence at all. And according to our comprehension it is a simple light alone (*ohr pashut livad*) while in truth it contains the potential for all the particulars within the body...Therefore it is obvious that all the

²⁸ The concern of anthropomorphically depicting that which cannot be depicted and thus transgressing the interdiction against iconicity was at the fore of many Kabbalists who called for a non-literal reading of Lurianic Kabbalah...

²⁹ See Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago University Press, 1994), 1-14; Elliot R. Wolfson, *Language, Eros and Being* (Fordham University Press, 2005), 197-214.

³⁰ The distinction between the "saying" and the "said" is borrowed from Emmanuel Levinas's analysis of the two modalities of language which may be applied to the present discussion, see for example, Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* (Duquesne University Press, 1998), 5-9, 45-57, 153-162; Levinas, *Proper Names* (Stanford University Press, 1996), 5-14. Regarding the application of Levinas's theory of language and Jewish Mysticism, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Giving Beyond the Gift: Apophasis and Overcoming Theomania* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 90-154.

³¹ See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), Translator's Preface, xiv-xviii; Aubrey L. Glazer, *Mystical Vertigo: Contemporary Kabbalistic Poetry Dancing Over the Divide* (Academic Studies Press, 2013), 21-30.

aspects and *partzufim* that we speak of in *atzilut* are, according to our perception, purely metaphorical (*rak b-dereh mashal levad*) for the entirety of *atzilut*, accordant to our perception, is the aspect of nought (*efes*) and nothingness (*ayin*).³²

Acknowledging the inherent metaphoricity involved in describing something that is devoid of any identifying or distinguishing traits or qualities- a literal no/thing- Elyashiv employs a metaphoric perspectivism wherein the literal reality of *atzilut* is disclosed only through a figurative veil that conceals the unknowable "nought and nothingness" thus revealing it in its metaphorical representation. From within itself, the configurations of *atzilut* exist in their ontological absoluteness, devoid of any "image, shape or color" and thus literally incomprehensible. Paradoxically however, this incomprehensibility is disclosed in the comprehension that there can be no literal comprehension beyond the figurative. Thus, our "perception" of *atzilut* must be inherently metaphoric in that the literal "nothingness" of *atzilut* is only disclosed through its figurative "comprehension" as the figurative is the simultaneous concealment and revelation of the literal³³. Softening his antimetaphoric stance, Elyashiv bridges the gap separating literal truth and figurative untruth while maintaining the irreducible distance that must be maintained for either one to maintain its significance. For Elyashiv the paradoxical play wherein the literal enunciation of the *partzufim* is inherently tied up with the metaphoric renunciation of their very literalness is what maintains the ineffable nature of *atzilut* while simultaneously allowing it to be captured by speech. On a philosophical register, the apophatic negation of *atzilut* within the infinite is loosened through the kataphatic impulse wherein the infinity of *atzilut* is reified through a series of metaphoric tropes that represent nothing but their unrepresentable referent.

Elsewhere while reiterating his position regarding the metaphoric literality of the *partzufim* in *atzilut*, Elyashiv applies his stance towards the textual instances

³² *Leshem Shevo v-Achlama: Drushei Olam HaTohu*, 1:162

³³ This approach to the inherent metaphoricity within the literal and vice versa is drawn from Nietzsche's description of metaphor as described in his essay "On Truth and Lies in the Non-Moral Sense", in *Philosophy and Truth: Selections From Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870's* (Prometheus Books, 1979), 79-97; Elliot R. Wolfson, "Suffering Eros and Textual Incarnation: A Kristevian Reading of Kabbalistic Poetics", in *Toward a Theology of Eros: Transfiguring Passion at the Limits of Discipline*, ed. V. Burrus and C. Keller (Fordham University Press, 2006), 341-365.

within the Lurianic corpus in which the R. Hayyim Vital gestures towards the figurative nature of *atzilut*:

"I will continue and say, regarding that which we find in the words of the *Arizal* himself that these aspects are by way of metaphor (*dereh mashal*), this is only by the lights (*orot*) that are above *atzilut*...and even when we find in certain places that he says this regarding *atzilut* as well, the true reader will understand that his [*Arizal*] intention is only regarding our grasp and comprehension, and it is certain that in this sense the truth of these aspects, as they are in their essence, are removed from our comprehension in the greatest possible distance, to the point that they are as absolute nothingness (*k-ayin mamesh*), and they are only by way of metaphor and enigma, but this is only accordant to our grasp of them...Therefore it is very reasonable to periodically find the words of the *Arizal* by way of metaphor, and the intention is with regards to our grasp and comprehension of these aspects from within this-worldliness (*bi-olam ha-zeh*), it is obvious (*pashut*) that they are above as absolute nothingness (*sh-hem li'maaleh ki-ayin mamesh*), and only by way metaphor (*dereh mashal bi-almah*)... but accordant to the relative orientation there [*atzilut*] they exist in their truthfulness precisely as their intended and plain meaning... However all of these revelations in *atzilut* are removed from all creatures, and relative to *by"o* they exist in *atzilut* in-the-aspect of absolute and fundamental negation (*bi-bechinat afisa muhletet w-tahlitit*) from all bodily concepts and processes altogether, without description or depiction, no image, shape or color at all, to that extent that accordant with our comprehension they have no essence whatsoever (*ad sh'al pi tfsoteinu ain la'hem mahut klaf*)...for there [*atzilut*] it is the root of roots of the potentiality of potential (*shoresh ha-shorashim di-koah koah*) of the properties (*tehunot*) within *by"o*, essentially concealed as stated above, and all of these properties exist there in essence (*ezem*), except they exist in a manner of essential concealment, only in-the-aspect of the root of roots of the potentiality of potential alone, but nevertheless they exist there in essence...³⁴"

In this text, Elyashiv brings the demarcation separating the literal world of *atzilut* and its figurative description into sharper focus. However, this irreducible distance between the literal and the metaphoric reveals the inherent interdependency that is disclosed through their mutual exclusivity. Meaning, the literal existence of *atzilut* is essentially concealed and thus unknowable beyond the self-reflective knowing of itself. As such the figurative depiction of *atzilut* is infinitely removed from its literal referent and thus "by way of metaphor and enigma" alone.

This inherent metaphoricity at play within the description of *atzilut*, however, is a sharp departure from what Elyashiv saw as the heretical view

³⁴ *Leshem Shevo v-Achlama: Biurim*, 1:13-16

espoused by "certain followers of RaMHa"L" wherein *atzilut* as depicted through the Lurianic symbols was seen as strictly figurative in need of demetaphorization. For Elyashiv, inherent within this mode of Kabbalistic hermeneutics is the assumption that one is capable of disclosing the *nimshal*, or the essential kernel of truth that lay beyond the signifying figurative trope. If the *partzufim* of *atzilut* are purely metaphoric one must assume that they can, and must undergo a process of demetaphorization in order to reveal the literal meaning concealed by the inessential metaphor. RaMHa"L's approach like classical substitution models of metaphor necessarily implies the possibility of translating the metaphorical onto the literal. If metaphor is defined as a deviation from the literal meaning, it is implied that a rhetorical analysis that would explore and expose the metaphorical action could restore the meaning from which it departed. In other words, if metaphor is engendered from and, consequently, reducible to an original meaning, it by necessity implies a translatability between the former and the latter³⁵. Like the Lurianic configurations apperceived by the subject in a personal state of imaginative beholding, *bi-yad ha-neviim edameh*, the metaphoric symbols present a bridge through which the distance separating the literal truth and the figurative untruth can, and must be collapsed. For Elyashiv, aside from relegating the Lurianic symbols to inessential tropes which must be discarded to reveal the essential and absolute nature of divinity, this interpretive approach implies the Lurianic subjects capacity of "grasping" and "comprehending" the true nature of *atzilut*. If the *partzufim* are truly figurative then the mystical adept must disrobe the metaphoric veil to disclose the secret referent that stands behind the concealing trope. Relegating the distance between the figurative untruth of the *partzufim* and the literal truth of their true meaning to an epistemological gap, the "kabbalists of our generation" miss, or worse, deny the ontological void separating *Ein-Sof* as disclosed in *atzilut* and the subject's comprehension and grasp. For Elyashiv this ontological separation is of utmost importance in that it maintains the distance between creator and creation upholding the delicate balance between the apophatic negation of divine

³⁵ My formulation is influenced by Elina Staikou's "*Metaphors of Travel and Writing: Deconstruction at Home*" (2002, Dissertation, University of Warwick).

Nothingness and kataphatic assertion of the divine something as disclosed in and through creation(s). According to Elyashiv this ontological divide constitutes the essential obscurity of Lurianic Kabbalah:

"With our words you may understand why the *mekubalim* always used the word secret (*sod*) in discussing their words, the intention is not specifically to point to some deeper aspect beyond what is written (*inyan amuk yoter mi-mah sh'katvu*), rather the intention is that the essence of their words and subject matter is concealed from the eyes of all living things- and as such this wisdom is referred to as the concealed wisdom, therefore they always use the word secret, meaning to say, that one must say it in whispers and concealment, for it is hidden and concealed regarding how it is or what it is (*nistar w'nealam aik sh'hu w-mah sh'hu*).³⁶"

The secrecy inherent within the Lurianic system- particularly the paradoxical nature of *atzilut* wherein Nothing (*ayin*) and Something (*yeish*) coincide in their nonidentity- is not contingent upon its being misunderstood; rather, it is an essential secrecy predicated on the impossible coincidence of the finite and the infinite existing simultaneously while maintaining their difference. The concealment of a clear and comprehensible synthesis between these two poles is essential and constitutive of the Lurianic system that represents both the concealed wisdom and the wisdom of concealment. As stated above Elyashiv does not view the incomprehensibility of *atzilut* as resulting from "unworthiness" or personal limitation of the subject, but "Rather, the intention here is that it is not possible (*sh-lo efshar*), and while for Him, may His name be blessed nothing is too wondrous; this [grasping of *atzilut*] is beyond the laws of creation. Meaning, it is impossible accordant with the laws of creation for the creature to grasp the creator."³⁷ For Elyashiv this irreducible distance between creator and created forecloses on any interpretive stance that implies the absolute comprehension of the true nature, or essence of *atzilut* through the demetaphorization of purely figurative and thus inessential metaphoric tropes. For Lurianic Kabbalah to maintain its unique mode of theosophical speculation in which the void separating creator and created is perpetually traversed in and through the upholding of their separation³⁸, *atzilut* and its configurations must occupy the liminal space wherein literal existence and figurative depiction act through

³⁶ *Leshem Shevo v-Achlama: Drushei Olam HaTohu*, 1:166-167

³⁷ *Leshem Shevo v-Achlama: Drushei Olam HaTohu*: 1:165

³⁸ See for example R. Nahman of Bratzlav, *Likkutei Moharan*, 1:64

one another disclosing a metaphoric literality in which the literal is metaphoric by virtue of its literality as the metaphoric is literal by virtue of its metaphoricity.

As stated above, by affirming the ontic reality of *atzilut*, Elyashiv accomplished two goals; rectifying what he saw as subversive heresy inherent within a strictly figurative approach, and a return to Lurianic Kabbalah's original project. These two facets of Elyashiv's hermeneutical endeavor split with regards to the inherent metaphoricity at play within his literalist interpretation. Regarding the former, it would be reductive to claim that Elyashiv's hermeneutical project calls for a strictly literal interpretation of the configurations of *atzilut*. In relegating his interpretive stance to rigorous literalism thus aligning it in binary opposition against a purely figurative view of the Lurianic system, the paradoxical and creative nature of Elyashiv's project is obscured. The literal affirmation of *atzilut* must be read simultaneously with, and against the figurative negation that negates the literal in the affirmation of the metaphoric. Meaning, by admitting to the necessity of metaphor and image in the comprehension of *atzilut*, Elyashiv concurrently denies the literal interpretation of the *partzufim*. However, this foreclosure on literal comprehension serves as the simultaneous upholding of that very literality, in that for *atzilut* as the disclosure of infinite unknowability to remain literal it must remain metaphorical. Iterating and reiterating his interpretive stance for fear of being misunderstood, Elyashiv blurs the boundary typically dividing the literal and the metaphoric:

"His investiture and contraction into the aspects of *atzilut*, is by way of the verse, "*bi-yad ha-neviim edameh*"...and we now see that the holiness blessed be His name contracted His truthful simplicity in order to reveal Himself to His creations, and this is what is written "*bi-yad ha-neviim edameh*". However, my intention is not to imply that all of these aspects mentioned in the *Zohar* and the *Arizal* are only by way of prophetic visions (*ma'arot ha-nevuah*), like we find in the words of some of the later kabbalists, particularly in our generation where they have excessively entrenched themselves in this opinion, heaven forbid that my opinion be like this, heaven forbid, for all of the prophetic visions, the visions themselves (*ma'arot gufa*) were by way of imagination alone, and the essential vision had no authentic existence whatsoever, as is stated by *Rashi* (tb. Yevamot 49b) regarding the sages comment, "All of the prophets gazed through a speculum that does not shine", "they presumed to see, but did not see". However, all the words of the *Zohar* and the *Arizal* are authentic, existing as they are written (*bi-mitzutam k'ktivam*), for through this He may His name be blessed is disclosed in the disclosure of the name *Y-H-V-H* whose seal is truth, as well as His disclosure in the entirety of *torah* which is a *torah* of truth, and in the

totality of creation in her truthful existence. The words of the *Zohar* and the *Arizal* are not metaphoric or imaginative whatsoever, heaven forbid. However, they are not accordant with our grasp or comprehension...and accordant to our grasp of these things they are in truth only in the aspect of metaphor and imagination (*rak bi-bichinat mashal w-dimyon*), however, accordant to the relative orientation of *atzilut* itself as she is elevated and removed from all creation in all her aspects, as they are in that space they are authentic precisely as they are written (*hinei k'fi mah sh'heim sham heim b'emet kol ha-dewarim k'kitvan mamesh*), except, they are invisible and incomprehensible for every creature...we can now say regarding the entirety of *atzilut* "*ki lo yir'anee ha-adam w-hai*", as all of the aspects that are stated there are concealed in all manners of concealment, and they cannot be grasped aside from Him may His name be blessed, alone, yet nevertheless, the words of the *Zohar* and the *Arizal* are true as they are written...I will review my words so that no mistake shall be made, as a mistake in this is a great danger. I will therefore review and restate, even though we have already written enough, that is, while we said that all of these things exist as they are written and in truth within *atzilut* itself, nevertheless, it is fundamental that accordant to the grasp and comprehension of all creation regarding these aspects that are described in the *Arizal* as existing in *atzilut*, they are only the aspect of absolute metaphor (*mashal mamash*) as they cannot be grasped by any being, and in *atzilut* there is no bodily form, no depiction or image whatsoever, for the entirety of *atzilut* is beyond creation...to the point that *atzilut* is absolute simplicity (*pashut l'gamrei*) relative to the entirety of creation...and we explicate and expound these aspects within *atzilut* as they serve as the concealed source (*shorasham bi-ne'elam*), however, how they are the source there, this is also concealed from all of creation, and it is only grasped by *atzilut* itself.³⁹

Unlike the rhetorical interpretation of metaphor wherein the literal is transferred unto the figurative endowing the figurative trope with the qualities of the literal signified; the unbridgeable gap separating *atzilut* as-it-is and *atzilut* as-it-is-grasped denies the figurative depiction any semblance or unity with the literal thing-in-itself. In place of the substitution, and thus inessential model of metaphoric equivalency, Elyashiv offers an innovative model wherein the absolute metaphor⁴⁰ draws forth the concealed potentiality of the literal thus disclosing the literal in and through the metaphoric veil that is the veil of metaphoricity. Elyashiv's approach to metaphor wherein the literal becomes literal through its metaphoric reification can be seen in Hans-Jost Frey's depiction of metaphoric indeterminacy:

³⁹ *Leshem Shevo v-Achlama*:

⁴⁰ Another model of metaphor that is germane to the approach described in this chapter is Hans Blumenberg's "absolute metaphor", see his *Paradigms for a Metaphorology* (Cornell University Press, 2010), 1-15; 40-45; Pajari Rasanen, *Counter-figures: An Essay on Antimetaphoric Resistance: Paul Celan's Poetry and Poetics at the Limit of Figuralty* (Dissertation, University of Helsinki 2007), 364-376.

“Does expressing something have to remain unexpressed? If it is expressed, then it is no longer expressing but something that has been expressed...To avoid this unavoidable demise of expressing, we would have to fulfill the seemingly contradictory requirement of expressing the expressing of something without letting it become something already expressed, or: expressing it without expressing it. If expressing something is not to become something expressed and thereby lost, then it must be replaced by another something that has been expressed that expresses the unmentioned expressing indirectly. This potential is fulfilled by metaphor. In metaphor, expressing is not expressed but meant. What is expressed is something else, fashioned in such a way that it makes what is meant but not expressed accessible. Expressing something can thereby be expressed without becoming something already expressed: when it is what is meant by what is expressed. This accessibility of expression via what is expressed is bound to the intransferability of the metaphor. Since expressing never becomes what is expressed without forfeiting the expression that it is, what is meant by what is expressed must not become something that is expressed. The nature of the metaphor, which does not say what is meant, must be kept viable. Waiving the hardly obligatory limitation of the metaphor, it can generally be said that discourse can make expression accessible when what is meant does not coincide with what is expressed, which is to say, whenever it does not name but speaks figuratively. How is expressing something made accessible in figurative discourse if it is never what is expressed but only what is meant? The step from expression to meaning must be made without reducing the metaphor. The metaphor must not be translated but must take place. Expressing something cannot be made accessible as something expressed, because it would no longer be what it was. But it is only what it is in the act of expression. If the metaphor is to make expressing something accessible as its unexpressed meaning, then it can only do so by provoking the act of expression as the occurrence of the metaphor. The unsolvable metaphor produces the expression that is its meaning.⁴¹”

Transferring Frey’s treatment of metaphoric indeterminacy unto Elyashiv’s path of kabbalistic hermeneutics, the infinite as disclosed through *atzilut* can be taken as the “expressing”, the inexpressible idea that seeks expression without losing its inexpressibility, or, the *nimshal*; while the *partzufim* of *atzilut* represent the “expressed”, the distinct manifestation of “expressing’s” potential, or, the *mashal*. As the essence of *atzilut* is neither nothing (*ayin*) nor something (*yeish*), its (non)existence remains expressible through its inexpressibility, or in Frey’s phrasing “the contradictory requirement of expressing the expressing of something without letting it become something already expressed, or: expressing it without expressing it.” The metaphor, or in this case the configurations of *atzilut*, discloses the “expressing” by showing itself as the “expressed” that means something other than what it is without being reduced to what

⁴¹ Hans -Jost Frey, “*Studies in Poetic Discourse: Mallarme, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Holderlin*” (Stanford University Press, 1996), 27-30.

it means. The *partzufim* are at once literal in their expressivity and figurative in the invisible “meant” that they disclose in and through their nonequivalence. The literal nature of *atzilut* is thus metaphoric in that its literal “expressed” purpose is to make the inexpressible “expressing” visible without reducing its invisibility. Using the language of Frey, “In metaphor, expressing is not expressed but meant. What is expressed is something else, fashioned in such a way that it makes what is meant but not expressed accessible. Expressing something can thereby be expressed without becoming something already expressed: when it is what is meant by what is expressed.” For Elyashiv this stance allows for the nothingness of *atzilut* to be expressed in its metaphorical figuration without losing its indefinable nature, thus reconciling the apophatic nature of Lurianic kabbalah and the kataphatic impulse inherent in depicting the invisible⁴².

By maintaining the negative theological impulse in and through Lurianic Kabbalah, Elyashiv places the spiritual-hermeneutic fecundity of the system into question. After clarifying the metaphoric literality of *atzilut* in which the literal is literal by virtue of its metaphoricity, the Lurianic subject is still stuck in a double bind wherein speaking of *atzilut* betrays the silence it demands as silence betrays the demand of speech. Foreclosing on the process of imaginative demetaphorization (*li-hasig et ha-nimshal*) advocated by some kabbalists, while simultaneously warning against a purely literalist comprehension and grasp that would imply a total beholding, and thus appropriation of divine infinity, Elyashiv places the Lurianic subject in a space of indeterminate ambiguity. To move beyond this indeterminacy Elyashiv continues to forge a path traversing the contradictory either/or binary of literal/figurative towards the clearing of a paradoxical both/and wherein the boundaries separating the literal and the figurative are collapsed without losing their functionality. To disclose the truly fecund potency of kabbalah and its study, Elyashiv reiterates his distinction between ontic literality and metaphoric comprehension, this time emphasizing the linguistic nature of the Lurianic Kabbalah, aligning it with the grand history of Jewish anthropomorphism, from The Song of Songs (*Shir Ha-Shirim*)⁴³ to the *Torah* itself:

⁴² For Elyashiv, understanding is depicted through an occularcentric mode of knowledge...As Jonathan Garb has correctly noted....

⁴³ While clarifying his paradoxical approach to metaphor Elyashiv consistently refers back to *Shir Ha-Shirim* as a paradigm for anthropomorphic figurativeness. Regarding the metaphoricity of *Shir Ha-*

"From these words of the Gr" a various kabbalists of our generation have founded their words, that everything is by way of metaphor alone, however, it is my opinion that these words of the Gr" a do not support their approach whatsoever, and ostensibly these words [of the Gr" a] are unintelligible when they state that everything we speak of is by way of metaphor etc., is it not true that all of our language is itself only the language of *ha-Rashbi* in the *Zohar*, particularly the *Idrot* and *Sifra di-Tzniuta*... This is also the language used by King Solomon throughout the entirety of *Shir ha-Shirim*, for in his days the moon stood in her fullness (*sihara bi-ashlimuta*) in the greatest rectification (*tikkun*) as it is known, furthermore, this is the language of the descriptive *shi'ur komah* in the *Torah* of Moses our master, and we have no other language in the works of Kabbalah aside from their exact language, and with this we are constantly engaged, perpetually speaking in this language that was spoken by all the elevated holy ones (*kidoshei elyon*) the first of the first back towards Moses from the mouth of Strength (*m'pi ha-gevurah*)...upon them we rely and establish all of our words as well accordant with the intention they intended, and we speak perpetually in that language itself. Therefore, regarding what the Gr" a said, that everything we speak etc. is only by way of metaphor, are we not engaged in the very same language aligned with their truthful intent that comes from the mouth of the Holiness blessed be He? The matter, however, is simple, the intention of the Gr" a is not meant regarding the language and speech (*ha-dibbur v'ha-lashon*), rather only on comprehension itself (*ha-haa'saga bilvad*), and all of his words come only to concretize in our hearts that we do not comprehend anything, and in order to distance and remove any thought of likeness, image or shape heaven forbid, regarding this he [Gr" a] said that anything we grasp in these aspects is only the back of the back (*ahorayim d'ahorayim*) and unrefined, and our comprehension in all of these things and languages are distant from their truth, for we do not understand at all to the extent that accordant with out comprehension all of their words are only the aspect of metaphor...But in truth all of these things themselves exist in their space in absolute truthfulness (*bi-mikoran al amitatam li-gamrei*), while remaining removed and negated from any image, likeness or depiction heaven forbid, without any bodily limitations, concealed in all manners of concealment how it is or what it is, and they cannot be grasped expect by Him to Himself, my His name be blessed⁴⁴."

Questioning the evocation of a statement attributed to the Gaon of Vilna⁴⁵ by those calling for a purely figurative interpretation, Elyashiv points towards the constitutive mistake in their approach. In viewing the language of Lurianic Kabbalah

Shirim as it relates to our presentation of metaphoric literality, see Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love* (Columbia University Press, 1987), 265-279.

⁴⁴ *Leshem Shevo v-Achlama: Biurim*, 1:17-18

⁴⁵ R. Elijah Kramer of Vilna, *Biur ha-Gra le-Sifra di-Tzeniuta* (Jerusalem, 2012), *Liqqutim*,

as strictly metaphoric, the figurative kabbalists are assuming a non-linguistic referent that lay beyond the *partzufim* of *atzilut*. Starting with the unnamed (no)thing that lay behind the nameable configurations, this interpretive approach claims, implicitly, to grasp and comprehend the absolute truth (*nimshal*) that grounds the Lurianic system, thus relegating the Lurianic symbols to rhetorical tropes that conceal the unnamed yet nameable essence. For Elyashiv the assumption that the unnamable essence can be named and grasped as anything other than the name that erases itself at the moment of its naming, uttered in its inutterability is tantamount to the idolatrous conception inherent within the kataphatic impulse. As a system of linguistic mysticism⁴⁶ all we have is the "exact language" containing the "intention that was intended" in and by the language itself. As a theistic kabbalist Elyashiv saw in the language of the *Arizal* a linguistic thread strung through the various attempts within Jewish mysticism to say the unsayable culminating and beginning within the recesses of the infinite (*ein-sof*). Disclosing the infinite-text that is the text-of-the-infinite in and through the text-of-*atzilut*, Divine Nothingness conceals itself thus enabling its investiture within the linguistic register. Lurianic language, a new echo of "the *Zohar* and *Shir Ha-Shirim*", is literal in its saying of the infinite in and as language, signifying nothing but its inherent signification; and figurative in its perpetual folding and unfolding onto and away from its ungraspable (non)ground, metaphoric when spoken as literal and literal when understood as metaphoric. With this conception of the linguistic nature of Lurianic Kabbalah that is both metaphorically real and literally unreal, Elyashiv describes the "essence and elevated status of studying Kabbalah" as:

"Speaking in *atzilut* alone, to use only the words and languages that were spoken and said in the *Zohar* and the words of the *Arizal*, [and] through this to stimulate those aspects above so that they may egress, be disclosed, and proceed from concealment to revelation, so as to increase in them light (*ohr*) through the unification of the infinite light in them (*al yidei ha-yichud d'ohr ein-sof sh-bo'hem*)...⁴⁷ (Biurim, 10)

⁴⁶ On the linguistic nature of Kabbalah see...

⁴⁷ *Leshem Shevo v-Achloma: Biurim*...

As a system of linguistic mysticism, the reader reading the text discloses the word from within its unspoken concealment through the speech-act. Ungraspable beyond language, the essential silence that marks the unspoken word of *atzilut* upholds the literalness that exists prior to revelation. With the saying of the word, the infinite potential of *atzilut* is disclosed through a procession of egression culminating in the said of *atzilut*. Disclosed through speech, the word of *atzilut* is now grasped in the saying of the said which is at once metaphoric and literal. Metaphoric in its comprehensibility and literal in its linguistic form, the speaking of *atzilut* draws the infinite and undefined potential into manifestation. The enunciation of the infinite as disclosed in *atzilut* is at once the renunciation of the silence that upheld the literality of the infinite. For Elyashiv, however, there is a dual movement at play in the speech act. Cutting the silent boundary separating Nothingness (*ayin*) and Something (*yeish*) speech simultaneously discloses the words limitedness while maintaining its unlimited and thus infinite nature, or in Elyashiv's words, speaking in *atzilut* causes the "procession from concealment to revelation" while causing "the unification of infinite light in them". In other words, the literality of *atzilut* that is upheld in the silence of its own unsayability folds into the metaphoric transport of language without losing its literal nothingness. Moving from "concealment to revelation" the textual potential merges, manifesting in the finite said of *atzilut*, yet, the speaking is marked by its own unspeakability murmuring beneath and within the utterance, resulting in the "unification of the infinite light" within the language of finitude. This paradoxical mode of Lurianic language that is both literal in its "saying" and metaphoric in its "said" pushes the speaking subject to the limit wherein what is said is unsaid in and through the word itself. Marked by the need to speak of that which is unspeakable, to visualize the invisible, Elyashiv understands the language of *atzilut* as a space one must say "in whispers and concealment"⁴⁸.

⁴⁸ Regarding the whisper as a mode of communicating the incommunicable in Jewish Mysticism see Elliot R. Wolfson, "Murmuring Secrets: Eroticism and Esotericism in Mediaeval Kabbalah", in *Hidden Intercourse: Eros and Sexuality in the History of Western Esotericism* Ed. W. Hanegraaff and J. Kripal (Brill, 2008), 85-110.



The Leshem on Tzimtzum with George Lasry

<https://www.jyungar.com/podcast/2015/3/29/the-leshem-on-tzimtzum-ii-with-george-lasry>

Leshem on Suffering: Sefer De'ah, *Derush Olam haTohu*,
chelek Alef, derush Heh, ot Heh, p. 82a.

<p>Since the upper light and vessel only shines through body and vessels, this makes the lower vessel be created and revealed on its (lower) level, and is able to help a still lower vessel to do the same, to the point that only in this way does it lead to the existence of the spiritual worlds, down to the lowest level, including the physical universe of the world of <i>Asiya</i>-Making. It thus becomes clear that whenever the upper vessel went down below its level, it was only to rectify the vessel in a lower position, so that the lower vessels would emerge as well. Then, afterwards through its rectification, it surges upward to connect to the higher consciousness. The preceding is the mystery of all the falls and times of constriction that every person goes through (including all elements of Creation although in a hidden manner). This is because the purpose of a fall is only so that upon coming down, a person and all of creation gets closer to one below their spiritual level and they help them ascend. The holy sparks in the soul of the person (and all creation) who was formerly in a lower level are thus enabled to ascend from their previous situation in which they were swallowed up, retrieving their precious light from the shell enclosing them. We learn from this to what</p>	<p>כי ע"י שאינו מאיר העליון אלא רק דרך גוף וכלים הנה עי"ז יוצא התחתון על מדרגתו וכן מתחתון לתחתון עד שרק עי"ז נעשה האפשרות למציאות כל העולמות כולם עד העשייה התחתונה ונמצא שכל ירידה אשר ירד העליון הוא רק לצורך תיקון וכדי שיוצא ויתהווה עי"ז התחתון ג"כ. וזהו ג"כ סוד כל הירידות והקטנות אשר עוברים בכל עת על כל אדם (וכן הוא בהעלם בכל הנמצאות כולם) כי הנה הוא כדי לירד ולהתקרב אל את אשר למטה הימנו וכדי להעלותו. כי נעשה בזה עליית הניצו"ק</p>
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extent man has to be careful not to think ill of Hakadosh Baruch Hu's – God's – ways, nor to resent it – Heaven forbid – if he finds himself in a lowly position, or upon realizing that he is not successful in his Divine service, or if ה"ו the impulse for evil attacks him and wins a battle against him in a way that to his mind, he did not deserve. For man does not know for what purpose he was sent down to this world. A person may be sent down to cleanse the conduits of divine shefa-bounty [which were blocked by the men's wrongdoings],¹ to clean and purify them from any ill and contamination [so that the waters of shefa could flow unobstructed] and so he always finds himself persecuted and in distress.² Alternatively, another person might be sent down in order to decorate the King's Palaces, fashioning a tiara to crown Him, and delights in his mission as he is granted precious benefits reserved for royalty.

However, as our Sages have said,³ *According to the effort is the reward*, and God does not confront His creatures with a challenge that they are not equipped to overcome.⁴ [The Leshem is saying that even though the wonderful task of decorating the King's Palaces may seem more desirable, however, the task of "spiritual plumbing" although more arduous, may gain

מבליעתן להוציא יקר מזולל. ומזה
 תראה כמה צריך האדם ליזהר מאד
 מלהרהר אחר מדותיו של הקב"ה
 להתרעם ח"ו על חלקו אם קטן ודל הוא.
 או כשרואה בעצמו שאינו מצליח ח"ו
 בחפצי שמים וכן כאשר יש לו התגברות
 היצר ח"ו יותר מהראוי לו לפי דעתו. כי
 אין אדם יודע על איזה מלאכה שולח
 בעולמו. זה שולח לגרוף את הביבין
 לטהר אותם ולנקותם מכל חלאה וזוהמא
 והוא תמיד במצור ובמצוק. וזה שולח
 לקשט את היכלי מלך ולעשות עטרה על
 ראשו ומתענג עי"ז בסגולות מלכים.

¹ The Hebrew expression is *ligrof chabibin*:
 לגרוף הביבין. היינו לתקן סתימת הצינורות של השפע מחמת מעשה הרשעים היינו גריפת ביבין שיהיו הצינורות נקיים.
 וילכו המים נוזלים בלי עיכוב.

² Paraphrasing Deuteronomy 28:53.
³ Pirkei Avot
⁴ Paraphrasing Tractate Avoda Zara 3a.

<p>the doer a higher reward in the ultimate future.] The preceding may be understood when having in mind that such is the mystery of the Shechina's exile, for She has to go down [to a heavenly world below Her level] to retrieve [fallen] holy sparks and a servant should be content to be like his master.⁵ In a similar way, [the idea of going below one's level in order to retrieve lost wealth] is also the mystery of the four exiles. Hence, rather than resenting his situation and spiritual level ה"ו, man should focus on asking for Divine compassion, always giving himself, body and soul, to the Holy One. Our master the <i>Ramak</i> – Rabbi Moshe Cordovero – has transmitted a similar teaching regarding the well known query as to why do righteous people suffer: This forms part of the concealed Providence of the Compassionate One, blessed is He. Man should not allow himself to fall when experiencing difficulties ה"ו, but rather always gird himself with strength and be a living model of the verse: <i>Be silent before Hashem and hope to Him alone</i>,⁶ for the Holy One alone, only and exclusively, sets up man, assigning tasks from above, selecting the appropriate mission designed to help each and every soul rectify the source of his/her soul in the heavenly world. And each and every one will glow with the light of the Countenance of the Living King.</p>	<p>אך כבר אמרו לפום צערא אגרא ואין הקב"ה בא בטרוניא עם בריותיו. כי הוא מסוד גלות השכינה היורד למטה לברר בירורין. ודיו לעבד להיות כרבו. והוא ג"כ סוד כל הד' גליות כנודע. ואין לאדם ח"ו להתרעם על מצבו ומדרגתו. אלא רק לבקש רחמים ולמסור את עצמו אליו ית"ש תמיד. וכבר כתב רבינו הרמ"ק ז"ל כי גם כגון זה הוא ג"כ בכלל השאלה הנודעת דצדיק ורע לו שהוא מכבשי דרחמנא ומהנהגתו הנעלמה</p>
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⁵ Tractate *Berachot* 58b.

⁶ Avraham Sutton, *Yearning for Redemption: The Psalms of King David*. Rabbi Sutton notes: [be silent and wait patiently in the face of His decrees, even if they seem unfair, i.e., even if the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper: wait for His salvation and you will see it.]

	<p>ית"ש. ולזאת אין לאדם ליפול בשביל ירידות ח"ו. אלא יתחזק את עצמו תמיד ויקיים בעצמו דום לה' והתחולל לו (תהילים ל"ז) כי רק לו ית"ש לבד נתכנו עלילות לחלק לכ"א ואחד את מלאכתו הראויה לו לתקן את שורשו במקום עליון. וכולם יאירו באור פני מלך חיים:</p>
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Further on, the Leshem extends the preceding teaching to a large scale regarding the sefirot-Divine emanations or vessels of Divine light in the plan of Creation.

<p>As taught in Tractate Rosh Hashana, p. 11a, all the elements of Creation came to existence according to their level, to their consent, their characteristics and desire.⁷ Each [element] was created according to its level, as per its [prior] consent and will, for it saw and</p>	<p>בראש השנה י"א ע"א. כל מעשה בראשית בקומתן נבראו לדעתן נבראו לצביונם נבראו. ונברא כ"א</p>
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⁷ The Leshem is saying that all the elements of Creation knew what their situation would be prior to Creation and consented to be created in this manner.

understood that this would be the best possible situation for it, to be created precisely in such a way, according to the plan of Creation that Hakadosh Baruch Hu - God - revealed to each and every one. And the same is true regarding all the lower worlds *Beriya*, *Yetzira* and *Asiya* in general, all of which are below the lowest aspect of Adam Kadmon and have no revelation of Adam Kadmon at all. As a result these elements [created as above indicated] became exceedingly darkened and dense. And this happened with their prior knowledge, will and consent, for they realized that it would be the best thing for them to remain in this way until the time of the final rectification, precisely according to Divine intentions for them as per the plan of Creation, and according to all the knowledge they were enlightened with from their heavenly source on high. All the elements of Creation are alive and enlightened, and they all know from the very beginning what will occur in the end. The plan of Creation and all the processes and events they would experience - all they would have to go through from the first beginning until the end of everything was revealed to them, and they were the ones who chose all this for themselves with a yearning soul, based on the knowledge that was revealed to them by the Master of Creation, the Holy One blessed is He, namely that such is the ultimate good

על מדרגתו כמו שהוא ע"פ דעתו ורצונו. כי ראה והשכיל שכן הוא הטובה האמיתי אליו להברא במדרגה כזה דוקא לפי תכלית כוונת מציאותו אשר נתגלה לו מפי הקב"ה לכ"א ואחד. וכן הוא ג"כ בכל העולמות בי"ע בכלל. אשר הם כולם למטה מרגלי א"ק ואין להם גילוי מא"ק מאומה והרי נתחשכו עי"ז ונתעבו הרבה. הנה נעשה להם כ"ז בהסכם דעתם ובחפצם ורצונם. כי הכירו וראו שכן הוא הטובה האמיתי להם לעמוד עד עת התיקון במדרגה כזו דוקא לפי תכלית כוונתו בהם בכל מציאותם כולו. וכל ההשכלה והדעת אשר השכילו לדעת כ"ז. הרי פשוט הוא שהוא רק לשרשם העליון שלמעלה. כי הם כולם חיים ומשכילים ויודעים בראש מה שיהיה בסוף ולהם

appropriate for them, according to the purpose of the final rectification.

[...]

The place [where they had to go down to] was very dark because it was below the lowest aspect of Adam Kadmon and the world of Atzilut-Closeness [to God], but still, they chose to go there out of their own awareness and will. As the master (the Ari z"l) teaches, they chose the lowest for themselves, for only in this way is there a possibility to extract from the higher dimension all the dense aspects of the lower heavenly worlds *Beriya*-Creation, *Yetzira*-Formation and *Asiya*-Making as they are. They were enlightened to realize that this precisely was the best for them according to Divine intention regarding the final rectification, and thus they made their educated choice with a yearning soul. Consequently, this is as we saw above regarding the act of Creation, that they came to existence according to their knowledge and desire. And as [the Ari z"l] said, "and they chose," for they acted in this manner out of their own choice and desire.

נתגלה תכלית כוונת מציאותם וכל תהלוכותיהם ומאורעותיהם כל אשר יעבור עליהם מהתחלתם הראשונה עד סוף הכל והם אשר בחרו לעצמם כל זאת בנפש חפצה ע"פ הידיעה שנתגלה להם כ"ז מפי יוצר בראשית המאציל עליון ית"ש שכן הוא הטובה והראוי להם לפי תכלית תיקון האחרון.

[...]

והגם שכל המקום הזה הרי הוא חשוך מאד באשר שהוא למטה מרגלי א"ק והאצילות לגמרי. עכ"ז הנה עשו כ"ז בבחירתם שהוא מדעתם ורצונם. וכמ"ש הרב ובחרו להם הנמוך. כי רק עי"ז יש אפשרות מעתה להוציא את כל העביות הבי"ע כמו שהוא. והשכילו וראו כי כן הוא הראוי להם בדוקא

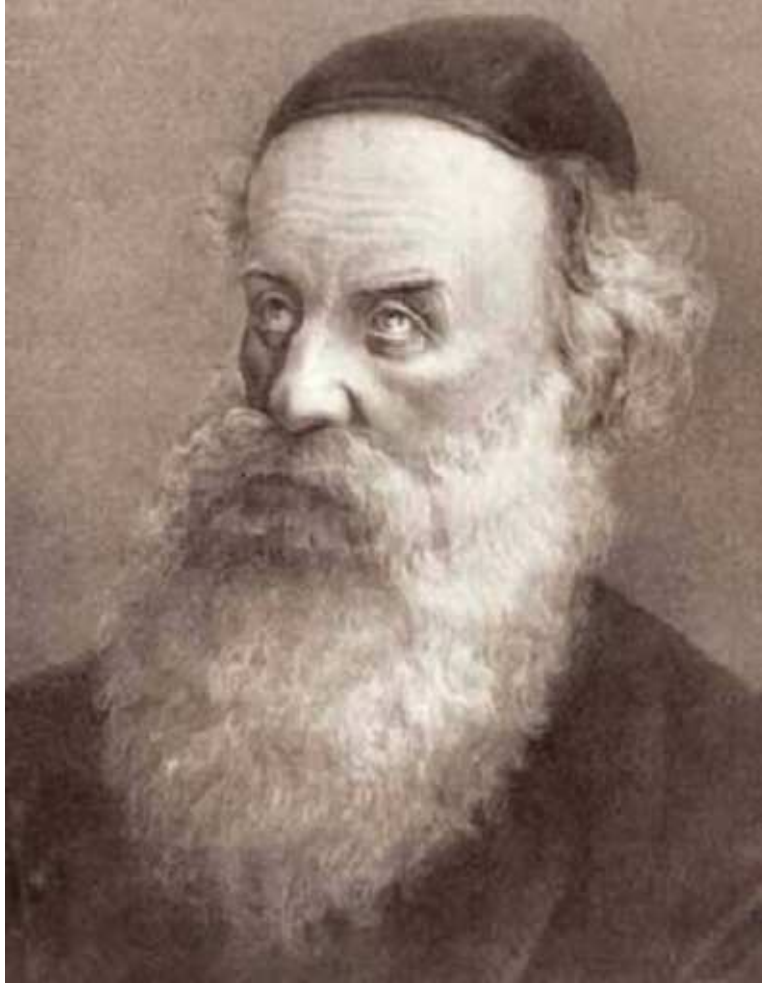
לפי הכוונה התכליתית אשר בהתיקון האחרון ולכן נעשה כ"ז מדעתם שהוא בנפש חפצה. והוא כמו שאמרו כל מעשה בראשית לדעתן נבראו לצביונם נבראו וכנ"ל. וזהו שאמר. ובחרו. כי עשו כ"ז בבחירתם שהוא בחפצם ורצונם.



WHICH LURIANIC KABBALAH?¹

Don Karr

https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/110196583/D.Karr.WHICH_LURIANIC_KABBALAH2024-libre.pdf?1704736697=&response-content-disposition=inline%3B+filename%3DWhich_Lurianic_Kabbalah.pdf&Expires=1708618152&Signature=R6OOAMGo5i1wXMA40TfQT4eDADGJjH-JJqWYvyeKO5jSfaz4DH84IoshqpR6Qc86rXZCAUg31Lg-EwASRWCFolsM2xsNa-71nf~hY-tERRf3L55z1N5kQ2XkRNqalN8~i7jqj9ZBhbndtleSE6CYbiquSOz20L6A8eM0uwnEvf8fVJU6O97ae04nE-EY-ovQhHqb9hd-IZ8HgykL6PAb-vVKAGnXvbWRt1vl4Tlee~f0arKMCxN-5r~zAv~598S9nyCeGgJZ-4rgTNkKvkNoH~JH~IO39qkmydHhsg402KfEG7wFPKYKhwr3JkJPPhCNvaRSomBLXxZcraThvHI0fhw__&Key-Pair-Id=APKAJLOHF5GGSLRBV4ZA



The Doctrine of “Tzimtzum Shelo Kepshuto” and Its Power

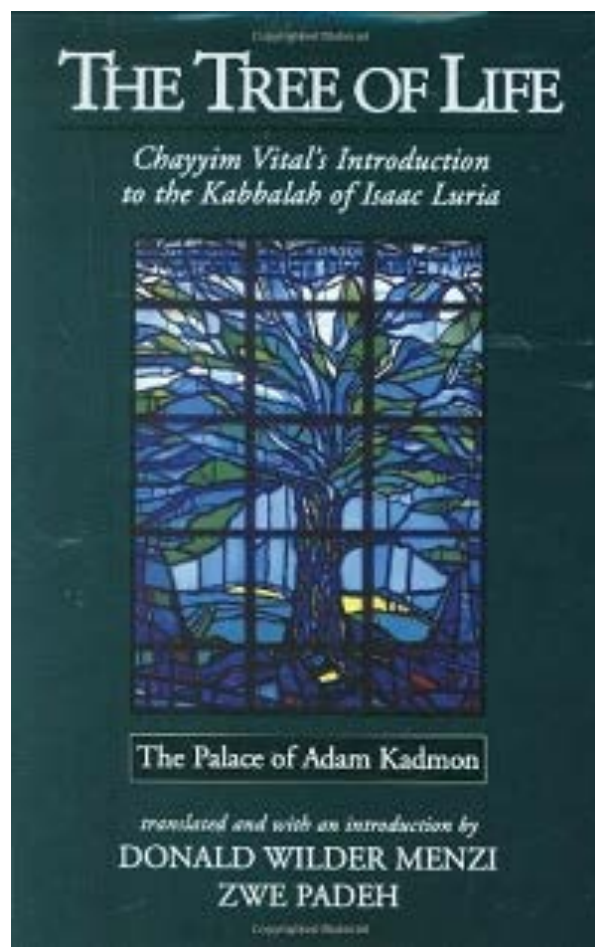
Prof. Tamar Ross writes:⁴

Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, founder and first Rebbe of Chabad, 1745 -1812
Luria was primarily a visionary. The power of his mythic teachings lay in their symbolic ramifications rather than in their discursive logic. Nevertheless,

⁴ <https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-doctrine-of-tzimtzum-shelo-kepshuto-and-its-power>

some of his more philosophically inclined students queried the viability of *Tzimtzum* when taken literally.^[1]

Luria may have couched his description of divine contraction with repeated caveats of “as if” and “as it were” (*kivyakhol*), acknowledging that all talk of movement and change in the *Ein sof* refers to spiritual rather than physical processes. This, however, did not dispel the qualms of some of Luria’s disciples regarding the very legitimacy of speaking of a “before” and “after” when referring to a timeless deity, or of attributing to such a sublimely spiritual Being any element of change. Others also raised doubts regarding the possibility of any space that could be emptied of God’s infinite and all-pervading presence. Such reservations led to the development of what eventually became known in the secondary literature as “the allegorical interpretation of the doctrine of *Tzimtzum*”, (or as the kabbalists themselves termed it: *Tzimtzum shelo kepshto*).



The Tree of Life: The Palace of Adam Kadmon – Chayyim Vital's Introduction to the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria

According to the first expositors of *Tzimtzum shelo kepshuto*, the original Lurianic doctrine of *Tzimtzum* should not be understood literally as a real displacement and the creation of an actual void within the *Ein-sof*, but rather as the establishment of a world of appearances, in which God's infinity is represented in finite proportions capable of being grasped by finite minds.

According to this understanding, God's monolithic unity before creation and after creation remains exactly the same; ontologically nothing has changed. But as a result of the spontaneous activity of the divine life, there ensued a covering over or concealment of some aspect of God's all-pervasive presence, thereby engendering an illusory realm of appearance. This so-called metaphoric "withdrawal" enables the epistemological distinction between subject and object, creator and created being, perceiver and perceived, and allows various elements of God's infinity to view themselves as separate entities, despite the fact that ontologically they remain merged with the whole.

By way of illustration, the act of divine *tzimtzum* was likened by some to the situation of a teacher who conceals the full scope of his knowledge so that some limited portion of it may be revealed to his student. Just as the wisdom of the teacher is unaffected by this concealment, so too all forms of existence gain a sense of their selfhood as a result of the hiding of God's all-pervasive presence, yet God's all-embracing monolithic unity remains the same. All appearances of diversity and particularization – while real enough – are swallowed up by His infinite unity, just as drops of water are contained by the sea and indistinguishable from the surrounding waters.

While the allegorical interpretation of *Tzimtzum*, and its sharp swing to a position of near pantheism, once again served to resolve difficulties of a theological nature, it raised new religious problems on a more practical plane. Proponents of this view might easily conclude that if all that distinguishes between Creator and created being is the illusion of selfhood, truly the unity

between man and God is but a hair's breadth away. All that is required is a switch of consciousness, and voila – *unio mystica* is achieved!

In contradistinction to this tantalizing possibility, one of the natural corollaries of Jewish monotheism and God's transcendence is the notion of divine command. Conceiving of God as a Supreme Being who reveals the divine will in the form of concrete laws encourages the sanctification of a this-worldly ethic as the most sublime expression of worship. A life of law, however, mandates the premise of a diversified, multifarious world, differentiating between holy and profane, good, and evil, and recognizing a hierarchy of clearly distinct entities and values. This stands in sharp contrast to the mystic understanding of God as an infinite, monolithic unity in which all binaries are dissolved.

In response to this threat of anti-nomism, there arose amongst Lithuania Jewry of the 18th and 19th century two new developments of Lurianic Kabbala, which on the one hand accepted the allegorical interpretation of the doctrine of *Tzimtzum* but on the other hand strove to stem its nihilistic effects. I refer here to the Hassidic movement, particularly in its *Habad* version – as developed by R. Shneur Zalman of Lyadi, and to the ideology of its opponents, the *Mitnagdim*, as explicated by R. Hayim of Volozhin, one of the most prominent disciples of R. Elijah Kremer, the Gaon of Vilna.^[2]

The bitter exchanges between the leaders of both movements have already become legion in the annals of Jewish history and to some extent continue to this day. What is less popularly known is that the *Hassidim* and the *Mitnagdim* were in fundamental agreement with regard to their central theological conception, illustrating the fact that minor differences between protagonists sharing a basically similar worldview are often experienced far more acutely than the differences between camps that are farther removed.

Common to both the *Hassidim* and the *Mitnagdim* was the notion of three levels of consciousness, which in effect represent three levels of existence. The first, or highest level, which I will dub Stage One, consists of all that there is, and as such, defies definition. Even the attribute "God" as applied here is inadequate, as this would imply comparison with something else. From the vantage point of creation as a separate entity, however, two other levels of perception can be spoken of.

Stage Two seeks to describe how we, as perceiving creatures, imagine that God relates to the world from God's point of view (*mitzido*). In other words,

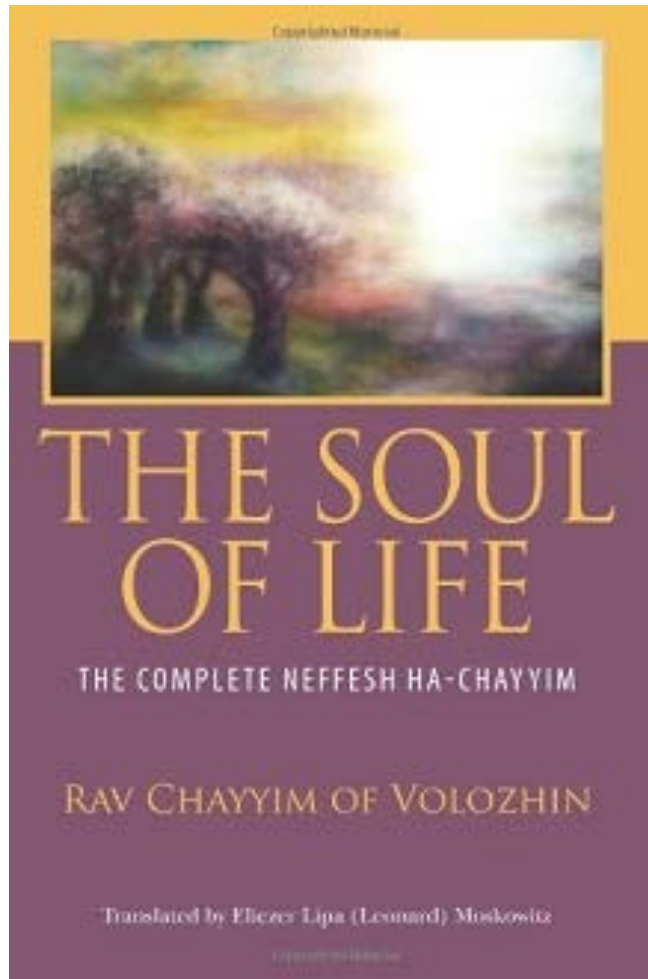
Stage Two explores how we might articulate the essentially ineffable reality of Stage One in words. Finally, Stage Three defines how we, as perceiving creatures, see God's relationship to the world from our point of view (*mitzideinu*).

The *Hassidim* and the *Mitnagdim* agreed (with a few reservations) regarding the ineffability of Stage One.^[3] They also agreed that Stage Two (how we, from our illusory vantage point of separate existence, conceptualize God's relationship to the world from God's point of view) is essentially a position of semi-a cosmic pantheism. What this term means to convey is that if we stretch our imaginations beyond the limits of our perception, we can hypothetically posit that from God's point of view, God's existence is all-inclusive, so that from God's perspective, there *is* no reality other than God.

The main point of difference between the *Hassidim* and the *Mitnagdim*, was their understanding of Stage Three – how we perceive God's relationship to the world from our point of view. Since it is this perspective that dictates the nature and ultimate objective of religious worship, one may readily understand why this difference was the cause of the great acrimony that ensued between the two movements.

According to R. Shneur Zalman of Lyadi, although the light of the *Ein sof* fills all worlds so that nothing is void of God's presence, the concealment of that light in our this-worldly reality is also absolute. The very delineation of our world (in contradistinction to God) renders the derivative ray of light which sustains it as qualitatively different in essence from the monolithic unity from which it stems. For this reason, God's reality from our point of view is not only "more", but also "other" in substance.

Precisely because nothing of God's absolute and infinite unity filters down to our world, the highest object of the religious life is to pierce our illusory sense of separate existence, and merge – to whatever extent possible – with that undifferentiated unity which is God's. This is accomplished by drawing that unity into this world, ^[4] eradicating its "reality" by eradicating our false sense of independent selfhood. The life of *halakha*, which combines spirit and matter in the study of Torah and performance of *mitzvot*, is an important tool in this endeavor, but its ultimate arena is the world at large.



Nefesh Ha-Chayyim: Rav Chayyim of Volozhin

R. Hayim of Volozhin, by contrast, contended that the distancing of our world from God's monolithic unity via the metaphoric act of withdrawal is actually a dual process. The hiding of God's infinity is indeed a result of the metaphoric act of *tzimtzum*. Nevertheless, the fact that the derivative ray of light emanating from that infinity appears to us as a plurality of descending gradations is not due to any essential property of the ray itself (whose concealment could, in principle, also appear as "uniform in all places") but rather to the manner in which it is perceived. ^[5] Hence, while the substantive relationship between God's absolute existence and any aspect of our created remains, we both "cannot and are also forbidden" to dwell upon the "awesome matter" of God's all-pervasive presence".^[6] Rather than strive for dramatic shifts in consciousness on the earthly plane, the task of the faithful is to worship God in accordance with reality as it appears to us, confident that through the study of Torah and practical observance of *halakha* we fortify the

ontological connection between the final and lowest point of God's manifestation in this world and its infinite source. R. Hayim of Volozhin likens awareness of the higher dimension of reality to embers of fire; as background warmth such knowledge can serve a positive function in fueling our devotion, but if approached too closely we face the danger of being consumed.^[7]

What may appear to lay eyes as abstruse theological nitpicking is actually a serious attempt on the part of both the *Hassidim* and the *Mitnagdim* to overcome a tension even more evident than in classical Kabbala between the conflicting religious sensibilities of pantheism and theism. Both the *Hassidim* and the *Mitnagdim* do this by developing a very intricate and finely tuned conceptual scheme that will allow these two incompatible bedfellows to somehow lie peacefully together. Emphasis on various forms of distinction between God's point of view and ours enabled them to hold on to the view of the unlimited reality, which is God's, without the threat to normative *halakha* which acceptance of God's ultimate unity would seem to entail.

More significant for our purposes, however, is the fact that in spelling out this version of the allegorical interpretation of the doctrine of *tzimtzum*, both the *Mitnagdim* and the *Hassidim* appropriate in Kabbalistic idiom a critical/subjectivist theory of knowledge which bears striking similarity to Kant's "Copernican" revolution in the realm of epistemology, as referred to above.^[8]

As already noted by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook,^[9] the distinction that the allegorical interpreters of the doctrine of *tzimtzum* made between God's point of view and ours served for these latter-day Kabbalists much the same function that the distinction between the noumenon and the phenomenal world did for Kant.^[10] There is, however, one critical difference. Whereas Kant was uncertain with regard to the nature of the noumenon, the skepticism of the latter day Kabbalists was directed towards the reality of this world and its perceptions. Despite its inherent inscrutability, for the kabbalists, the truth of God's infinite unity constituted the one absolute certainty. As R. Eliyahu Dessler, the 20th century proponent of the modern Musar movement, expressed it:

The definition of [God's] unique unity expressed as "there is none but Him alone" cannot be grasped inherently from within creation, for this aspect of God's uniqueness implies that creation does not really exist [i.e., "there

is *nothing* but Him alone“]. The world was created through [divine self-] contraction and concealment of that truth, and the reality of creation can be perceived only from within creation itself – that is to say, following, and within, that self-contraction – and its reality is only in and of itself, relative to itself.....It follows that all our understandings are only relative to creation. They are only within and in respect to creation, in accordance with our concepts, which are also created. We possess only relative truth, each one in accordance with his station and condition.^[11]

Under such circumstances, it would appear that not only the reality of creation, but even that of a personal, finite God who reveals Himself to an entity that is other than He, makes sense only from within the concealed and illusory state of *tzimtzum*. Indeed, when relating to the distinction between the Jewish view and that of Kant, R. Kook (whose entire worldview is also predicated on the assumption of *tzimtzum shelo kepshuto*)^[12] explicitly debunks the notion of an infinity capable of being grasped (אין סוף מושג) as a logical contradiction in terms. He goes so far as to claim that this concept could only have stemmed from a descendant of idolaters, such as Kant.^[13] Nevertheless, it was precisely their faith in this mystic equation of God with infinity that led the allegorical interpreters of *tzimtzum* to develop a more charitable view of the relationship between language and metaphysics, or human truth-claims and divine reality that is germane to our discussion.

Notes:

1. For an initial formulation of this interpretation, see Joseph Ergas, *Shomer Emunim* (Hebrew), second polemic, pp. 34, 39.
2. For primary sources explicating the allegorical interpretation of *Tzimtzum*, as applied in Habad Hassidic and Mitnaggedic ideology, see *Likkutei Amarim* (Hebrew) by R. Shneur Zalman of Lyadi and *Nefesh Ha-Hayim* (Hebrew) by R. Hayim of Volozhin, respectively. For further discussion of the two views, see Rachel Elijor, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God: The Kabbalistic Theosophy of Habad Hasidism*, trans. Jeffrey M. Green (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), pp. 79-91 and Norman Lamm, *Torah for Torah's Sake in the Works of Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin and His Contemporaries* (Hoboken: Ktav/Yeshiva University, 1989). Regarding finer points of difference between them, see Tamar Ross, "Two Interpretations of the Doctrine of Zimzum: Hayim of Volozhin and Shneur Zalman of Lyadi", *Mehkarei Yerushalayim B'machshevet Yisrael*(Hebrew) 2, Jerusalem, 1981, pp. 153-169.
3. For explication of these subtle differences, see Ross, "Two Interpretations", pp. 159-162.
4. It is important to note that even in his most pantheistic formulations, R. Shneur Zalman applied brakes to the unio mystica ideal, by distinguishing between drawing the original divine light into

this world and immersion in its Source, regarding the latter possibility as beyond the pale – see Ross, “Two Interpretations”, p. 165

5. *Nefesh Ha-hayim, Shaar gimmel*, chapter 7
6. *Nefesh Ha-hayim, Shaar gimmel*, chapter 6
7. *Nefesh ha-Hayim, Shaar gimmel*, chapter 4; see also *ibid*, chapter 8.
8. “The trading of the medieval notion that man’s perceptions revolve around some fixed reality, for the modern notion that this reality, far from being fixed, is filtered and shaped by the mind perceiving it” *Supra* section VIII. It is instructive to note that Immanuel Kant was born in 1724, a year before R. Shneur Zalman of Lyadi, and twenty-five years before the birth of R. Hayim of Volozhin, providing room for speculation regarding shared sources of inspiration.
9. See *Iggrot ha-Reayah I* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1985), pp. 47-48, where R. Kook applies this observation to the Kabbala at large, declaring:

“It is true, and we [Jews] have always known it – and we did not need Kant to reveal this secret to us – that all human cognitions are relative and subjective.”

Kook then proceeds to interpret the significance of *Malkhut*, (the lowest of the ten sefirotic manifestations of *Ein Sof*, which is depicted by classical Kabbala as an empty vessel that bears no light of its own), as corresponding to the function of Kant’s categories of thought in mediating and filtering raw experience. For closer analysis of this passage and its claims, see Tamar Ross, “The Cognitive Value of Religious Truth Statements: Rabbi A.I. Kook and Postmodernism”, in *Hazon Nahum*, edited by Yaakov Elman and Jeffrey S. Gurock, (Hoboken : Ktav/Yeshiva University Press, 1997), pp. 487-488.

10. In Kant’s philosophy, a “noumenon” is the thing in itself, not how it is known by the senses. A “phenomenon”, however, is how the object is known or perceived.
11. Eliyahu Dessler, *Mikhtav Me-Eliyahu III* (London: Honig and Sons, 1955), pp. 256-257
12. For further amplification, see: “The Concept of G-d in the Thought of Harav Kook” (Hebrew), Part I, *Daat* (Hebrew) 8, Bar Ilan University, Summer 1982, pp. 109-128; Part II, *Daat* Winter 1983, pp. 39-70; “The Lurianic Doctrine of *Tzimtzum* in the Writings of Harav Kook” (Hebrew), in *Mechkarim b’Hagut Yehudit*, edited by Moshe Idel and Sarah Heller-Wilensky (Jerusalem, Magnes Press, 1989), pp.159-172.



Tzimtzum I-

Chabad - Tzimtzum - literal or figurative? ⁵

This is a translation of a letter the Lubavitcher Rebbe wrote regarding tzimtzum. It was a strong criticism of Rav Dessler's understanding of the doctrine which he learned from a Chabad chasid and which is published in Michtav M'Eliyahu IV page 324.

Rav Dessler asserts that there was in fact no disagreement between the Gra and the Baal HaTanya regarding tzimtzum.

Tzimtzum II -

Gra vs. Baal HaTanya/Lubavitcher Rebbe's explanation⁶

⁵ <https://daattorah.blogspot.com/2008/08/chabad-tzimtzum-literal-or-figurative.html>

⁶ <https://daattorah.blogspot.com/2008/08/tzimtzum-gra-vs-baal-hatanyalubavitcher.html>

ובספרו של וולנסקי מודפס קטע אפילו יותר חריף בשם הגר"א

רדו לעמק יהושפט לעומקא דדינא לבער הקוצים מכרם בית ה' צבאות כל בני ישראל להדפם ולרודפם ברדיפות מלאות הזעם להחרימם ולעקור שרשם בנפשם ומאדם, לעקור אותם ולשרש אתהם כדין עבודה זרה. צא תאמר להם. הכנס אל תאמר להם, המה הקהל מורידין ולא מעלין לדכאם ולמוגגם כמוך לפני מים ולהתאמץ להפרידם איש מאחיו לבלי יתחברו ויתקשרו יחד חבר בוגדים ומנגדים נגד דת תוה"ק ובכל מקום שהם מצויים לשלחם מן המחנה כדין צרוע וזב

ואני על משמרת אעמודה כמאז כן עתה... ועל כל מי אשר בשם ישראל יכונה ואשר נגע יראת ה' בלבבו מוטל עליו להדפם ולרודפם בכל מיני רדיפות ולהכניעם עד שיד ישראל מגעת כי עוונם טמון בחבם וכי קשים המה לישראל כספחת

אמוני בני ישראל החרדים לשמוע בקול דברו. תצא אש קנאתם ומצאו קוצים כסוחים נתנו לאכלה, יכלו אותם מכרם ה' צבאות העם בחר לנחלה לו, אם ללצים יליצו יריצו גולגלותם. מכנים עצמם בשם חסידים, חסד היא. לא יחמול עליהם איש ולא יחנם, ולתת עדת חנף גלמוד, והשומע להם ימתח על העמדה. לבשו קנאת ה' ויצא רשף לרגליכם, מפיהם לפידיים יהיו בלהט החרב נוקמת נקם ברית ותורה נוקמת, והנשארים יראו וישמחו, כי שמחה לצדיק עשות משפט ולפועלי אוון מחיתה, ה' יחישנה בעיתה. נאום עורך שוע בצר נפשו, כי רע עליו המעשה, המקנא קנאתו ואליו הוא נושא את נפשו, אלי' במוהר"ר שלמה זלמן זלה"ה

Number 11

This letter was addressed to Rabbi Yerachmiel Benjaminson, a distinguished Rabbi from London. Reference to it is found in Marbitzei Torah U'Mussar, Vol. III, p. 66.

B"H, 19 Shvat, 5699, Paris

Greetings and blessings,

The letter with the enclosed \$28 arrived on time.

With regard to your comments concerning the tzimtzum, [the initial contraction of G-dly light,] and the statement of your acquaintance that all the different approaches [to the concept] flow in a single direction:

I was amazed to hear such a proposition, particularly inasmuch as in your letter, you describe that person as one who has studied Kabbalistic texts. Obviously, he does not fit that description at all. Even in the first generation after the AriZal - the one who revealed the secret of the tzimtzum - there were radical differences in opinion among his disciples with regard to the tzimtzum. These are obvious from the texts they composed, and these differences were perpetuated [in the subsequent generations].

The crux of the differences centers around two issues:

- a. Should the concept of tzimtzum be understood literally or not, i.e., are we speaking about a withdrawal of the light, or merely its concealment?
- b. Did the tzimtzum affect merely G-d's light, or did it affect also the Source of light, [i.e., that He Himself has withdrawn or is hidden from our world]?

[In dealing with these questions,] it is possible to outline four different approaches:

- a. the tzimtzum should be interpreted literally, and moreover, that it affected G-d's essence. The proof offered in defense of this theory is that it is impossible for the King to be found in a place of filth, Heaven forbid;
- b. the tzimtzum should be interpreted literally, but that it affected only His light;
- c. the tzimtzum should not be interpreted literally, but it affected the Source of light as well; and
- d. the tzimtzum should not be interpreted literally, and it affected only His light.

As is well known, the misnagdim at the time of the Alter Rebbe followed the first approach mentioned. They explained the expression,^[1] "There is no place apart from Him," meaning - apart from His providence.^[2] They said, moreover, that the approach which states that G-d's essence is found everywhere contradicts the laws applying to [the restrictions against prayer and Torah study] in places of filth,^[3] as reflected in the notices and proclamations which were circulated at the time of the Baal Shem Tov and the Alter Rebbe.

See also the references to the issue in Shaar HaYichud VehaEmunah, ch. 7, and Iggeres HaKodesh, the conclusion of Epistle 25. It appears to me that Beis Rebbe also includes a letter from the Alter Rebbe concerning this subject.[4]

[Reb Chayim of Volozin,] the author of Nefesh HaChayim which you mentioned in your letter, follows the third approach mentioned above. In this, he differs from his master, the Gaon, Rav Eliyahu [of Vilna]. In general, it appears that Reb Chayim of Volozin had seen Chabad texts, in particular, the Tanya, and had been influenced by them. I do not, however, have definite proof of this.

[As chassidim,] we follow solely the fourth approach mentioned which explains that the concept of tzimtzum should not be interpreted literally, and that it affects only [G-d's] light, but not the Source of light. [Indeed, within the light,] it affects only the lowest level of the light which existed before the tzimtzum, as explained in the texts and manuscripts of Chabad [teachings].

ספר

יושר לבב

שחברתי אני

הצעיר **עמנואל חי בן לאיא אברהם רוקי תנצבה**
 מה ארם צובה כעממיים משנת הסידים בשנת בלו
 אמת לפיק תעשיתי המהרניא כנרא מה ירושלים תוכיב.

גלל בתוכו:

טרפס הלב סידוש הסוקים שהעוני לחבר ספר זה.
קנה הלב סידוש הסוקים שהעיר הרססת ספר זה.
שני בתי הלב בית ראשון ובית שני.
סדקי הלב חדר א' חדר ב'.

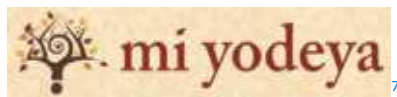
חדר א'	ורידו הלב	חדר ב'
א' צמזום עצמותו כ' סוקים	א' דרך החלנחה . י"א סוקים	ב' חדר האותיות י"ו
ג' בריאות הפרגוסים כ"ג	ב' כח זמורה . י"ג	ד' שודש הנשמות ד'
ה' סדקי הלב	ג' ידעת העבודה . י	ו' תהמה הפעולה ט"ו
ז' סוקים	ד' תהמה הפעולה ט"ו	ט"ז סוקים.

און ישן הלב שלא ידן על סדק לחבינו עד שיקרא במ תבירו הראוי לו.
 און ששאל הלב שידקדק בדכרו ולא יזדעזע אחריום עד שידק מוצאם
 ומבאם.

זעתה נרמס סדרש על די **אברהם ליינצייג** מקישאנוב.

For example, Yosher Levav (the author of the Mishnas Chassidim) wrote that it is based on both logic (that it is disgraceful for Hashem to be found in a dirty place) and because it is also what the Arizal taught him.

This Mahlokes ultimately seems to stem from an earlier Mahlokes between Rabeinu Yosef Gikatelia (Shaarei Orah) and the Rashash (the Kabbalist). The SO holds that Keser of Atzilus (Keser Elyon) is the Ein Sof Himself and the Rashash holds that Keser of Atzilus is the Ohr of the Ein Sof.



The doctrine of tzimtzum teaches that HaShem contracted Himself to create a space within which to create creation. "Prior to Creation, there was only the infinite Or Ein Sof filling all existence. When it arose in G-d's Will to create worlds and emanate the emanated ... He contracted (in Hebrew "tzimtzum") Himself in the point at the center, in the very center of His light. He restricted that light, distancing it to the sides surrounding the central point, so that there remained a void, a hollow empty space, away from the central point ... After this tzimtzum ... He drew down from the Or Ein Sof a single straight line [of light] from His light surrounding [the void] from above to below [into the void], and it chained down descending into that void. ... In the space of that void He emanated, created, formed, and made all the worlds. — Etz Chaim, Arizal, Heichal A"K, anaf 2".

This teaching directly contradicts Malachi 3.6 which states that "HaShem does not change." That is, before creation all there was HaShem. Since creation all there is HaShem (Ayn Od Milvado); that is, HaShem is Eternally the same at all times and in all places. There is also the passuk (verse) Tehillim 90.1 "A Prayer of Moses the man of G-D. Lord, thou hast been our dwelling-place in all generations."

Shlomo Elyashiv writes: "I have also seen some very strange things in the words of some contemporary kabbalists who explain things deeply. They say that all of existence is only an illusion and appearance and does not truly exist.

⁷ <https://judaism.stackexchange.com/questions/125693/is-someone-who-believes-in-the-doctrine-of-tzimtzum-a-heretic>

This is to say that the ein sof didn't change at all in itself and its necessary true existence and it is now still exactly the same as it was before creation, and there is no space empty of Him, as is known (see Nefesh Ha-Chaim Shaar 3)."

First, the Tzimtzum is a mere expounding of Midrash Temura 1.5 that tries to explain the wording of the blessing "ברוך כבוד ה' ממקומו" - what does it mean "from His place"?

"אנשי לשכת הגזית קוראין אותו מקומו של עולם ולא העולם מקומו"
([Members of the Sanhedrin] call Him "in which the world is placed" and not "placed IN the world".

So what does it mean "God is where the world is placed"?

The early Platonic and Aristotelian idea of God's omnipresence (c.400BCE), pronounced in Rambam's Yesodey Hatora (c.1200CE), goes beyond the classic Biblical idea of God being simultaneously everywhere, as described in Psalms: "If I ascend to heaven, you are there; If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.", and sees God as a transcendental entity that "permeated everywhere before the world was created".

That posed a question of where could our world be created if God is one and "infinite"? The Tzimtzum approach provides a theory - God "created a hole in Himself" that became our "space".

Tzimtzum is to be understood literally.

Rav Amnuel Chai Ricki - Yosher Levav (Bayis Rishon, Cheder Rishon, 13-20/ Bayis Sheni, Cheder Rishon, 5). Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv - Leshem Shevo V'achaloma (Chelek Ha'biurim, Derushei Igulim V'yosher, Intro, 2).

Tzimtzum is a metaphor for concealment.

Rav Avraham Ben Ha'Rambam - Commentary on Chumash (Yisro, 20, 3). Rabeinu Bachya - Commentary on Chumash (Bereishis, 1, 1). Rav Yosef Irgas - Shomer Emunim Hakadmon (Vikuach Sheni). Rav Moshe Chayim Luzzato - Klach Pischei Chochmah (24). Rav Shneur Zalman of Liadi - Tanya (Shaar Hayichud V'emunah, 7). Rav Chayim of Volozhin - Nefesh Ha'chayim (3,8).

Depending on what you mean by Tsimtsum, which in itself is a very slippery concept of which to get clear explanation.

The position of most Kabbalists are consistently linking the "contraction" to God himself, implying change in him. It's still a complicated subject.

In his **Da'at Elokim**, R'Kook was correct in his rejection of Spinozist pantheism, which insisted God is equal with nature. However in his Orot haKodesh, he continued to be marred by the insistence that the world is *inside* God, while not being contained by it.

The same problem applies to the Alter Rebbe (and many other Hasidic groups beyond Lubavitch), as well as R'Kook, is that God's infinity goes outward into the world. It isn't corporealism *per se*, but it is not correct.

This is a faulty understanding of what "infinity" means in the context of our human existence, as well as that of God.

In the view of classical Jewish philosophy, as explained by giants such as R'Hai Gaon, R'Saadia Gaon, R'Abraham ibn Daud, R'Bahya ibn Pakuda and haRambam, God is completely unlike anything in this world. Godly transcendence involves a complete negation of all aspects of worldly existence, such as composite unity, spatio-temporal location, and ontological "presence" in matter.

God's "infinity" preceded all space, so those who say he is "hosting" the world "inside of him," is a faulty misapplication of our own human cognitive categories.

Rasag explicitly says in Emunot veDe'ot that God didn't create the world from his own "essence," but made it all anew. That is a defining aspect of Rabbinic Torah, even before the alleged influence of Aristotle on later Jewish thinkers.

However, there are some interpretations of Tsimtsum that are not problematic in this regard. The Gaon of Vilna himself said that the contraction was of the "process of the creation of the world," and not God himself. (*Perush haGRa leSafra haZeniutha*)

This is a fancy way of saying **"VeYekhulu haShamayyim veHaAretz..."**

Echoing Rasag, HaGra additionally said that God's glory in the world is not equal to him, and that all seeming "divine manifestations" in this world are

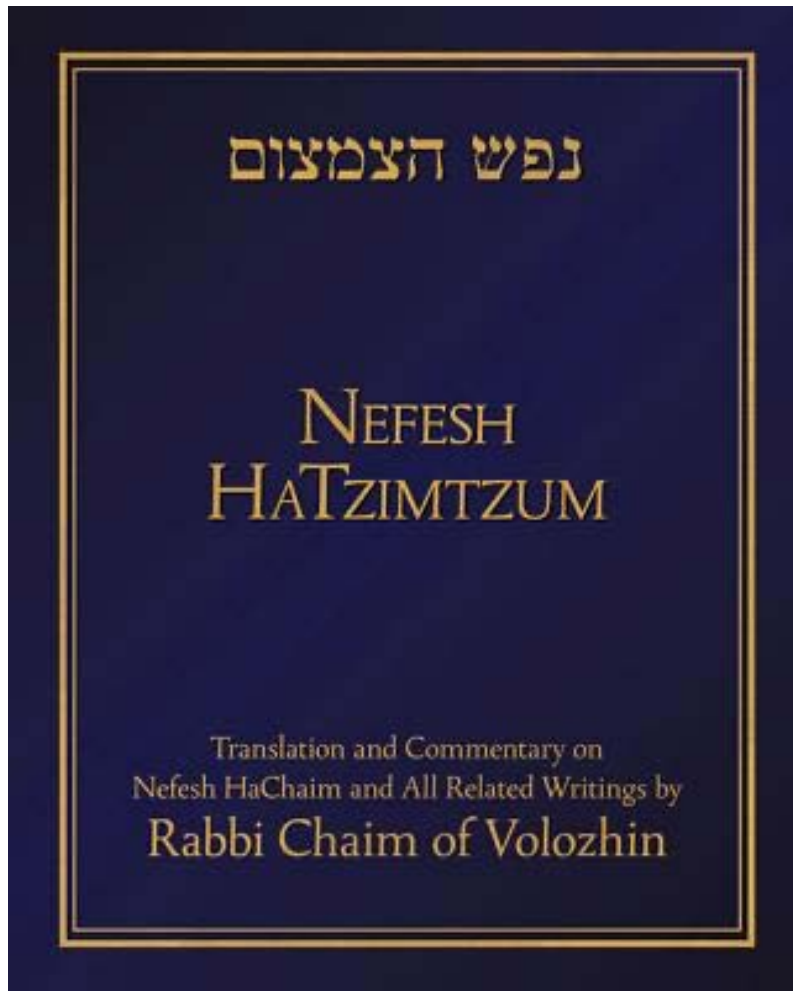
based on God's sovereignty over all parts of the world. (*Biur haGra leSefer haZohar*)

To use an analogy found in the Torah, like the beauty of a book attests to the genius of its author, without it literally containing him.

That is how one should best understand the idea of "omnipresence," that God controls all of creation equally. His will is dissimulated by the laws of nature.

Many might push back, citing the verses that say "En Od Milvado," but that is also incorrect. Targum Onkelos and many Midrashim explicitly interpret these verses as implying that God is the only worshipful being, no others exist.

Additionally, when Yirmiyahu haNavi says that God "fills heaven and earth," many midrashim indicate that the "filling" was **only** the filling of heaven in the creation of the moon and the stars.



Nefesh HaTzimtzum, Volume 2: Understanding Nefesh HaChaim through the Key Concept of Tzimtzum and Related Writings

Avinoam Fraenkel writes:⁸

The Baal HaTanya⁹

The Baal HaTanya's position in respect of where the Tzimtzum process took place is very clearly stated:

⁸ <https://avinoamfraenkel.com/>

⁹ <https://zoboko.com/text/jvy6gdxe/nefesh-hatzimtzum-volume-2-understanding-nefesh-hachaim-through-the-key-concept-of-tzimtzum-and-related-writings/37>

- In his Sefer HaTanya, he provides an outright definition of Tzimtzum and explicitly states that “Malchut *is* the characteristic of Tzimtzum” and that it “conceals the Ohr Ein
- Sefer HaTanya also defines Tzimtzum as being “Vessels” and therefore as Malchut as per the following explicit statement: “The level of Tzimtzum and concealed life force is referred to as ‘Vessels.’ The life force itself is referred to as ‘Light.’ Just as a Vessel conceals that which is within it, similarly the level of Tzimtzum conceals and hides the light and life force which is.
- The Baal HaTanya also explicitly refers to the Tzimtzum taking place in the “Vessels” of any world level, i.e., the level of Malchut which is the lowest Sefira of that world level as follows: “The concept of all of the Tzimtzum processes is to conceal the ‘Light’ so that it is clothed in the level of the ‘Vessels’ of the Ten
- Elsewhere he writes even more clearly that “the entire sequence of the cascading down [of all of the world levels] only occurred and was generated within the level of the characteristic of [God’s] Malchut . . . for even the Kav only extended through Tzimtzum and the empty space within the level of
- The Baal HaTanya refers to this point in a number of other places in his writings including the following “the bringing into being of all the worlds, the supernal and lower [worlds], and the power and life force which is clothed within them and causes them to be – extends from the level of the characteristic of ‘Your Malchut’ . . . for there to be an emanation of the Ohr Ein Sof on the level of His Malchut, there were many levels of

He further describes the Tzimtzum process occurring iteratively, cascading down through all the world levels with the different world level categories being differentiated by different forms of The Tzimtzum takes place within the Keter/Malchut interface between each higher and lower world which connects and creates each of the lower world God thereby fills all of the worlds and is manifest within them in a concealed way such that they can exist as separate finite entities in their own right without being The Tzimtzum process therefore initially occurs in the level of Malchut of the Ohr Ein Sof and recurs iteratively within the level of Malchut of each lower world.

In the light of all that has been explained in the previous chapters in relation to Malchut, these statements of the Baal HaTanya indisputably frame his approach to Tzimtzum in precisely the same context as that of the Vilna Gaon and the Leshem.

The Baal HaTanya explains that the concept of God’s removal as per the Zohar and as per the Arizal’s Tzimtzum, is not one of a real removal but rather is of a simultaneous concealment and revelation of the Ohr Ein He distinguishes between two concepts, the first of propagation from one place to another and the second of concealment and revelation. He explains that

with propagation, there is a change in state of the substance propagating. In contrast however with the process of concealment and revelation there is no change at all before and after the emanation of the Ohr Ein Sof and subsequent creation of All is analogously referred to as God's Speech reflected in the Ten Statements with which the world was This encapsulates the idea that while speech reveals aspects of concealed thoughts, it cannot capture the essence of the thought and conceals most of it in order to reveal the relevant aspect. Similarly, the process of emanation of the Ohr Ein Sof and creation is one of concealment in order to generate a simultaneous revelation, a concept which is loudly echoed in the writings of the Leshem as previously explained.

Detailed explanations are also provided by the Baal HaTanya of the Zohar's paradoxical statements that God is both "Memaleh Kol Almin" in that He fills all worlds, whereas, on the other hand, God is simultaneously "Sovev Kol Almin" in that He circumvents all in providing these explanations, the Baal HaTanya is describing the dual perspective of reality. From the perspective of the creations, he explains that God is "Memaleh Kol Almin" in that He is revealed in a diminished way, in physicality, through the concealment process of Tzimtzum. In contrast, from God's perspective, He is also "Sovev Kol Almin" in that He circumvents all of Creation and causes it all to exist.

As we have seen earlier, the key point in relation to the ideas of "Memaleh Kol Almin" and "Sovev Kol Almin" is the fact that there is a simultaneous relative perspective of reality from both God's perspective and the perspective of the creations. We also saw that the particular use of these terms in relation to a particular perspective purely depends on the context and they can potentially be used interchangeably.

This relative perspective provides the backdrop against which the Baal HaTanya provides a clear statement on the nature of reality. In his presentation of the creation of Yesh, this physical world, from Ayin, from he presents a detailed analogy which expresses a very deep understanding of the dual perspective of He explains that it is just the limitation of our physical perception which restricts our vision to only be able to relate to reality as physical and as Yesh. Were we, however, able to see things without this physical mask, then it would be clear to us that this same reality is Ayin. There is no change in reality itself as a result of the creation of Yesh from Ayin. There is only a change of our perception of reality such that we relate to it as Yesh instead of as Ayin.

It must be very clearly emphasized that the Baal HaTanya is not in any way suggesting that this physical world of Yesh is an illusion. He is saying that the Yesh and Ayin are the very same reality. It is just that from the perspective of the creations, the context of Ayin is not visible, and therefore, from our

perspective, that same reality appears to be Yesh – physical and separate from God.

He expresses this concept using an analogy of a particle of light which is within the ball of the sun. Relative to the ball of the sun, the particle of light is infinitesimally immaterial, of absolutely no consequence and is Ayin. However, relative to the particle of light, if it can view itself outside of its context of being within the ball of the sun, then its existence as a particle of light appears to have major consequence and existence as an independent entity. It therefore sees itself as Yesh. In this analogy, the ball of the sun is God and the particle of light is our entire physical Universe. Physical reality is therefore absolutely real and exists in the same way as it did before its creation. It is only that the Creation process concealed (and constantly continues to conceal) its Source such that our Universe is revealed as an entity in its own right and appears.

Therefore, when we talk of a dual perspective, it is of exactly and absolutely the same reality. From both God's perspective and the perspective of the creations, the essence and nature of reality is absolutely the same – it is just that from the perspective of the creations, the context of God is not seen and physical reality appears to be a separate existing entity in its own right.

The Baal HaTanya's grandson, the Tzemach clarifies his grandfather's position further by stating:

- . . . that the world and everything in it is nullified in existence to the extent that it is it does not exist and that only God exists alone. We are *not* saying that there is no world at all here, God.

In this passage, the Tzemach Tzedek uses the word "Ke'ilu" a number of times and additionally explicitly clarifies that the word "Ke'ilu" begins "with the letter *kaf* to signify the comparative similarity" to being non-existent "to the extent that it is just God alone that exists." The Tzemach Tzedek emphasizes that this world is very real and says that "God forbid" one should think otherwise. However, he explains that the fabric of reality is almost if "this world could be mistaken for being an illusion. With this he emphasizes the relative dual perspective of the same reality and that "relative to us, the many [levels of] Tzimtzum conceal [God]."

In summary, the Baal HaTanya held that:

- The Tzimtzum process only occurs in the level of Malchut of the Ohr Ein Sof. It also only occurs in the level of Malchut of all subsequent lower world levels.

- The Creation process is one of simultaneous concealment and revelation.
- God is entirely unchanged as a result of creating all of the worlds and that the creation created a dual perspective of reality without actually changing reality in any way.

It should now be obvious that both the Leshem's and the Vilna Gaon's position in respect of the Tzimtzum process and of the nature of reality, are entirely consistent with and share the same underlying principles as that of the Baal HaTanya.

Notwithstanding the Baal HaTanya's clear statement of his position, there are those who historically misinterpreted it to mean that as a result of everything being God, our perception of physical reality appearing to be something other than God is simply an illusion. Such a statement denies the relevance of the physical world and thereby undermines the entire fabric of Torah and Mitzvot which must be observed in this real physical world. Those who would ascribe to such an erroneous misunderstanding would have no compunction to literally compromise the required Halachic time or manner of physical performance of a Mitzvah if it meant that they would thereby generate some sort of personal feeling of increased inspirational fervor. There is no doubt that the Baal HaTanya would never advocate such malpractice and Halachic compromise and that he would consider those engaging in such practice to be entirely misguided and it is perhaps for this reason that the Tzemach Tzedek emphasizes that even though it is almost as if this world can be taken to be an illusion, "God forbid" that it is so and that this physical world is absolutely real.

Nefesh HaChaim

Before getting into some of the details of the Nefesh HaChaim, it is instructive to carefully examine R. Chaim's use of the word "Atzmut/Essence" and of the term "Ein Sof." As mentioned earlier, it is not possible to talk about God's Atzmut/Essence at all. It is not even possible to talk of the Ein Sof which is an emanation from God's Essence. Furthermore, it is only possible to talk of the aspect of the Ein Sof which is engaged in and connected to the Creation. Various Kabbalists use the terminology of "Atzmut" and "Ein Sof " differently, and some simply equate "Atzmut" and "Ein Sof " as being the same thing, as to all intents and purposes, from our point of view, it is the same thing. This also applies to the use of the terminology of "Ein Sof " and "Ohr Ein Sof " where both expressions are often used. R. Chaim defines his use of terminology in a number of places.

He states that the expression "Essence of the Unified Adon Yachid" or the alternative expression "Essence of the Master of Adon Kol" is the "Ein Sof" and explains that no thought or name can grasp or describe this level except for the miniscule way in which it is connected to the It is this definition in particular which is relevant to us as we know that the point at which God begins to be connected to the worlds is within Malchut of the Ein Sof. This point of connection is, of course, the starting point of the Tzimtzum process. Therefore, R. Chaim's mention of "Atzmut Adon Yachid" and "Atzmut Adon Kol" in this context are direct references to Malchut of the Ein in other places, he uses other expressions using the word "Atzmut," e.g., "Ohr Atzmut Light of His Unified Essence" to refer to the "Ein Sof".

While R. Chaim does not explicitly state that the details of the Tzimtzum process occurred within the level of Malchut of the Ein Sof, he does however indirectly refer to this fact in the following places:

1. A description is given of the Arizal's Tzimtzum process as revealing the as explained earlier, the "Vessels" form the material substance of each lower world level in the Creation process. These "Vessels" are therefore only ever formed within the level of Malchut of any world level. In particular, when the Arizal talks of the *concealment* which takes place within the "empty a process which revealed the "Vessels," he is specifically referring to the level of Malchut within, as R. Chaim puts it, the *Atzmut* " i.e., the Ein Sof.
2. Reference is also made to the Vessels in the context of the relative perspective of the Names of the name "YHVH" is described as relating to God's perspective and "Elokim" as relating to our perspective. It is specifically YHVH which does not change as a result of the Creation. However, R. Chaim quotes the Tikkunei Zohar which explains that "Elokim," our perspective, relates to the "changes in the Vessels," i.e., that change as a result of the Creation only occurs within "Vessels," which is a specific reference to the level of Malchut.
3. In describing the very highest level of God that a person can possibly contemplate when reciting the Shema and declaring God's Unity, R. Chaim queries the Talmud's enigmatic and apparently contradictory usage of the concept of Malchut/Kingship in relation to that level of He mentions, without elaborating, that this is not just Malchut/Kingship, but is referring to the specific level of Malchut/Kingship of the Ein Sof. Moreover, he highlights that Malchut of the Ein Sof is the place that the Arizal identifies as where God's *initial thought* related to the Creation occurred. In the context of our discussions, we know that as the level of Malchut of the Ein Sof is the starting point of the Tzimtzum process, it

is the point of initiation of God's interaction with the worlds and therefore the highest possible describable aspect of God about which a human can declare His Unity.

In contrast to the above veiled references to the Tzimtzum process only occurring within Malchut and being initiated in the level Malchut of the Ein Sof, R. Chaim's description of relative reality is very explicitly stated and explained in detail throughout the Third Gateway of Nefesh HaChaim.

R. Chaim explains the Zohar's relative statement that from God's perspective, He fills the worlds and is "Memaleh Kol Almin," and from our perspective, He circumvents the worlds and is "Sovev Kol He maps this relative perspective to the Tzimtzum concept by associating the term "Tzimtzum" with God's perspective and the term "Kav" with our perspective. Although highlighting this dual perspective, R. Chaim very explicitly emphasizes that this is a dual perspective of a single reality, that God is absolutely unchanged as a result of the Creation and that the Creation does not change God's reality in any way, but only changes our perception of that. In addition, he repeats this statement of dual perspective in the context of God's Names of YHVH and Elokim. He relates YHVH to God's perspective and Elokim to our perspective. However, notwithstanding this relative difference, it is simultaneously true that "YHVH *is* Elokim," just like the Tzimtzum and Kav are one and the same.

It is this very dual perspective of a single reality that is unchanged before and after the Creation process that allows us to understand how the Creation process is, and is also described by R. Chaim as being, both of concealment and simultaneously also of God is unchanged in any way as a result of the creation – "there was no change or anything as a result of the Creation process. From His perspective, absolutely nothing has and "He causes all to exist in the imaginary environment of The Creation process simply *conceals* His Existence and thereby *reveals* the existence of this world as a seemingly separate entity in its own right from our perspective, separated from the context of God's Existence. This is to the extent that R. Chaim states that we are "able to imagine, with eyes of flesh, that this world has a reality and existence".

The nature of the Creation process simply being a creation of a change in perspective and nothing else is so sublime that R. Chaim explains that from God's perspective, it is physical reality does not. Therefore, from God's perspective it is *as if* physical reality can be considered to be an illusion. However, from our perspective, the perspective of all creations, R. Chaim goes out of his way to emphasize and re-emphasize that the physical world is real and that it is the reality of the physical world which crystallizes our obligation

to perform Mitzvot which are all framed in this physical He even goes as far as to issue a stern warning to “never be drawn to translate this awesome concept into physical action – as this can easily result in many practices which also contradict the statutes and foundations of our Holy In fact, this point is so strongly stated and reiterated that it forms part of the key message of Nefesh HaChaim, that one should never bend Halacha out of a desire to draw close to God through inspirational fervor. There is, of course, no deeper concept that this applies to than with the focus on the fundamental nature of reality and the Tzimtzum process.

In summary, R. Chaim’s position is that:

- The Tzimtzum process only occurs in the level of Malchut of the Ohr Ein Sof.
- The Creation process is one of simultaneous concealment and revelation.
- God is entirely unchanged as a result of creating all of the worlds and that the Creation created a dual perspective of reality without actually changing reality in any way.

R. Chaim’s position is therefore clearly identical to that of the Baal HaTanya, the Vilna Gaon, and the Leshem.

In the light of the above, it is apparent that many have historically misunderstood R. Chaim’s position on Tzimtzum. The key misunderstandings revolve around R. Chaim’s use of terminology. Although there are a number of sentences in Nefesh HaChaim which have been misunderstood, perhaps the key statement is the following: “This is what the Arizal writes, that from the perspective of Tzimtzum, which is the same as the perspective of the Atzmut Achduto/Unified Essence of God which fills all of the This statement is misunderstood by some to be saying that the Tzimtzum process was applied to God’s Absolute Essence and not just to the first emanation from it, the “Ohr Ein In the light of everything that we have said so far, this is very clearly not R. Chaim’s position who, like everyone else, understands that the Tzimtzum process only initially occurred in the level of Malchut of the Ein Sof. R. Chaim is simply using his own application of the Arizal’s terminology of “Tzimtzum” and “Kav” to describe two relative perspectives of the same reality. He chose to use the term “Tzimtzum” to consistently relate to God’s perspective and therefore all he is saying in the above quoted sentence is that from God’s perspective, His Essence fills all and is unchanged and unaffected by the Creation of the world.

R. Chaim is most certainly *not* saying that the Tzimtzum process was applied to God’s Essence! On the contrary, he is saying that from God’s perspective there was no change at all and that therefore the process was not applied. The confusion therefore comes from R. Chaim’s use of the “Tzimtzum”

terminology to apply to God's perspective. He does this to contrast it with the "Kav" terminology which he very appropriately applies to our perspective, as the "Kav" depicts a line which has a beginning and end and differentiated points along it, representing a physical reality where differences exist in contrast to God's Absolute. The key point here, however, is not R. Chaim's specific use of but rather the message of relative reality that he is expressing with it.

There are some who even compound the above misunderstanding together with a further misunderstanding. They quote R. Chaim's statement in relation to the Arizal's description of the Tzimtzum process that "the explanation of the word 'Tzimtzum' here does not mean the *removal* [of God] from one place and transfer to another . . . however, its meaning is . . . an expression of being *hidden* and They also refer to the Vilna Gaon's statement referred to in Chapter 5 where an expression of removal is used in the Vilna Gaon's commentary on Sifra DeTzneyuta, erroneously concluding that the Vilna Gaon's position was that God is literally removed from this world in line with "Shabbetian Tzimtzum Kipshuto."

With these compounded errors, they mistakenly conclude that R. Chaim radically differed in his position from his principal mentor and master, the Vilna Gaon! In the light of the Leshem's explanation of the Tzimtzum process we now know that it did involve a stage of removal but that at the same time the overall process achieved concealment. Furthermore, as R. Chaim points out, from the perspective of the creations, it can almost be imagined that it is *as if* there was a There was therefore never any contradiction between the Vilna Gaon and R. Chaim in the first place.

It should be noted that some support for the possibility of deep disagreement comes from one of R. Chaim's statements recorded by his students in Ruach Chaim. It arguably reflects the Vilna Gaon's encouragement that students be intellectually independent in their relationship with their teachers and masters. R. Chaim explains that it is the process of studious debate with one's teacher which refines and expands a person's understanding of Torah. It is referred to as "the war of and that in the context of this war, even a father and son and a teacher and student are respectfully pitched against each other as *enemies* in debate and that ". . . it is forbidden for a student to accept his teacher's words when he has serious questions about them and that sometimes the truth is with the however, it is totally incongruous to even vaguely consider that R. Chaim, as the Vilna Gaon's primary disciple, would go against his master on an issue that so fundamentally underpins the philosophical outlook of a Jew and implicitly defines how one must approach all aspects of Jewish life, including prayer, Mitzvah performance, and Torah study. Such a possibility is absolutely and incredibly unbelievable given the

extent of R. Chaim's profound relationship with and total reverence, veneration, and admiration that he had for the Vilna. In any event, in the light of the details of this section it is simply untrue that there was any disagreement between R. Chaim and his master and they both totally and absolutely agreed on the principles of the Tzimtzum process.

There was one historic debate, referred to earlier in detail, about the interpretation of R. Chaim's position on Tzimtzum between R. Naftali Hertz HaLevi Videnbaum and the Leshem. R. Videnbaum, as presented by the Leshem, argued that the Nefesh HaChaim's position is that physical reality is an illusion and that the Arizal's descriptions of the Tzimtzum process are just analogies. It should be clear from the above that the Nefesh HaChaim most certainly did not relate to the physical world as being anything other than very real and that this point is critical in order to give license and a mandate for all of the Mitzvot to be meaningful and absolutely relevant to us.

However, the point that the Arizal's descriptions in general and of the Tzimtzum process in particular were just analogies, requires further explanation as R. Chaim himself states that "it is known that all of the Arizal's comments relating to hidden things are If the detail of the Tzimtzum and Kav are just analogies and not real, then by extension there is scope to argue that physical reality is also not real! The Leshem, however, explains this by stating that those who refer to these concepts as analogies, "the meaning is relative to our grasp of these He explains that they are certainly not ordinary analogies but have a direct analog in reality, albeit in the most sublime way. He goes further still and strongly states that "those who say that the words of the Arizal are *ordinary analogies* totally deny the validity of all of the Kabbalistic This parallels the point made about the reality of the physical world, but the Leshem amplifies this point in respect of Kabbalistic Wisdom, as a distorted understanding there has a much greater impact and affects the inner essence of the Torah. Elsewhere he states that "one who investigates and clarifies the homiletic explanations of the Arizal will establish through them that all of his words are.

as stated and literal and are not analogies at all . . . but they are true to In fact, in the continuation of R. Chaim's previous sentence where he mentions that the words of the Arizal are an analogy, he states that the "inner essence of the concepts of Tzimtzum and Kav is to relate to these two perspectives . . . which really, in essence, are absolutely one single He is therefore saying that the inner essence of the analogy is very much a single unified reality and that while the concept of Tzimtzum and Kav is an analogy, it does indeed most certainly have a direct analog in reality.

The positions described so far in respect of Tzimtzum in this section are all clearly tied to the same set of underlying principles, even if those who expressed them may not have always clearly understood that their colleagues were also in agreement. It should however be noted that the single exception is R. Videnbaum's position (as presented by the Leshem) which genuinely is different and inconsistent with that of all the other Kabbalists.



R. Dessler, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, and R. Klufit

It should now be crystal clear that all the individuals who were historically seen to be the key protagonists in an apparent debate over Tzimtzum, all in fact absolutely and totally agreed on the same set of underlying principles.

Having said this, it is also true that right from the Arizal's introduction of the Tzimtzum terminology and description, many great leaders of the Jewish People were caught in a web of total confusion and misunderstanding over this topic. These leaders included individuals of absolutely stellar consequence, of unbridled genius and outstanding Torah scholarship, who in some instances were even responsible for motivating tens of thousands of Jews to return to their roots and observe Torah and Mitzvot. Confusion also

reigned among some of Kabbalistic renown and has spilled over into all groups within the Jewish People, including both the Chassidim and Mitnagdim. Notwithstanding the greatness of these individuals, they have inadvertently propagated this smokescreen of confusion and misunderstanding, with each one contributing his additional layer of confusion through the generations. It should be noted that this confusion in no way diminishes the greatness of these individuals as it is due to the "Exile of the Torah," a concept which will be explained in the next chapter.

Given the sheer importance and fundamental nature of this topic, it is essential to carefully review some of the historic statements of these great leaders so that once and for all the unnecessary smokescreen of confusion around this topic can be dispersed.

It is therefore instructive to fully analyze the details of an indirect correspondence between R. Eliyahu and the last Rebbe of Lubavitch, R. Menachem Mendel. It is also relevant to be aware of R. Yoel's response to R. Dessler's position.

One of the followers of the fifth Rebbe of Lubavitch, the exceptional Torah scholar R. Yitzchak "Matmid" Horowitz, stayed in the Dessler home for a number of weeks in 5698. Following that visit, R. Dessler wrote to R. Horowitz mentioning, with only brief explanation, that after extensive research, he had concluded that there was no difference of opinion between the Baal HaTanya and the Vilna Gaon about the concept of Tzimtzum itself. The only difference of opinion was in relation to what extent the concept should be directly applied in practice – as part of a person's required service of He. He commented that this idea was reflected in Nefesh HaChaim, in that while the concept of Tzimtzum was to be used by great people, there was concern that lesser individuals would use it to mistakenly change Halacha.

He also commented that the Nefesh HaChaim hinted that the deep root for this concept is that concealment is revelation, that they are one and the same thing. R. Dessler concluded his letter with the plea that "in this generation in which there is a need to unite . . . it is fitting to publicize the fact that there are no differences of opinion in the essence of these issues apart from how to use them to serve God. . . ."

After some delay, R. Horowitz wrote back and apologized that religious persecution in Russia had rendered him unable to respond in an appropriate timely manner and caused him not to have access to his copy of Nefesh HaChaim. He then provided an explanation of Tzimtzum according to how he saw the Lubavitch understanding stating that then R. Dessler "would understand the difference [between the Baal HaTanya and Nefesh HaChaim]

on his own using his refined intellect, as the difference is subtle. The rest [of anything thought to be more than a subtle difference], is evil speech and slander, may God have mercy, and a covenant was made that evil speech will be especially among the great leaders.

Soon after this, R. Dessler also shared his thoughts with another prominent follower of the fifth Rebbe of Lubavitch, R. Yerachmiel Binyaminson, who was living in London at the time, and requested that he explain any difference between the positions of the Vilna Gaon, the Baal HaTanya, and Nefesh HaChaim. R. Binyaminson then wrote to R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson about and received a letter from him outlining his perspective on Tzimtzum in general and of his understanding of the Lubavitch position in particular, dated 5699. This letter strongly dismissed R. Dessler's position expressing amazement at the assumption that everyone agreed on the underlying principles of Tzimtzum. It would appear that R. Schneerson's letter may have elicited a subsequent response from R. Dessler, taught and recorded in 5700 (1940), which rather than overtly dealing with R. Schneerson's comments, it simply expands on the detail from his initial R. Dessler's response was only published relatively and it is not known if R. Schneerson ever saw it, but if he did, he did not change his. Before looking closely at R. Schneerson's position, let us briefly look at the main thrust of the explanation with which R. Dessler substantiated his position.

The key point which R. Dessler expresses is that of the dual perspective of the same single reality. He states that "the nullification of [physical] existence is dependent on the perspective of the viewer and does not relate to a real nullification of physical existence." R. Dessler shows that this was the view of the Baal HaTanya and also quotes the Vilna Gaon who said that "the Tzimtzum is in our minds" and it is purely a state of perspective. Putting R. Dessler's comments another way, this all means that both the Baal HaTanya and the Vilna Gaon are saying that the nature of physical existence is a function of perspective. From God's perspective, the existence is real but not physical, but from the perspective of the creations, the identical real existence appears physical and separated from God. R. Dessler then continues to demonstrate that this relative perspective is also highlighted by the Nefesh HaChaim. He concludes by explaining some of the depth behind the Nefesh HaChaim's statement that the two perspectives of Tzimtzum and Kav are one and the same thing as are the concealment and revelation. R. Dessler's position on Tzimtzum is clearly entirely consistent with the positions of the Baal HaTanya, Vilna Gaon, R. Chaim, the Leshem, the Arizal, and the Zohar as detailed at length earlier in this section.

In contrast, R. Schneerson's letter presents a picture of strong disagreement and he stated that the Vilna Gaon, R. Chaim, and the Baal HaTanya each

ascribed to three distinctly different positions on Tzimtzum. He compartmentalized these three positions within an analyzed framework of how he saw the different historic positions on Tzimtzum. The key argument presented to differentiate between both the positions of the Vilna Gaon and R. Chaim on the one hand, and of the Baal HaTanya and the Lubavitch Chassidim on the other, is that “as for us [Lubavitch Chassidim], we only follow the . . . position . . . that Tzimtzum is not literal and also does not apply to the Source of Light but only to the Light – and then only to the lowest level of Light from before the Tzimtzum.”

R. Schneerson’s reference to the “lowest level of Light from before the Tzimtzum” is a direct reference to the fact that the Tzimtzum process only and exclusively occurred within the level of Malchut of the Ohr Ein Sof. However, as explained in detail in the earlier chapters, this statement is simply not consistent with the facts and there is no difference of opinion at all about this! In addition to the Baal HaTanya, both the Vilna Gaon and the Nefesh HaChaim also are very much of the opinion that the Tzimtzum process only and exclusively occurred within the level of Malchut of the Ein Sof and are consistent with the Arizal and the Zohar. The force of this point is so strong that it totally undermines the validity of the entire analysis of Tzimtzum presented in the rest of R. Schneerson’s letter, as there is indeed no difference and never was any difference between the positions of the Baal HaTanya, the Vilna Gaon, and the Nefesh HaChaim about this!

It is also important to review some of the other points made in R. Schneerson’s letter which echo a number of the historic misunderstandings already explained in detail in previous chapters. Doing so demonstrates just how far all of these misunderstandings, especially when compounded together, contributed to complete confusion in the understanding of what the Tzimtzum process actually is.

R. Schneerson compartmentalizes the Vilna Gaon and the Mitnagdim of the Baal HaTanya into the view defined earlier in this section as the “Shabbetian Tzimtzum Kipshuto.” He supports this with three concepts:

1. The general arguments which he identifies were published on public notices in the times of the Baal HaTanya and the Baal Shem Tov. R. Schneerson doesn’t mention it but they were also directly expressed by the Yosher Levav, i.e., that the statement “there is no place devoid of Him” applies to God’s and that God’s Essence cannot be found in filthy places.

It is quite likely that when these arguments were posted on public notices they would have been taken completely out of context as, at the time, very few would have understood the very confusing presentation of the Yosher Levav.

However, the fact still remains, as explained earlier, that these arguments are certainly valid from the relative perspective of the creations and that neither the Yosher Levav nor the Vilna Gaon ascribed to the blasphemous position of "Shabbetian Tzimtzum Kipshuto."

2. That the Baal HaTanya wrote directly against the Mitnagdim in Sefer As explained earlier in detail, any suggestion that the Baal HaTanya was aiming his remarks at the Mitnagdim of the time totally contradicts the Baal HaTanya's strongly documented policy on how his Chassidim were to behave towards the Mitnagdim. He highlighted the philosophically motivated imperative of remaining silent in the face of The Baal HaTanya's comments, which were very sharply stated, can only therefore make any sense in the context of countering the truly blasphemous position of the Sabbatians. They certainly cannot have been aimed at the Mitnagdim of his times as they would be hypocritically contradicting his policy of silence.

3. R. Schneerson writes, "It appears to me that Beit Rebbi also published a letter from the Baal HaTanya on this matter."

As explained in detail earlier, this letter published in Beit Rebbi was a forgery. While it expresses sentiments which were generally rife at the time, it is nonetheless a work of fiction and cannot be ascribed to the Baal HaTanya.

In addition, R. Schneerson stated that the Nefesh HaChaim disagreed with his master, the Vilna Gaon, and viewed that the Tzimtzum process was directly applied to God's Essence, the Source of the Light and not to just the Light, i.e., not to just the Ohr Ein Sof. In saying this, it is clear that R. Schneerson was misled by some of the statements in Nefesh HaChaim related to the context of his use of his terminology of "Atzmut." It should be noted that the Nefesh HaChaim never said that the Tzimtzum process applied to God's Atzmut. What he did say however is that as a result of relative perspective of a single reality, the Tzimtzum process was applied to the perspective of the creations only and this resulted in God's concealment, a position which everybody, including the Baal HaTanya, agrees. These details are fully elaborated on in the earlier chapters and it is clear that R. Chaim held that the Tzimtzum process was only applied to the lowest level of Light and not to the Source of the Light. It is also very clear indeed that R. Chaim did not disagree in even the minutest detail from the position of his master, the Vilna Gaon, on this most important topic!

Perhaps the most misleading of all the points made in R. Schneerson's letter is his presentation of the four possible exclusive positions on the letter clearly communicates that each of the opinions only held that one position is true and that therefore the other positions were incorrect. In presenting the concept in

this way, it seems to miss the most important point about the Tzimtzum process, a point which is highlighted by R. Dessler in his most diplomatically stated response. R. Dessler explains that there is a dual perspective of the same single reality. From God's perspective, nothing has changed at all and it is therefore non-literal, it is "Tzimtzum Lo Kipshuto." However, from the perspective of the creations, the Tzimtzum process is all in the mind and therefore appears literal and is the "Acceptable Tzimtzum Kipshuto" which was discussed earlier. In effect, R. Dessler is therefore saying to R. Schneerson that none of his four stated possible positions are correct! He is saying that the correct position is the simultaneous combination of R. Schneerson's first and fourth position – i.e., that the Tzimtzum process is simultaneously both non-literal and literal depending on whether we are referencing God's perspective or the perspective of the creations – and that the Baal HaTanya, the Vilna Gaon, and R. Chaim all genuinely agree.

Although when looking at R. Schneerson's letter in isolation, it really does seem like he misses the dual perspective of the same single reality, from other sources of his teachings however, it is clear that he very much did agree with the simultaneous dual. While this may seem to contradict R. Schneerson's letter, a suggested possible reconciliation of the dual perspective with his letter is that R. Schneerson may have simply been using terminology in his letter in a different way to the way it has been used in this section. In his letter, he utilizes the model of four exclusive positions on Tzimtzum as a tool to answer R. Dessler and very specifically describe what he saw as the differences between the Baal HaTanya, the Vilna Gaon, and R. Chaim. His usage of the term "Tzimtzum Kipshuto" in his letter is taken directly from the context of Sefer which, as we have already seen, uses it in the way we have previously defined as the unacceptable "Shabbetian Tzimtzum Kipshuto." He therefore understandably distances himself from his reference to "Tzimtzum Kipshuto" when referring to the dual perspective of reality. It is then possible to understand that R. Schneerson may have used the term "Tzimtzum Lo Kipshuto" to encapsulate both aspects of the dual perspective of reality and that both the different perspectives of the creations and of God are simultaneously referred to by it. Its reference to God's perspective is clear and is as previously discussed that the Tzimtzum process had no effect from God's perspective and God did not change in any way as a result of it. Its reference to the perspective of the creations, on the other hand, is that while God is concealed from the creations by the Tzimtzum process, everything they actually physically see is God who is unchanged as a result of Tzimtzum – even if the perception of the creations prevents them from understanding that all they see is actually God who is totally concealed within physical reality. By explaining R. Schneerson's position in this way, it can be understood to be in full agreement with the position of the Baal HaTanya and also unwittingly in full agreement with both the Vilna Gaon and the Nefesh

In addition to R. Schneerson, R. Yoel Kluft also took issue with R. In his Daat he also strongly dismisses R. Dessler's position, without mentioning R. Dessler's name, saying: "I saw books and authors who erred in their studies writing incorrect statements when comparing the above books [of Sefer HaTanya and Nefesh HaChaim], to the extent that they even boldly write that there are even equivalent statements made in the two works. Therefore, I have decided to express my humble opinion on this . . . I will write in general and not with precise details . . . and I will only write points which are plainly visible and simply copy them – and I will try to copy expressions which capture the essence of both [books] displaying them next to each other – and the wise person will understand."

R. Kluft then proceeded to do exactly what he said he would and quoted sentences from the works of both authors setting them out in consecutive sections. He offers no explanation or analysis at all and leaves it entirely to the reader to form conclusions. The sentences he chose included stark differences in terminology, e.g., "Atzmut" and "Ein Sof " and of the switched presentation of "Memaleh Kol Almin" and "Sovev Kol Almin" between the two authors. Following the detailed explanation of all of these terminology changes as expressed earlier in this section, a reading of R. Kluft's presentation reveals nothing whatsoever to substantiate his claim that there is any difference at all between the Nefesh HaChaim and Sefer HaTanya in relation to the underlying principles of Tzimtzum. On the contrary, the comment that "there are even equivalent statements made in the two works" is absolutely true, because in relation to the concept of Tzimtzum, the Nefesh HaChaim and Sefer HaTanya *are* saying exactly and precisely the same thing!

The result of all of the above is that even in the face of the strongest dissension from his peers, including prominent outstanding Chassidic and Mitnagdic leaders and Torah scholars, R. Dessler's position is fully vindicated and that the Baal HaTanya, the Vilna Gaon, and R. Chaim all totally agreed on the principles of the concept of Tzimtzum.

It should be noted, however, that R. Dessler was not a lone voice among his peers. He was joined by many illustrious colleagues including R. Shraga Feivel Mendelovitch, R. Yitzchak Hutner, R. Aharon Kotler, the Tchebiner Rav (R. Dov Berish Weidenfeld), the Nazir (R. David Cohen), the elder Chassidic followers of Lubavitch.



The Teaching of the Ariz"l Concerning Tzimtzum (Contraction)

Rav Itamar Eldar writes:¹⁰

One of the main issues that crops up over and over in the teachings of R. Nachman is that of doubts that plague one's faith, and heresy. Countless teachings, sayings, stories and even prayers are devoted to those times when a person falls into doubt in his faith.

R. Nachman's guiding approach to this issue is found in a teaching that I personally consider the most fundamental to all his works; a teaching that has become the mantra of all those who follow his way; a teaching I personally consider to have been uttered with rare and outstanding inspiration, even for someone such as R. Nachman: teaching no. 64 in Likutei Moharan.

Before addressing this teaching, it is appropriate to generally sketch the various philosophies of the Divine, and particularly their ramifications concerning the man-God relationship, which is the main subject of this teaching.

The classical view of God, dating back mainly to the Middle Ages, speaks of God's transcendence above human material experience. This transcendence creates a powerful dichotomy between material reality, which is limited,

¹⁰ <https://etzion.org.il/en/philosophy/great-thinkers/r-nachman-breslov/teaching-arizl-concerning-tzimtzum-contraction>

contracted and - most importantly - finite, and the God Who cannot be defined or quantified and Who is characterized by His infiniteness.

The basis for this perception is found in neo-Platonic thought (which influenced medieval intellectuals and also left its mark on the early kabbalists). Neoplatonism which regards the process in which the world came to be as gradual and evolutionary, beginning with the elevated and noble "Primary Cause," from which objects emanate, clothed in an increasingly particularistic, defined, and limited, until they become the components of our revealed, material world. (It is interesting to debate whether this process is compatible with the biblical concept of Creation or whether the two theories are necessarily contradictory. Jewish philosophers of the Middle Ages did not reject this view out of hand, and even attempted to identify it with the biblical account of Creation). The distance between us and God, according to this view, is the distance between the Primary Cause at the beginning of this evolutionary process and the last object that emanates from it at the end.

This view led many Greek philosophers - with some degree of justification - to conclude that this transcendence precludes any possibility of contact, dialogue or connection between man and God. The abyss was considered too deep and wide to allow for any bridging. The finite cannot touch the Infinite, and no matter to what degree man develops, he cannot reach it. The echo of the Infinite may ring in our ears, since after all, we emanated from it, but the process of development is strictly one-way and the distance between God and us will remain eternally. A person seeking to encounter the Divine must climb from one rung to the next, yet even as he reaches great heights, he will be able to come closer, but not encounter its reality. [Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi, in the Kuzari (4:3) explains the Jewish concept of 'devekut' ('cleaving' to God) as referring to "a cleaving to His guidance and providence, not a cleaving of dependence and contact." In other words, a person who "cleaves" to God is one who knows His commandments and lives his life; accordingly, his 'cleaving' is not literal in the sense of unmediated contact. Aristotelian schools that did not accept the concept of revelation in the literal sense, as Judaism does, turned to the world of consciousness, maintaining that 'cleaving' and 'revelation' refer to the intellectual understanding and rationalistic knowledge that man may attain.]

Medieval Jewish thinkers sought to retain Greek philosophy's perception of a transcendental God without relinquishing the fundamental Jewish tradition concerning the permanent connection between God and man, as expressed in almost every pasuk of the Torah, from the detailed system of laws, and the entire philosophy of reward and punishment, through the very tangible descriptions of revelation. They exerted themselves to bridge the wide abyss between the traditional view and the transcendental perception of the Divine.

(Non-religious philosophical schools, not bound by the Torah's concept of revelation turned to consciousness, maintaining that 'cleaving' and 'revelation' refer to the intellectual understanding and rationalistic knowledge that man may attain.)

For the sake of clarification, we will choose an example, the attitude towards the Divine word. Since, in the view of medieval thinkers, the idea of God speaking to man could not possibly be understood literally, they proposed that Divine speech is a tangible creation of God. This creation both communicates and connects with man while simultaneously serves as a barrier between man who hears the Divine voice (at Mt. Sinai, etc.) and God Himself. By means of this interpretation the encounter between man and God is maintained without in any way undermining God's transcendental status.

In contrast to the transcendental approach, which relates to God and the material world as polar opposites, there is a completely different approach which seeks not just to lessen the distance but actually to do away with it altogether - the philosophy of immanence. (The scope of this article does not allow for a full treatment of the fine differences defining the various pantheistic schools; we shall suffice here with a general definition.)

The roots of the Jewish version of this approach are found in the development of kabbala, which later also branched out to form the fundamental concepts of Chassidism and other systems.

The fundamental position of kabbala on the relationship between God and the world is that "there is no place that is devoid of Him" (Zohar). God dwells within all of reality, from the loftiest angels to the lowliest and most mundane level of this vulgar, opaque world. There are places where the Divine light can be perceived only faintly, but it is still the Divine light. (In this context mention should be made of R. Azriel, who, in his commentary on the Ten Sefirot, makes extensive use of the neo-Platonic models with regard to kabbala as well.)

This view, as we shall see, greatly reduces the distance between man and God. God is not to be found beyond the seven heavens (in space) and at the historical starting-point of the entire development of the Creation (in time), but rather firmly and squarely in the here-and-now.

This view has many existential ramifications for religious worship, some of which we shall encounter below, but let us begin with the starting point that brought the kabbalists to this view - which is also the starting point of R. Nachman's teaching no. 64. (When we speak here of the 'kabbalists' we refer to R. Yitzchak Luria, the 'Ariz"l' - mid-16th century onwards - who consolidated the concealed wisdom that had been handed down until his time, including

study of the Zohar, and was unanimously accepted in kabbalistic circles. This shiur intentionally evades a discussion of the various stages in the development of kabbala, except for a few instances where such distinctions will aid us in understanding more accurately the various views that we shall discuss.)

The beginning of reality, according to the kabbalists, is in the Infinite One who dwells in everything. The existence of the Infinite One - God - has two critically important ramifications:

First, it negates the existence of anything other than the Infinite One, for the Infinite One does not leave any space or vacuum that undermines His Infinity. In other words, if we say that Infinity is God, then all of existence is God and there is nothing besides Him.

Second, it negates the existence of anything that is separated or defined within the Infinity. The possibility of speaking about definition, boundary, or a separate object does not exist within Infinity. For every tiny point within the Infinity is itself infinite and devoid of boundaries, and therefore it is nullified and included within Infinity. For this reason, on this level it is impossible to address God's attributes, His ways, and his various characteristics.

These two limitations - speaking of something that is outside of God and speaking of any definition or boundary within Him - negate the possibility of the Creation of the world.

The two pesukim with which the biblical account of Creation opens, undermine these two limitations. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" - this assumes the concept of boundary and limitation. There are the heavens and there is the earth, and a dividing line passes between them.

"And the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters" - this assumes the existence of something that is outside of God. The 'spirit of God hovers over...' - i.e., there is a discrepancy, a barrier, a space between the waters and the spirit of God that hovers above them.

The Ariz"l devotes an extensive and significant portion of his teaching (as recorded by his two principal disciples - R. Chaim Vital and R. Yosef Ibn Tibol) to an explanation of the jump from the Infinite - with all its implications - to Creation, all based on the concept of 'tzimtzum' (contraction).

In order to allow for the development of something outside of God, and in order that that thing would have definition and dimension, the Infinite had to

"make room," as it were; to create an empty space in which the possibility of Creation could exist.

Thus, the very beginning of the process of Creation is the act of 'tzimtzum' (contraction), where the Infinite One "placed Himself aside," and created an empty space. Within this empty space a world was created; a world that is not identical with the Divine but is nourished by it, via a connecting channel that blazed its way between the empty space and the surrounding Infinity, allowing for the influx and creation of a world, but now the light that came through would be limited, contracted, and controlled.

What is the nature of that empty space? The key question is whether this empty space is completely devoid of Godliness. This is more than a purely technical question; it has vast significance both for the theological debate and for one's existential view, as we shall see in R. Nachman's teachings.

We began by saying that the most basic, fundamental element in kabbala is the assertion that "there is no place that is devoid of Him." How, then, can we suddenly speak of a reality - even if we call it "empty space" - in which there is no Godliness?

There are some (especially based upon the writings of R. Yosef Ibn Tibol) who maintain that according to the Ariz"l, even within the empty space itself there remained a pale glow of the light called "Reshimu," which is a sort of weak, dull residue of the Great Light. We cannot accept this opinion without coming back to the difficult question of the contradiction between the Infinite One and finite, limited reality. Is the weakening of the light that "making space" discussed by the Ariz"l that was necessary in order to make the creation of the world possible? Is this sufficient in order to facilitate the existence of a reality that is outside of God? It is perhaps this difficulty that brought R. Chaim Vital to tend quite clearly towards the opinion that the empty space was devoid of any Divine light at all. However, as we have mentioned, this approach brings us into conflict with the statement of the Zohar, that "there is no place that is devoid of Him." (Another issue related to this difference of opinion is the status of evil in the teachings of the Ariz"l; however, we shall not elaborate here.)

The first ramification of this question pertains to what we mentioned at the start - the distance between man and God. We began by saying that the classical view of divinity, perceiving the relationship between the world and God as one of a chain of phenomena emanating from God downwards, emphasizes God's transcendental aspect and creates a significant distance between Him and the world.

The immanent approach, on the other hand, narrows the gap, and in fact brings God into every nook and cranny of material reality. God's immanence in reality is the focus of this view.

R. Chaim Vital's understanding weakens this emphasis somewhat. Again, R. Chaim Vital creates a gap between God in His primal Infinitude, and the world. All the worlds that came into being within the empty space - including divine worlds - are nourished by the Supreme Divinity, yet with the empty space still separating and preventing them from unifying with it completely.

The second approach, that of R. Yosef Ibn Tibol, leaves a point of contact between the Infinite and the finite. This point of contact may be difficult to accept and to understand, but it exists. The faint impression of the Infinite that remains in the empty space is what preserves the unbroken continuity between the original reality of the Infinite One and the reality that is revealed to us - the temporal, limited reality.

Is there a definitive conclusion on this issue? Is there any way of reaching a definitive conclusion? What existential ramifications concerning the man-God relationship are associated with each view?

R. Nachman of Breslov presents a fascinating and meaningful path in addressing this issue, and we shall, God willing, turn our attention to it in the next shiur.



"Tzimtzum" in the Teachings of Rav Nachman

Rav Itamar Eldar writes:¹¹

Above we provided a general introduction to the principle of tzimtzum in the teachings of the Ari z"l. We concluded the shiur on a note of tension between the two possibilities concerning the nature of the "empty space" that is left after Hashem withdraws Himself, as it were. This tension is expressed in R. Nachman's teaching no. 64, where it is garbed in a highly existential message. We shall study this teaching in stages.

For the blessed God created the world out of His mercy, for He wished to reveal His mercy; if the world had not been created, then to whom could He display His mercy? Therefore He created all of Creation, from the beginning of Emanation up until the innermost point of the material world, in order to display His mercy. And when the blessed God wished to create the world, there was no place in which to create it because all was (His) infinity. Therefore He drew back the light to the sides, and by means of this withdrawal an empty space was created. And it was within this empty space that all of time and space came into being - i.e., the creation of the world (as is written at the beginning of Etz Haim):

And this empty space was vital for the creation of the world. For if it were not for the empty space, there would be no room in which to create the world, as explained above. This withdrawal of the empty space is impossible to understand or to grasp except in the future world. For it entails the simultaneous assertion of two opposites - existence and nothingness. For the empty space is created through tzimtzum, where God "withdrew" Himself from there, as it were, and there was no Godliness in that space, as it were, for otherwise it could not be empty, since all is (part of God's) Infinity and there would be no room for the creation of the world at all. But in truth, of course despite this there must be Godliness there too, for of course nothing can exist without His vitality. And therefore it is impossible to grasp the concept of the empty space at all, until the future time.

In this passage R. Nachman teaches nothing new; he simply describes the teaching of the Ari z"l concerning tzimtzum. But the way in which he presents it already assumes certain significant principles. We shall divide the above excerpt into three parts and treat each of them individually:

¹¹ <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/philosophy/great-thinkers/r-nachman-breslov/tzimtzum-teachings-rav-nachman>

- i. the "Primary Will"**
- ii. tzimtzum**
- iii. the empty space**

The "Primary Will"

R. Nachman's first assertion pertains to the reason for Creation. "For the blessed God created the world out of His mercy." This simple statement has significance on two levels:

- i. It is specifically the principle of tzimtzum, which tends towards a rather mechanical description of how the world came to be, that may lead one to a perception that shrinks the Divine intention and will to almost nothingness. To illustrate this point let us turn our attention to the conclusion drawn by one of the great students of the teachings of the Ari:

The results of our study shed new light on the nature of tzimtzum (contraction) itself: the act of contraction is a sort of breaching of the Infinite One Himself. It is not God's will to elevate the universes and to make room for their existence that is of primary importance, but, rather, the need to remove the strict judgment from within Himself; in other words, the softening of God, that brings about the chain of creation of the universes. And this softening is impossible to achieve except through contraction, in other words, through breaching and inner breaking. Contraction pulls apart the essence of Infinity and disturbs its peace - in order to ensure its absolute purity, the 'merciful purpose' of His being. (Y. Tishbi, "Torat hara ve-ha-kelipah be-kabbalat ha-Ari" pp. 57-58)

This excerpt, together with others in the same vein concerning the teachings of the Ari z"l, has two immediate ramifications:

First, it posits the absence of Divine will in Creation. The Divine infinity is almost "forced" to vomit the evil and the harsh judgments from within itself. And this process of "vomiting" is accompanied by contraction and the creation of the worlds.

Second, it relegates the creation of the world to the sidelines of the process of formation. It becomes almost a "side effect" of the excision of harsh judgments from within the Infinite Being.

Both conclusions are completely nullified in R. Nachman's presentation of the concept of tzimtzum. First, tzimtzum involves God's completely free will. He is not forced to perform this contraction, nor is it required for His 'perfection,'

as it were; rather, it is purely a result of Divine desire. Secondly, the creation of the world lies at the foundation of this desire, and the creation is the central - if not sole - reason for the contraction of the Divine Infinity.

Another teaching of R. Nachman which describes the idea of contraction appears at first to contain a note of "forcing," but of a fundamentally different nature:

For prior to Creation the light of the Holy One was infinite. And the Holy One wished His kingship to be revealed, but there can be no King without a nation, and so He needed to create human beings who would accept His kingship ([Likutei Moharan 141 49, 1](#). See also [Likutei Moharan 141 78](#)).

Here, too, God's initial free will to be revealed is preserved, but this teaching emphasizes a point that was somewhat obscure in the previous one: the need for Creation. This need, according to R. Nachman, involved not only contraction, but also the concrete reality that God's free will to be revealed assumes: the creation of human beings.

R. Nachman does not shy away from relegating the world and human beings to a secondary significance, with all that it entails, but even this significance is meant to realize God's free will. Here again, according to this distinction, Creation is not a "side effect" of processes that are unrelated to the world and man, but rather a means - even if it is *bediavad* (a posteriori) - towards the realization of God's free will.

- ii. Another ramification of R. Nachman's presentation is the assertion that the first Divine act in the whole process of the coming into being of existence was an act of mercy. Contraction is an act of harsh judgment. It contains a hiding of God, distancing, disappearance. Beginning with this act means placing strict judgment at the foundation of existence. R. Nachman's contention that "the blessed God created the world out of His mercy" is a soothing balm for the terror that overcomes us when faced with the original description of *tzimtzum*. Every revelation of strict judgment - every plague, every punishment, every atomic explosion that threatens to destroy the entire world - assumes different proportions if we keep in mind that "the blessed God created the world out of His mercy." This assertion does not nullify the existence of strict judgment: the act of contraction will surely come, and its effects on the world will echo throughout human history for all generations, but we should always know, according to R. Nachman, that something more fundamental, more primal, and therefore more eternal stands at the foundation of the world: mercy. (Rav Soloveitchik also addresses the subject of *tzimtzum* and

writes similarly as follows: "Out of love for man and the world, God abandoned Infinity and, as it were, moved aside." [Divrei Hagut ve-Ha-Arakhah, 'Gaon ve-Anavah,' 221])

Tzimtzum

The second principle mentioned by R. Nachman in his description is that of tzimtzum. As we discussed in the previous shiur, the transition from Infinity to a finite reality must follow the path of contraction, such that the Infinity removes itself and confines its light to the side.

The principle of contraction, which is the key point in the coming-into-being of reality, according to the Ari z"l, affects not only the initial stage in the process, but is rather a guiding principle in every stage of Creation. In order that a limited revelation be revealed, it is necessary that there first be a removal of the unlimited. There can be no direct and consistent transition from the Infinite and abstract to the finite and limited.

In the kabbala of the Ari this is a fundamental principle pertaining to the creation of the universes, but in Chassidism in general, and the teachings of R. Nachman in particular, it assumes an existential, spiritual - sometimes even psychological - dimension in a person's religious life. (The phenomenon whereby kabbalistic models of the Ari are translated into existential concepts in a person's religious devotion is commonly found in chassidic works.) Rabbi Nachman learns two significant lessons from the concept of tzimtzum and applies them to our lives.

The first and more fundamental lesson is that in order to reveal Himself to man, in order to create contact with him, the Holy One had to contract Himself. This principle is meant to be applied in every instance where man encounters Divinity, and R. Nachman deduces from this a lesson concerning the relationship between student and teacher:

A concept of the Divine cannot be attained except through many contractions. From the superior to the inferior, from the Supreme Intelligence to lower intelligence. We see this in our own experience - it is impossible for a great intelligence to be accessible unless it assumes the garb of the lower intelligence (which seeks access to it). For example, a teacher who wishes to explain a difficult concept to a student must clothe it in simpler and more basic terms in order that the student will understand. In other words, he first provides an introduction and some simpler related ideas in order that through these he will understand the real message - which is a most great and complex concept. (Likutei Moharan Kama 30:1)

Later in the same teaching R. Nachman instructs a person to find himself a good and worthy teacher, who is able to contract the Divine concepts that he wishes to convey and to clothe them in such garments as will match the student's ability. R. Nachman demands of the teacher that he imitate the Divine action of contraction - but this involves no special mystical powers. The teacher's ability to take an elevated idea and to present it in a form that the student will understand, is an ability derived from the principle of contraction. R. Nachman concludes that the younger the student, or the less his ability, the greater the talent required of the teacher:

For the smaller or more distant he (the student) is, the greater the teacher that he needs - a true artist, who will be able to clothe and present such great intelligence - i.e., Divine concepts - to one as small and distant as he is. (ibid). (It is interesting to note that popular belief assumes that the greater the age of the students, the better the teachers need to be. R. Nachman maintains precisely the opposite.)

In the above excerpt R. Nachman applies the concept of contraction, again according to the same structure: the teacher, who is the "middleman" between Godliness and the student and whose task is to reveal the Godly concepts, must know the secret of contraction.

The second principle that R. Nachman learns from tzimtzum is the fact that the contraction of the Infinite One was aimed at allowing the world of space and time to come into existence. Measurement, boundaries, definition - all of these are the results of that contraction. This principle brings R. Nachman to take one step further:

And it is known that the Torah - i.e., the middot (attributes), i.e., time, is infused with God's love. As it is written in the holy Zohar (Balak 191:, Bereishit 46), "In the day Hashem will command His lovingkindness" - for lovingkindness, i.e., love (as it is written in Yirmiyahu 31, "I have loved you with an everlasting love, [therefore I have drawn you with lovingkindness]") is the day that goes with all the days - in other words, the middot. For the attributes are contractions of His Godliness in order that we shall be able to understand Him through His attributes, as it is written in the holy Zohar (Parashat Bo 42:) "so that we might know him," for without His attributes it is impossible to understand Him. And out of His love for Israel and His desire that they would cleave to Him and love Him from this material world, He clothed His Godliness in the middot of the Torah. (Likutei Moharan Kama 33:4).

Here, R. Nachman, in effect, makes this process a two-way street. Just as God's descent to man in order to be revealed to him requires contraction and a transition to the world of middot, so the same applies in the other direction: when a person wishes to come close to God and to cleave to him, he has to seek the place where God contracts Himself - i.e., the Torah.

The Torah's central principle is that of middot and boundaries. Starting with Creation, whose central foundations are those of separation and demarcation. As the narrative moves through the stories of the forefathers and of Bnei Yisrael, God's various attributes and modes of operation find expression, and culminate in the world of mitzvot, which demarcate a person's life in every possible sphere.

Between the Torah and the Divine Infinity stretches the great abyss of the "empty space," and a person may be tempted to try and cross that great abyss in order to gain direct access to the Infinite. R. Nachman teaches that just as the Holy One Himself did not jump directly from His Infinity to man, but rather undertook the process of contraction, so a person in his path towards God cannot omit the world of middot and boundaries, which is a "garment" for the Infinite.

But R. Nachman applies this principle even further:

For prior to Creation the light of the Holy One was infinite. And the Holy One wished His kingship to be revealed, but there can be no King without a nation, and so He needed to create human beings who would accept His kingship. But it is impossible to grasp the revelation of His Kingship except through the middot, for it is through the middot that we may grasp His Godliness and know that there is a Master and Ruler. And so He contracted the Infinite Light to the sides, leaving an empty space. And within that empty space He created the universes (as explained in Etz Haim), and these themselves are His middot.

The heart is the axis of the middot - i.e., the wisdom of the heart, as it is written (Shemot 31:), "And in the heart of everyone who was wise of heart." Creation was performed mainly through wisdom, as it is written (Tehillim 104), "You have made them all with wisdom." Thus the heart is the axis, as it is written (ibid. 73), "the Rock of my heart." And when a person thinks evil thoughts, he dulls the empty space of Creation, where the middot are revealed. For the heart is the Rock of the universes - i.e., the strength of the middot. For by the flames of the heart of a Jewish person, a revelation from the middot is impossible. For the light of his flames is infinite, and there is no end to his desire to come close to God.

Therefore he has to limit his enthusiasm in order that an empty space will remain in his heart, as it is written (Tehillim 109): "And my heart is empty within me." And through the contraction of his enthusiasm, he may come to a revelation from the middot, i.e., to serve God gradually and in the proper measure." (Likutei Moharan Kama 49:1)

Here, a person, in his desire to come close to God, is required not only to seek God's contracted revelation but also to contract himself. A person is compared, as it were, to God in the sense that he must contract himself in his effort to attain closeness. Obviously, this contraction is meant not for the benefit of God but rather for the person himself. Nevertheless, in this teaching R. Nachman compares the inner enthusiasm and desire for God with the Infinite. This being so, this desire is also unable to be translated into the language of action.

If we understand R. Nachman correctly, his innovation here is that sometimes a person's infinite enthusiasm is itself an obstacle to his progress in coming close to God. Sometimes he is required to make room, to push his enthusiasm aside, and then, quietly, and calmly, he can enter the empty space in a controlled manner, and this gradual movement will allow his enthusiasm to be constructive.

This principle of contraction, which assumes that sometimes power and illumination must be set aside in order to create a space in which the power and light may be gradually rebuilt, applies to a person's life as well. We saw one such application above in relation to a person's Divine service. There is another application, which is to be found in other contexts:

He said: ***There are tzaddikim who have great Torah knowledge and are completely fluent in many books and teachings of the Sages, and it is specifically because of this that they are unable to bring about a new understanding of the Torah - because they are so well-versed. Because when they begin to say words of Torah and wish to convey some new idea, their great proficiency confuses them, and they immediately begin to give long introductions and to say many things that they know from books, and as a result their words are mixed up and they are unable to bring to light any proper new idea.***

And then he brought, as an example, a great scholar of his generation who was unable to teach Torah for this reason. What he meant to say was that when one wishes to bring new ideas, he must contract his mind, and not allow it to become carried away and to confuse him with introductions that are not necessary for what he wants to say. And he should make himself as one who

does not know, and then he will be able to bring to light many original ideas, gradually and in an orderly fashion. And (he also said) something else on this subject, but it is impossible to explain such a matter in writing, and a wise person will understand on his own. (Sichot Moharan 266).

The above teaching applies to the collection of information that exists in the mind of a talmid chakham. The ability to translate this river of knowledge into a defined and intelligible idea is dependent on his ability to "contract his mind." This contraction, in R. Nachman's view, requires not only patience and orderliness, but also much more: "He should make himself as one who does not know"! R. Nachman demands not a reorganization of the light, but a truly empty space. It is a person's ability to erase his knowledge and to stand before his students as an empty vessel that bestows upon him the talent of being able to construct a defined and understandable structure of knowledge.

I believe that this is not mere "methodological advice," but rather a profound message. A person who brings to light new revelations in the Torah, according to R. Nachman, does so not from his own mind alone. The innovation that he introduces is a lofty Divine influx that flows in the spring of knowledge of that scholar. A teacher who wishes to drink himself and to allow others also to drink from that spring must place himself in a spiritual position of listening. Many lecturers and teachers teach Torah to their students, and sometimes one senses that there is no living spirit in their study. In order for God to breathe the spirit of life into the "knowledge" of the teacher ("One who breathes out does so from his innermost self"), the teacher must contract himself, to listen, to make himself into an empty space - like one who does not know.

In this chapter, we have seen R. Nachman apply the Ari's principle of tzimtzum to the world of the religious Jew, a servant of God: the Beit ha-Mikdash, the giving of the Torah, teacher and student, desire for closeness to God, new revelations in Torah. All of these concepts, and others, express the principle of tzimtzum, which is immanent in them as in every other phenomenon that exists in the world.

Of what significance is the application of tzimtzum in every step of our lives? It would seem that the way in which Rav Soloveitchik employs the principle may serve as a contrasting model to that of R. Nachman. Rav Soloveitchik, too, applies the idea of tzimtzum to different subjects. In one instance he identifies the principle of tzimtzum as the psychological movement required in order to liberate oneself from a position of existential loneliness, towards society and towards God. He describes tzimtzum as a movement of contraction whose foundation is in the secret of the Godly contraction. (Ha-Kehillah, in "Divrei Hagut Ve-Ha'arakhah, p. 230). Elsewhere, he speaks of

faith's demand that a Jew sometimes arrest his inborn drive for conquest, step back, and acknowledge that not everything can be conquered and not everything is worthy of being conquered. This applies to the world of science, the world of esthetics as well as the world of religion. ("Tzeruf," *ibid.* p. 244 onwards.)

The scope of this shiur prevents a full discussion of the significance of the movement of withdrawal according to Rav Soloveitchik and a comparison with that of R. Nachman. Suffice it to say that R. Soloveitchik, too, teaches that the contraction and withdrawal are meant to allow man to encounter something greater that comes in the wake of the withdrawal. Rav Soloveitchik focuses on the aspect of refinement accompanying the withdrawal as a foundation for rebuilding, while R. Nachman focuses on the making room and the deeper listening that are created from the deathly silence that reigns after the withdrawal.

But it seems that the central difference between R. Nachman and R. Soloveitchik in this context is related to the status of the principle of *tzimtzum* in the world. R. Soloveitchik writes as follows:

Let me pose the following question: Is the Lurianic teaching concerning *tzimtzum* solely a kabbalistic secret, devoid of any moral ramification for us, or is it perhaps the very basis of our moral approach? If God indeed withdrew, and from this act of contraction the creation of the world was drawn, then we are called upon to walk in His ways, in the light of the principle of imitating God. Therefore Jewish ethics requires of a person that in certain circumstances he steps back. ("Gaon ve-Anavah," in *Divrei Hagut Ve-Ha'arakha*, p. 221).

Rav Soloveitchik sees the *tzimtzum* of the Ari as a movement of God at the stage of the world's coming-into-being. In light of the principle of imitating God, we must walk in His ways and continue the same movement.

This instruction takes the form of a Divine command that is external to man. It is possible that the command is not neutral but rather corresponds to the nature of the world - which is logical in light of the fact that we are speaking of an act that represents the basis for the world. But it still remains a command that requires the moral backing of the principle of imitating God.

For R. Nachman the situation is entirely different. The act of *tzimtzum* as described by the Ari is not, to R. Nachman's mind, an act that belongs to a certain moment or a certain time in history, such that thereafter our relation to it is historio-ethical. The act of *tzimtzum*, which is the hiding of the Divine light in order to reveal it anew, is a Divine movement that has never ceased

since the beginning of Creation until now. The Divine light that was hidden in every corner, in every creature and in every person continues to disappear and to reveal itself at every moment. When a person is required, according to R. Nachman, to step back and to contract himself, this is not an external command that is imposed upon him, but rather a response to the Divine movement that is occurring in the world outside of man and within him.

Man's infinite thirst for God is itself an infinite light that exists within a person and seeks to be revealed, and by contracting it a person joins with God's essence in the movement of hiding and revealing. A person who covers the light and contracts himself is not similar to God, as R. Soloveitchik proposes, but is rather responding to the impression of God that is found within him and outside of him.

Perhaps the basic difference between R. Soloveitchik and R. Nachman relates to their perception of God - an issue we began to address in the previous shiur, and which will be our main occupation in the next. The principle of imitating God has at its foundation a transcendental perception of Divinity. Just as He - distant, infinite, elevated and sanctified above man - is merciful, so shall you be merciful. Tzimtzum, from this point of view, is perceived as an historical event which, although it engraved in the nature of Creation a fundamental principle and law that is relevant to us as well, still remains an historical event.

The immanent view - which R. Nachman adopts wholeheartedly (as we shall see in the next shiur), and which identifies the Divine Light that operates within all of existence including within man himself - sees in every derivation, both general and specific, the movement of the Divine Light, which continues to disappear and to reveal itself. The Divine contraction discussed in the teachings of the Ari is, in this sense, here and now, and a person's task is to respond, to join himself and flow together with this Divine movement.

This partnership, as addressed by R. Nachman, when undertaken consciously, brings a person to constant cleaving to God - even while he weeps with the suffering of contraction and hiding, for he senses that his suffering is the suffering of contracted Divinity, and their hardship is shared.



Through the Void:

The Absence of God in R. Nahman of Bratzlav's Likkutei MoHaRan

Shaul Magid writes:¹²

¹² HTR 88:4 (1995) 495-519 (Harvard Theological review)

Although not usually viewed as a manifestation of modern spirituality, Hasidism strikingly resembles a product of the spiritual and ideological reorientation of Western religion in the post-Copernican world.² Largely unaware of the philosophical and theological changes in European intellectual culture, many of the hasidic masters exhibited a sensitivity to the existential plight of humankind in the modern world.

¹Unless otherwise indicated, translations and italics throughout the article are mine.

²Martin Buber, Samuel Abba Horodetzky, and Hillel Zeitlin introduced hasidism to the modern world. Buber's early studies on hasidic thought were directed at the larger scholarly audience in Europe with the hope that hasidism would serve as a Jewish component in the mystical revival at the turn of the century. This is true to a lesser extent for Horodetzky and Zeitlin. See, for example, Horodetzky's comparative study of R. Nahman and Schleiermacher, "Rabbi Nachman von Brazlaw; Beitrag zur Geschichte der jüdischen Mystik," in Steven Katz, ed., *Studies by Samuel Horodezky* (New York: Arno, 1980); Hillel Zeitlin, *Rabbi Nahman mi-Bratzlav: Hayav u-Torato* (Warsaw: n.p., 1910); and idem, *Reb Nakhman Braslaver* (New York: Harper, 1952). See also Martin Buber, *The Legend of the Baal Shem Tov* (1908; trans. Maurice Friedman; New York: Harper, 1955); and idem, *The Tales of Rabbi Nahman* (1906; trans. Maurice Friedman; Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1988). On the contribution of hasidism in general and R. Nahman in particular to modern Western spirituality, see idem, "Spinoza, Sabbatai Zvi, and the Baal Shem," in idem, *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1988) 89–112; idem, "The Place of Hasidism in the History of Religion," in idem, *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, 219–39; and Joseph Weiss, "Sense and Non-Sense in Defining Judaism—The Strange Case of Nahman of Braslav," in idem, *Studies in East European Jewish Mysticism* (ed. David Goldstein; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) 249–69.

It must be stated at the outset that any analysis of hasidism and its ideological symmetry to modern thought must begin by recognizing the divergent and multifarious nature of hasidic spirituality. Contemporary scholarship has rendered any overarching statement about hasidism obsolete. The hasidic movement contained and still contains numerous strains, differentiated by various schools of thought that flourished in Eastern Europe from the mid-eighteenth century until the present.³ Thus, any conclusions drawn from my analysis of one very provocative hasidic thinker, R. Naḥman of Bratzlav (1772–1810), should not be viewed as a statement regarding hasidism in general.

The life and thought of R. Naḥman of Bratzlav is particularly striking in its sensitivity to the struggle of one who seeks God in the very realm of God's absence. In this sense he is unique among early hasidic thinkers, many of whom adopted a more acosmic stance, where God's absence was viewed as an illusion to be overcome by means of devotion, culminating in an experience of communion with God (*devekut*). It is therefore not surprising that, whereas most hasidic masters at first attained legitimacy by being disciples of a particular master, R. Naḥman's reputation is based largely on the originality of this thought.⁴ This theme of divine absence and the struggle to overcome it places R. Naḥman squarely in the company of some of the more provocative theistic existentialists of the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The paradigm shift from the medieval period's sense of the incomprehensibility of God to the human estrangement from God may be seen in light of the shift in orientation of early modern thought from the cosmos to the individual.⁵ Perhaps the most striking characteristic

³Joseph Weiss's typological analysis ("Contemplative Mysticism and 'Faith' in Hasidic Piety," in idem, *Studies*, 47–55) maintains that hasidism can be divided into two trends: "mystical hasidism" and "faith hasidism." While this is perhaps too simplistic, it does point to a useful distinction. Much of this theory rests on how much each hasidic school integrated and interpreted the medieval kabbalistic tradition.

⁴R. Naḥman was born into the family of the Baal Shem Tov (Besht), the founder of hasidism. His mother Feige was the granddaughter of the Baal Shem and his two uncles, R. Moshe Ḥayyim Ephraim of Sudikov (1737–1800) and R. Barukh of Medzhibozh (1750–1812) were leaders of Ukrainian hasidism at the end of the eighteenth century. His family lineage was important to him and he used it to legitimate his place in the annals of hasidism. Yet even as he was influenced by his uncles and their disciples, R. Naḥman did not consider himself to be a disciple of one particular master. He often portrayed himself as a self-made *zaddik*. For more on his early life, see Arthur Green, *Tormented Master: A Life of Rabbi Naḥman* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights, 1992) 23–62.

⁵For a general discussion on this shift in modern theology, see Anthony T. Padovano, *The Estranged God: Modern Man's Search for Belief* (New York/Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1966); David Everett Roberts, *Existentialism and Religious Belief* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1967); Ralph Harper, *On Presence: Variations and Reflections* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1991); and John Wild and James M. Edie, eds., *Christianity and Existentialism: Essays by William Earle* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1963).

of R. Naḥman is that his outlook reflects this shift without his being aware of its existence. Moreover, R. Naḥman's "existential" stance, which was rooted in the sixteenth-century Jewish mystical tradition typical of early hasidism, emerged out of a theosophic worldview that did not easily lend itself to such an existential interpretation.⁶

In this article, I illuminate the hasidic treatment of divine absence in order to show how it offers a creative theistic Jewish response to the existentialist position of alienation rooted in traditional piety.⁷ The first part of this article includes an analysis of the theory of divine absence in R. Naḥman, which is depicted as the divine void (*ḥalal ha-panui*) in the theosophic kabbalism of the sixteenth-century Jewish mystic, R. Isaac Luria. I shall then attempt to place R. Naḥman's position in the context of other modern theistic existentialists who grappled with similar issues, even as they reached different conclusions. I hope that the creative spiritual struggle of R. Naḥman, which has remained largely inaccessible to the general schol-

⁶The question of how much R. Naḥman integrated this kabbalistic worldview is a topic for another study. Although he used kabbalistic categories and jargon, it is difficult to determine how much his thinking reflects this medieval mystical tradition. Both Scholem and Buber agree—although from different perspectives—that early hasidism contributed little to furthering the kabbalistic agenda. See Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1941) 338. While Scholem suggested that hasidism adopted kabbalistic ideas without offering anything "new," Martin Buber argued ("The Faith of Judaism," in idem, *Mamre: Essays in Religion* [trans., Greta Horn; Westport, CN: Greenwood, 1970] 13) that hasidism had overcome Kabbala in the same way he felt it had overcome talmudism: "The Kabbalah was overcome [in hasidism] because it was taken up into the ur-Jewish conception of the dialogical life just as it was. This overcoming of Kabbala is the important work of Chassidism; it left all middle-substances to fade before the relationship between God's transcendence, only to be called 'the limitless' with the suspension of all limited being, and his immanence, his 'indwelling.'" Although one can surely argue this point for the hasidic tradition of early Ḥabad and the Polish school of Kamarno, Buber's sweeping claim resonates in R. Naḥman's personalist approach.

⁷Such a theory is implied by Eliezer Schweid in his *Jewish Thought in the 20th Century: An Introduction* (trans. Amnon Hadary; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1992) 327–33. Schweid places R. Naḥman's theory of divine absence between the quasi-Nietzschean pessimism of the Jewish poet Yosef Ḥayyim Brenner and the positivistic Tolstoyian ideology of A. D. Gordon, two influential thinkers in early twentieth-century Israeli thought. Referring to R. Naḥman's stories, Schweid states, "The picture which emerges from his stories is one of unbridled apostasy where demonic depravity reigns the world. The state of '*hester panim*'—the eclipse of God—which is endemic to Exile has deteriorated to a full-blown severance from God. God's presence is nowhere in evidence, not even tangentially. . . . The sovereignty of God is at best a distant dream, a willed vision, a groundless chimera, whereas evil is mighty, palpable and inescapable" (p. 328). I would suggest that Schweid, possibly influenced by Joseph Weiss's studies on R. Naḥman's existential persona, is reading too much of Joseph Ḥayyim Brenner's pessimism into R. Naḥman. R. Naḥman, unlike Brenner, does claim to resolve the crisis, both existentially as well as mystically. I am, nonetheless, in total agreement with Schweid's juxtaposition of R. Naḥman between Brenner and Gordon, making him a model of the modern struggle to come to terms with a world from which God is absent.

arly audience due to its intricate exegetical framework, can offer an authentic Jewish response to the idea of divine absence which challenges the modern seeker of religious meaning.

■ An Explication of R. Naḥman

For the most part, classical scholarship on the ideological foundations of hasidism has worked under the assumption that hasidism is preoccupied with the notion of divine immanence.⁸ The Besht's emphasis on God as the "filler of worlds" has been viewed as the signpost for hasidic ideology. In both its mystical formulations and its more faith-oriented presentation, hasidism has often been viewed as a religious ideology founded on uncovering the presence of God in the world. This uncovering is seen as a personal and collective process of redemption. The notion of revealing the divinity hidden in the recesses of nature, however, presupposes the omnipresence of God in the world; God's hiddenness is therefore epistemological rather than ontological.

Although such a principle indeed exists in hasidism,⁹ R. Naḥman's philosophy is different. His theory of divine presence and the human experience of it (*devekut*) is based upon overcoming the ontological absence of God depicted in the void that preceded creation in the Lurianic scheme set forth by R. Luria.¹⁰ In order to understand R. Naḥman's position on the absence of God, one must first address his reading of the Lurianic concept of *zimzum*. *Zimzum*, or divine contraction, is the kabbalistic solution to the perennial problem of how the finite world could emerge from the infinite God. Even as the Lurianic reading of *zimzum* suggests the creation of a void—a place of divine absence that becomes the space of creation—this absence of God is usually viewed as one stage in a dynamic process whereby the absence of God, or the void, is overcome by a new influx of divine

⁸For some classical articles in English on the social and ideological foundations of hasidism, see Ben Zion Dinur, "The Origins of Hasidism and its Social and Messianic Foundations," in Gershon David Hundert, ed., *Essential Papers in Hasidism: Origins to Present* (New York/London: New York University Press, 1991); Simon Dubnow, "The Beginnings: The Baal Shem Tov and the Center in Podolia," in Hundert, *Essential Papers in Hasidism*, 25–58; Abraham J. Heschel, *The Circle of the Baal Shem Tov* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Louis Jacobs, "Hasidism," *EncJud* 7 (1972) 1403–7; and Gershom Scholem, "Devekut or Communion with God," in idem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1971) 203–27.

⁹This was particularly true of early Habad hasidism. See Rachel Elijor, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1993) 49–78.

¹⁰The importance of the recognition of divine absence has been addressed by scholars of Jewish mysticism. See, for example, Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 7–8: "There is no room for mysticism as the link, as the abyss between man and God has not become a fact of the inner consciousness. . . . Mysticism does not deny or overlook the abyss; on the contrary it begins by realizing its existence."

light into creation. While the notion of *zimzum* introduces the possibility of divine absence as only a temporary phase in the dynamic process of creation, R. Nahman focused his attention on this part of the process rather than on its culmination, when the absence is infused with a renewed state of divinity.

While some eastern European Jewish proponents of the *zimzum* theory attempted to theosophize or rationalize divine contraction,¹¹ R. Nahman did not focus on the cosmic movement of God, but on the emotional angst of the one who seeks God's presence. His position emerged slowly as he attempted to integrate the conventional notion of *zimzum* into his radical reading. Initially, he followed the classic kabbalistic view that God creates his own absence in order to allow for the possibility of creation.¹² What is therefore first created is the void, which is then filled with a finite form of divine presence that culminates in human beings, who serve as a bridge between creation and that which preceded it. In R. Nahman's approach, the kabbalistic notion of God's presence in creation does not fully supplant the initial creation of the void.¹³ The void is interpreted as the empirical expe-

¹¹The issue of literal and nonliteral readings of *zimzum* in post-Lurianic Kabbala is central in early hasidism, particularly in Habad hasidism. See, for example, Shneur Zalman of Liady, *Likkutei Torah* (Brooklyn: Kehot, 1979) 104–6; and Aharon ha-Levi of Starosielce, *Sha'arei ha-Yihud ve ha-Emunah* (2 vols.; Jerusalem: Mekkora, 1982) 1. 42a–43b. See also Elior, *Paradoxical Ascent*, 79–91; and Tamar Ross, "Two Interpretations of *Tzimzum*: R. Hayyim of Volozhin and R. Shneur Zalman of Liady," *Mehkarei Yerushalayim* 2 (1982) 152–69 [Hebrew]. For an alternate reading of the use of *zimzum* in postmedieval Jewish mysticism, see Y. Ben-Shlomo, "The Kabbala of the Ari in the Teachings of R. Kook," *Mehkarei Yerushalayim* 10 (1992) 449–57 [Hebrew].

¹²See, for example, R. Hayyim Vital, *Ozrot Hayyim*, part 1: *Mevo She'arim* 1.1.1 and idem, "Sha'ar ha-Kelalim" in *Ez Hayyim* (n. p.: Mekor Hayyim, n. d.) 5a. A systematic appraisal of Lurianic *zimzum*, which may have influenced R. Nahman, can be found in Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto, *One Hundred and Thirty-Eight Openings of Wisdom* (Bnei Brak: n. p., 1992) 58–72 [Hebrew]. See also Isaiah Tishby, *The Doctrine of Evil and the 'Kelippah' in Lurianic Kabbala* (reprinted Jerusalem: Magnes, 1991) 13–20 [Hebrew]; and Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 261–64. On Luzzatto's influence on hasidism, see Isaiah Tishby, "Ikvot Ramhal be-Mishnat ha-Hasidut," *Zion* 43 (1978) 201–34. For a more traditional rendition of the kabbalistic notion of *zimzum*, see Aryeh Kaplan, *Inner Space* (Jerusalem: Moznaim, 1990) 120–31. This book attempts to introduce major themes in Kabbala, mostly from the Lurianic tradition. It is interesting that in the discussion of *zimzum*, a large part of the chapter is devoted to R. Nahman's reading of *zimzum* and the void.

¹³The notion that the void remains after creation is, as far as I know, R. Nahman's alone. A more conventional view is expressed by Luzzatto (*One Hundred Thirty-Eight Openings*, 66): "The emanated light is called a *rishimu* ['remnant'] of the primordial light. . . . The secret of this remnant is what is called the space of all existence, because it gives [life] to all of that which exists, which the eternal light could not have given. This space is called *halal* ['void']. It is empty of the eternal *eyn sof*, which is the primordial light which existed before." See also Luzzatto's commentary to Vital's *Ozrot Hayyim* in *Ginzei Ramhal* (Bnei Brak: n. p., 1984) 297: "The void (*halal*) is that which is empty of eternity (*bilti takhliot*). The remnant which remains

rience of God's absence that becomes, in R. Naḥman's understanding, the heretical notion of faithlessness.¹⁴ Faithlessness is the outcome of giving credence to the observation of a world empty of God; yet R. Naḥman apparently could not let go of the very notion that he deemed so dangerous. He was not willing to turn away from the heresy of divine absence by calling it an illusion.¹⁵ Whereas traditional readers of R. Naḥman stress that his interpretation of the void is in concert with the cosmic void of creation in the Lurianic scheme, I would argue that R. Naḥman had little interest in the ontology of the cosmic void. What interested him was that the void may serve as a foundation for the emotional response to the perception of divine absence in human experience. To complicate matters further, he suggested that the absence of God and the eternal nature of God (as *eyn sof*) are identical vis-à-vis human experience. Both represent the unbridled passion of human emotions and desire that yield spiritual impotence, faithlessness, and heresy, if left unattended.¹⁶ The kabbalistic formu-

is called 'empty air.' [Yet] there is no void without a remnant [of divine light]." The notion of the remnant of light left after the *zimzum* serves as a source for the panentheistic idea in the hasidic reading of Kabbala. R. Naḥman suggested that the void or emptiness of God is not supplanted by the divine light (*ʿor yashar*) that is injected subsequently into the void. For more on the source of this remnant of light in Lurianic Kabbala, see Ḥayyim Vital, *Shaʿar ha-Hakdamot* (Jerusalem: n.p., 1850) 17–23; R. Shlomo b. Ḥayyim Haikel Eliashuv, *Leshem Shevo ve-Aḥlamah, Hakdamot ve Shaʿarim* (Jerusalem: n. p., 1948) 35ff; *Shemen Sasson* no. 2, a commentary of R. Shalom Sharabi's *Nahar Shalom* printed in the Meqor Ḥayyim edition of the *Ez Ḥayyim* p. 49c and Jacob b. Ḥayyim Zemah, *Zohar ha-Rakiʿa* (Koretz: Kriger, 1785) 23a.

¹⁴The classic Lurianic stance on this is that the product of *zimzum* is the emergence of judgment (*middat ha-din*). See, for example, Ḥayyim Vital, "Drosh Igulim ve Yosher," in *Ez Ḥayyim*, 11d. For a scholarly study on this idea in Kabbala, see Mordecai Pachter, "Circles and Lines—The History of an Idea," *Daʿat* 18 (1987) 59–90 [Hebrew].

¹⁵Mendel Piekarcz argues (*Studies in Bratzlav Hasidism* [Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1972] 21–55) that R. Naḥman was infatuated with heresy; after a fire destroyed his house in Bratzlav, R. Naḥman decided to settle in Uman, a Ukrainian town known for its Jewish heretics. When he first arrived in Uman he stayed in the house of a well-known member of the Jewish Enlightenment rather than in the residence of the local rabbi. Traditional interpreters explain this strange phenomenon by arguing that R. Naḥman intentionally engaged these heretics to redeem the divine sparks embedded in their souls, fulfilling the Lurianic directive of "descent for the sake of ascent." This idea became a central feature in the thought of Sabbatai Zvi, who proclaimed himself messiah in the seventeenth century. For a discussion on the similarities between these two figures, see Yehuda Liebes, "Ha-Tikkun ha-Kelali of R. Naḥman of Bratzlav and its Sabbatean Links," in idem, *Studies in Jewish Myth and Jewish Messianism* (trans. Batya Stein; Albany: SUNY Press, 1993) 115–48.

¹⁶See, for example, R. Naḥman of Cheryn (in his commentary to *Likkutei MoHaRan* entitled *Parperaʿot le Hokhma* [Brooklyn: n. p., 1976] 37a) who comments: "We are forced to state that God removed Himself from that place [that is, the place of the *zimzum*]. In truth, however, in this place there is also divinity since there can be nothing without Him. Rather, godliness is hidden and concealed there so much that it is likened to an 'empty void' in order

could not exist. . . . There is [thus] a second type of heresy, made up of wisdom, which is really no wisdom at all. The perplexities and questions of this heresy come from the void (*ḥalal*). They have about them the quality of silence, because no intellect nor language can resolve them. Creation came about through the word. . . . In language there is intellect. . . language defines all things. . . . But in the void which surrounds all worlds and is completely empty, there is no language.¹⁹ . . . Therefore the questions which arise, they are silent.²⁰

In this synopsis of a much more complex text, R. Naḥman introduced the basic elements of his reading of the void. The person of faith faces two challenges. The first challenge confronting the one who seeks divine wisdom is the heresy rooted in the finite creation, the product of the breaking of the cosmic vessels in Lurianic Kabbala (*shvirat ha-kelim*). In this heresy, as in the finite world, God exists, and by finding the divine element in the philosophical question one can resolve the crisis of faith. The challenge is to uncover the divine element hidden in the shards of the apparently heretical question, revealing that it is not heresy at all. R. Naḥman believed that this type of heresy was not compelling for the seeker of divine truth, but only satisfying for one whose spiritual journey is limited to this finite world. On this, R. Naḥman stated, “There is a difference between these [two] questions. There is a question to which one can understand the answer. On this [type] of question the mishna states, ‘Know what to answer the heretic’ [*m. ʿAbot* 2.14]. There is also a question, however, to which it is impossible for a human being to find an answer.”²¹ This is the second challenge. Apparently unsatisfied with uncovering the divine in the first question, R. Naḥman set for himself a much more formidable task: he sought not only the God in creation—the immanent God—but the transcendent God as well. This search for the transcendent God forced R. Naḥman to confront the initial perception of God’s absence. The question of the first heretic is resolved by coming to understand the apparent ab-

¹⁹The term “language” here refers to the noncommunicative language of the *Sefer Yeẓirah*, where the Hebrew letters are viewed as the fabric of the cosmic world. Therefore, R. Naḥman suggested that the void is the remnant of divine contraction (*zimzum*) that was not filled with the finite form of God in the supernal worlds. He drew his notion of language in this case from *m. ʿAbot* 5.1, “With ten utterances God created the world.” On the nature of language in *Sefer Yeẓirah*, see Ithamar Gruenwald, “Some Critical Notes on the First Part of *Sefer Yeẓira*,” *REJ* 132 (1973) 475–512; and Joseph Dan, *Three Types of Ancient Jewish Mysticism* (Cincinnati: University of Cincinnati Press, 1984) 16–24.

²⁰See R. Naḥman of Bratzlav, *Likkutei MoHaRaṅ* (New York: n. p., 1976) 78b–79c. I used portions of Green’s translation (*Tormented Master*, 312).

²¹R. Naḥman of Bratzlav, *Likkutei MoHaRaṅ* 19d (§1.62). See also 20b (§2.12). For a study on the implications of the “question” in R. Naḥman, see Joseph Weiss, “The ‘Question’ in the Teachings of R. Naḥman,” in Piekarcz, *Studies in Bratzlav Hasidism*, 109–49 [Hebrew].

lation of the cosmic void reflects R. Naḥman's empirical findings, placing him constantly on the verge of faithlessness and despair.¹⁷ Rather than succumbing to the temptation of fatalism, however, R. Naḥman saw in the process of creation an antidote for his own situation; human beings can move beyond the void by first recreating and then possessing it, retreating from our own creation as God did in the kabbalistic reading of the biblical account of creation. In such a manner, R. Naḥman invited humans to reproduce emotionally the entire creative process and thus to utilize the void, as was the case in creation, as a constructive tool in the search for divine presence.¹⁸

The most explicit and developed statement of the void in R. Naḥman's thought appears in *Likkutei MoHaRan* §1.64, where he described his typology of heresy:

Know that there are two types of heresy. There is one heresy which is derived from extraneous wisdom. . . . [The claims of] this heresy may be answered, for they come from extraneous wisdom, brought about by the breaking of the vessels. . . . God can be found there, if one looks for Him and seeks Him out. . . . Therefore it is said, "Know what to answer the heretic" [*m. 'Abot* 2.14]. . . . God is, as it were, inside all the worlds, yet he surrounds them. But there must remain some space between His immanence and His transcendence, for if not, the world

to create a place for the creation." This reading indeed reflects the classical interpretation of all theories of *zimzum*. See, for example, Zemaḥ, *Zohar ha-Raki'a*, 23a–b. In my view, however, it deviates sharply from the way this void is used by R. Naḥman in *Likkutei MoHaRan* 79d (§1.64).

¹⁷Although Green and Weiss used R. Naḥman's teachings as the basis for their respective psychoanalytic appraisals of his personality, I do not intend to take a similar stance. Rather, I find the spiritual struggle implicit in R. Naḥman's teachings as indicative of a Jewish spirituality founded upon the real possibility of unbelief. In my view, his struggle mirrors the spiritual life of Pascal, whose conversion and subsequent spiritual struggle were not deemed by his biographers as psychotic or depressive. See, for example, Romano Guardini, *Pascal for Our Time* (trans. B. Thompson; New York: Herder & Herder, 1966) 45–88; and Jean Mesnard, *Pascal* (trans. Claude and Marcia Abraham; Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1965).

¹⁸The notion that the affirmation of the void can lead to a renewed sense of religious meaning is strikingly similar to Nietzsche's stance that nihilism can be restorative. See, for example, Karen Leslie Carr, *The Banalization of Nihilism: Twentieth Century Responses to Meaninglessness* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992); Carr states, "Such questioning [the questioning of truth], however, is a temporary state; from such abysses, from such severe sickness, one returns *newborn*." One requires a more 'delicate taste of joy,' and finds within a second dangerous innocence. Thus we see here confirmation that Nietzsche regarded nihilism as a potentially restorative and redemptive event, something not only useful, but necessary for the renewed experience of the world" (p. 48). Of course, for R. Naḥman, restoration as mystical experience arises only through faith. For Nietzsche, according to Carr, the healing quality of nihilism is that it finally liberates man from the "sick" state of dependence and impotence. As is the case with most comparisons between hasidism and existentialism, their common bond is only in their shared assumptions, not in their resolutions.

sence of God as an illusion. The question of the second heretic cannot be resolved rationally.

Throughout history, the dichotomy between the immanent and transcendent God permeates Jewish theology, both rationalist and mystical. For example, the mystics of the Lurianic school have openly stated that the transcendent God, or *eyn sof*, is not their concern.²² One could argue that the void has no ontic status, but is only a psychological or empirical barrier that separates the eternal God (*eyn sof*) from the immanent God of creation. That is, all of creation is divine. The distinction between God and world is only the result of human limitations. Although this may very well be the position of R. Naḥman, close readings of his teachings yield another possibility. The anguish and anxiety that permeated his life as well as his discourse suggested that his experiences were not of the absence of God's presence but the presence of God's absence; the void is not a lacuna between the two dimensions of God, but the possibility of the nonexistence of the transcendent God, which makes the immanent God an illusion. This is not to say that R. Naḥman came to such a conclusion; his life's work attempted to avert such heresy and disbelief. He began, however, with the assumption that the heretical question must be taken seriously if it is to be overcome. Moreover, only by confronting this question can one achieve an experience of the transcendent God.²³

Whoever contemplates the void not as the absence of divine presence, but the experience of divine absence, is confronted by the second heretic, whose question is rooted in this void. In this case, the human intellect is rendered useless as the question is no longer intellectual but experiential. Regarding this, R. Naḥman stated, "When a man follows his intellect and

²²This was not so in the earlier Kabbala. Gershom Scholem (in R. J. Z. Werblowsky, ed., *Origins of the Kabbalah* [trans. Alan Arkush; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987] 431) states, "From 1250 onward, a degree of uncertainty existed among kabbalists with regard to such important questions as whether the first *sefirah* itself was not to be considered the transcendent diety, or whether the *sefirot* were to be regarded as identical with the substance of the diety, or merely organs of its manifestation." This was not the case for the Lurianists, for whom *eyn sof* is clearly beyond the scope of human inquiry; see also Daniel Chanan Matt, "Ayin: The Concept of Nothingness in Jewish Mysticism," in Robert K. C. Forman, ed., *The Problem of Pure Consciousness* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) 121–59; and Moshe Idel, "On the Concept of *Zimzum* in Kabbala and its Research" *Mekhkarei Yerushalayim* 10 (1992) 59–113, esp. 60–68 [Hebrew].

²³R. Naḥman's interest in heresy was not limited to the theoretical. Although his desire to settle in Uman at the end of his life is shrouded in mystery, one theory is that he was drawn to the Jewish heretics in the city, with whom he developed an ongoing relationship. For studies that deal with the move to Uman and R. Naḥman's relationship to the Maskilim, see Ḥayyim Lieberman, "Rabbi Naḥman Bratslaver and the Maskilim in Uman," *Yivo Annual of Jewish Social Studies* 6 (1951) 287–301; Piekarcz, "The Episode of Uman in the Life of R. Naḥman of Bratzlav," *Studies In Bratzlav Hasidism*, 21–55 [Hebrew]; and Green, *Tormented Master*, 251–65.

mind he can fall prey to many mistakes and barriers and can come to great evil, God forbid.”²⁴ To conclude from this statement that R. Naḥman vied for a retreat to “simple faith” as the only solution to the human epistemic dilemma is, in my view, premature. The challenge of the void poses a particular danger to the spiritual seeker. Yet one’s desire for God should not be destroyed by this ominous challenge; unless one passes through this dark forest, the quest for the transcendent God remains unanswered. R. Naḥman stated that the general solution is faith (*ʿemunah*), but this must be understood practically in terms of what R. Naḥman in other places called silence and the primal wordless scream²⁵—two applied methods of attaining the necessary emotional state in order for the language of faith to be constructive.

R. Naḥman’s view of faith is complex, and a full treatment of his highly nuanced approach is beyond the scope of this present study. It is important, however, to note that he spoke of two distinct types of faith, the first a “simple” faith, the second a “dialectical” faith. R. Naḥman maintained that the first type of faith should be that of everyone except the *zaddik* of the generation, a group that included R. Naḥman, one presumes. It is a faith that rejects philosophical speculation and negates the use of reason as the matrix of religious worship.²⁶ R. Naḥman strongly argued that the one who adheres to simple faith must discard reason: “Truly, reason ought to be cast aside and all cleverness discarded—God must be worshipped in simplicity.”²⁷ This simple faith is highly antirational, even in the devotional world of hasidic piety. The second type of faith requires interaction with the heretic, a knowledge of philosophy, and thus the constant struggle to overcome the heretical question.²⁸ This second, dialectical type of faith brings forth suffering and anguish; it is the faith of the *zaddik*, for only he can truly overcome the absence of God and reach the experience of the tran-

²⁴R. Naḥman of Bratzlav, *Likkutei MoHaRan* 19d (§2.12).

²⁵Ibid., 9b–c (§1.8).

²⁶The simple faith of the Hasid is perhaps the faith in the *zaddik* and the ability of the *zaddik*, who exhibits the second type of faith, to redeem him from his spiritual malaise. See R. Naḥman’s image (*Likkutei MoHaRan* 80a–81b [§1.65]) of the “master of the garden” (the *zaddik*) who must nurture the “trees outside the garden” (the Hasidim), whom the *zaddik* ultimately brings back to the garden from which they have been exiled. This lesson has been translated and published as a pamphlet by the Breslov Research Institute; see *Garden of the Souls* (trans. Avraham Greenbaum; Monsey, NY: Breslov Research Institute: n.d.). See also R. Naḥman of Bratzlav, *Siḥot ha-Ran* (Jerusalem: Breslav Publishers, 1961) 141.

²⁷R. Naḥman of Bratzlav, *Likkutei MoHaRan* 15 (§2.5). This battle against reason for the masses and the interaction with reason (*tikkun*) for the *zaddik* is developed in Liebes, “*Ha-Tikkun Ha-Kelali* of R. Naḥman of Bratzlav,” 115–51, esp. 124.

²⁸For a discussion of the notion of dialectical faith in R. Naḥman see Green, *Tormented Master*, 285–330; and Joseph Dan, *The Hasidic Story: Its History and Development* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1975) 144–71 [Hebrew].

scendent God.²⁹ It appears, however, that the faith presented in R. Naḥman's lessons is a dialectical one and not a simple faith that would retreat from any confrontation with the void. For the adherent of simple faith, the whole exegetical enterprise is largely useless, as is the possibility of experiencing the transcendent God. Hence, the pattern of using the primal scream and prayer, which I shall now address, should open one's consciousness to the new dimension of God's presence beyond God's absence, but this pattern is only relevant for the one who dares to take the road of the dialectic.

In numerous places R. Naḥman stressed that the nonverbal scream has the potential to break through the silence—which is the experiential confrontation with divine absence of God—and thus yield an experience of divine presence.

Sometimes it is that consciousness (*moḥin*) and divine everflow (*shefa*) are hidden in the dimension of pregnancy (*‘ibur*).³⁰ At that time, the human scream is wonderful, whether in prayer or study. . . . This scream is in the place of the scream of the *shekhina*, as if the *shekhina* is screaming. At that point, the [hidden] *moḥin* are born [revealed].³¹

²⁹For some examples of R. Naḥman's explicit directions not to become involved with this dialectical faith, see R. Nathan (Sternharz) of Nemerov *Ḥayyei MoHaRan* (Jerusalem: Breslav Publishers, 1976) 48–55; and *Siḥot ha-Ran*. R. Naḥman stated (“Devotion to God,” 175–76): “And he spoke to me about the ways of serving God, which usually entail great suffering. . . . He then said, But this does not mean you, since you always must be joyful.” R. Naḥman himself stated, however, that even the *zaddik* can experience joy once he recognizes that his own suffering is due to his lack of vision (*Likkutei MoHaRan* 80c–d [§1.65]). For a development of the notion of suffering and the tragic fate of the *zaddik* as a necessary component in healing the world, see R. Naḥman of Cheryn, *Parpera’ot le Ḥokhma* 37c on *Likkutei MoHaRan* (§1.65), where the author notes that the lesson in question was delivered just before the death of R. Naḥman's son, Shlomo Efrayim. R. Naḥman apparently felt that his son's suffering was the fate of the *zaddik* who had to perish in order to redeem the world. A more elaborate version of this episode can be found in Aryeh Kaplan, *Until the Mashiach: Rabbi Nachman's Biography, an Annotated Chronology* (ed. David Shapiro; Jerusalem: Breslov Research Institute, 1985) 121–23. According to this source, R. Naḥman's first son, Shlomo Efrayim, was born the spring of 1805 and died the summer of 1806 after contracting tuberculosis. The lesson on the necessity of the suffering of the *zaddik* was said beside his son's deathbed, days before his untimely passing.

³⁰The idea of pregnancy (*‘ibur*) in Lurianic Kabbala is a central principle in the process of *tikkun*. There are three stages of cosmic pregnancy, and each serves as a gestation period for the broken fragments of the supernal world; these are born as “new” stages of consciousness (*moḥin*) and then nurtured (*yenika*) until they reach maturation. See, for example, Vital, “Sha‘ar ha-Kelalim,” in *Ez Ḥayyim*, 9c, 10a; and idem, *Mevo She‘arim* 12a–b (§2.3.2). See also R. Jacob Ḥayyim Zemah's gloss to *Mevo She‘arim* 12a (§2.3.2) no. 2. For a scholarly discussion on the notion of pregnancy in Lurianic Kabbala, see Mordecai Pachter, “Smallness and Greatness in Lurianic Kabbala,” *Mekhkarei Yerushalayim* 10 (1992) 171–210 [Hebrew].

³¹R. Naḥman of Bratzlav, *Likkutei MoHaRan* 30b (§1.21). See also 111b (§1.198): “When one screams to God, they say to him ‘go forward,’ as it is written (Exod 14:15), ‘then the Lord said to Moses, Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward.’” Interestingly,

The scream serves as a midwife, as it were, which, reflecting the exilic character of the *shekhina*, yields a new level of consciousness. This new *mohin* diminishes the alienation of the worshipper by revealing the divine overflow (*shefa*).

In a complex discussion concerning the *makkifim* (“hovering light”),³² which R. Naḥman defined as a level of consciousness hovering outside the realm of human experience, he stated:

The fundamental question [which concerns us] is how do we birth this consciousness (*mohin*) from its concealed state? Afterward, when it emerges, how can we integrate the *makkifim* [“external consciousness”] inside [our consciousness]? How this is accomplished has already been well explained. That is, by way of the scream of Torah study and prayer we can birth this consciousness from its concealed place. By means of the sanctity of the seven lights of the Temple menorah which represent the sanctification of our eyes by not gazing upon forbidden things; also by sanctifying the mouth, the nose and the ears we can draw these *makkifim* inside.³³

In this particular case, the scream is not wordless but rather a mode of verbal expression that allows the words of study or prayer to give birth to a new state of consciousness. This then becomes integrated into the individual only to introduce new *makkifim*, which then must be integrated as well.

In another instance, the scream does not contain words but opens up the possibility *for* words. Discussing the trial of sexual desire, which faces each individual, R. Naḥman stated:

R. Naḥman transformed the apparently negative implications of Moses’ scream in the biblical narrative to something that enables one to “go forward,” that is, to give birth to consciousness (*mohin*) and thus pray. For other examples of this, see R. Naḥman of Bratzlav, *Likkutei MoHaRan* 32d (§1.22) 50d (§1.36) 89d–90b (§1.75).

³²R. Naḥman’s use of *makkifim* is quite complex; in Lurianic Kabbala this term generally refers to light that first retreated from vessels of creation before they shattered and then descended into the depths of the void. These lights remain undamaged and subsequently are utilized in the process of *tikkun* by slowly entering and exiting the broken vessel, each time building the vessel until it will be able to sustain a total integration of the light. R. Naḥman used this concept to illuminate the slow development of human consciousness. Green states (*Tormented Master*, 302–4) that the term *makkifim* in R. Naḥman’s thought serves as the core of his dialectical faith as opposed to simple faith. In Lurianic Kabbala the “dialectical” phenomenon in the cosmic process of *tikkun* can be found in *Etz Hayyim* Palace 1, Palace of *Adam Kadmon*, Seventh Gate, the Gate of *Mate ve lo Mate*, 24–30. R. Naḥman used this motif explicitly in one instance in *Likkutei MoHaRan* (36d [§1.24]), where he stressed the impossibility of apprehending the light of *eyn sof*, even by means of the dialectical process of *mate be lo mate* except via *simḥa* (“joyousness”).

³³*Ibid.*, 31d (§1.21).

The principle test that man is confronted with is the test of sexual desire. This [desire] is embodied in the seventy nations, which is embodied in the notion of *other* (*ʿaḥer*), *another God*. When one screams, as it is written, “*My soul cries for You, O God*” (Ps 42:1), one must scream seventy times, not less [corresponding to the seventy nations].³⁴ Then the secrets of the Torah will be open to him and the hidden will be revealed to him, new souls and Torah will be born. That [new] Torah is embodied in the totality of the souls of Israel. It will reveal the faces of Torah which were, until now, concealed in the extraneous matter (*kelippot*).³⁵

In each of the three cases cited, the scream discloses new possibilities. In the second text, a scream without words breaks apart the silence, which is represented as both the root of sexual desire and idolatry. In the previous text, the use of the word *ʿaḥer*—literally, “other”—appears to have a double meaning. As R. Naḥman indicated, it implies either “another God” or idolatry. It is also, however, the name given to the talmudic heretic R. Elisha b. Avuiah, whose statement, “there is no judge and there is no justice,”³⁶ resounds with the heresy of divine absence with which R. Naḥman grappled throughout his teaching. According to my reading of R. Naḥman, Elisha b. Avuiah’s mistake was not in his perception of the absence of God, but in his inability to complete the creative process beginning—but not ending—with *zimzum* in order to apprehend the transcendent nature of God beyond the absence. The heretical nature of this tannaitic sage is that he initiated a process that he did not complete. Perhaps the silence of divine absence R. Naḥman likened to the question of the second heretic discussed earlier is the very root of the heresy of the rabbinic sage and is transcended through the scream, or the voice that precedes creation, the scream that enables the words of creation to emerge. As the world is created through *zimzum* and this is followed by the “ten utterances” (*m. ʿAbot* 1:5), human *zimzum* is accomplished by the scream, which is followed by words of study and prayer. The scream brings one past the darkness, through the void to the presence of God as creator by giving birth to a new state of consciousness, moving from the wordless to the word.³⁷ This scream is

³⁴For R. Naḥman, the seventy nations are synonymous with idolatry and the force of evil. See, for example, *ibid.*, 13a (§1.10) where the Gentile as idol worshipper is likened to the “power of death” in *Gen. R.* 9.

³⁵R. Naḥman of Bratzlav, *Likkutei MoHaRan* 50d–51a (§1.36); my italics. This statement is not part of the original lesson, but a later addition by the editor. These additions, most of which are statements made by R. Naḥman himself, are not uncommon in *Likkutei MoHaRan*. See Weiss, *Studies in Bratzlav Hasidism*, 251–77.

³⁶*b. Ber.* 15b.

³⁷In another passage (*Likkutei MoHaRan* 9b–c [§1.8]), R. Naḥman likened the creative process to the breath (*ruah*) of God, again an illusion to a sound that has no linguistic formu-

intended to force the individual to confront divine absence and to produce a way beyond that absence.³⁸ In typical hasidic style, R. Naḥman argued that one must confront the cosmic emptiness with one's own emptiness, with the very fabric of the void within oneself.³⁹ Yet this void is not an intrinsic part of the individual but must be created by the person, just as the void of the *zimzum* was created by God. Through silence and the wordless scream—through that which comes before prayer and through prayer itself—R. Naḥman believed that he could delve into the void and emerge unscathed. The mechanics of this process must now be addressed.

In *Likkutei MoHaRan* 1.5, R. Naḥman addressed this issue from a slightly different perspective. The wordless scream discussed above becomes the image of thunder, which empties the heart of insincerity—literally, crookedness—in order to experience joy.

The fundamental place of joy is in the heart, as it is written (Ps 4:8), “You put joy into my heart.” It is impossible for the heart to be joyous until it removes the crookedness which is in the heart; that it should be a “straight heart” (*yishrei lev*). At that point he will merit joy, as it is written (Ps 97:12), “O you righteous [straight hearted], rejoice in the Lord.” The crookedness in the heart is removed by thunder as it says in Talmud Berakhot (59b), “Thunder was not created except to remove crookedness from the heart.” Thunder corresponds to the voice which comes forth strongly in prayer. From this [strong voice] thunder is created.⁴⁰

This text likens the heavenly voice of thunder which, as the talmudic passage suggests, causes the heart to become straight by arousing one to fear the power of God, to the voice that emerges in prayer. The individual, by being attentive to his or her own voice—not the words of prayer, but the power of the voice itself—enables the heart to become “straight” and thus experiences joy (*simḥa*). Like the primal scream discussed earlier, the voice of prayer in this passage empties the heart. The emptying of the heart enables one to be joyous; it allows one's heart and mind to interact in order to filter reason through the chambers of the heart, the place of faith, and

lation: “How great is the groan and sigh of a Jew, for this [causes] the perfection of his deficiencies. By means of the aspect of breath, which is the spirit of life, the world was created. . . . The newness of the world comes about through breath [*ruah*, meaning both breath and spirit].” This breath or spirit is depicted here as a sigh or groan that shares the nonlinguistic character of the scream that precedes linguistic prayer.

³⁸See for example in Yehudit Kook, *R. Naḥman of Bratzlav: Studies in His Writings* (Jerusalem: Mosad Y. L. Girsh, 1973) 169–75 [Hebrew].

³⁹This idea is strikingly similar to Carl G. Jung's notion of the “shadow” or the “dark self.” See his *Psychology and Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1938) 93–95; and *idem, Man and His Symbols* (New York: Doubleday, 1964) 168–76.

⁴⁰R. Naḥman of Bratzlav, *Likkutei MoHaRan* 5c (§1.5).

thus to experience the true nature of the *mitzvot*, the commandments. I must now develop this idea further in order to view how R. Naḥman continued to deepen his reading of *zimzum* as a human act that opens the possibility for the experience of the transcendent God.

In *Likkutei MoHaRan* 1.49, R. Naḥman began a lengthy discussion on prayer with what seems to be a reiteration of his view of *zimzum*. There are, however, subtle nuances worth noting. R. Naḥman stated that the concept of *eyn sof* (God as infinite) is a prerequisite for creation, yet cannot sustain creation as such. If the purpose of creation is, as R. Naḥman put it, “to reveal the glory of God,” this recognition of God can only occur through the fragmentation of worlds that can hold attributes of God’s finite presence.⁴¹ This framework of “worlds and attributes” is, by definition, antithetical to God as eternal (*eyn sof*). In this case, the void (*halal*) is not the place empty of God but a place so full of God that God cannot be recognized by humans. The ontic character of *zimzum* as presented by the Lurianic school is now interpreted phenomenologically. God’s absence and God’s eternal presence become identical.⁴²

The process of this act of creation is now read into the act of prayer. Prayer must be preceded by a desire for God. Yearning for God is viewed as an existential response to the experience of God’s absence.

From the grandeur of the unbridled desire in the heart of a Jew which reaches to the eternal nature of God (*eyn sof*), it would not be possible to perform any act of devotion and thus one would be unable to reveal any positive attribute (*middah*). From the grandeur of this pure heart, it is not possible to do anything! This can be likened to the fact that in the beginning of the creative process, there was no room for creation because everything was eternal (*eyn sof*). The creation of the world is the creation of attributes (*middot*). Therefore, it is necessary for a person to contract (limit) the great unbridled desire in his heart which is *eyn sof*, in order to serve God according to gradations and attributes

⁴¹Ibid., 57a (§1.49). “The fundamental purpose of creation is to reveal God’s kingship. This is impossible without the creation of worlds [fragmentation] for there is no King without a people. Therefore, *zimzum* was necessary to [create] the empty void, to create a place for the worlds in order to reveal his kingship” (ibid., 57c [§1.49]). This is a classic definition of the purpose of creation. R. Naḥman’s innovation emerged when he likened the eternal nature of God to the unbridled emotions of the heart, and the *zimzum* to the human limitation of those emotions, which creates a void and thus desire in the heart.

⁴²For a discussion of the ontic character of the Lurianic system, see Karl Erich Grozinger, “Principles and Aims in Lurianic Cosmology,” *Mekhkarei Yerushalayim* 10 (1992) 37–46 [Hebrew]. R. Naḥman’s reading of *zimzum* here is less psychological and more phenomenological in that his concern is how *zimzum*, as the absence of God, serve as a foundation for one’s perception of the external world. His phenomenological reading retains the ontic character of *zimzum* and uses it to legitimate both his vision of a world without God and his belief in a world full of God.

(*middot*). . . . When one limits the light in one's heart, an empty void remains. . . . It is in that void where good attributes are revealed. They are the secret of the creation of worlds in the divine void (of God).⁴³

This reading appears to be based on the oft-quoted rabbinic dictum that prayer is the service of the heart. Here R. Nahman suggested that the heart before prayer is like God before creation. It is the place of unbridled emotions incapable of sustaining any form and thus potentially very destructive. It is also filled with unbridled desire yet devoid of yearning since, like the *eyn sof*, it contains no distinction and thus has nothing to yearn for.⁴⁴ R. Nahman suggested that prayer, like creation, must be preceded by *zimzum*, that is, an emptiness in the heart, which will house the human desire to pray. Invoking Ps 109:22, "My heart is empty (*halal*) within me,"⁴⁵ R. Nahman stated, "Prayer of the heart is likened to the revelation of God's kingdom [that is, the purpose of creation], from within the empty void, into the divine attributes and the worlds."⁴⁶ One must create the void of divine absence in one's own heart in order for prayer to be effectual, just as God created his absence in order to make way for his finite presence.

What must be avoided are the two opposite poles which pose the same danger. First, one must not allow the emotions embedded in one's heart to go unattended, thus avoiding confrontations of divine absence. This is the

⁴³R. Nahman of Bratzlav, *Likkutei MoHaRan* 57c (§1.49).

⁴⁴This idea reflects a similar distinction which Paul Tillich made in his discussion on the nature of the philosopher (*Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955] 11, 12): "We are a mixture of being and non-being. This is precisely what is meant when we say we are finite. It is man in his finitude who asks the question of being. He who is infinite does not ask the question of being, for, as infinite, he has the complete power of being. He is identical with it; he is God. And a being which does not realize that it is finite (and in our actual experience that is every being except man) cannot ask, because it cannot go beyond itself and its limits." Echoing Heidegger, Tillich argued that the notion of nonbeing is the fundamental principle for philosophy (what Heidegger called "thinking" [*Denken*]). R. Nahman suggested that the void—perhaps his confrontation with nonbeing—is the necessary prerequisite for an experience of the transcendent God.

⁴⁵R. Nahman used this verse in another context which corresponds to the present discussion. In *Likkutei MoHaRan* 6b (§1.6) he develops his notion of repentance as the transformation from anger to passive submission: "The fundamental aspect of repentance is that one should hear an embarrassing [remark] and remain silent." Anger is likened to the blood in the left side of the heart (*gevurah*), which is the seat of the evil inclination. The reaction of anger is then the reaction of the evil inclination. "The fixing for this is to turn anger (*dam*, literally 'blood') to submission (*dom*, 'silence')" (6d [§1.6]). Thus the heart is emptied of the blood and left silent or vacant. At this juncture R. Nahman again invoked the verse in Psalms, "My heart is empty within me" (109:22), to illustrate the success of repentance in destroying the evil inclination in the heart. Although in this case the emptiness is not the absence of God but the absence of anger, the emptiness in the heart is still seen as constructive.

⁴⁶R. Nahman of Bratzlav, *Likkutei MoHaRan* 6b (§1.6).

realm of *eyn sof* where creation, prayer and divine service (*‘avodah*) are impossible. Second, one must avoid only confronting the emptiness and not completing the creative process by actually elevating the yearning for God in prayer. The first danger will lead to antinomian heresy in that one will never be able to justify the performance of *mizvot* since one lacks the proper yearning to find God.⁴⁷ The second danger will yield to fatalism: the individual will become overcome by the absence, seeing no possibility of redemption, and thus will be trapped in the snares of the second heretic. Either inaction or incomplete action represents the two dangers that confront the second seeker. When the unbridled eternal nature in the human heart is not confined and directed or when the *zimzum*, which creates the potential for God’s presence, does not look to a renewed flow of divine presence, the individual confronts the second form of heresy, which cannot be resolved by way of reason.

How, then, does one overcome this confrontation with the void, which appears here as a necessary step in the creative process as well as the initial prerequisite for prayer? In *Likkutei MoHaRa*n 2.12, R. Naḥman began his discussion on doubt by defining the place of doubt as rooted in the “closed utterance” (*ma’amar satum*) that preceded creation.

After (it has been determined that) everything was created for the glory of God, it is found that God is the root of all of creation. All that God created he created for (the revelation) of His glory. It follows that the glory of God is the root (*telos*)⁴⁸ of all of creation. Even though it is all (rooted) in the One, creation (is divided) into parts. Each part has its own (way of manifesting) a particular dimension of his glory, which is its source. This is the meaning of the mishnah in *’Abot* (5.1), “In ten

⁴⁷The issue of antinomianism is complex and quite subtle in hasidic thought. In this case, I have suggested that for R. Naḥman creating the void in one’s own heart allows one to experience the absence of God and thus to yearn for God’s presence. This implies that without that action the individual will conclude that he or she and God are truly one. Thus, any action will be God’s will. Although R. Naḥman himself never reached such a conclusion, it was apparently of primary concern. For a discussion of the possible connections between Bratzlav hasidism and the Sabbatean heresy, see Leibes, “*Ha-Tikkun Ha-Kelali* of R. Naḥman of Bratzlav,” esp. pp. 128–50. See also Green, *Tormented Master*, 91. For a more general discussion, see Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer, *Quietistic Elements in Eighteenth Century Hasidic Thought* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1968) 54–77 [Hebrew]; Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 78–142; and Shaul Magid, “Hasidism in Transition: The Hasidic Ideology of R. Gershon Henoch of Radzin in Light of Medieval Jewish Philosophy and Kabbala” (Ph.D. diss., Brandeis University, 1994) 474–523.

⁴⁸My rendering of the Hebrew term *shoresh* (literally, “root” or “source”) as *telos* in this case follows the logic of R. Naḥman’s argument. Earlier he suggested that the purpose of creation is the revelation of God’s kingship. Here he used the term *kavod* (“glory”) instead of *malkhut* (“kingship”). Similarly, in this instance I believe that he used *shoresh* to mean purpose or *telos*.

utterances the world was created.” He could have created the world with one utterance. In order to make reward and punishment possible, however, he created it with ten utterances. Each utterance contains its own particular dimension of (God’s) glory.⁴⁹

In kabbalistic jargon, the closed utterance is the root of the ten utterances that created the world, an idea originally expressed in *m. ʔAbot* 5.1.⁵⁰ According to Lurianic Kabbala, the closed utterance is rooted in the world of creation where distinction has yet to take place.⁵¹ This closed utterance gives birth to the ten fragmented utterances with which God created the world. *Mizvot*, human actions, or words of human speech (*dibur*), can serve as catalysts for humans to maintain a relationship with the utterances, or supernal spheres, which connect the finite with the infinite. Words, however, that are the product of creation within the void of God—words, however, that are by definition the product of creation, which fill the void of God—cannot overcome the heresy that is rooted in the void itself. This challenge can only be met by an expression that is wordless—for R. Naḥman, the primal scream or silence that is the ultimate expression of faith. The cosmic closed utterance in the process of creation is thus likened to the nonverbal or preverbal state of human expression. Ironically, speech, whether Torah study or prayer, which in the realm of God’s finite presence connects one to God as an answer to his infinite absence, leads to a verification of divine absence. For R. Naḥman the utterance of words (*dibur*), being rooted in the world of creation where the fragmentation of the divine has already taken place, poses a challenge to the spiritual seeker; thus, if human speech is not connected back to its source by subsequent words of prayer, fatalism and faithlessness result. The words of prayer alone are not enough to achieve this goal, however. Words diffuse the initial expression of the soul and can only be productive if they remain rooted in the soul even after they are spoken. Thus, the words of prayer complete a circle that begins with the wordless expression of the soul responding to the realization of divine absence.⁵²

⁴⁹R. Naḥman of Bratzlav, *Likkutei MoHaRan* 12d–20a (§2.12).

⁵⁰For an interesting and somewhat provocative kabbalistic and hasidic reading of this mishnah, see R. Yizhak Isaac Yehuda Yehiel Safran of Kamarno, *Nozar Hessed* (1855; reprinted Jerusalem: n. p., 1982) 80–81.

⁵¹The notion of the closed utterance as the aspect of the infinite dimension of God that is present but undetectable in the created world is not uncommon in hasidic thought. See, for example, R. Shnuer Zalman of Laidy, *Torah Or* (Brooklyn: Kehot, 1975) 91b–c. In this text the “closed utterance” is termed “closed consciousness” (*moḥin satum*).

⁵²See R. Naḥman of Bratzlav, *Likkutei MoHaRan* 80b–c (§1.65). R. Naḥman apparently based his ideas on *Sefer Yeẓirah* 1.7 (Jerusalem: Levin Epstein, 1965) 28a: “Their end is unified with their beginning and their beginning is unified with their end.” See Moses Naḥmanides’ commentary on that statement; he illuminates the circular nature of the cosmic order in rela-

To overcome divine absence, one must reach beyond creation by creating the abyss in oneself through emotional *zimzum* and then retreat from the realm of divine absence that entices the person of faith with the unresolvable philosophical question. R. Nahman's retreat is not a denial of the experiential confrontation with the absence of God. Rather, it is a stark affirmation of it. This affirmation requires a retreat from finitude to the moment before creation, to relive the *zimzum*, confront the absence that is the product of *zimzum*, and then utilize the void to overcome the second heresy which entices humans to solve its speculative question by using the tools of the finite nature of God. Thus, without denying the existential reality of divine absence, R. Nahman attempted to lead his readers through the winding alleys of his own skeptical soul only to arrive at the iron gate where God is truly absent; in this very confrontation with God's absence, one can locate the key to enter into the palace of God's eternal presence.

In summary, R. Nahman suggested an innovative reading of Lurianic *zimzum* which froze the process of contraction and emanation in order to posit a phenomenological reading of the void. As stated earlier, whether R. Nahman held that this void has any ontological status is not central in his argument. He had little interest in building a cosmology and used the Zoharic/Lurianic model only as it served his existential and phenomenological needs. For R. Nahman, the void exists because humans experience it. The question is then not whether it really exists or is just an illusion resulting from our human limitations. R. Nahman showed little patience for either ontology or epistemology. He sought to resolve the empirical absence of God in order to avoid the heresy that he felt threatens the one who adopts his theory of dialectical faith. Working within the framework of correlation between the supernal world and the mundane world that emerged in the Kabbala of Gerona in the thirteenth century, R. Nahman used the *zimzum* theory as a model for resolving the experience of divine absence in the heart and mind of the one who intently seeks God's presence.

■ R. Nahman and Modern Philosophy

As stated at the outset, R. Nahman's concerns are surprisingly relevant and reflect the crisis of modern persons. In the words of Gershom Scholem, "The void is the abyss, the chasm or the crack which opens up in all that exists. This is the experience of modern man, surpassingly well depicted in

tion to the system of the *sefirot*. R. Nahman took this notion and applied it to the words of prayer: "When one stands on the last word of his prayer, he should still be on the first word of his prayer. In that way he can complete his entire prayer without separating from the first letter of his prayer." The danger of words is that they threaten the closed and holistic nature of the pristine expression of the soul. Thus, the one who speaks must be certain that the words do not become linear and diffuse the initial intent of the soul's yearning.

all its desolation by Kafka, for whom nothing has remained of God but the void—in Kafka’s sense, to be sure, the void of God.”⁵³ The implications of the *zimzum* theory as explicated by R. Nahman and reiterated by both Scholem and Martin Buber pose a challenge to the Jewish thinker not dissimilar from the existentialist grappling with the assertion that God is dead.⁵⁴ Buber, unlike Scholem, attempted to make a connection between hasidism and existentialism. For Buber, hasidism was “enveloped by the abyss,” yet differed from Nietzschean existentialism in that hasidism offered a solution—the redemptive nature of history.⁵⁵ Thus, if R. Nahman’s discussion were placed in the context of modern solutions to the problem of the abyss and the absence of God, his ideas are similar to those of theistic existentialists such as Blaise Pascal, Gabriel Marcel, Paul Tillich, and, of course, Søren Kierkegaard, and not Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus.⁵⁶ In the following pages, I shall initiate such a comparison in the hope that it will inspire others to attempt to draw R. Nahman’s message out of its intricate exegetical framework and place it

⁵³Gershom Scholem, “Reflections on Jewish Theology,” in W. J. Donnhauser, ed., *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis* (New York: Schocken, 1976) 282. Such an assertion resonates in existential thought from Pascal through Heidegger. Scholem’s statement, however, is particularly relevant to the present discussion in that it serves as the conclusion of his discussion on kabbalistic interpretations of creation (*zimzum*). As discussed earlier, *zimzum* is the basis of R. Nahman’s affirmation of the void as well as his solution against the heresy that may result from such an assertion. Scholem states, “The universe of space and time, this living process we call Creation, appeared to the kabbalists to be intelligible only if it constituted an act of God’s renunciation in which He sets Himself a limit. Creation out of nothing, from the void, could be nothing other than creation of the void, that is, of the possibility of thinking of anything that was not God” (p. 282). Without reference to R. Nahman, whom Scholem respected as a creative hasidic thinker but not as a kabbalist, Scholem seems to have discovered the very foundation of R. Nahman’s position.

⁵⁴For the most recent discussion on Scholem and Buber’s dialogue on Hasidism, see Jerome Gellman, *The Fear, the Trembling, and the Fire: Kierkegaard and Hasidic Masters on the Binding of Isaac* (New York/London: Lanham, University Press of America, 1994) xiv–xxi. Gellman’s work reflects many of the issues I addressed in this article.

⁵⁵See Martin Buber, *The Legends of the Baal Shem Tov* (New York: Schocken, 1969) 69–70: “All things were enveloped by the abyss, and yet the whole abyss was between each thing and the other. None could cross over to the other, indeed none could see the other, for the abyss was between them.” As with Scholem’s writing, this appears to be a direct reference to R. Nahman, stated in the larger context of early hasidism. Although many early hasidic writings point to this assertion, I have not found the sophisticated and intricate treatment of the problem and its solution in texts other than R. Nahman’s *Likkutei MoHaRa*n. See also Buber, *Tales of Rabbi Nahman* (trans. Maurice Friedman; New Jersey: Humanities, 1988) 3–17; and idem, “Judaism and Civilization,” in idem, *On Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1967) 194. This issue has also been discussed in Laurence J. Silberstein, *Martin Buber’s Social and Religious Thought* (New York: New York University Press, 1989) 50–56.

⁵⁶For a brief overview of some of these figures, see Padovano, *The Estranged God*; and Roberts, *Existentialism and Religious Belief*.

against the more speculative and theologically sophisticated theories of modern theistic thought.

The relationship between faith and reason poses a complex problem in R. Nahman's thinking.⁵⁷ While R. Nahman initially viewed faith as the matrix of religious worship and reason as the "evil inclination" that draws one toward heresy, he also nuanced the concepts.⁵⁸ R. Nahman was a man of faith, but also a man forever enticed by reason. As Arthur Green has noted, R. Nahman was a hasidic master with a complex dialectical personality, and his submission to faith never solved his infatuation with reason.⁵⁹ Thus, faith should not be viewed as the solution to a problem, but as the unfolding of the divine mystery. Gabriel Marcel's distinction between "problem" and "mystery" may shed light on my claim regarding R. Nahman's dialectical faith. Marcel states, "A problem is something which I meet, which I find complete before me, but which I can therefore lay siege to and reduce. A mystery is something in which I myself am involved."⁶⁰ For Marcel, the mystery by definition cannot be resolved precisely because a person can never be fully objective about it. Marcel's distinction between mystery and problem resonates in R. Nahman's dialectical faith. R. Nahman stressed that the process of emotional *zimzum*, which leads from wordless scream to prayer and subsequently the overcoming of divine absence, is a dynamic process requiring constant activity. His notion of *makkifim* as well as his innovative approach to repentance⁶¹ support his view that faith is not

⁵⁷For a thoughtful discussion of this issue see, Green, *Tormented Master*, 275–336.

⁵⁸In my view, the Bratzlav school has minimized the dialectical nature of his thought. For example, R. Nahman's apparent tirade against rationalist medieval philosophy from Sa'adia Ga'on through Gersonides is viewed as his explicit rejection of the whole medieval Jewish philosophical tradition. Although that may be the case, his teachings, only a small portion of which I discussed in this article, exhibit a far more complex picture. This picture yielded a creative and innovative solution to a problem that faith, in its pristine simplistic form, could not cure. For his critique of rationalism, see R. Nathan (Sternharz) of Nemerov, *Hayyei MoHaRan* 2.18d–21b and R. Nahman of Bratzlav, *Sihot ha-Ran*, 36 (§32).

⁵⁹R. Nahman's dialectical thinking emerges numerous times in his teachings. See, for example *Likkutei MoHaRan 7a* (§1.6): "When a person wants to go in the way of repentance, he must be an expert in halakhah. He must be an expert in two aspects—that is, an expert in 'going' (*razo*) and an expert in 'coming' (*shov*). The halakhic system becomes a dynamic process that demands an ability to be in constant spiritual motion. This results in the elevation of the one's consciousness to the realization of the divine." See *Zohar* 2.213b and 3.71.

⁶⁰See Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having* (London: Dacre, 1949) 100. See also idem, "On the Ontological Mystery," in idem, *The Philosophy of Existentialism* (1956; reprinted New York: Citadel, 1962) 19: "A mystery is a problem which encroaches upon its own data, invading them, as it were, and thereby transcending itself as a simple problem."

⁶¹For R. Nahman, repentance is dynamic in that it always yields the need for further repentance. It is the process of human transformation whereby the individual, having achieved a new consciousness through repentance, looks back on his or her first act of repentance and, from his more elevated place, needs to repent on his initial act of repentance. This process

the solution to the problem of divine absence but the affirmation of the ontological mystery of divine presence. Just as Marcel was not interested in constructing a fundamental ontology and had little interest in the question of Being outside of its relationship to humans,⁶² R. Nahman had little interest in kabbalistic theosophy or rooting his existential dilemma in the ontic character of classical Kabbala.⁶³ Marcel reflected R. Nahman's position when he argued that reason limits one's access to mystery and thus one's apprehension of absolute knowledge. He stated,

I firmly believe that scientific truth is in no sense—not even in the most critically real sense—the measure of the real. On the other hand, it is not true to say that science is only an empty formalism; rather, it

continues indefinitely. See *Likkutei MoHaRan* 6d (§1.6c): “Even if a person knows himself that he achieved a complete repentance, he needs to repent on his first repentance. Initially when he repented, he did it according to his understanding. Afterward, when he did repent and thus achieved a higher apprehension of God, it will be found that, according to his understanding now, his initial understanding was mundane. Therefore, he must repent on his initial understanding.”

⁶²See Ralph Harper, *On Presence: Variations and Reflections* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1991) 39–54. Harper draws an important distinction between the early Heidegger and Marcel, seeing Marcel as a bridge between Heidegger and Buber. The introduction of Buber to Harper's discussion on Marcel strengthens comparison between Marcel and R. Nahman. Buber's earliest works on hasidism focused on R. Nahman of Bratzlav with whom Buber shared a common journey. See *Buber's Tales of Rabbi Nahman*.

⁶³This describes the general attitude of hasidism toward Kabbala, and is even more pronounced in R. Nahman. See, for example, Rachel Elijor, “Hasidism—Historical Continuity and Spiritual Change,” in Peter Schäfer and Joseph Dan, eds., *Gershom Scholem's Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism: 50 Years Later* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1994) 318: “Hasidic doctrine did not intend to create a new layer of theosophy in order to decipher the subtleties of the divine cosmology. Rather, it sought to present a *comprehensive dialectical worldview* which would bridge between the divine processes described in Lurianic Kabbala and man's consciousness and his thinking process.” Even though Elijor attempts to defend Scholem's thesis that hasidism did not offer an “original” kabbalistic doctrine, I believe her point can be taken out of its formal polemical context. If Elijor could make this argument for a more theosophically oriented hasidism such as Habad, it would only strengthen such a claim regarding R. Nahman. Traditional Bratzlav readings of *Likkutei MoHaRan*, beginning with its author R. Nathan of Nemerov, argue that Kabbala was the backbone of R. Nahman's thought. For example, see “Introduction to *Sifre Likkutei MoHaRan*,” in *Likkutei MoHaRan* 5b: “All the writings of the Ari, may his memory be blessed [R. Isaac Luria, a sixteenth century Kabbalist from Safed], the *Zohar*, the *Tikkunim* and all of the holy Kabbala. All of them are included in this holy work [*Likkutei MoHaRan*]. Every lesson is directed toward a particular mitzvah and chapter in [R. Isaac Luria's] *Ez Hayyim*.” This may indeed be the case. R. Nahman's personalist approach, however, does not contribute to the kabbalistic system of Luria, and he does not require his reader to know intimately the kabbalistic system from which he works. In this light Buber's position that hasidism “overcame” the Kabbala by transforming it into a source for the encounter between the human and divine may be useful. See Martin Buber, “Spirit and Body of the Hasidic Movement,” in idem, *Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, 121–25 and idem, “The Faith of Judaism,” 13.

is such only if we arbitrarily isolate scientific findings from the spiritual activity which has engendered them. Science is relative to the spiritual activity which produces it, and it is a fallacy to see in the world considered as reified science a whole sufficient unto itself.⁶⁴

In both Marcel's and R. Nahman's dialectical faith, reason cannot answer the need of the seeker of presence, but neither can it be abandoned. For R. Nahman, the one who abandons reason is the carrier of simple faith, which cannot yield an experience of presence that lies beyond divine absence. For Marcel, reason or science gives the transcendent—the infinite—a place in the finite and thus opens the possibility for an experience of the infinite.⁶⁵ Both thinkers maintain a dialectical relationship with reason, each arguing—or, in R. Nahman's case, implying—that reason cannot define presence but cannot be abandoned for the sake of presence.

A similar ambivalence regarding reason can be found in Pascal's *Pensées*. Pascal drew an important distinction between reason and Reason, between the use of the mind and heart to acquire knowledge and the claim of Logic as certainty. For Pascal, reason is the handmaiden of faith, useful and adequate as long as it knows its limits. "Reasons, seen from afar, appear to limit our view; but when they are reached, we begin to see beyond."⁶⁶ Although Pascal was critical of a religion based on Reason, he understood that reason plays an important dialectical role in the apprehension of religious Truth.⁶⁷ With regard to R. Nahman's "simple faith," it appears that reason plays only a negative role and thus would fall outside of Pascal's claim. In R. Nahman's dialectical faith, however, reason—depicted as the experience of the absence of God—is represented by the second heretic, the one who is rooted in the void and poses the unanswerable question to the seeker of divine presence. In this case, reason cannot be avoided but must be confronted and only then overcome. This attitude is reflected in Pascal, who spoke of the proponents of theories of religious truth that offer "proofs of God": "But for those in whom this light is extinguished, and in whom we purpose to rekindle it, persons destitute of faith and grace, who, seeking

⁶⁴Gabriel Marcel, *Philosophical Fragments 1909–1914* (trans. Lionel A. Blain; Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965) 41.

⁶⁵Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being* (trans. Rene Hague; 2 vols.; Chicago: Regency, 1950) 46: "Not only does the word 'transcendent' *not* mean 'transcending experience,' but on the contrary there must be a possibility of having an experience *of* the transcendent as such, and unless the possibility exists the word can have no meaning." The finite or empirical world gets its life from the infinite, he explained. "In other words, if there is anything real in the finite, it will be infinite; it is from the infinite that the finite gets the little reality it possess, by itself, it is nothing, nothing but an abstract and contradictory view" (*idem*, *Philosophical Fragments*, 44).

⁶⁶Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (trans. A. J. Krailsheimer; Baltimore: Penguin, 1996) §263.

⁶⁷*Ibid.* §282.

with all their light whatever they see in nature can bring them to this knowledge, find only obscurity and darkness.”⁶⁸

Pascal, like R. Nahman, pitied the one who defines his faith by rational proofs, however convincing those proofs may be. He asserted that whoever seeks God through reason “find(s) only obscurity and darkness.”⁶⁹ For R. Nahman, the person who enters into rational dialogue with the second heretic will conclude that divine absence is all that exists. While Pascal had pity for the person of reason, R. Nahman, apparently less confident in having permanently overcome the absence and having cleansed himself of the second heretic, retained a dialectical framework. To argue that R. Nahman would agree with Pascal that reason is the handmaiden of faith would overstate the case. Only by confronting reason, however, can R. Nahman’s theory of reaching beyond the void be understood.

With regard to R. Nahman and his use of the mystical tradition, Arthur Green has correctly noted that Weiss, in his bold typology, deleted the mystical dimension of R. Nahman’s position.⁷⁰ Green notes, “Nahman’s position is, on the one hand, that of a simple fideist who lives the life of Torah because God has commanded it, on the other hand that of a mystic who strives to reach such a state of oneness with God that the divine Will becomes entirely his own.”⁷¹ Hasidism in general, emerging out of the kabbalistic thought of the *Zohar* and subsequent Kabbala, viewed itself as an authentic form of Jewish mysticism, never rejecting the theurgic, mythic, and even magical context of medieval Kabbala.⁷² Although the mystical experience of the divine may indeed challenge R. Nahman’s striking vali-

⁶⁸Ibid. §242. See also Lucien Goldman, *The Hidden God: A Study of Tragic Vision in the Pensées of Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine* (trans. Philip Thody; New York: Humanities, 1964) 22–40, 167–92.

⁶⁹Pascal, *Pensées* §242.

⁷⁰Green states (*Tormented Master*, 318–19): “As we closely examine certain passages dealing with the very heart of Nahman’s ‘existential’ teachings, the constant struggle to search out integrate *maqifin* we find that the end of that process is in fact mystical, in the most proper sense of the term.” Perhaps Green intends to make a distinction between the terms “mystical” and “kabbalistic” here. While R. Nahman indeed resolved the ominous trek through the void with a mystical perception of divine presence, the kabbalistic cosmological apparatus plays only a nominal role. Green’s observation thus questions the accuracy of the typology set up by Joseph Weiss in his *Studies in Bratzlav Hasidism* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1974) 87–96 [Hebrew].

⁷¹See Arthur Green, *Devotion and Commandment: The Faith of Abraham in the Hasidic Imagination* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1989) 55.

⁷²The use of and interest in magic and theurgy in hasidism is an area that is only now receiving scholarly attention. See, for example, Gedalyah Nigal, *Magic, Mysticism and Hasidism* (Northvale, NJ: Aronson, 1994); and Moshe Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995).

dation of the divine void, he incorporates the mystical experience as the reward for confronting the void and not falling prey to its fatalistic threat.

R. Nahman froze the Lurianic theory of creation in the midst of its dynamic process to focus not on the creation as such, but on the frozen frame of divine absence before it is filled with the finite form of divine presence. It is this frozen frame of *zimzum* to which R. Nahman devoted so much attention. He implied, perhaps, that if one seeks divine wisdom from “the bottom up” (that is, through nature and reason alone), one can never reach the transcendent God who lies beyond creation. It is only by freezing the void before it apparently disappears that one can achieve the ultimate experience of God. This frozen frame is also, however, the residence of the heretical question, the empirical recognition of divine absence which must be overcome by reenacting the creative process and then participating in the wordless scream, which is the divine soul’s pure yearning for its home beyond the void. For R. Nahman this ominous journey, which he apparently travelled daily, is the narrow bridge; spanning the abyss below, this journey connects the yearning soul to its place in the divine. Not to undertake the journey is to be a carrier of R. Nahman’s simple faith and thus to be satisfied with the immanent God of creation. To step onto the narrow bridge is to step into the void, with the roaring rapids below and the transcendent God calling from the other side.



Is Chabad Heresy?

Gil Student writes: ¹³

Heresy accusations have a way of returning with a vengeance. R. Samson Raphael Hirsch was known by some as a heresy hunter. He harshly attacked historians such as R. Zechariah Frankel and Hirsch's one-time protegee Heinrich Graetz. He even attacked as heresy an essay by the halakhist, R. David Tzvi Hoffmann. In an ironic historical twist, one of R. Hirsch's essays was attacked as heretical (or, implausibly, a forgery) in the Slifkin Torah-Science Affair a few years ago.

A recent debate in an educational forum (link) about the propriety of teaching kabbalah in yeshiva high schools led to a debate over the theological soundness of kabbalah and, in particular, the founding treatise of Chabad Chassidus, the *Tanya*. This debate about the *Tanya* is hardly new. Indeed, the charges were first raised by none other than the Vilna Gaon. (Note that R. Eliyahu of Vilna is also known as the Gra and Vilna Gaon. R. Schneur Zalman of Liadi is also known as the Alter Rebbe and Ba'al Ha-Tanya.)

After an impostor posing as the Vilna Gaon's son claimed that his "father" had reversed his negative evaluation of Chassidus, the elderly sage issued a letter in 1796 denying a change of heart. After the authenticity of this letter was questioned, the Vilna Gaon in 1797 issued another letter detailing his problems with the movement. The letter was circulated and published the next year in the Slutzker Maggid's book and many times since. I take it from Mordechai Willensky's *Chassidim U-Misnagdim* (Mossad Bialik, 2nd ed. vol. 1 p. 187ff.). In the middle of his list of accusations against Chassidim, written in flowery rabbinic Hebrew, the Vilna Gaon states (p. 188, in loose translation):

¹³ <https://www.torahmusings.com/2013/01/is-chabad-heresy/>

דוד מה רמו עניו, ומילין לצד עלאה מללו: אלה אלקיך ישראל, כל עץ וכל אבן, ומגלים פנים בתורה שלא כהלכה בפסוק: ברוך כבוד ה' ממקומו, ובפסוק: ואתה מחיה את כולם. הוי על הרום הרעים שבהם שבדו מלבם משפט חדש ואולפין חדת, ושתו תלמידים הבאים אחריהם, ושם שמים מתחלל על ידיהם...

Oh how the generation lifted its eyes and spoke words directed above: "This is your god, Israel" (Ex. 32:8), every tree and rock. They reveal the Torah contrary to law in the verse: "Blessed is the glory of God from His place" (Ez. 3:12) and in the verse: "And you preserve them all" (Ne. 9:6).

As Willensky points out in his footnotes, these are accusations of heresy. The Vilna Gaon charges Chassidim with believing in panentheism, that God is present in everything, even inanimate objects. The *Tanya* (2:Yichud Ve-Emunah:1) states that God is present in inanimate objects and in this next chapter explains Ne. (9:6) similarly. It also explains (1:42) Ez. (3:12) in this manner.

It is not clear how the Vilna Gaon knew the contents of the as-yet unpublished *Tanya*. Historians suggest he saw an unpublished draft or an early printing. It is irrelevant because his understanding of Chabad philosophy was confirmed by the Ba'al Ha-Tanya. In an undated letter, first published in 1857 and then many times since, the Ba'al Ha-Tanya explains his philosophical disagreement with the Vilna Gaon.

The following is from his letter (Willensky, vol. 1 pp. 200-201, also in loose translation):

ולפי הנשמע אין במדינות ליטא מי שירום לבבו שלא לבטל דעתו מפני דעת הגאון החסיד ולאמר בפה מלא
אין בפיהו נכונה ד"ו, כ"א במדינות הרחוקות כתוגרמא ואיטלייא ורוב אשכנז ופולין גדול וקטן. ובזאת
חפצתי באמת, ובפרט בענין האמונה אשר לפי הנשמע במדינותינו מתלמידיו אשר זאת תפיסת הגאון
החסיד על ס' ליקוטי אמרים דומיו, אשר מפורש בהם פי' ממלא כל עלמין ולית אתר פנוי מיניה כפשוטו
ממש, ובעיני כבודו היא אפיקורסות גמורה לאמר שהוא ית' נמצא ממש בדברים שפלים ותחתונים ממש,
ולפי מכתב מעלתם ע"ז נשרף הספר הידוע, ובפירוש מאמרים הנזכרים יש להם דרך נסתרה ונפלאה,
ומלא כל הארץ כבודו היינו השגחה וכו'.

ומי יתן ידעתיו ואמצאהו ואערכה לפניו משפטינו להסיר מעלינו כל תלונותיו וטענותיו הפילוסופיות אשר
הלך בעקבותיהם לפי דברי תלמידיו הנ"ל לחקור אלקות בשכל אנושי, וכאשר קבלתי מרבותי נ"ע תשובה
נצחת על כל דבריו.

*It is heard that no one in Lita will be so arrogant as to fail to submit to the Vilna Gaon's view
and say openly that he was wrong, only in distant lands like Turkey, Italy, most of Germany
and Poland major and minor. This is what I truly want, particularly in matters of faith that,
according to what is heard in these lands from his students, that this is what he thought about
the Tanya and similar: They say explicitly that the meaning of "He fills all the worlds and there
is no place empty of Him" literally. In the Vilna Gaon's eyes it is complete heresy to say that God
exists literally in mundane, lower things.... [In his view] these sayings have a hidden meaning,
that God's providence fills the world, etc.*

*If only I could find him and arrange my case before him to remove all of his philosophical
complaints, which according to his students followed in his study of God with his human
intellect, as I have received from my teachers successful responses to all his words....*

7

The Ba'al Ha-Tanya continues to base his views on the Arizal and Zohar. He also claims that the Vilna Gaon did not believe that all of the Arizal's kabbalah all came from Eliyahu, much of it originating with the Arizal's genius and therefore subject to rejection. (The truth of this claim is certainly disputed but irrelevant to our current discussion.)

We see that the Ba'al Ha-Tanya accepts the Vilna Gaon's description of his views as panentheism. However, he defends this theological view as authentically Jewish while the Vilna Gaon rejects them as heresy.

In particular, the Ba'al Ha-Tanya portrays himself as the defender of tradition and the Vilna Gaon as the radical philosopher, the innovative theologian trying to determine on his own the nature of God.

I do not care to decide between these two great scholars. In my circles, we value the works of both without deeming heretical. In particular, R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, an intellectual descendant of the Vilna Gaon, strongly recommended studying the Tanya.

What I find most interesting is that the Vilna Gaon himself accused the Rambam of being misled by his philosophical pursuits (*Bi'ur Ha-Gra* to *Yoreh De'ah* 179:13, see Jacob Dienstag's article on this in *Talpiot*, July 1949). Eventually, the Vilna Gaon was accused of the very same thing. History's irony continues.



Differing Views on Tzimtzum

Rabbi David Sedley writes:¹⁴

Last time I introduced the concept of tzimtzum as a way of reconciling the differing views of the Rishonim. However, there are differing views about the meaning of tzimtzum as well. It is my contention that these are not only abstract philosophical differences, but that they can lead to differences in education, relationship with G-d and others, and how we see our role in the

¹⁴ http://www.rabbisedley.com/audio/Tzimtzum_Views.pdf

world.

Yosher Levav claims that tzimtzum is to be understood literally - that the essence of G-d is not in the world. This view is criticised by the chasidim as both dangerous and bordering on heretical.

The Vilna Gaon claims that tzimtzum was literal in terms of G-d's Essence, but that His Will never left the world, and through this we can connect to him (because ultimately His Essence and His Will are One).

The Baal HaTanya attacks this approach and presents the view which has perhaps become the most widespread today - that tzimtzum is essentially an illusion from our vantage point. From G-d's viewpoint nothing has changed, He never left the world, and we don't really exist. The goal of existence is to understand that "there is nothing apart from Him" and that we ourselves do not really exist.

The implications of these differing views lead to many practical differences (though most people will find a middle path, or actually do both):

Do we cause and effect as real, or illusory? When a tragedy happens in the community, do we try to take practical steps to prevent it happening again, or do we say it is the Will of G-d and recite Tehillim?

Do we teach our children to perceive G-d through science and the world, or is G-d to be found primarily through Torah? Do we require a Rebbe or Torah scholar to tell us how to think, or can we make decisions for ourselves?¹⁵

¹⁵ https://www.hashkafacircle.com/journal/R1_DS_Exist.pdf

Overview

Maimonides wrote his *Guide of the Perplexed* ostensibly as a response to the philosophy of the *Kalam*¹³⁴, which in his view had corrupted the clear thinking of his pupil Rabbi Joseph¹³⁵. He writes in his Letter to a Student at the beginning of the *Guide*:

I saw that you demanded of me additional knowledge and asked me to make clear to you certain things pertaining to divine matters, to inform you of the intentions of the *Me'tukallim* (Islamic philosophers of the *Kalam*) in this respect, and to let you know whether their methods were demonstrative and, if not, to what art they belonged.... Your absence moved me to compose this Treatise, which I have

¹³⁴ The *Kalam* is a general term for Medieval Islamic philosophy as we will explain below.

¹³⁵ As Pines points out (footnote 2, p. 3) and as Rambam himself states, the *Guide* was written for the benefit of this pupil and for those like him. Therefore we should take seriously Rambam's description of Joseph's corruption by the *Me'tukallim*, and understand that the *Guide* was intended as an antidote.

“The Perception of Reality: contrasting views of the nature of existence

composed for you and for those like you, however few they are.¹³⁶

Thus begins the Guide, and thus begins an argument about the nature of the world and the nature of reality. This argument continues in a slightly differing form to this day. The main point of contention, as Rambam saw it, between himself and the *Kalam* was the nature of existence and the validity of science.

This same basic argument between Rambam and the philosophers of the *Kalam* repeated itself several hundred years later after the Arizal’s revelations of the kabballah to the world. It is most clearly expressed in the fundamental dispute between the Chasidim and the Vilna Gaon (and his followers). However, the language and terminology had changed over the course of 500 years, and their prime argument was over how to understand a single line of the Arizal’s book *Etz Chaim*. As we will see, this argument led to almost the same two alternative theologies with all the implications and ramifications as between Rambam and *Kalam*.

As we will show, the implications of this argument affect most aspects of Jewish philosophy and have had a major impact on current Jewish thinking.

At its most basic, the argument can be stated in words adapted from Hamlet:

“Are we, or are we not? That is the question.”

The Debate

Rambam disagreed fundamentally with the *Kalam*, going so far as to describe those Jewish scholars who base themselves on *Kalam* philosophy “ill with the illness of the *Kalam*.”¹³⁷

He sums up his most basic disagreement with the *Kalam* in the following short phrase:

“To sum up: I shall say to you that the matter is as Themistius puts it: that which exists does not conform to the various opinions, but rather the correct opinions conform to that which exists.”¹³⁸

For Rambam, one of the main objections to *Kalam* was that it did not view the world as really existing, which led to theology and philosophy that melded the ‘world’ (or the illusion thereof) to fit what its followers felt was the truth. No matter that they often came to the correct result, Rambam’s argument was with the methodology.

Pines¹³⁹ shows that *Kalam*, for Rambam, represents the ‘anti-reality’ philosophy, and that the main purpose in writing the Guide was to argue against that position:

It should also be noted that Maimonides’ “premises” of the *Metukallimun*, as well as his “premises” of the philosophers, are mainly, or indeed exclusively, concerned with physical science if, in accordance with the medieval classification, the concept of this science is extended so as to include the psychology of perception. But whereas the propositions of the philosophers are expound and account for the order and the causality of the cosmos, the principles of the *Metukallimun*, such as their atomist, the assumption that

¹³⁷ *Shmonah Perakim (Introduction to Pirkei Avot)* chapter 6. He is almost certainly referring to R’ Saadiah Gaon as we will discuss later.

¹³⁸ *Guide* I: 71 p. 179

¹³⁹ Introduction to his translation of *Guide for the Perplexed* p. cxxv

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everything that can be imagined can happen and so on, are meant to prove that no causality and no permanent order exist in the world; all events are determined directly, without the intervention of intermediate causes, by the will of God, which is not bound by any law. In other words, there is no cosmos and there is no nature, these two Greek notions being replaced by the concept of congeries of atoms, with atomic accidents inherent in them being created in every instant by arbitrary acts of divine volition.

Rambam himself writes about the *Kalam*:

Thus there arose among them this science of *Kalam*. They started to establish premises that would be useful to them with regard to their belief and to refute those opinions that ruined the foundations of their Law.... They also selected from among the opinions of the earlier philosophers everything that the one who selected considered useful for him, even if the later philosophers had already demonstrated the falseness of these opinions – as for instance affirming the existence of atoms and the vacuum.”¹⁴⁰

The *Kalam*

Kalam is the common name of medieval Islamic, mostly rationalist, sometimes apologetic (or polemic), religious philosophy. *Kalam* is the Arabic word for ‘word’ (dibbur), showing that this Islamic philosophy grew out of discussions and exchanges. The philosophers of the *Kalam* are called *Me’tukallim*, ‘speakers’ (medabrim). The *Kalam* arose as a response to debates with Christian theologians.

¹⁴⁰ *Guide I*: 71 (Pines edition pp. 177-8)

The most famous amongst the early *Kalam* groups is the *Mu'tazilites*. Only a few of the early Mu'tazilite works have survived. Most of the information concerning the positions of early Mu'tazilite thinkers comes from polemic, hostile sources (mainly Ash'arite authors) or later Mu'tazilite authors who wrote comprehensive compendia of the schools' system. They were based in Baghdad and Basra from approximately 750 – 900.

They were still active in Rambam's time, although some of their philosophy had changed due to the influence of the more dominant school of *Kalam* Islamic theology, the al-Ash'ari (Ash'arites).

The *Kalam* view of the reality of the world is explained by Frank and Leaman¹⁴¹:

“The large majority of *Me'tuzallim* tied the proofs for the created-ness of the world *ex nihilo* to a rather complex atomistic theory, which they may have derived from both ancient Greek and Indian philosophies. According to this theory, all bodies are composed of identical atoms of substance that do not have any essential characteristics, and that have been understood by many modern researchers to have no spatial dimensions. Upon these atoms reside the atoms of both physical (for example, composition and separation, motion and rest, colors) and abstract or mental properties (for example, life, knowledge, will, capacity). In many *kalam* compendia, the exposition of this theory constitutes the basis for the discussion of the createdness of the world.

The theory differs from any other atomistic theory on one important point of principle: the universe is not

141 Frank, D and Leaman, O. (eds.) (1997) *History of Jewish Philosophy*, Routledge, London and New York. p. 119.

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governed by chance; instead, the existence or the extinction of every single individual atom, of substance or accident, is a creation of God, whose absolute omnipotence is thus emphatically underlined.... Causality is thus denied; what appear to be laws of nature or a causal sequence of are rather a ‘customary’ recurrence of isolated, unrelated events that result from God’s unlimited will and power. Some Mu’tazilites, mainly from the Baghdad school, did not accept the atomistic theory and established a theory that recognized essential properties of species and individuals, a certain mode of causality and the laws of nature.”

Rambam himself describes the way in which the *Kalam* viewed the reality of the world:

“The proofs of the Mutakallimun, on the other hand, are derived from premises that run counter to the nature of existence that is perceived so that they resort to the affirmation that nothing has a nature in any respect.... For whereas the proof, with the aid of which some Metakallimun prove by inference the creation of the world in time and which is their most powerful proof, is not consolidated for them until they abolish the nature of all existence and disagree with everything that the philosophers have made clear, I reach a similar proof without running counter to the nature of existence and without having recourse to violating that which is perceived by the senses.”¹⁴²

Although many Jewish philosophers, including R’ Saadiah Gaon, made use of *Kalam* philosophy, when it came to the reality of existence, they abandoned the *Kalam* for a realist approach. The Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy says as follows:

¹⁴² *Guide I*: 71 (Pines edition p. 182)

Saadia Gaon makes especial use of arguments taken from the *Kalam*, as the plan of the *Amanat (Emunot v'Deot)* shows. Its first two chapters discuss the unity of God, the topic with which exponents of *kalam* usually begin their treatises, whilst the seven following chapters consider God's justice, the second main theme of the *Kalam*. None the less, Saadia does not adopt one of the central ideas of the *Kalam*, that of atomism and the renewal of creation by God at every instant (the corollary, which is the denial that there are laws of nature). He chooses instead a somewhat vague Aristotelian understanding of the physical world. ('Islamic Theology')

Rambam acknowledges the error of those Jewish philosophers who based themselves on the *Kalam* when he writes:

“It has so happened that Islam first began to take this road owing to a certain sect, namely the Mu'tazila, from whom our coreligionists took over certain things walking upon the road the Mu'tazila had taken.”¹⁴³

Rambam and the Eternity of the Universe

Rambam rejected the *Kalam's* placing of the theological cart before the scientific horse. This is most clear in his attitude to the question of the eternity of the universe. In Rambam's time, this was the major 'reality' issue, which led the philosophers of the *Kalam* to a rejection of any scientific method.

Rambam holds that the validity of the Torah would be disproved were Aristotle to be correct, and the universe would be proven to be eternal, as Rambam writes:

¹⁴³ *ibid.* (pp. 176-6)

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“If the philosophers would succeed in demonstrating the eternity as Aristotle understands it, the Law as a whole would become void.”¹⁴⁴

He rejected Aristotle’s eternity of the universe but is at pains to explain that he does so not because of theology, but rather because it has not been proved to be true. He writes:

“Know that our shunning the affirmation of the eternity of the world is not due to a text figuring in the Torah according to which the world has been produced in time. . . . Nor are the gates of figurative interpretation shut in our faces or impossible of access to us regarding the subject of the creation of the world in time. For we could interpret them as figurative, as we have done when denying God’s corporeality. Perhaps this would even be much easier to do: we should be very well able to give a figurative interpretation of those texts and to affirm as true the eternity of the world, just as we have given a figurative interpretation of those other texts and have denied that He, may He be exalted, is a body.”¹⁴⁵

Rambam is stating explicitly that theology, and even our interpretation of the Torah, must follow from scientific reality and not vice versa. In this approach, Rambam was in line with almost all his contemporaries. R’ Saadiah Gaon¹⁴⁶, Ramban¹⁴⁷, Ralbag¹⁴⁸ and others all choose to reinterpret verses in the Torah in the light of scientific knowledge.

¹⁴⁴ *Guide* II: 25 p. 330

¹⁴⁵ *ibid.* p. 327-8

¹⁴⁶ E.g. *Emunot ve-Deot* VII: 2

¹⁴⁷ E.g. commentary to Genesis 9: 12 where he interprets the Torah non-literally to accommodate the Greek scientific description of the rainbow.

¹⁴⁸ E.g. *Milchamot Ha-Shem* chapter 6. See also Feldman, S. translation (1984) Jewish Publication Society of America, p. 96

Rambam states clearly and forcefully that the search for reality must begin with an understanding of the physical world, and all theology can only grow from that:

I have already told you that nothing exists except God and this universe, and that there is no other evidence for His Existence but this universe in its entirety and in its several parts. Consequently, the universe must be examined as it is: the propositions must be derived from those properties of the universe that are clearly perceived, and hence you must know its visible form and its nature. Then only will you find in the universe evidence for the existence of a Being not included therein¹⁴⁹.

The Kabbalah of the Arizal and tzimtzum

Some 350 years after Rambam and his dispute with the *Kalam*, a new revelation of Torah occurred in Tzefat. Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, the AriZal, interpreted the Zohar in new ways, leading to new ideas in Jewish philosophy. He opens his *Etz Chaim* with a discussion of the interaction between the Divine Infinite and the finite world. His explanation is based upon the concept of tzimtzum, a 'contraction' of the Infinite (Ein Sof), which allows for the existence of the world. He writes:

You should know that before His exaltedness rested and before the creatures were created, there was simple supernal light filling all of existence. There was no empty place or void vacuum because everything was filled with the simple infinite light, and there was no aspect of beginning or end. Everything was simple and even with complete evenness, and this is called the infinite light. When it arose in His simple

¹⁴⁹ *Guide I: 71*



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Will to create the worlds and to rest his exaltedness to bring to light the completeness of His Actions, and His Names and His Descriptions, which were the purpose of creation of the worlds, as we have explained... Then he contracted His infiniteness into a middle point which was in the absolute middle of His Light. He contracted this light and distanced it from the edges around this middle point. Then a space remained of empty space and void vacuum in the middle point like this:

The question is what did he mean by these words? Did the contraction actually happen, or is this a metaphor to describe to humanity how to live in the world and how to relate to God? Is God transcendent or immanent? In short, did God create a void in which to make a world, or is everything God, after creation just as it was before creation?

The dispute about the answer to this question is at the heart of the biggest division in Ashkenazi Jewry, the split between the Chasidim and the Mitnagdim.

Early Interpretations and Argument

The earliest two opposing views about the meaning of the AriZal's concept of tzimtzum appear in Shomer Emunim (Ha-Kadmon) and Yosher Levav. They take completely opposite approaches to understanding this paragraph, and each accuses the other of being a very dangerous opinion.

Arguing the dangers of understanding tzimtzum to mean that God is no longer present in the world, R' Yosef Irgas writes¹⁵⁰:

Anyone who wants to understand tzimtzum literally will come to make many mistakes and will come to contradict many of the principles of faith.

Presenting the opposing view, Yosher Levav states¹⁵¹:

From these things, we have learned that one who takes pity on His Creator must think in his heart that tzimtzum is literal so that he doesn't come to insult God's honour and think that God's essence is present in the lowly, dishonourable, physical and even in the lowest things, God forbid.

It is apparent that these two world views are irreconcilable. Yet, ironically, the author of Yosher Levav, Rabbi Emanuel Chai Riki, wrote approbation for Shomer Emunim (Ha-Kadmon), even though he argues strongly against that position of tzimtzum. It seems that in his mind, these two divergent opinions, though poles apart theologically, were details rather than essentials in the study of kabbalah.

Chasidut – non-literal interpretation of tzimtzum

Dresner writes about the earliest beginnings of Chasidut that:

After seven years of seclusion high up in the Carpathian Mountains amidst those fields and forests he so loved to wander in since his childhood, the Baal Shem Tov burst

150 *Shomer Emunim (Ha-Kadmon)* vikuach sheni, ot 35 ff.

¹⁵¹ 1: 1: 12

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upon the stage of history with a shocking cry – “*Altz iz Gott!*”
“Everything is God!”¹⁵²

Even though this was a rallying cry for the new movement and not necessarily a reasoned philosophical position, it was not long before the philosophical backing was enunciated. The clearest statement of Chasidic philosophy was written by one of the leaders of the third generation of Chasidim, R’ Schneur Zalman of Liadi. He explains:

Now, following these words and the truth [concerning the nature of the Creation], every intelligent person will understand clearly that each creature and being is actually considered naught and absolute nothingness in relation to his Activating Force and the “Breath of His mouth” which is in the created thing, continuously calling it into existence and bringing it from absolute non-being into being.... The spirituality that flows into it from “That which proceeds out of the mouth of God” and “His breath” – that alone continuously brings it forth from naught and nullity into being, and gives it existence. Hence, there is truly nothing besides Him.¹⁵³

We see here already a position similar to that of the Al Ashari *Kalam*. Everything is God, and God constantly brings the world into existence at every moment. It was this position that Maimonides had fought against with his *Moreh Nevuchim*. Yet it resurfaced a few centuries later.

Furthermore, R’ Schneur Zalman explicitly attacks any other understanding of *tzimtzum* and shows that it cannot possible by true:

152 Dresner, S (1981) ‘Hasidism and its Opponents’ in Jospe, R. and Wagner, S. (eds.) *Great Schisms in Jewish History* Centre for Judaic Studies; Denver. p. 143

In the light of what has been said above, it is possible to understand the error of some, scholars in their own eyes, may God forgive them, who erred and misinterpreted in their study of the writings of the Ari, of blessed memory, and understood the doctrine of *Tzimtzum*, which is mentioned therein literally – that the Holy One, blessed be He, removed Himself and His Essence, God forbid, from this world, and only guides from above with individual Providence all the created beings that are in the heavens above and on the earth below. Now, aside from the fact that it is altogether impossible to interpret the doctrine of *Tzimtzum* literally, [for then it] is a phenomenon of corporeality, concerning the Holy One, blessed be He, who is set apart from them [i.e. the phenomena of corporeality], many myriads of separations *ad infinitum*, they also did not speak wisely, ... [since] the Holy One, blessed be He, knows all the created beings in this lower world and exercises Providence over them, and perforce His knowledge of them does not add plurality and innovation to Him, for He knows all by knowing Himself. Thus, as it were, His Essence and Being and His Knowledge are all one.¹⁵⁴

Mangel summarizes the position of R' Schneur Zalman in contrast to that of Maimonides (and explains that the departure from Maimonides' accepted position was necessitated by Luranc Kabbalah):

Maimonides' interpretation of God's Unity emphasizes also that His Essence and Being is a simple and perfect Unity without any plurality, composition or divisibility and free from many physical properties and attributes....

154 *Likutei Amarim Tanya* Shaar Hayichud ve-Ha-Emunah Chapter 7

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The Chassidic interpretation of Unity, based on the Zoharic concepts of “Lower Level Unity” and “Higher Level Unity,” gives it a more profound meaning. Rabbi Schneur Zalman explains that Divine Unity does not only exclude the existence of other ruling powers besides the One God or of any plurality in Him, but it precludes any existence at all apart from Him. The universe appears to possess an existence independent from its Creator only because we do not perceive the creating force that is its *raison d'être*. All created things, whether terrestrial or celestial, exist only by virtue of the continuous flow of life and vitality from God. The creative process did not cease at the end of the Six Days of Creation but continues at every moment, constantly renewing all existence.... Thus the true essence and reality of the universe and everything therein is but the Divine power within it.¹⁵⁵

The difficulty with this position is that if everything is God, and *tzimtzum* is not to be understood literally, there is no room for free choice or meaningful human service to God. If everything is as it was before creation began, and everything is the Ein Sof, there can be no change, no choice, and no independent identity.

Rav Nachman of Breslav threw up his hands in despair when it came to resolving this inherent difficulty with our understanding of God and the purpose of human effort. We are forced to be either atheists or pantheists:

“Only in the future will it be possible to understand the *tzimtzum* that brought the 'Empty Space' into being, for we have to say of it two contradictory things... [1] the Empty

155 *Likutei Amarim Tanya*, Bi-Lingual Edition; Revised edition 1998 Kehot Publication Society New York. Introduction to Part 2 by Rabbi Nissan Mangel. p. 855

Space came about through the tzimtzum, where, as it were, He 'limited' His Godliness and contracted it from there, and it is as though in that place there is no Godliness... [2] the absolute truth is that Godliness must nevertheless be present there, for certainly nothing can exist without His giving it life”¹⁵⁶.

The Vilna Gaon and Mitnagdim: literal understanding of tzimtzum

The opposition of the Mitnagdim (led by the Gaon of Vilna) to the new chasidic movement was precisely over the same issue that became Maimonides' main attack on the *Kalam* – the nature of reality. As we have seen, according to R' Schneur Zalman, the world does not really exist. Nature has no independent validity, and the world is constantly recreated every moment (just as the atomists had understood centuries earlier).

Although there is much discussion as to precisely why the Vilna Gaon saw fit to excommunicate the chasidim (and certainly there were political and sociological reasons as well as theological), the only explicit writing we have from the Gaon on the issue seems to indicate that this was the main objection:

Into your ears I cry: Woe to him who says to his father, 'What have you begotten?' and to his mother, 'What have you brought to birth?' a generation whose children curse their fathers and do not bless their mothers; who have sinned greatly against them by turning their backs to them. Their stubborn hearts insist on rejecting good and choosing evil, transgressing the Torah and changing its laws.... They call

¹⁵⁶ *Likkutei Moharan* I, 64:1

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themselves Chasidim – that is an abomination! How they have deceived this generation, uttering these words on high: “These are your Gods, O Israel: every stick and stone.” They interpret the Torah incorrectly regarding the verse “Blessed be the name of the glory of God from His dwelling place” (Ezekiel 3: 12) and also regarding the verse: “... and You give life to everything” (Nehemiah 9: 6).¹⁵⁷

Even though it is not certain that this was the main objection to Chasidut, it was certainly understood by R' Schneur Zalman to be the crucial issue at stake.

I would welcome [a discussion] in matters of faith. According to a report from his disciples in our provinces, it is precisely in this area that the Gaon and Hasid found objections to [my] book *Likutei Amarim* and other similar works. The teachings that God “fills the world” and that “there is no place void of Him” are interpreted [by us] in a literal sense, whereas in his esteemed opinion, it is pure heresy to hold that God, blessed be He, is to be found in the mundane matters of our world, and it is for this reason, according to your esteemed letter, that the book [*Toledot Yaakov Yosef* or *tzava'at ha-Rivash*] was burned. For they explain the passages “the whole earth is full of His glory” etc. in a figurative manner, as referring to Divine Providence. Would that I might present our case to him, so as to remove from ourselves all his philosophical censures¹⁵⁸.

157 Letter of the Gra to the rabbinic leadership of several Belorussian and Podolian communities 1796 in *The Faith of the Mitnagdim*, Rabbinic Responses to Hasidic Rapture, Allan Nadler 1997 p. 11.

158 Translation in Dresner, S (1981) ‘Hasidism and its Opponents’ in Jospe, R. and Wagner, S. (eds.) *Great Schisms in Jewish History* Centre for Judaic Studies; Denver. p. 121-2

Dresner explains:

What moved the most noted rabbinic figure of his time, the Gaon, Elijah of Vilna, to declare Hasidism to be a heretical sect and issue a ban of excommunication against its followers?... according to the testimony of a letter we possess ... by Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Ladi, the foremost philosopher of the Hasidic movement and the one most directly involved in controversy with the Gaon, the latter questioned more seriously the conceptual basis of the new movement: particularly its doctrines (1) that God was literally 'in all things,' and (2) that man's task was to redeem the holy sparks, which had fallen into the *kelipot*, the husks of evil.¹⁵⁹

For the Vilna Gaon, the passage "The whole earth is full of his glory" denoted a manifestation of divine transcendence and divine providence, rather than a manifestation of divine immanence. The text was praising God for the extension of His providence throughout the world, not for the presence of His essence in places of impurity. To the Gaon, the passage spoke of the transcendence of God; to R. Schneur Zalman, it spoke of the immanence of God.

The Gaon believed in the reality of nature and that God runs the world indirectly, through natural forces, as he writes:

Elokim refers to God's relationship with the world through nature. This world works on nature. Therefore, in creation, the only name used is Elokim, which is nature¹⁶⁰

He is explicit of his understanding of tzimtzum in a recently published manuscript entitled *Asarah Klalim*:

¹⁵⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ *Aderet Eliyahu* Devarim 33: 1

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This original contraction (*tzimtzum*) is called *Atik*. This word has two meanings. Firstly, it means ‘old’, and secondly ‘removed’. It is called ‘old’ because it is first of all the contractions, therefore it is called *Atik*. This contraction was also the removal [of God from the world], and this is the other meaning of the name *Atik*¹⁶¹.

We see clearly that through the act of *tzimtzum*, God removed Himself from the world, allowing for an existence independent of Himself.

Nefesh HaChaim: non-literal understanding of *tzimtzum*

The foremost student of the Vilna Gaon was Rav Chaim Volozhener. It is generally understood that in most areas, his opinions and Torah follow those of his teacher, the Gaon. However, when it comes to his explanation of *tzimtzum*, Rav Chaim diverges from the opinion of his teacher.

Although his explanation of *tzimtzum* almost directly opposes the description found in the *Tanya*, Rav Chaim agrees on the basic point of whether it is to be understood literally or not. He writes:

The explanation of the word *tzimtzum* here is not ‘removal’ or ‘abandoning’ from one place to another in order to come back and reconnect Himself with Himself, as it were. Nor does it mean to make a space empty [of His Essence] – Heaven forbid. Rather it means... hidden or covered.¹⁶²

Clearly, this is not the opinion of the Vilna Gaon (who does define the word *tzimtzum* as ‘removal’ and ‘abandoning’). Perhaps Rav Chaim was influenced by the opinion of the chasidim, or perhaps he

161 *Asarah Klalim* Clal 2

162 *Nefesh HaChaim* shaar 3, perek 7

was seeking a ‘middle ground’, which would avoid both the ‘pantheism’ of chasidut, and the ‘atheism’ of the mitnagdim. In any event, the author of the *Leshem* (whose opinion we will explore later) saves his strongest attack on misunderstandings of tzimtzum for this opinion of the *Nefesh HaChaim*.

Modern Opinions

In contemporary writings, we find the same argument as to how to understand tzimtzum and the nature of reality. Rav Dessler writes:

We call God’s acts “nature” when He wills that certain events should occur in a recognizable pattern with which we become familiar. This familiarity presents you with a challenge. We can choose to recognize that these events, too, have as their sole and immediate cause the unfettered will of Hashem. Or we can imagine that Hashem has delegated certain powers to “Nature”, and that within the realm of Nature man, too, has the ability to influence events by the process of cause and effect. The whole concept of “nature” is thus nothing but a test for the human being. Nature has no objective existence; it is merely an illusion that gives man a choice to exercise his free will: to err, or to choose the truth.¹⁶³

Rav Adin Steinsalz also describes the world as not having any true reality. The connection through God is through Torah, which allows us to dream God’s dream with Him:

“Intellectual and emotional immersion in Torah is therefore a way of making contact with the essence of all the worlds on various levels. For the Torah expresses the divine will, and

163 *Strive For Truth* vol. 2 p. 240

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wisdom itself, in all the world; whereas in the world of action the divine will express itself only in terms of the immediately surrounding reality. And the limitations of this reality in our world, which are experienced through the reign of nature, are extreme; they can be overcome only through man's freedom of choice. The relation between Torah and the world is thus the relation between idea and actualization, between vision and fulfillment. So that the intellectual study of Torah and the emotional involvement in its contents are a form of identification with the divine will, with what may be called God's dream of the existence of the world and the existence of man. One who is immersed in Torah becomes a partner of God, in the sense that man on one hand and God on the other are participating in the planning, the spinning out of the idea, the common dream of the existence of the world.”¹⁶⁴

At the other extreme, the *Leshem* claims to wear the mantle of the Vilna Gaon and attacks those who don't understand tzimtzum to be literal. He challenges not only the **ch**asidim, but primarily the Vilna Gaon's main pupil, R' Chaim Volozhiner, for not seeing existence as truly real. He writes:

I have also seen some very strange things in the words of some contemporary Kabbalists who explain things deeply. They say that all of existence is only an illusion and appearance and does not truly exist. This is to say that the *ein sof* didn't change at all in itself and its necessary true existence and it is now still exactly the same as it was before creation, and there is no space empty of Him, as is known (see *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* Shaar 3). Therefore, they said that in truth, there is

164 Steinsaltz, A. (2006) *The Thirteen Petalled Rose* pp. 66-7; Basic Books, New York.

no reality to existence at all, and all the worlds are only an illusion and appearance, just as it says in the verse “in the hands of the prophets, I will appear” (Hoshea 12: 11). They said that the world and humanity have no real existence, and their entire reality is only an appearance. We perceive ourselves as if we are in a world, and we perceive ourselves with our senses, and we perceive the world with our senses. It turns out [according to this opinion] that all of existence of humanity and the world is only a perception and not in true reality, for it is impossible for anything to exist in true reality, since He fills all the worlds....

How strange and bitter is it to say such a thing. Woe to us from such an opinion. They don't think and they don't see that with such opinions, they are destroying the truth of the entire Torah....¹⁶⁵

165 *Leshem Sh-vo ve-Achlama Sefer Ha-Deah* drush olam hatohu chelek 1, drush 5, siman 7, section 8 (p. 57b)

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The Claim that there is no Argument

Rav Dessler goes a step beyond any of his predecessors and claims that there is no argument about tzimtzum, and that, in essence, the Vilna Gaon and Rav Shneur Zalman agree.

I have already mentioned... that there is a doubt as to whether there is any argument between the author of the *Tanya*, may his merit protect us, and the Vilna Gaon, of blessed memory, regarding the definition of tzimtzum. That is to say, in the fundamental issues, such as the limits of tzimtzum, and whether it is literal or not, whether it was only in His light, or also in His illumination Himself, and the meaning of the concept of ‘filling the entire world’ and similar things.

In the famous letter of the Gaon, he hints that the error of the chasidim was that they thought that there was Divinity in everything, even in sticks and stones. They understood ‘filling the entire world’ as if it was referring to God’s essence, as it were. It would seem that this is very fundamental.

The truth is that these were only [unfounded] concerns, for chasidut was at its early state and had not yet been fully explained. The Baal Shem Tov holds that tzimtzum is not literal, and does not apply to God’s Essence, because ‘filling all the worlds’ and ‘there is no place empty of Him’ applies even after tzimtzum. This is one of the fundamental beliefs of chasidut. It was only that some fools made a mistake to explain it as if the Divine was literally in every place and everything. This never entered the minds of the great chasidic Masters....¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ *Mikhtav Me-Eliyahu* vol. 5 pp. 484-5

The Vilna Gaon wrote the same thing, that tzimtzum does not apply to God's Essence, in his statement about the foundation of tzimtzum. There he writes:

Know that we must not think about the *Ein Sof* at all... and what we are talking about with *sefirot* is only regarding His Will (*Ratzon*) and His Providence (*Hashgacha*), which is known from His actions. This is a basic rule in all areas of Kabbalah.... Therefore He contracted His Will in the creation and the worlds, and this is tzimtzum.¹⁶⁷

We see that the Gaon was only speaking about tzimtzum in His Will, and not in His Essence, Heaven forbid.

So the argument was not in these fundamentals at all. This argument is only how much to use these subtle concepts in the service of God. The chasidim used them widely, as is known. Rav Chaim of Volozhin warned against it in *Nefesh Ha-chaim* because they can lead to great mistakes.

This position seems truly untenable. If he is correct, why did the authors cited above argue with each other so vehemently? The simple reading of the *Tanya* and all later chasidic works is that tzimtzum occurred not only in His Will (*ratzon*) but also in His Essence (*atzmut*). And it does not seem reasonable to bring a proof from Rav Chaim to the position of the Gaon (as we have explained above, in this area, the student did not follow his teacher).

Furthermore, the last leader of Chabad chasidut, Rav Menachem Mendel Schneerson, held that the argument between the founder of his movement and the Gaon was from one extreme to the other:

The crux of the differences centres around two issues:

¹⁶⁷ *likutim on Safra de-Zneuta*

“The Perception of Reality: contrasting views of the nature of existence

a) Should the concept of Tzimtzum be understood literally or not, i.e., are we speaking about a withdrawal of the light, or merely its concealment?

b) Did the Tzimtzum affect merely God's light, or did it also affect the Source of light, [i.e., that He Himself has withdrawn or is hidden from our world]?

[In dealing with these questions,] it is possible to outline four different approaches:

1) The Tzimtzum should be interpreted literally, and moreover, it affected God's essence. The proof offered in defense of this theory is that it is impossible for the King to be found in a place of filth, heaven forbid;

2) The Tzimtzum should be interpreted literally, but it affected only His light;

3) The Tzimtzum should not be interpreted literally, but it affected the Source of light as well; and

4) The Tzimtzum should not be interpreted literally, and it affected only His light.

As is well known, the misnagdim at the time of the Alter Rebbe followed the first approach mentioned. They explained the expression, "there is no place apart from Him," meaning - apart from His providence....

[Reb Chayim of Volozhin,] the author of Nefesh HaChayim which you mentioned in your letter, follows the third approach mentioned above. In this, he differs from his master, the Gaon, Rav Eliyahu [of Vilna]....

[As chassidim,] we follow solely the fourth approach mentioned, which explains that the concept of Tzimtzum should not be interpreted literally, and that it affects only [God's] light, but not the Source of light.¹⁶⁸

R' Shlomo Elyashiv, in his sefer *Leshem*, holds that the opinion of the Gaon was that tzimtzum was only in His Will and not in His Essence.

There are three aspects, which are one. The True Hidden Essence, Blessed is He, which is everything and in everything, just as before creation, and includes within Himself every kind of perfection... the Vilna Gaon wrote in the *likutim* about this that it is forbidden even to think about it....

The second aspect is that it arose in His Will to reveal Himself, and the existence of this Will is what we call revelation.... Those parts that are before the revelation are called the *Ein Sof*... And therefore He contracted Himself, as it were, into the middle point, and this is the tzimtzum.¹⁶⁹

Nevertheless, he understands that there is a vast chasm between understanding tzimtzum literally (within His Will) and non-literally.

It is clear from what we have said that the whole concept of tzimtzum is according to the simple meaning and the straightforward interpretation. This is the opinion of the Holy Rabbi, the author of *Mishnat Chasidim* in his book *Yosher Levav*, and also the opinion of the Holy Rabbi, the author of *Mikdash Melech* in his book *Hadrat Melech*.... We have explained at length, and you will see that it is proven and

¹⁶⁸ *Igrot* section 3: 18 Kislev page 224

¹⁶⁹ *Leshem Shevo Ve-Ahlama Helek Ha-Biurim* Drushei Igulim ve-yoshar Anaf 1, Ot 1 (p. 1a-b)

“The Perception of Reality: contrasting views of the nature of existence

clear from all the writings of the AriZal regarding tzimtzum, that it is according to the simple meaning....

And that which is written in the name of the Gra in the likutim at the end of *Safra de-tzneuta* printed in Vilna 5642 that tzimtzum is in the *ratzon* but not in the essence [in truth, it seems to me that all these likutim are not the words of the Gra but were written by an unknown student. This seems clear to me], it is known that His *ratzon* and He are one and the same. The intention there is to give us an understanding according to our limited capabilities since it is impossible for us to grasp the essence of tzimtzum apart from in *ratzon*....¹⁷⁰

Finally, even if Rav Dessler is correct in his understanding of this line, it seems very unlikely that we can take this one phrase (along with a note in the siddur written by someone from the Gaon's Beit Midrash) to be representative of the Gaon's position in the face of all the other sources that we have brought above. Indeed, R' Menachem Mendel Schneerson states that someone who holds that there is no argument regarding tzimtzum clearly has not studied the Kabbalistic texts. He writes:

“With regard to your comments concerning the Tzimtzum, [the initial contraction of Godly light,] and the statement of your acquaintances that all the different approaches [to the concept] flow in a single direction. I was amazed to hear such a proposition, in particular insomuch as in your letter, you describe that person as one who has studied Kabbalistic texts. Obviously, he does not fit that description at all.”¹⁷¹

170 *Leshem Shevo Ve-Ahlama Helek Ha-Biurim* Drushei Igulim ve-yoshar introduction to Anaf 2, Ot 5

¹⁷¹ *Igrot* section 3: 18 Kislev page 224



Understanding Tzimtzum – sources

1. Rav Immanuel Chai Rikki: *Yosher Levav* 1:1:12

ומרשי עניינים אלו למדנו כי החס על כבוד קונו צריך לעלות על לבו מחשבת צמצום זס כפשומו לכל יפגום בכבודו בחשבו שעצמותו נמצא גם בגשמיים השפלים הבלתי נכבדים.

From these things, we have learned that one who takes pity on His Creator must think in his heart that tzimtzum is literal so that he doesn't come to insult God's honour and think that God's essence is present in the lowly, dishonourable, physical and even in the lowest things, God forbid.

2. Rav Tzadok HaCohen: *Sefer Zichronos* 3:13

There have already been many great people and authors of the kabbalists who have made this mistake. For example the author of *Yosher Levav* explains the concept of *tzimtzum* and other concepts in a way that gives God physicality, to those who understand his words. I mention him by name because many other authors who came after him already mentioned his name in print and attempted to clarify his mistakes. He was certainly a great and holy man, as is well known, and his error of belief came through his learning.

3. Rav Yosef Irgas: *Shomer Emunum HaKadmon Vikuach Sheni*:35

Anyone who wants to understand *tzimtzum* literally will come to make many mistakes and will come to contradict many of the principles of faith.

4. Vilna Gaon: *Likutim* at end of *Safra de-Tzneuta* (Sod HaTzimtzum)

דע כי א"ס ב"ה אין לחשוב בו כלל וכלל כי אסור לכנות בו אפי' חובת המציאות . כי אפי' ספי' ראשונה קורין אין ושני' מכנין יש שידענו שהוא נמצא וזה לבד משיגין ממנה משא"כ בראשונה וכ"ש בא"ס ב"ה ית"ש שאסור לחשוב כלל וכלל ואפי' א"ס אסור לקרותו . ומה שאנו מרברים בו ובספירות הכל מרצונו והשגחתו שידוע מצד פעולותיו . וזה הכלל לכל דרכי הקבלה . וידוע כשם שהוא בלתי כל תכלית כן רצונו . וזהו א"ס לרצונו הפשוט ואף כזה אסור לחשוב כלל רק ידוע שהעולמות הן בעלי תכלית והכל במספר וע"כ צמצם רצונו בבריאת העולמות וזהו הצמצום .

5. Vilna Gaon: *Asarah Klalim* Clal 2

This original contraction (*zimzum*) is called *Atik*. This word has two meanings. Firstly it means 'old', and secondly 'removed'. It is called 'old' because it is first of all the contractions, therefore it is called *Atik*. This contraction was also the removal [of G-d from the world], and this is the other meaning of the name *Atik*.

6. Rav Shneur Zalman of Liadi: *Likutei Amarim Tanya* Shaar Hayichud ve-Ha-Emunah Chapter 3

והנה אחרי הרברים והאמת האלה כל משכיל על דבר יבין לאשורו איך שכל נברא ויש הוא באמת נחשב לאין ואפס ממש לגבי כח הפועל ורוח פיו שבנפעל המהוה אותו תמיד ומוציאו מאין ממש ליש . ומה שכל נברא ונפעל נראה לנו ליש וממשות זהו מחמת שאין אנו משיגים ורואים בעיני בשר את כח ה' ורוח פיו שבנברא . אבל אילו ניתנה רשות לעין לראות ולהשיג את החיות ורוחניות שבכל נברא השופע בו ממוצא פי ה' ורוח פיו לא היה גשמיית הנברא . וחומר וממשו נראה

כלל לעינינו כי הוא בטל במציאות ממש לגבי החיות והרוחניות שבו מאחר שמבלעדי הרוחניות היה אין ואפס ממש כמו קודם ששת ימי בראשית ממש. ורוח פיו הוא לכדו המוציאו תמיד מאפס ואין ליש ומהוה אותו א"כ אפס בלעדו באמת.

Now, following these words and the truth [concerning the nature of the Creation], every intelligent person will understand clearly that each creature and being is actually considered naught and absolute nothingness in relation to His Activating Force and the "Breath of His mouth" which is in the created thing, continuously calling it into existence and bringing it from absolute non-being into being. The fact that every creation and act appears to us to exist and have substance is only because we are unable to perceive and to see with our eyes of flesh the power of G-d and the breath of His mouth. But were we able to see and perceive the life force and spirituality that is in each creation which is sustained from the mouth of G-d and breath of His mouth, there would be no physicality to creation or substance or reality apparent to our eyes at all. It is nullified in actuality when compared to the life and spirituality which it contains, since without the spirituality it would literally be nothing and naught like before the six days of creation. The spirituality which flows into it from "That which proceeds out of the mouth of G-d" and "His breath" – that alone continuously brings it forth from naught and nullity into being, and gives it existence. Hence, there is truly nothing besides Him.

7. Ibid. Chapter 7

והנה מכאן יש להבין שגגת מקצת חכמים בעיניהם ה' יכפר בעדם ששגו וטעו בעיונם בכתבי האריז"ל והבינו ענין הצמצום המוזכר שם כפשוטו שהקב"ה סילק עצמו ומהותו ח"ו מעוה"ז רק שמשגיח מלמעלה בהשגחה פרטית על כל היצורים כולם אשר בשמים ממעל ועל הארץ מתחת והנה מלבד שא"א כלל לומר ענין הצמצום כפשוטו שהוא ממקרי הגוף על הקב"ה הנכבד מהם ריבוא רכבות הבדלות עד אין קץ אף גם זאת לא כדעת ידברו מאחר שהם מאמינים בני מאמינים שהקב"ה יודע כל היצורים שבעוה"ז השפל ומשגיח עליהם וע"כ אין ידיעתו אותם מוסיפה בו ריבוי וחידוש מפני שידוע הכל בידיעת עצמו הרי כביכול מהותו ועצמותו ודעתו הכל א'.

In the light of what has been said above it is possible to understand the error of some, scholars in their own eyes, may G-d forgive them, who erred and misinterpreted in their study of the writings of the Ari, of blessed memory, and understood the doctrine of *Tzimtzum*, which is mentioned therein literally – that the Holy One, blessed be He, removed Himself and His Essence, G-d forbid, from this world, and only guides from above with individual Providence all the created beings which are in the heavens above and on the earth below. Now, aside from the fact that it is altogether impossible to interpret the doctrine of *Tzimtzum* literally, [for then it] is a phenomenon of corporeality, concerning the Holy One, blessed be He, who is set apart from them [i.e. the phenomena of corporeality], many myriads of separations *ad infinitum*, they also did not speak wisely, ... [since] the Holy One, blessed be He, knows all the created beings in this lower world and exercises Providence over them, and perforce His knowledge of them does not add plurality and innovation to Him, for He knows all by knowing Himself. Thus, as it were, His Essence and Being and His Knowledge are all one.

8. Rav Shneur Zalman of Liadi: Letter to Chasidim in Vilna.

I would welcome [a discussion] in matters of faith. According to a report from his disciples in our provinces, it is precisely in this area that the Gaon and Hasid found objections to [my] book *Likutei Amarim* and other similar works. The teachings that G-d "fills the world" and that "there is no place void of Him" are interpreted [by us] in a literal sense, whereas in his esteemed opinion it is pure heresy to hold that G-d, blessed be He, is to be found in the mundane matters of our world, and it is for this reason, according to your esteemed letter, that the book [*Toledot Yaakov Yosef* or *Tzava'at ha-Rivash*] was burned. For they explain the passages "the whole earth is full of His glory" etc. in a figurative manner, as referring to Divine Providence. Would that I might present our case to him, so as to remove from ourselves all his philosophical censures.

9. Rav Chaim Volozhin: *Nefesh HaChaim* shaar 3, perek 7

The explanation of the word *tzimtzum* here is not 'removal' or 'abandoning' from one place to another in order to come back and reconnect Himself with Himself, as it were. Nor does it mean to make a space empty [of His Essence] – Heaven forbid. Rather it means... hidden or covered.

10. Shlomo Elyashiv: *Leshem Sh-vo ve-Achlama Sefer Ha-Deah drush olam hatohu chelek 1, drush 5, siman 7, section 8* (p. 57b)

I have also seen some very strange things in the words of some contemporary kabbalists who explain things deeply. They say that all of existence is only an illusion and appearance, and does not truly exist. This is to say that the *ein sof* didn't change at all in itself and its necessary true existence and it is now still exactly the same as it was before creation, and there is no space empty of Him, as is known (see *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* Shaar 3). Therefore they said that in truth there is no reality to existence at all, and all the worlds are only an illusion and appearance, just as it says in the verse "in the hands of the prophets I will appear" (Hoshea 12: 11). They said that the world and humanity have no real existence, and their entire reality is only an appearance. We perceive ourselves as if we are in a world, and we perceive ourselves with our senses, and we perceive the world with our senses. It turns out [according to this opinion] that all of existence of humanity and the world is only a perception and not in true reality, for it is impossible for anything to exist in true reality, since He fills all the worlds... How strange and bitter is it to say such a thing. Woe to us from such an opinion. They don't think and they don't see that with such opinions they are destroying the truth of the entire Torah....

Practical Difference

11. R' Tzadok HaCohen: *Machshevet Charutz* 25b

A person must know that G-d is the One who does everything in the world and in the hearts of people, because there is nothing in the world but Him and all our actions He does for us. Everything that he thinks is his own wisdom, strength and wealth, is only from the perspective of *Olam HaZeh* in which there is a revelation of free choice and it is as if a person is separate from G-d.

12. Rav Tzadok HaCohen: *Tzidkas HaTzadik* 140

As long as a person has not reached perfection, he should know that anything that seems to him one way is really exactly the opposite. This is clear from the Talmud (Pesachim 50a) "There [in the World to Come] I saw an upside down world." There, in the place of truth, everything is the opposite of this world. Only if G-d has lit up someone's eyes through Torah, about which it says "truth" as our Sages have told us (Avoda Zara 4b), can a person can come to know the truth.

13. Rav Elyahu Dessler: *Strive for Truth* vol. 2 p. 240, 250

Nature has no objective existence; it is merely an illusion which gives man a choice to exercise his free will: to err, or to choose the truth.... If someone is successful this is not because he is clever; Hashem wanted him to succeed and therefore gave him cleverness.

14. Rav Eliyahu Dessler: *Strive for Truth* vol. 3 p. 163-64

The Torah obliges each one of us to carry on our lives by reference to natural causes.... The person at the lower level, since he believes in the efficacy of natural causes, will find this mitzvah perfectly understandable. On the other hand, the person on a higher level, who realizes the essential unreality of natural causes, finds this mitzvah difficult to understand – a *chok* like the mitzvah of the Red Heifer.... He is aware that there is no logical reason why the effect should follow the cause; the whole system of apparent cause and effect is erected by Hashem to form a background for our moral choices and the exercise of our free will.

15. Vilna Gaon: *Introduction to Pe'as HaShulchan*

כה אמר כל החכמות נצרכים לתורתנו הק' ובלולים בה וידעם כולם לתכליתם והזכירם חכמת עלגברע ושולשים והנדסה וחכמות פסיקה ושיבחה הרבה.

This is what he said: All wisdom is necessary for our holy Torah, and included within it. He knew all of them very well, and mentioned wisdom of algebra, trigonometry, engineering, and physics, which he praised highly.

16. Vilna Gaon: *Asarah Clalim Clal 2*

בן רצונו ית' נתגלה בכתיבה ב' פעמים כלומר ע"י הספר ב' פעמים, אחד בעת הכתיבה שנחקקו ונכתבו כמו כתיבה השגחתו ורצונו בהאור אשר בה נבראו כל הברואים, וכן תמיד שהשגחתו ית' בא ע"י האור והוא הטוב שזהו רצונו כמ"ש וירא אלקים את האור כי טוב, אך עדיין הוא כספר החתום שאין מבינים בהם כבודו ית' ורצונו האמיתי רק חכמים מחוכמים הקוראים בהם ומשימין עינין שכלם היטב בפעל ה' ובמעשה ידיו, כענין שכתוב שאו מרום עיניכם וראו מי ברא אלה.

So too, His Will was revealed twice, meaning in two 'books'. The first is at the time of writing when it was engraved and written, like the writing of Providence and Will with the Light with which all creatures were created. So too, always, His Providence comes to use through the light, which is the Good, and which is His Will, as the verse states "G-d saw the light that it was good". However, it is like a sealed book from which we cannot understand G-d's Glory and true Will. Only the wise people who read it and delve deeply into the works of G-d and his handiwork [can understand]. As the verse states "Raise your eyes to heaven and see Who created these".

17. Rambam: *Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah* chapter 2:2

והיאך היא הדרך לאהבתו, ויראתו: בשעה שיתבונן האדם במעשיו וברואיו הנפלאים הגדולים, ויראה מהם חכמתו שאין לה ערך ולא קץ--מיד הוא אוהב ומשבת ומפאר ומתאוה תאוה גדולה לידע השם הגדול, כמו שאמר דויד "צמאה נפשי, לאלוהים--לא לאל חי" (תהילים מב, ג). וכשמחשב בדברים האלו עצמן, מיד הוא נרתע לאחוריו, וירא ויפתח וידע שהוא בריה קטנה שפלה אפלה, עומד בדעת קלה מעוטה לפני תמים דעות, כמו שאמר דויד "כי אראה שמיך . . . מה אנוש, כי תזכרנו" (תהילים ת, ה-ה).

What is the way to love and fear G-d? Whenever one contemplates the great wonders of G-d's works and creations, and one sees that they are a product of a wisdom that has no bounds or limits, one will immediately love, laud and glorify Him with an immense passion to know the Great Name, like David has said, "My soul thirsts for G-d, for the living G-d". When one thinks about these matters one will feel a great fear and trepidation, and one will know that one is a low and insignificant creation, with hardly an iota of intelligence compared to that of G-d, like David has said, "When I observe Your heavens, the work of Your fingers...what is man, that You are heedful of him?".

18. Rambam: *Guide for the Perplexed* 1:71

I have already told you that nothing exists except God and this universe, and that there is no other evidence for His Existence but this universe in its entirety and in its several parts. Consequently, the universe must be examined as it is: the propositions must be derived from those properties of the universe that are clearly perceived, and hence you must know its visible form and its nature. Then only will you find in the universe evidence for the existence of a Being not included therein.



A diagram of the worlds created after the first Tzimtzum, found in a manuscript written by Menahem Lonzano, a version of a diagram found in the writings of Hayyim ben Joseph Vital

Review of Nefesh HaTzimtzum

Bridging the Kabbalistic Gap

Rabbi Bezalel Naor writes:¹⁶

Recently there has been a spate of English translations of the classic of Mitnagdic philosophy, *Nefesh ha-Hayyim* by Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin (1749-1821), eminent disciple of the Vilna Gaon. This is perhaps the most glorious—certainly the lengthiest—of the translations, one that attempts to rewrite the debate between Hasidim and Mitnagdim.

The present edition, the most extensive to date, is divided in two volumes. Volume One consists of a Hebrew-English edition of the entire book with the exception of the famous note by the author's son, Rabbi Isaac (Itzeleh) of Volozhin, known as "Ma'amar Be-Tzelem." That note and other related writings of Rabbi Hayyim have been translated in Volume Two. In a unique typesetting innovation, the translator divides the complex Hebrew sentences into phrases, easing the English reading.

In the lengthy introduction to Volume Two, entitled "Tzimtzum—The Key to Nefesh HaChaim," Avinoam Fraenkel has carved out for himself a most ambitious goal: to tackle the perennial problem of latter-day Kabbalah, namely the Lurianic doctrine of Tzimtzum or divine self-contraction. Traditionally, there have been two schools of thought on the matter: those who hold "tzimtzum ki-peshuto," i.e. the doctrine is to be taken literally; and those convinced that "tzimtzum she-lo ki-peshuto," i.e. Tzimtzum is not to be taken literally. As Fraenkel points out, this terminology first gained currency in the debate between two Italian kabbalists, Rabbi Joseph Ergas (author *Shomer Emunim*) and Rabbi Immanuel Hai Ricchi (author *Yosher Levav*) back in 1736-7.[1]

Fraenkel's thesis is that even when things are "pashut" (simple), they truly are not so "pashut" (simple). Even when a kabbalist such as Rabbi Shelomo Elyashiv (author *Leshem Shevo ve-Ahlamah*) writes boldly that he understands the doctrine literally as did the author of *Yosher Levav*—that requires complexification.

You might ask of what concern is this rarefied debate to the masses of Jews living in the twenty-first century. Ah! It just so happens that

¹⁶ <https://avinoamfraenkel.com/nh-rabbi-bezalel-naor/>

many if not most historians have assumed that this debate, which translates into transcendentalist versus immanentist theology, was at the heart of the terrible controversy between the Mitnagdim and Hasidim that tore apart East European Jewry in the late eighteenth century. At that time, the Vilna Gaon issued a herem, an official rabbinic ban excommunicating the followers of the Ba'al Shem Tov.

If it can be proven that there is essentially no difference of theology between the Tanya (the "Bible" of Hasidism), written by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, founder of the Habad school of Hasidism, and the Nefesh ha-Hayyim (the "Shulhan 'Arukh" of Mitnagdic ideology), then we will have dissolved any continuing animus between Hasidim and Mitnagdim, and "Shalom 'al Yisrael" (Peace to Israel). This is the fondest wish of the author.

The truth is—as the author makes us aware—this is not the first attempt to smooth over theological differences between the Tanya and Nefesh ha-Hayyim. On the eve of World War Two, Rabbi Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler—a preeminent master of the Mussar school, Mashgi'ah Ruhani of Gateshead and later of the Ponevezh Yeshivah in B'nei Berak—then residing in London, wished to issue a proclamation to the effect that there is essentially no mahloket, no difference of opinion between Rabbi Shneur Zalman and Rabbi Hayyim regarding the correct interpretation of Tzimtzum. Rabbi Dessler's distinguished houseguest at the time was Rabbi Yitzhak Horowitz (known in Lubavitch as "Reb Itche Der Masmid," on account of his legendary "hatmadah," or devotion to learning), who acted as fundraiser on behalf of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Joseph Isaac Schneerson. Rabbi Dessler asked Rabbi Horowitz to sign on the proclamation.

To make a long story short, eventually Rabbi Dessler's overtures were forwarded to the son-in-law of the Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (eventual successor to his father-in-law as Rebbe of Lubavitch), who penned a formal reply. For the life of him, Rabbi M.M. Schneerson could not fathom how someone with competence in Kabbalah (which Rabbi Dessler certainly did possess) could fail to see the obvious differences between the Habad and Volozhin understandings of Tzimtzum. (Rabbi Schneerson further outlined that there was a difference between the Vilna Gaon and his student Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin regarding Tzimtzum, a point in the letter which continues to rile Mitnagdim to this day. In fact, Rabbi Yosef Zussman

of Jerusalem, eminent disciple of Rabbi Ya'akov Moshe Harlap, wrote several unanswered letters to the Lubavitcher Rebbe remonstrating how absurd it is to entertain the notion that Rabbi Hayyim, who adored his master the Gaon, disagreed with him on so basic an issue.)

Left without a "partner in peace" of the opposite camp, Rabbi Dessler's proclamation was buried. Where titans such as Rabbis Dessler and Schneerson could not see eye to eye, Avinoam Fraenkel certainly has his work cut out for him. Before we proceed further to the "nuts and bolts" of the Tanya—Nefesh ha-Hayyim debate, the reader may wish to listen to some music pleasing to the ear:

- *When Rabbi Abraham Mordechai Alter, Rebbe of Gur ("Imrei Emet") asked Rav Kook how he knew so much Hasidut, Rav Kook responded that he had studied Nefesh ha-Hayyim.*
- *Rabbi Michael Eliezer Forshlager of Baltimore, a foremost student of Rabbi Avraham Bornstein, Rebbe of Sokhatchov (author Responsa Avnei Nezer) carried in his tallit bag a volume which consisted of Tanya and Nefesh ha-Hayyim bound together at Rabbi Forshlager's special request.*
- *Once around the family table in Brooklyn, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (by then Lubavitcher Rebbe) spoke so enthusiastically of Nefesh ha-Hayyim that his brother-in-law Rabbi Shemariah Gurary said in jest: "Then perhaps we Hasidim should take to studying Nefesh ha-Hayyim."*

Back to the mahloket. What are the cold facts concerning the debate? It is incontrovertible that Rabbi Hayyim has stood the Zohar's terms "memale kol 'almin" ("filling all worlds") and "sovev kol 'almin" ("surrounding all worlds") on their heads. What for the Tanya is "memale kol 'almin," is for Nefesh ha-Hayyim, "sovev kol 'almin," and vice versa. Rabbi Shelomo Fisher of Jerusalem has written that this is merely semantics.^[2] Others read into the shift of terminology a substantive controversy as to Weltanschauung. What for Hasidism is common experience, namely the immanence, the immediate presence of God, is for Mitnagdism a recondite mystery reserved for the elite.

In the words of Rabbi Eizik of Homel, a major disciple of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi and of his son, Rabbi Dov Baer of Lubavitch (Mitteler Rebbe):

This belief is possessed by all the Hasidim, but the Mitnagdim, even those who are not etc. [the word etc. occurs in the original], do not have this faith, only in a very, very concealed manner, as Israel were in Egypt...They have no room for this faith that Altz iz Gott (All is God).[3]

Fraenkel observes that much of the “poisoning of the waters” was done by publication of a spurious letter attributed to the “Alter Rebbe,” Rabbi Shneur Zalman, in the anonymous Matzref ha-`Avodah (Koenigsberg, 1858). Later the letter was incorporated in Heilman’s more responsible Beit Rebbi (Berdichev, 1902). In the forged epistle, Rabbi Shneur Zalman writes that it has come to his awareness that the Vilna Gaon understands Tzimtzum literally.

This letter contributed to Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson’s formulation concerning the Vilna Gaon’s view of Tzimtzum. One might mistakenly assume that once the letter is exposed as a forgery, Habad should have no problem accepting that there truly was no disagreement between the two rival camps concerning Tzimtzum. But Fraenkel knows that this is not the end of his troubles.

There is the matter of the passage in the second part of Tanya (titled Sha`ar ha-Yihud ve-ha-Emunah) which reserves some pretty harsh language for the literalists:

...the error of some wise men in their own eyes, may the Lord forgive them, who erred and were mistaken in their study of the writings of the Ari, of blessed memory, and understood the doctrine of Tzimtzum mentioned there literally, that the Holy One, blessed be He, withdrew Himself and His essence, God forbid, from this world, only that He supervises from above.[4]

Who are the unnamed villains of this passage? To endeavor to answer this question, we would do well to research the printing history of the Tanya. The passage in question was missing from all editions of the Tanya printed before the year 1900. In that year, the passage surfaced in the Romm edition printed in Vilna at the behest of Rabbi

Shalom Dov Baer Schneersohn of Lubavitch. Until that time, it had been preserved in manuscript in the keeping of the heirs of the Ba'al ha-Tanya. That means that for over a century since the Tanya was first printed in Slavuta in 1796, this sensitive piece—a sort of J'accuse if you will—was suppressed. Why was it ever suppressed to begin with, and why was it finally revealed in 1900?

An obvious solution would be that the passage obliquely lambasted the Vilna Gaon, and it was not until a century later that a direct descendant of the author felt that times had changed and that the sociological “climate” had warmed sufficiently to allow for an unexpurgated version of the Tanya to appear in print. This time, no herem would be issued in Vilna.

And for the record, Rabbi Menachem Mendel was not the first Schneerson to assume that the Gaon understood Tzimtzum literally. Earlier, the Rebbe of Kopyst, Rabbi Shelomo Zalman Schneerson (1830-1900), author Magen Avot, wrote in a letter to Rabbi Don Tumarkin: “This is the entire subject of Tzimtzum, and this is the Hasidism of the Ba'al Shem Tov and the Maggid, may they rest in peace, that the Tzimtzum is not to be taken literally, as opposed to the opinion of the Mishnat Hasidim [i.e. Rabbi Immanuel Hai Ricchi] and the Gaon Rabbi Elijah, of blessed memory.”[5]

Fraenkel is not willing to accept that the passage in Tanya is directed at the Vilna Gaon or earlier Rabbi Immanuel Hai Ricchi. He stands in good company. Upon receipt of Hayyim Yitzhak Bunin's Mishneh Habad II (Warsaw, 1933), Rav Kook wrote back to the author requesting that he retract his statement that the pejorative “wise men in their own eyes” refers to the author of Mishnat Hasidim and the Gaon of Vilna.[6]

But then the question remains. Who are the “bad guys” of the Tanya? Fraenkel would have us believe that the reference is to the likes of the crypto-Sabbatian Nehemiah Hiyya Hayyon, against whom Ergas inveighed in his polemical works Tokhahat Megulah and Ha-Tzad Nahash (London, 1715).[7]

If that were the case, the language of the Tanya is too mild and reserved. Sabbatians (believers in pseudo-Messiah Shabtai Tzevi) are

usually treated to much more invective, such as “blasted be their bones.” There is a parallel passage in the work of Rabbi Aaron Halevi Horowitz of Starosselje, Sha’arei ha-Yihud ve-ha-Emunah. There the language is even more compassionate and conciliatory. It is hard to imagine that the Ba’al ha-Tanya and his prime pupil Rabbi Aaron Halevi Horowitz would show such empathy towards a Sabbatian heresiarch. With very few exceptions, members of the rabbinates were not “melamed zekhut” when it came to deviants of the Sabbatian persuasion. The passage reads:

...As it occurred to some latter-day kabbalists who attempt to be wise (mithakmim)...to understand Tzimtzum literally, as if He contracted Himself, and this is a crime, and their sin is too great to forbear, but their merit is that they have not spoken all these things with premeditation, God forbid, but rather from lack of understanding. May the Lord forgive them, “for in respect of all the people it was done in error” (Numbers 15:26).[8]

Tzimtzum-literalism is not a characteristically Sabbatian posture, nor is it the exclusive domain of Sabbatians. Rabbi Jacob Emden, the arch-nemesis of the Sabbatians, took Tzimtzum literally, drawing an analogy to the vacuum created by a pump.[9] In fact, Emden excoriated Ricchi for belaboring the point, when “certainly, absolutely, it is not to be construed other than literally, and it is one of the a priori assumptions for the believer in our holy religion, if not for anti-religious apikorsim who do not concede the creation of the world.”[10]

There is another problem with deflecting the Tanya’s critique away from the Gaon of Vilna toward Sabbatian kabbalists. If Sabbatians were being targeted, then why did the passage need to be suppressed at all? The Vilna Gaon and his disciples were certainly condemnatory of Sabbatianism in all its guises, so there would have been nothing in the passage to give offense to the Mitnagdim, the opponents of Hasidism.

Fraenkel’s work is much more difficult than that of Rabbi Dessler, for Fraenkel has tasked himself with harmonizing the view of Rabbi Shelomo Elyashiv (1841-1926), author of Leshem, as well. Rabbi Shelomo Elyashiv wrote—both in his Helek ha-Bi’urim and in his

recently published correspondence with fellow Mitnagdic kabbalist Rabbi Naftali Herz Halevi Weidenbaum—that he subscribes to the literalist interpretation of Tzimtzum as described in Ricchi’s Yosher Levav.[11] The Leshem went so far as to cast aspersions on the Likkutim printed at the conclusion of Bi’ur ha-Gra to Sifra di-Tzeni`uta, which present a non-literal reading of Tzimtzum.[12]

Professor Mordechai Pachter was struck by the most incongruous dovetailing of the perspectives of Lubavitch and Leshem concerning the Vilna Gaon’s interpretation of Tzimtzum. Both ascribe to the Gaon a literalist interpretation.[13]

“To cut to the chase,” Fraenkel’s strategy for reconciling what appear glaring differences of opinion involves invoking the kabbalistic theory of relativity, namely the distinction between the divine perspective and the human perspective. The Aramaic expressions that convey this thought are “le-gabei dideh” versus “le-gabei didan.”[14] (In Nefesh ha-Hayyim, the Hebrew terms “mi-tzido”/“mi-tzidenu” serve the same purpose.)[15] This distinction is certainly a valuable tool but it should not be overused. It strikes this reader as overly simplistic to assume that all writers (with the exception of Sabbatians) who grasp Tzimtzum literally are necessarily writing from the human perspective, while writers who understand Tzimtzum non-literally are necessarily writing from the divine perspective. And if the distinction should not be overused, a fortiori it should not be misused. To ascribe the human perspective (as opposed to divine perspective) to Rabbi Immanuel Hai Ricchi when he clearly writes the opposite, is to do violence to his words. A key passage in his Yosher Levav (quoted in fact by Fraenkel) reads:

Therefore relative to us (le-gabei didan), it is as if there was no Tzimtzum and we can say that the Tzimtzum is not literal. However, relative to the Ein Sof (le-gabei ha-Ein Sof) itself, it is literal.[16]

How it is then possible to flip around the author’s mindset and reverse his stated position, is beyond me.

At day’s end, the warring factions within Knesset Yisrael may have to make peace with their differences of opinion intact, even in the matter of Tzimtzum.

[1] Prof. Menachem Kallus confided to the writer that in his estimation the earliest discussion whether Tzimtzum was intended literally or not, is to be found in the notes to Vital's 'Ets Hayyim penned by Rabbi Meir Poppers (ca. 1624-1662). Poppers writes that it sounds to him as if Luria's disciples Rabbi Hayyim Vital and Rabbi Yosef ibn Tabul understood from the Rav [Isaac Luria] that "the Tzimtzum is literal" ("ha-tzimtzum ke-mishma'o"). See Rabbi Meir Poppers, 'Or Zaru'a, ed. Safran and Sofer (Jerusalem: Hevrat Ahavat Shalom, 1986), Sha'ar ha-Iggulim ve-ha-Yosher, chap. 2 (p. 29).

[2] See "Derush ha-Tefillin" in Rabbi Shelomo Fisher, Beit Yishai—Derashot (Jerusalem, 2004), p. 355.

[3] Rabbi Eizik of Homel, "Igeret Kodesh" (Holy Epistle) printed at the conclusion of Hannah Ariel—Amarot Tehorot (Ma'amar ha-Shabbat, etc.) (Berdichev: Sheftel, 1912), 4b. [4] Tanya II, 7 (83a). [5] Published in M.M. Laufer, Ha-Melekh bi-Mesibo II (Kefar Habad: Kehot, 1993), p. 286. [6] Rav Kook's manuscript was published in Haskamot ha-Rayah (Jerusalem: Makhon RZYH Kook, 1988). Ironically, Rav Kook's maternal grandfather Raphael Felman was a Hasid of the Rebbe of Kopyst.

Fraenkel dismisses out of hand the notion that the Tanya pilloried Ricchi because of the fact that references to Ricchi's Mishnat Hasidim figure prominently in the Tanya. See Nefesh HaTzimtzum, vol. 2, p. 79, n. 89. This argument is unconvincing. It is quite conceivable that the Ba'al ha-Tanya was fond of Mishnat Hasidim, a popular digest of Lurianic Kabbalah, while viewing Ricchi's other work Yosher Levav as being outside the pale. And for the very reason that such a venerable Kabbalist erred in his judgment concerning Tzimtzum, he was worthy of compassion. Cf. Rabbi Tzadok Hakohen Rabinowitz:

There were already found many great men, authors among the Mekubbalim, who stumbled in this, including the author of Yosher Levav, who explained the matter of Tzimtzum and similarly many matters of Kabbalah in [terms recognizable] to the understanding [as] total corporealization. I have spelled out his name, for some authors published after him already publicized him in order to clarify his errors in this respect. Behold he was a great and holy man, as is known, and erred only in his faith. Though this too is a great error and requires atonement (as explained above), nonetheless it is not such a grievous sin, as explained in the words of the Rabad... (Sefer ha-Zikhronot in Divrei Soferim [Lublin, 1913], 32d)

The reference is to Rabad's animadversion to Maimonides' statement in MT, Hil. Teshuvah 3:7 that one who professes belief in a corporeal deity has the halakhic status of a "min."

[7] Fraenkel's "Shabbetian Tzimtzum Kipshuto" (as opposed to the "Acceptable Tzimtzum Kipshuto") strikes this writer as a "straw man" contrived for purposes of pilpul. [8] Rabbi Aaron Halevi, Sha'arei ha-Yihud ve-ha-Emunah (Shklov, 1820), Part 1, Gate 1, chap. 21, note (f.51). [9] Rabbi Jacob Emden, Mitpahat Sefarim (Altona, 1768), 35b-36a (i.e. 45b-46a). [10] Mitpahat Sefarim 35b (i.e. 45b). To the question of whether Ricchi himself a crypto-Sabbatian was, I devoted an entire chapter of my book post-Sabbatian Sabbatianism (1999): "Immanuel Hai Ricchi—Literalist among Kabbalists."

[11] Rabbi Shelomo Elyashiv, Helek ha-Bi'urim (Jerusalem, 1935), 3a-b. The letters of Rabbi Elyashiv to Rabbi N.H. Halevi Weidenbaum were published in Rabbi Moshe Schatz, Ma'ayan Moshe (Jerusalem, 2011).

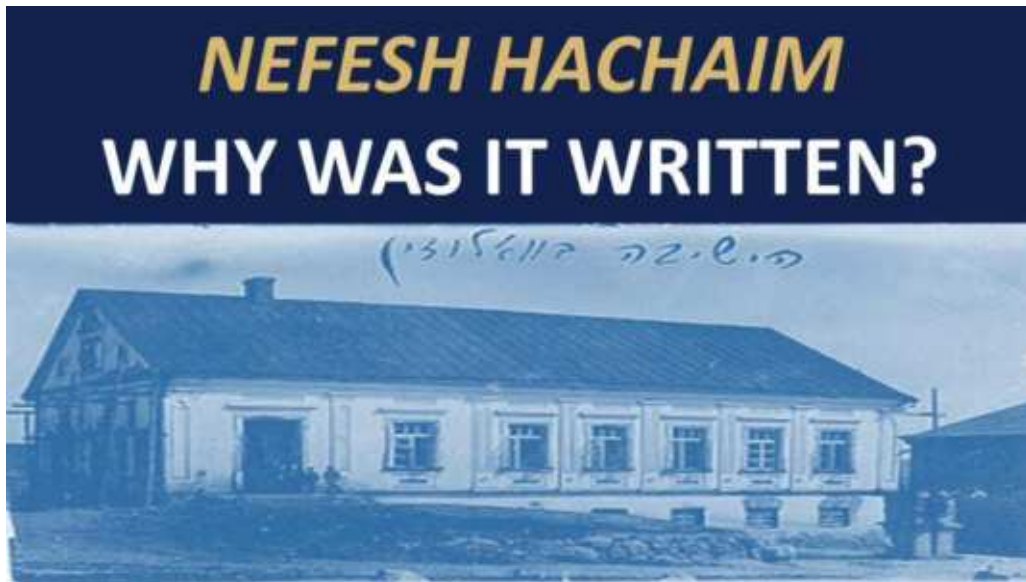
[12] Helek ha-Bi'urim, 5b.

[13] Mordechi Pachter, "The Gaon's Kabbalah from the Perspective of Two Traditions" (Hebrew), in The Vilna Gaon and his Disciples (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2003), pp. 119-136.

[14] See Rabbi Menahem Azariah da Fano, Ma'amar ha-Nefesh, Part 2, chap. 4 in Ma'amrei ha-Rama mi-Fano (Jerusalem: Yismah Lev, 1997), p. 339; Rabbi Immanuel Hai Ricchi, Yosher Levav (Amsterdam, 1737), chap. 15 (10a), Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto, Kalah Pithei Hokhmah (Koretz, 1785), petah 27 (31b); idem, Peirush Arimat Yadai in Adir ba-Marom II, ed. Spinner (Jerusalem, 1988), p. 74; Rabbi Aaron Halevi Horowitz, Sha'arei ha-Yihud ve-ha-Emunah (Shklov, 1820), Part 1, Gate 1, note to chap. 21 (43b-44a); Rabbi Isaac of Volozhin, "Ma'amar Be-Tzelem" (note to Nefesh ha-Hayyim, Gate 1, chap. 1) in Avinoam Fraenkel, Nefesh HaTzimtzum, vol. 2, p. 397; Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hakohen Kook, Shemonah Kevatzim (Jerusalem, 2004), 2:120 (vol. 1, p. 284).

[15] Nefesh ha-Hayyim III, 6.

[16] Rabbi Immanuel Hai Ricchi, Yosher Levav (Amsterdam, 1737), chap. 15 (10a). Quoted in Nefesh ha-Tzimtzum, vol. 2, pp. 260-261. See also Fraenkel's discussion of Ricchi's position on pp. 63-71.



Rabbi Chaim Volozhin's Motivation to Write *Nefesh HaChaim*

Including a response to R. Bezalel Naor's Review of Nefesh HaTzimtzum¹⁷

Avinoam Fraenkel writes:¹⁸

Avinoam Fraenkel's new 2 volume work, *Nefesh HaTzimtzum* (Urim Publications), is a full facing page translation and extensive commentary on *Nefesh HaChaim* together with all related writings by R. Chaim Volozhin. It also presents a groundbreaking study on the Kabbalistic concept of Tzimtzum which is demonstrated to be the key principle underpinning all

¹⁷ Seforim Blog, 28 June 2016

¹⁸ <https://avinoamfraenkel.com/article-rabbi-chaim-volozhins-motivation/>

of *Nefesh HaChaim*. The following essay captures some of the key insights in overview from *Nefesh HaTzimtzum* which should be referred to for in-depth details and sources.[1]

Life is complex and our most significant actions in life are often motivated by a wide spectrum of catalysts driven by both conscious and subconscious objectives. Therefore it is a considerable challenge when looking deeply into R. Chaim Volozhin's magnum opus, *Nefesh HaChaim*, to try to ascertain what may have primarily driven him to compose it and what motivated him to provide an urgent deathbed instruction to his son in 1821, to publish it as soon as possible.[2]

Was it simply a structured presentation, recording the enormously important worldview of R. Chaim's revered master, the Vilna Gaon? Was it a manifesto to set the tone for his newfound and soon to be world famous Volozhin Yeshiva? Was it a broadside shot at the entire Chassidic establishment to attempt to bring it into line? Was it a defense for the Mitnagdic camp, to shore up their opposition to the Chassidim by providing them with its own authoritative framework to dampen any attraction to the looming specter of what for many was the compelling allure of the competing Chassidic philosophy?

In all likelihood, all of these factors and many more, both communal and personal, may have motivated R. Chaim, at least to some degree. Nevertheless, on investigation, it appears that there was indeed a single primary motivating factor that can be isolated as significantly influencing the presentation of *Nefesh HaChaim*. However, in order to be able to relate to this factor, it is necessary to first dispel a smokescreen of deep rooted misconception which has persisted for the last 200 years about perceived fundamental differences of faith between the Chassidim and the Mitnagdim. Once dispelled, as explained below, it becomes clear that R. Chaim aimed his urgent message in *Nefesh HaChaim* at many on the periphery of the Chassidic movement, but not directly at the Chassidic establishment itself. He perceived those on the periphery to be at severe risk of compromising their faith due to their mistaken adoption of practices whose sole objective was to passionately increase their piety to get closer to God at all costs even if this would ironically result in Halachic compromise.

This smokescreen was a result of raging turmoil between the Chassidim and their opponents, the extent of which was so acute that it caused many to be utterly confused as to what the fight was actually about. It prepared the ground for it to be all too easy to believe and accept that the schism was about the fundamental principles of Judaism focusing, in particular, on the Kabbalistic concept of Tzimtzum and the degree to which God is directly manifest in this physical world – and therefore to have a different perception

of the required balance between the desire to get closer to God and the necessary punctilious observance of the Halacha. So, even though many equivalences can be found between statements in *Nefesh HaChaim*, the contemporary Chassidic literature of its time in general and *Sefer HaTanya* in particular, the profound importance of the key message of *Nefesh HaChaim* to the wider Chassidic community was entirely misunderstood and therefore totally ignored, as *Nefesh HaChaim* was perceived to have been based on a fundamentally different philosophical outlook that diverged from what was mistakenly thought by many to be the exclusively Chassidic view on the extent of God's immanence.

It should be noted that this is not just of historic interest in that it was only relevant in R. Chaim's day. Even though the acuteness of the schism between the Chassidim and Mitnagdim has abated and both camps, although with some exceptions, are generally accepting of each other nowadays, nevertheless the prevalence of Halachic practice becoming the primary casualty of a desire to get closer to God is in many ways just as rife today as it ever was. This impacts all camps across the entire spectrum of Jewish religious affiliation. The less religiously affiliated who are susceptible to possibly view Halachic compromise as sometimes being acceptable if they see it as enabling more of their activities to otherwise be closer to God. The more religiously affiliated who frequently adopt pious self-imposed practices going beyond the letter of Halachic obligation, where out of what they call "Frumkeit," are vulnerable to possibly look down on, speak about and act disdainfully with baseless hatred towards others who they may view as less pious, flagrantly, and often publicly breaching the Halacha.

This phenomenon is arguably manifest in its worst form in instances of acts of open aggression in the name of God against Jews by some extremist Jews who try to enforce what they perceive to be a high level of piety, where neither the aggression nor the supposed piety conform with anything even vaguely close to any accepted standard of Halachic practice. R. Chaim's message is therefore just as urgently required and relevant today and the fact that *Nefesh HaChaim* has largely been ignored for the last 200 years has prevented its critical message from being properly communicated and absorbed.

It should also be highlighted that while the Chassidic community has ignored the message of *Nefesh HaChaim* due to their perception of the entire work as being philosophically disconnected from their own outlook, the Mitnagdim on the other hand have had a problem accepting the widespread study of Kabbalah. No-one in the Mitnagdic community has any authority or would dare to challenge the status of *Nefesh HaChaim* as a seminal work that must be studied. Nevertheless, many in the Mitnagdic community have been generally guilty of attempting to rebrand *Nefesh HaChaim*, trying to ignore that it is a

Kabbalistic work, failing to appreciate, or even denying outright, that engagement in the Kabbalistic concepts it so intentionally presents for public consumption is an absolute pre-requisite to properly relate to its message. They surreptitiously treat it as an ethical work, a work of Mussar, by only focusing study on some selected non-Kabbalistic parts of the book and thereby entirely miss the point of the book.[3] Therefore from either the Chassidic or Mitnagdic perspective, the key burning message of *Nefesh HaChaim* which so badly needs to be applied to Jewish life today, has sadly and irresponsibly been ignored!

The historic smokescreen of fundamental difference between the Chassidic and Mitnagdic camps has unfortunately been propagated by many of great stature in the Jewish world and also by many in the academic world. Simply put, the general mistaken presentation of difference around the Tzimtzum process which explains why we cannot see the infinite God in this finite physical world, is that the Chassidic view is that God is present everywhere and in everything physical but His presence is concealed, i.e., God is totally immanent. Whereas the Mitnagdic view is that God is removed and absent from the physical world and merely controls all from a distance through Divine Providence, i.e., God is totally transcendent.

This unfortunate presentation was perhaps most famously captured by a letter written in 1939 by R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the last Lubavitcher Rebbe, which delineates a 4 position approach to the concept of Tzimtzum and presents a picture of stark contrast between each of the views of the Vilna Gaon, the Baal HaTanya and R. Chaim.[4] In this letter R. Schneerson went so far as to state "... the author of *Nefesh HaChaim* ... disagrees with his master, the Vilna Gaon [about the concept of Tzimtzum]. In general, it appears that R. Chaim Volozhin saw the works of Lubavitch – and *Sefer HaTanya*, in particular – and that he was influenced by them, however, I do not have definite proof of this." In contrast to the positions of both the Vilna Gaon and R. Chaim, R. Schneerson then continued to explain the Chassidic view, that the Tzimtzum process was only initially applied to "the lowest level of the Light [of the Ein Sof]."

R. Schneerson's statement here explicitly highlights a diverse difference in fundamental philosophical outlook between the Chassidic world and that of the Vilna Gaon and therefore the Mitnagdic world. His suggestion, without proof, that R. Chaim was swayed somewhat towards what he describes as the Chassidic view was based on the employment of many seemingly Chassidic statements in *Nefesh HaChaim*.

However, on in-depth study of the positions of the Vilna Gaon, R. Chaim and the Leshem[5] it becomes crystal clear that they are identical with the Baal HaTanya, and indeed with the Arizal and the Zohar, regarding the concept of

Tzimtzum. In order to see this it is crucial not to initially look at the terminology they employ but to carefully assess the substance of each of their arguments. On face value, the Vilna Gaon and the Leshem seemed to openly express strong dissatisfaction with the Chassidic perspective and there is scope to question if the Baal HaTanya aimed scathing comments on this topic directly at the Vilna Gaon. Notwithstanding this, if we are particular to examine what they actually say about the substance of the topic, and not be deflected about what they may or may not have said about each other, then it will allow us to see that they in fact all agreed.

The critical factor to appreciate the substance of each of their arguments is to understand that they all saw the arena within which the Tzimtzum process occurs as only being in the Sefira of Malchut of any level, including that of the highest level called the "Ein Sof."^[6] Malchut is the lowest Sefira of any level and is in fact in a different dimension to it. This means that any change within Malchut of any level as a result of the Tzimtzum process, does not impact the level itself in any way. Therefore, the first instance of the Tzimtzum process which occurred in the Malchut of the first level which was emanated from God's Essence, the Ein Sof, did not impact the Ein Sof in any way. Therefore, by extension, not only does the Tzimtzum process not change the Ein Sof, but it also has no impact on God's Essence in any way.

Once this is understood then it becomes clear that the debate over whether Tzimtzum means either immanence or transcendence is simply wrong. As the Tzimtzum removal only occurs within Malchut, transcendence only applies to Malchut. Therefore, everything above Malchut, i.e., both God's Essence and also the Ein Sof, is entirely and absolutely immanent. In other words, the Tzimtzum process itself results in a dual simultaneous combination of both immanence *and* transcendence. The particular stance of immanence or transcendence then becomes a matter of perspective. In the language of the Nefesh HaChaim, immanence is "Mitzido", the perspective of the higher level (and ultimately God's perspective) and transcendence is "Mitzideinu", the perspective of the lower level (and ultimately that of the physical creations).^[7] All discussion about the differences between levels therefore becomes relative to the level the discussion is centered upon. This point is so important that it is the key to begin to understand any discussions of the Arizal.^[8]

This, in a nutshell, is the concept of Tzimtzum that was held in common by the Vilna Gaon, R. Chaim, the Leshem, the Arizal and the Zohar. Any time any one of these sources refers to a "removal", they are therefore referring to a removal within "Malchut" only of whatever level they happen to be discussing. It is far beyond the scope of this essay to provide sources to explain the

concepts and demonstrate how they translate into day to day life and the reader is referred to *Nefesh HaTzimtzum*.[\[9\]](#)

However, just to whet the appetite and demonstrate that our focus must be on the substance of the argument and to not be deflected by terminology let's look at two simple sources. The Baal HaTanya states "... the characteristic of His Malchut is the characteristic of Tzimtzum and concealment, that conceals the light of the Ein Sof."[\[10\]](#) This, unsurprisingly, is consistent with R. Schneerson's statement that the Tzimtzum process was only initially applied to "the lowest level of the Light [of the Ein Sof]." The Leshem, on the other hand, states the following "...and therefore that place within which the Tzimtzum process occurred is called Malchut of the Ein Sof ... it is exclusively in Malchut of every revelation for every Tzimtzum is exclusively in Malchut ..."[\[11\]](#) Therefore, very surprisingly to many, the Leshem, the staunch Mitnaged and follower of the path of the Vilna Gaon, entirely agrees with the Baal HaTanya and with what R. Schneerson presents as the Chassidic view that the Tzimtzum process is only within Malchut!

With all of the above in mind, we are now in a position to step aside and briefly focus our attention on R. Bezalel Naor's review of *Nefesh HaTzimtzum* (see below).

In his eloquent review, he "cuts to the chase," as he puts it, to describe his argument against the Tzimtzum thesis of *Nefesh HaTzimtzum*. Unfortunately, he "cuts" out more than he "chases" and it is astonishing that in his entire review, R. Naor doesn't even vaguely mention or make any attempt to counter the key critical factor presented above that is emphasized numerous times in *Nefesh Hatzimtzum*, that all the players in the Tzimtzum discussion agree with each other that Tzimtzum happens exclusively in Malchut! It seems that R. Naor, in common with many of great stature before him, has unfortunately fallen into the classic historical trap which has plagued this topic for centuries of focusing on a presumed understanding of the terminology employed by the various proponents, especially in their expressions of disagreement with their colleagues. In doing so he has failed to investigate the actual substance of their Tzimtzum argumentation and is unaware that they actually agreed with each other! (This response continues in the note.[\[12\]](#))

Stepping back to the main thread of this essay, historically most were severely misled and confused by a smokescreen of difference which was contributed to by two key factors. Firstly, by terminology used by some key Kabbalists, the historic context of which was misunderstood.[\[13\]](#) Secondly, by a famous letter forged in the name of the Baal HaTanya which explained the Vilna Gaon's position on Tzimtzum as arguing with the view of Chassidut.[\[14\]](#) However, not all were misled. Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, among many other prominent

individuals, understood that the argument between the Chassidim and the Mitnagdim was not about the fundamental principles of Judaism. He wrote on the topic of Tzimtzum in 1938 that "*in this generation in which there is a need to unite...it is fitting to publicize the fact that there are no differences of opinion in the essence of these issues*".[15]

After fully absorbing the fact that the philosophical outlook in relation to the Tzimtzum concept of the Vilna Gaon, R. Chaim, the Baal HaTanya, and the Chassidic world are identical, the genius of R. Chaim's presentation in *Nefesh HaChaim* can then be clearly seen. The Chassidic works of his day, including *Sefer HaTanya*, barely quoted their sources. In contrast, when R. Chaim presents his ideas in general, and the concept of Tzimtzum in particular, ideas which at the time were seen by many to be uniquely Chassidic ideas, he frames them in the context of extensive quotations from and references to traditional Jewish sources.

As mentioned above, he even uses many similar expressions and sentences to those appearing in the Chassidic works of his day. He is demonstrating that there is no scope for anyone to suggest that there is a fundamental difference between the formal outlook of the Chassidic Movement and that of mainstream Judaism and that the paths for serving God of both the Chassidim and the Mitnagdim are fundamentally the same and are derived from the same Torah and the same Mesorah. Therefore, against a historic backdrop of some who erroneously thought that the new Chassidic Movement had blazed a new trail in Judaism and were using the inspiring Chassidic presentation of these concepts to compromise Halacha, R. Chaim's key message is, there is no basis for anyone to bend these concepts out of their true context of mainstream Judaism, and as a result, there is no basis to use them to license Halachic compromise in any way whatsoever.

It is fascinating to note that R. Chaim was not alone in this quest to highlight the potential pitfalls of Halachic compromise resulting from an attempt to get closer to God. He was joined by some of the establishment Chassidic figures who expressed themselves in a very similar way.[16] Furthermore it is inconceivable that the Baal HaTanya would have sanctioned any form of Halachic compromise, as he is after all the author of the widely respected and accepted Halachic work, the *Shulchan Aruch HaRav*. [17]

The underlying principle guiding R. Chaim's presentation in *Nefesh HaChaim* reflects the position of his master, the Vilna Gaon, that as the Kabbalah is an intrinsic part of the Torah, it cannot be that anything derived from it can prescribe any action which contradicts and is inconsistent with the Torah.[18] Any directive derived from the Kabbalah which contravenes the Torah and Halachic practice must therefore be a misunderstanding of Kabbalah. In addition, this principle was explicitly

highlighted by some of the Chassidic masters who were also clearly objecting to the same phenomenon of Halachic compromise on the periphery of the Chassidic world that R. Chaim was objecting to.[19]

The outcome of all the above is that because of R. Chaim's historic motivation to write *Nefesh HaChaim*, he has left us with a remarkable work, a motivational framework of how a person is to view and philosophically interact with the world, which substantiates every statement it makes by referencing many traditional Jewish sources in general, and Kabbalistic sources in particular. As a result, the highly structured presentation of *Nefesh HaChaim* itself is a unique gateway into the highly unstructured world of Kabbalah. It is a tremendous portal through which a genuine introduction to the world of Kabbalah and to the deeper meaning of the Torah has been made accessible to one and all. May the study of *Nefesh HaChaim* and R. Chaim's Torah bring a true conscious awareness of unity in the Jewish World.

[1] *Nefesh HaTzimtzum* includes the following:

- A historical and structural introductory overview.
- A corrected Hebrew text for *Nefesh HaChaim*, likely to be the most accurate ever published.
- An innovative hierarchical presentation of both the Hebrew and facing page English texts for ease of use.
- Extensive explanatory annotations on all texts.
- Expansion in English translation of virtually all sources quoted and referenced in *Nefesh HaChaim*, including all Kabbalistic sources.
- An explanation of the concept of Tzimtzum with:
 - Full details of the positions of the *Zohar*, the Arizal, R. Yosef ben Immanuel Irgess, R. Immanuel Chai Ricchi, the Vilna Gaon, the Baal HaTanya, R. Chaim Volozhin, the Leshem, R. Dessler and the Lubavitcher Rebbe, among others.
 - Extensive source material in both the original Hebrew and facing page translation.
 - A comparison between *Nefesh HaChaim* and *Sefer HaTanya* on their key approaches to Torah study, Mitzvah performance and prayer which are all based on their common understanding of the Tzimtzum concept.
 - A demonstration of how the correct understanding of the Tzimtzum concept underpins the concept of Partzuf and therefore all of the Arizal's Kabbalistic teachings.

- A presentation of the Vilna Gaon's messianic outlook which is dependent on knowing Kabbalah and Science.
- An explanation of the concept of The World of the Malbush.
- Facing page translation of all of R. Chaim Volozhin's published writings related to *Nefesh HaChaim*, including his single published sermon, letters, and his introductions to commentaries of the Vilna Gaon on *Shulchan Aruch*, *Zohar* and *Sifra DeTzniyuta* (which includes the largest authentic published repository of stories of the Vilna Gaon by any of his students).
- Translated and cross-referenced extracts of all *Nefesh HaChaim* related sections from *Ruach Chaim*.
- R. Yosef Zundel of Salant's brief extract on prayer with translation.
- Detailed outlines and extensive indexes by themes, people's names, and book references.

[2] As recorded by R. Chaim's son, R. Yitzchak, in his introduction to *Nefesh HaChaim*. *Nefesh HaChaim* was subsequently published in 1824.

[3] Most of the Yeshivot which include the study of *Nefesh HaChaim* as part of their curriculum only study the last section, the Fourth Gateway. Most of the commentaries and translations that have been published to date omit comment on or even translation of the Kabbalistic material which forms a substantial part of the book.

[4] *Iggrot Kodesh*, published by Kehot, Volume 1, Letter 11.

[5] For a scholarly portrait of the Leshem which brings together much important biographical information, a succinct overview of the Leshem's major works and many further sources, see Joey Rosenfeld, "A Tribute to Rav Shlomo Elyashiv, Author of Leshem Shevo v-Achloma: On his Ninetieth Yahrzeit," the Seforim blog, 10 March 2015.

[6] It is not in the scope of the discussion here to discuss what is meant by a Sefira or a level. In Kabbalistic terminology a level may be called a "World" or a "Partzuf". A "Sefira" is a subcomponent of the "World" or the "Partzuf".

[7] "Mitcido"/"Mitzideinu" are also synonymous with the *Zohar's* terminology "Yichuda Ilaah"/ "Yichuda Tataah," e.g., as per end of *Nefesh HaChaim* 3:6 (*Nefesh HaTzimtzum*, Vol. 1, pp. 510-511). Incidentally "Mitcido"/"Mitzideinu" are also synonymous with the terms of "Orot"/"Keilim". "Mitzideinu", "Yichuda Tataah" and "Keilim" are all different expressions which mean "Malchut".

[8] In particular, it is the dual simultaneous perspective which generates the concept of "Partzuf" which underpins all the discussions of the Arizal. See *Nefesh HaTzimtzum*, Vol. 2, pp. 145-150.

[9] In particular, to the first 2 sections of Volume 2.

[10] Sefer HaTanya 2:7:

... שמדת מלכותו היא מדת הצמצום וההסתר להסתיר אור אין סוף ...

[11] Sefer Hakdamot UShearim, Shaar 7, Perek 5, Ot 1:

ולכן נקרא אותו המקום שנתצמצם בו בשם מלכות דאין סוף ... הנה הוא הכל בהמלכות של כל גילוי ...
... כי כל צמצום הוא רק בהמלכות

There are many similar statements across the writings of the Leshem. This source is particularly explicit and the review of all of Ot 1 will be insightful.

[12] In continuation of the response to R. Naor's review, a number of points have been picked up on as detailed below. Please note that all of these points are side issues and pale into insignificance compared to the details of R. Naor's stark omission of the concept of Tzimtzum in Malchut as per the main essay text. These points are as follows:

(1) In note 1 of his review, R. Naor quotes Dr. Menachem Kallus and mentions that in a note to Etz Chaim, R. Meir "Poppers writes that it sounds to him as if Luria's disciples Rabbi Hayyim Vital and Rabbi Yosef ibn Tabul understood from the Rav [Isaac Luria] that 'the Tzimtzum is literal' ('ha-tzimtzum kemishma'o')."

R. Naor's suggestion here is that the Arizal is saying that the Tzimtzum process results in total literal removal and transcendence of God from physicality. However, in the light of the fact that we now know that the Tzimtzum process that the Arizal is referring to only took place in Malchut of the Ein Sof, this point is simply not relevant as the removal and transcendence only occurs in Malchut, from the perspective of the creations, Mitzideinu, but at the same time there is a total immanence of God within the unchanged presence of the Ein Sof.

Even the Baal HaTanya agrees that there is a removal in Malchut, resulting in physicality from our perspective, as he says e.g., in *Sefer HaTanya* 2:3 that our "flesh eyes" only see physicality.

Also see the particularly explicit statement of the Baal HaTanya in *Sefer HaTanya* 4:20 which is a direct corollary of the Mitzido/Mitzideinu concept of Nefesh HaChaim: "Relative to [God – i.e., Mitzido], the created physical entity is as if it has no consequence, i.e., its existence is nullified relative to the power and the light which is bestowed within it. It is like the radiance of the sun [before it has emanated and is still] within the sun. This is specifically relative to Him, where His Awareness is from above to below. However, from the perspective of the awareness of [the created entities – i.e., Mitzideinu,] from below to above, the created physical entity is an entirely separate/disconnected entity, with this awareness and perception being [only] from below, as [from its perspective] the power which is bestowed within it is absolutely not perceived at all."

Multiple sources from across *Sefer HaTanya* directly expressing the Mitzido/Mitzideinu concept are brought in *Nefesh HaTzimtzum*, Vol. 2, pp. 94-95, fn. 120.

(2) R. Naor quotes from R. Yitzchak Aizik of Homil, one of the greatest students of the Baal HaTanya who stated that the Mitnagdim "have no room for this faith that All is God."

It is of interest to note that R. Dessler was a close student of R. Mordechai Duchman who in turn was a close student of R. Yitzchak Aizik of Homil (See *Nefesh Hatzimtzum*, Vol. 2, p. 305, fn. 474). R. Dessler was therefore intimately familiar with the works of Lubavitch and would have most certainly been aware

of R. Yitzchak Aizik of Homil's comment. Notwithstanding this he clearly saw that Tzimtzum was not the issue of the Machloket and valiantly tried to publicize this, as quoted in the continuation of this essay.

(3) The Baal HaTanya's rejection of "Tzimtzum Kipshuto" (*Sefer HaTanya* 2:7) uses scathing, derisive language to describe those who hold by that position referring to them as "scholars in their own eyes" (*Yishayahu* 5:21) and that "they also do not speak intelligently" (*Iyov* 34:35). The question is who was the Baal HaTanya referring to? *Nefesh HaTzimtzum* presents a number of arguments to say that it could not have been the Vilna Gaon or R. Ricchi and by a process of elimination would then be referring to the Shabbatians. R. Naor rejects this position but in doing so starkly omits most of the argumentation from *Nefesh HaTzimtzum*!

A brief summary of the main *Nefesh HaTzimtzum* arguments is presented as follows (see *Nefesh HaTzimtzum*, Vol. 2, pp. 75-79 for much more detail on this).

Firstly and most importantly, even if we were to say that the Baal HaTanya was directing his statements at the Vilna Gaon and disagreed with what he may have assumed was the Vilna Gaon's position, it doesn't change the fact that the Vilna Gaon actually agreed with the Baal HaTanya on Tzimtzum only occurring in Malchut. So the debate about who the Baal HaTanya was referring to, while it may be interesting, is academic as far as who held what about Tzimtzum is concerned, as both the Baal HaTanya and the Vilna Gaon shared a common position.

R. Naor severely underplays the level of vitriol in the Baal HaTanya's tone and considers that his statements are mild. In *Nefesh HaTzimtzum*, Vol. 2, p. 75, fn. 80, a number of sources are brought which demonstrate that Chazal very specifically used both the expressions "scholars in their own eyes" and "they do not speak intelligently" to refer to the "wicked", e.g., ". . . and even among the wicked there are scholars, as it says . . . 'Woe to those who are scholars in their own eyes'" (*Bereishit Rabbati*, Toldot, on *Bereishit* 26:12). Even if one could make a (somewhat forced) argument that the Baal HaTanya is taking these expressions out of their original context, since the Baal HaTanya quotes directly from R. Ricchi's *Mishnat Chassidim* twice in *Sefer HaTanya*, it is highly questionable to suggest that such a punctilious author would quote holy statements from anyone he directly refers to derisively as "a scholar in his own eyes" and implies that he is wicked!

The section of *Sefer HaTanya* which included these statements, although distributed to the Baal HaTanya's students and is extant in manuscripts of *Sefer HaTanya*, was only inserted for the first time in a published edition of *Sefer HaTanya* in the 1900 Romm edition some 88 years after the passing of the Baal HaTanya. It should be noted that this section was not just a few lines containing caustic statements. It actually ran on for a number of pages. The majority of the information it contains is repeated from other places in *Sefer HaTanya*, although brought together in an effective presentation in one place. Even though this is the only place in *Sefer HaTanya* that the specific expression "Tzimtzum Kipshuto" is used, the rejection of this position is very clear from the presentation of Tzimtzum in other places in *Sefer HaTanya*. Therefore, if it were just 2 or 3 caustic statements that were not initially included in *Sefer HaTanya* and were later inserted in the 1900 edition, it could reasonably be argued (as R. Naor suggests) that they were not included due to the raging arguments at the time of the original printing in 1796 and that they therefore were pointed at the Vilna Gaon. However, if the Baal HaTanya wanted to include this section, it would have been trivial for him to simply edit the 2 or 3 very brief caustic statements to make them politically correct. The fact that he did not edit these statements, but omitted the entire lengthy section, suggests that there was another reason for the omission.

It should also be noted that the Vilna Gaon, never used the expression "Tzimtzum Kipshuto" in any of his writings and also, as already explained, did not actually hold this position. This means that if the Baal HaTanya was directing his vitriol at the Vilna Gaon, he was doing so based on rumor. On the Baal HaTanya's release from prison in 1798, he wrote a letter outlining the importance of remaining silent in the face of controversy, strongly highlighting that this is a characteristic of those close to God (*Sefer HaTanya* 4:2). Given the devotional premium that he attached to remaining silent in the face of controversy it would have been complete hypocrisy were the Baal HaTanya to have been openly derisive about his main partner in controversy. This is accentuated by the fact that the Vilna Gaon did not actually hold this position and the Baal HaTanya's attack would have been based on rumor.

(4) R. Naor quotes what he refers to as a key passage from *Yosher Levav* (*Nefesh HaTzimtzum*, Vol. 2, pp. 260-261): "Therefore relative to us (le-gabei didan), it is as if there was no Tzimtzum and we can

say that the Tzimtzum is not literal. However, relative to the Ein Sof (le-gabei ha-Ein Sof) itself, it is literal." He argues that as R. Ricchi is saying that relative to the creations the Tzimtzum is not literal, how can *Nefesh HaTzimtzum* present R. Ricchi as saying that relative to the creations the Tzimtzum IS literal?

Unfortunately, R. Naor omits to present the very specific and complex context of R. Ricchi's statement which appears in *Yosher Levav*, Ch. 15 – and as a result his statement is misleading! The context is set at the beginning of Ch. 15, arguably the most subtle argument in the *Yosher Levav*'s overall Tzimtzum presentation, saying "Even though we have proven that the Tzimtzum process itself is literal, nevertheless there is scope to say that the way in which the Tzimtzum process was applied was not literal".

R. Ricchi spent the previous few chapters explaining that the Tzimtzum process is literal and earlier (*Yosher Levav*, Ch. 13) he makes a key statement: "even though I cannot imagine how this could be [literal], as I have no knowledge of how He can contract Himself since there was no space empty of Him – this is my deficiency, as I have no way of knowing anything about His Exalted Unity." He is saying that God's perspective is unknowable and notwithstanding God's point of view of there being no space empty of Him, that from the point of view of the creations there is an apparent literal removal of God even though, as R. Ricchi highlights, he cannot logically relate to how this can be so. Therefore R. Ricchi's general position is that from our point of view, relative to us, Tzimtzum IS literal.

In contrast, the very specific context of the beginning of *Yosher Levav*, Ch. 15, is discussing a scenario *after* the literal Tzimtzum has already taken place. R. Ricchi explains that *after* the literal Tzimtzum, there still remained a residue, called a "Reshimu," which has greater creative intensity than anything we could ever imagine – therefore relative to us, we cannot differentiate between the intensity of the Reshimu and of the Ein Sof, so we would relate to the Reshimu in the same way as we do to the Ein Sof and therefore relative to us there is scope to say that it is as if there was no Tzimtzum – however relative to the Ein Sof it is literal, because compared to the Ein Sof the Reshimu is like something physical.

This point is succinctly related to in *Nefesh HaTzimtzum*, Vol. 2, p. 70, fn. 65.

[13] In particular by R. Yosef ben Immanuel Irgess and R. Immanuel Chai Ricchi. See *Nefesh HaTzimtzum*, Vol. 2, pp. 63-71, for details.

[14] This forged letter is published in *Iggrot Kodesh Admor HaZaken*, published by Kehot in 1987, letter 34, p. 85. It was first published as an appendix to *Metzoref HaAvodah*, 1858 – which was also an entirely forged work. For extensive details and hard evidence of both the letter and *Metzoref HaAvodah* forgeries, see *Nefesh HaTzimtzum*, Vol. 2, pp. 79-88.

[15] This was from a letter written by R. Dessler expressing his position on Tzimtzum. It was R. Dessler's position which prompted the response by R. Schneerson in his 1939 letter. R. Dessler's complete letter is published in *Kodshei Yehoshua* by his son-in-law R. Eliyahu Yehoshua Geldzahler, Volume 5, Siman 421, pp. 1716-1717. It is also partially printed in *Michtav MeEliyahu* by R. Eliyahu Dessler, Volume 4, p. 324. This part of the letter only appeared in earlier print editions of *Michtav MeEliyahu* and was removed from the more recent print editions when its editor later decided to include another paragraph which was previously omitted (the complete letter could not be included at that stage as the book layout had been fixed and the contents of this letter had to be restricted to a single page).

[16] E.g., R. Tzvi Elimelech Shapira of Dinov, the Bnei Yisaschar, in *Derech Pikudecha*, Mitzvah Lo Taaseh 16, Chelek Hamachshava 4. Also R. Nachman of Breslov in *Sichot Moharan*, Siman 267. See *Nefesh HaTzimtzum*, Vol. 2, pp. 137-138, fn. 217.

[17] E.g., as quoted frequently by the Chafetz Chaim in his *Mishneh Berurah*, referring to the Baal HaTanya as "HaGraz", "HaGaon Rabbi Zalman."

[18] See R. Chaim's introduction to the Vilna Gaon's commentary on *Zohar* as brought in *Nefesh HaTzimtzum*, Vol. 2, p. 464.

[19] E.g., R. Tzvi Hirsch of Zidichov in *Sur MeRah VeAseh Tov*, pp. 79-80 of the Emet publication, Jerusalem, 1996. Also R. Yitzchak Issac Yehuda Yechiel of Komarna in *Zohar Chai*, Hakdamat Sefer HaZohar, p. 41b. See *Nefesh HaTzimtzum*, Vol. 2, pp. 138-139, fn. 217.



Rabbi Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler (1892 – 1953)

The Potential Contribution of the Allegorical

Interpretation of Tzimtzum to the Dilemma of Post-Liberal

Theology

Prof. Tamar Ross writes:¹⁹

If, as implied by the allegorical interpretation of *tzimtzum*, fixating on a fragment of God's revelation is essentially a form of idolatry, what, then, could possibly be the justification for living our lives in accordance with this heresy? In other words, what merit is there to a form of worship that diminishes and distorts the true object of faith by equating it with our limited and subjective perceptions?

In continuation of the passage quoted above, R. Dessler provides what might appear to be a half-hearted answer to this question:

What is the value of a relative perception? Its value lies in its being relative *to us*, in accordance with our situation in this world – the world of free-will and worship; accordingly, *it is the only truth we have...* "You endow man with understanding" – even our perceptions have been created for us and given to us by the Creator, may He be blessed, for purposes of fulfilling our role in this world – *and that is their entire value.* ^[1]

On the surface it would appear that R. Dessler is merely reiterating Stout's critique of the skeptical realist (as cited above) in religious terms,^[2] once again cautioning against striving for the impossible. Yet the facile manner in which Dessler lapses in the concluding sentence of this passage, which emphasizes God's pantheistic acosmism, into to a theistic mode, viewing God as a Creator deliberately fashioning our perceptions, is telling.

¹⁹ <https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-potential-contribution-of-the-allegorical-interpretation-of-tzimtzum-to-the-dilemma-of-post-liberal-theology>

Fueling his compliance with the inevitable subjectivity and finitude of human perception, it would be safe to conclude, is a layered conception of God which legitimizes the personalist understanding not only because this is all that we are capable of imagining, but also because it too is ontologically part of that infinite reality which is beyond definition.

More explicit expression of this type of justification is encapsulated in a statement popularly attributed to the charismatic 18th century *Hassidic* teacher, R. Nachman of Breslau, who declared:

Whenever I think about God, I am at first saddened, because I realize that in thinking about Him, I distance myself from Him. But then I remember that since He is all, He is also my thought and my distance, and I am consoled.^[3]

A more philosophical formulation of the same idea appears in a passage by R. Kook, in which he declares:

Every definition of the divine leads to heresy. Definition is spiritual idolatry... even divinity itself and the name 'God' is definition. And without the supreme knowledge that all these are merely sparkling flashes of what is beyond definition they too would lead to heresy. And for people who have become completely distanced from this original view they indeed do lead to gross heresy.^[4]

From here we see that R. Kook, similarly to R. Dessler and R. Nachman, does not denigrate the appeal to imperfect, human theological conceptions. So long as one is careful to distinguish between these limited "awarenesses of the heart" (*hakarot ha-lev*) and their infinite source, while not severing the relationship between "the core of faith" and its "explication", such depictions are worthy of respect and not to be belittled.^[5]

Applying such insights to a constructivist view of revelation, one might say that the human (or Rabbinic) decision to view the Torah as a direct communication of God to man is to be defended simply because this perception is an element of that ultimate reality itself.

Such a defense, however, does not take us very far, for if everything can be validated on the basis of its grounding in some monolithic undefined, all-inclusive, and infinite noumenon, how are we to distinguish between revelation and non-revelation, and why prefer *any* truth claim (revelatory or not) over another?

The allegorical interpreters of *tzimtzum* preceding R. Kook do not appear to have been troubled by this specter of relativism, but their assumptions regarding the superior revelatory status of Torah as self-evident merely reflect their personal existential experience or the influence of tradition. R. Kook, however, does attempt to address these questions in a manner that intensifies the intertwining of the subjective and objective dimensions of our God-talk even further.

Footnotes

1. Eliyahu Dessler, *Michtav Me-Eliyahu* III, pp. 257.
2. *Supra*, towards the end of section XII.
3. Although I have not succeeded in locating a verbatim source for this statement in the writings of R. Nachman, it does indeed capture and paraphrase some of his teachings. See, for example, the account of the heart of the world and its longing for the well-spring in "The Tale of Seven Beggars" (Hebrew) in his *Sippurei Ma'asiyot*, or his identification of human lack with that of

the *Shekhina* [divine presence] (to wit: "might there be any greater honor than this?") his *Likkutei Moharan* (Hebrew) part I, teaching 89.

4. "Zar'onim", *Orot*, (Jerusalem: Mosad Ha-rav Kook, 1963), pp.124-125
5. For discussion of a comparable attitude to conceptual idolatry in the writings of R. Mordekhai Yosef of Izbica, see Herzl Hefter, "Idolatry: A Prohibition for Our Time", *Tradition* 42:1, 2009, pp. 15-28. See also Robert Merrihew Adams, "Idolatry and the Invisibility of God", in *Interpretation in Religion*, edited by Shlom Biderman & Ban-Ami Scharfstein (Leiden/New York/Koln: E.J. Brill, 1992), pp. 39-52 for a Christian formulation of the same idea. Both Adams and Hefter relate to theologian Paul Tillich's insistence upon the necessity of broken myths.



Rav Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935)

The Problem of Relativism and Rav Kook's Concept of "Perfectible Perfection"

Prof. Tamar Ross writes:²⁰

One criterion that can be gleaned from R. Kook's thought for accepting the notion of revelation as a God-driven message is an instrumentalist one, serving decidedly human purposes. R. Kook's personal writings consistently refer to the ultimate object of religion with abstractions, such as "the divine" (*Elohut*), rather than God (*Elohim*). He prefers terms like "the highest sanctity", "reason", "will", "the all-inclusive unity", "the essence of being", "perfection", "the source of the spiritual", etc. He rarely employs more colloquial references to *Hakadosh Barukh Hu*, and *Ribbono Shel Olam* beyond the framework of institutionalized prayer.

Nevertheless, R. Kook explicitly defends the personalist, theistic view of God as an indispensable "chamber and reception hall."^[1] In other words, such a view functions as a necessary steppingstone, eventually leading us to apprehension of an ultimate reality that transcends such distinctions. But another criterion that R. Kook adopts for favoring a dialogic mode of relationship with the divine is more theocentric. This second criterion provides a new twist to the dialectic between outsider and insider perspectives.

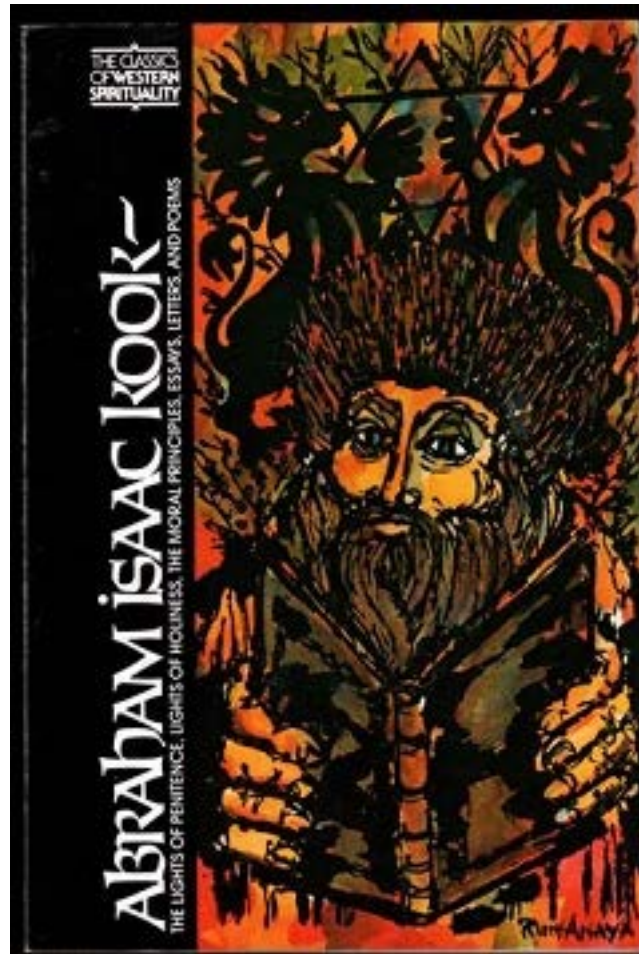
Appropriating *Mitnagdic* "realism" in acknowledging that created beings can never exceed the limitations inherent to our Stage Three sense of

²⁰ <https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-problem-of-relativism-and-rav-kooks-concept-of-perfectible-perfection>

selfhood *mitzideinu*, yet unwilling to forgo the *Hassidic* yearning to experience a greater sense of unity with that which lies beyond,^[2] R. Kook develops a model of God *mitzideinu* that is necessitated even *mitzido*.

In a seminal passage entitled "The Inhibition of Good and its Purpose" (*Meniat ha-tov u-magamata*), R. Kook begins by introducing a classical theological question: What was God's motive for creation? In consonance with what might be construed as a basically constructivist orientation, R. Kook first takes the wind out of the sails of the very question by pointing out that such a discussion is legitimate only from *our* point of view, since all talk of motive and purpose only makes sense in a world which includes the perception of lack. As he formulates it:

Every purpose must be preceded by a lack. Therefore, there is no room for querying the purpose of existence without assuming some primordial lack... But at the heart of the matter, we are forced to conclude that our soul's inability to put the riddle of the world's existence to rest and its need to assume some lack (as motive) arises only from the negative aspect of reality, because of the existence of evil in the world. In the context of God's perfect reality, the value of existence is self-evident and requires no justification...^[3]



Abraham Isaac Kook: The Lights of Penitence, Lights of Holiness, The Moral Principles, Essays, Letters, and Poems

Thus we must realize from the outset that it is not merely the question that is legitimate only from our point of view, from within the context of human perspectives and concerns (*legabei didan*).^[4] By the same token, any response to this question must also be regarded as merely of palliative, explanatory value, because it too relies necessarily on (illusory) assumptions of lack and evil drawn from our imperfect this-worldly experience.^[5] In God's infinite reality, where all possibilities are actualized, both the question and the answer are redundant.

After establishing these caveats (limiting the question to human perspectives and limiting the ability to achieve an adequate response), however, R. Kook is still prepared to discuss the question, recognizing that even an “as if” solution must be formulated in a way that will picture God for us in as dignified and intelligible a manner possible.^[6]

He begins this effort by contending that the pantheistic a cosmic reality (or *Shlemut*) that we attribute to God from God’s point of view must always appear imperfect from the perspective of created beings, because “infinite perfection leaves no room for improvement, or perfectibility” (*Hishtalmut*).^[7] From the point of view of a limited imperfect reality, God’s infinite existence lacks the property of lack, which is in effect the necessary impetus for creativity, free will, improvement and growth.^[8]

But although as created beings living in a finite world, we can never attain total identification with that infinite state of being, we can – as against this – enhance and improve upon what appears to us as the limitation of its static perfection. We do this by consciously relating the seemingly barren infinity which is God’s to the multitude of this-worldly experiences that it generates. Precisely because we are incapable of connecting to God in a manner that renders the divine completely independent of our limited perceptions, we possess the freedom to replicate and infinitely expand upon God’s original unity from our point of view via the never-ending dynamic of the world of appearances. The resultant *Shlemut mishtalemet*(perfectible perfection) provides a further intertwining between the objective and subjective point of view.

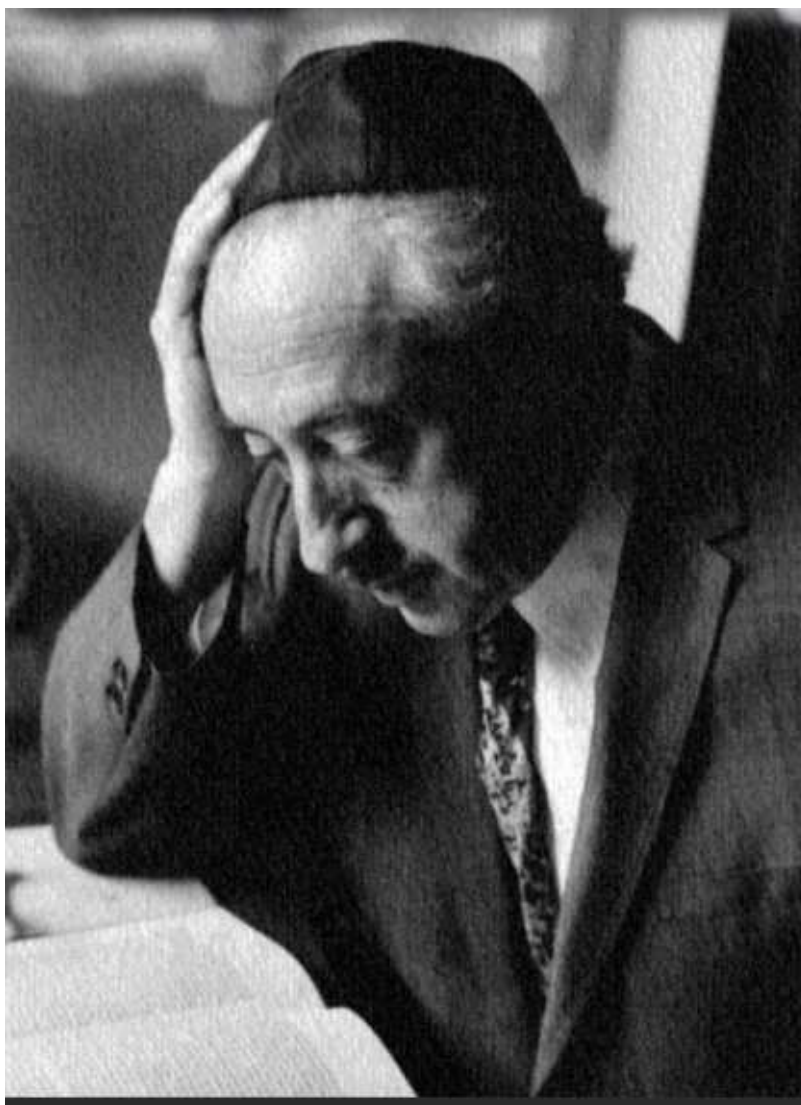
R. Kook frankly acknowledges that his theology of a perfectible perfection (*Shlemut mishtalemet*), which views the lack of room for improvement and growth (*Hishtalmut*) as the cause of creation, is a decidedly human construct. Even when promoting this particular image of the divine *mitzideinu*, he accompanies its endorsement with the telling phrase “we will profit much” by picturing God thusly.^[9] It is as if R. Kook were inviting us to his private workshop for the fashioning of theological systems, and frankly laying his cards out on the table. In this maneuver, Rav Kook is essentially weighing up the various answers to a serious theological issue on no more objective grounds than the very anthropocentric consideration of: where will this picture of God’s *shlemut* requiring completion in human *hishtalmut* lead to in terms of profit to man?

But even with this R. Kook has not yet played his final hand. Instead, he takes this blurring of boundaries one step further. For Rav Kook, this way of viewing the world was not just a matter of perception. It also had practical implications. Adopting increasingly inclusive models of reality was to his mind a method of “world-making,” overcoming the limits of human creativity.

When mind-body, religious-secular, reason-imagination, and other such polarities are broken down and viewed as a continuum, phenomena that formerly seemed miraculous might now appear as elements of natural process.^[10] All this without diminishing the infinite possibilities of the supernatural still waiting to be discovered.^[11]

Footnotes

1. A.I. Kook, *Orot ha-kodesh II*, 399-401.
2. For more detailed discussion of R. Kook's unique amalgam of *Hassidic* and *Mitnagdic* teachings with regard to the allegorical interpretation of the doctrine of *tzimtzum* and its broader implications, see Tamar Ross, "The Concept of G-d in the Thought of Harav Kook - Part I". *Daat* (Hebrew) 8, Bar Ilan University, Summer 1982, pp. 109-128; "The Concept of G-d in the Thought of Harav Kook - Part II" *Daat* 9 (Hebrew), Winter 1983, pp. 39-70. For a more concise version, see: idem, "The Lurianic Doctrine of Tzimtzum in the Writings of Harav Kook" (Hebrew), in *Mechkarim b'Hagut Yehudit*, edited by Moshe Idel and Sarah Heller-Wilensky (Jerusalem, Magnes Press, 1989), pp.159-172.
3. *Orot ha-Kodesh II* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1985), 464-465.
4. *Orot ha-kodesh II*, 464-465
5. *Orot Ha-Kodesh II*, 465
6. *Orot Ha-Kodesh II*, 464-465
7. *Orot Ha-Kodesh II*, 531
8. See *Orot Ha-kodesh II*, 531, as well as all the other passages appearing in *Orot Ha-Kodesh II*, part 5, which is entitled "Hit'alut Ha-olam".
9. *Orot ha-kodesh II*, 464-465
10. *Arpilei Tohar* (Jerusalem: Ha-machon al shem Harav Zvi Yehuda Koo, 1983), p. 5
11. For application of this understanding to R. Kook's view of immortality and the potential power of new ways of conceptualizing the relationship between spirit and matter, see Tamar Ross, "Immortality, Natural Law, and the Role of Human Perception in the Writings of Rav Kook", in *Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and Jewish Spirituality*, (edited by David Shatz and Lawrence Kaplan, New York University Press, 1995), pp.237-257.



Tsimtsum in the Writings of Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits

Reuven Mohl writes:²¹

²¹ <https://library.yctorah.org/files/2016/09/Tsimtsum-in-the-Writings-of-Rabbi-Eliezer-Berkovits.pdf>

ELIEZER BERKOVITS is best known for his writings on post-Holocaust theology, but, in his nineteen books and many journal articles, he has also written extensively on various subjects in Jewish law and philosophy.¹ This paper will explore the issue of how Berkovits, a modern rationalist theologian and by no means a mystic, used the mystical concept of *tsimtsum* to enhance his theology of Judaism. It will look at how he used it to explain crucial historical events, like the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel, as well as seminal concepts, such as human freedom, God's attributes, and the Exile. We will further note that even Berkovits' approach to *halakhah* is shaped by the concept of *tsimtsum*.

Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534-1572), the Ari, introduced the mystical concept of *tsimtsum*, God's self-contraction, and it was developed by his disciples, Rabbi Hayyim Vital and Rabbi Israel Sarug. This divine retreat and emanation process of creating the world is discussed mainly in mystical and Kabbalistic literature, but the concept of *tsimtsum* has also influenced Jewish Eastern European thought and even Christian European philosophy.² According to Rabbi Luria, the creation of the world was a three-step process: "the *tsimtsum*, or self-limitation, of God; the *shevirah*, or breaking of the vessels; and the *tikkun*, or harmonious correction and mending of the flaws which came into the world through the *shevirah*."³

Berkovits was unique in that he clearly utilized the mystical concept of *tsimtsum* within his rationalistic philosophy without delving into the mysti-

cal and cosmological meaning of the idea. Interestingly, he did not use the exact phrase “*tsimtsum*” in the core of his writings. He used other expressions such as “Divine self-limitation”, “Divine self-denial”, “Divine self-control”, “Divine self-abnegation”, “Hiding God”, “humbles Himself”, “reduces Himself”, and “restraint” of God, which are all phrases reminiscent of *tsimtsum*.⁴ There is only one footnote in all of his writings where Berkovits explained that his concept of Divine self-limitation is analogous to Rabbi Luria’s concept of *tsimtsum*.

We do not feel competent to judge to what extent our concept of divine self-limitation is identical with Luria’s focal concept of the *Tsimtsum* . . . it would appear that *Tsimtsum* is a withdrawal of divine substance into God, in order to make “room” for creation. For us, the act of divine self-limitation is a logical requirement for God’s involvement in a finite reality. . . . With Luria, as well as in our discussion, divine self-limitation establishes the reality of the particular and individual and makes the encounter and, thus, religion possible.⁵

Berkovits evidently felt that his concept of Divine self-limitation was similar in some ways to Luria’s, in that, both he and Luria maintained that *tsimtsum* created the “reality of the particular and individual.” From this fundamental point of similarity between himself and Luria, Berkovits developed his own philosophy.

For Berkovits, the most important outcome of divine self-limitation is God’s ability to create a finite world. Without it there would be no possibility of religion, as there would be nothing besides God. The encounter between God and Man can occur only if God and Man are distinct from each other. God’s self-limitation allows for human self-determination and freedom of choice.

God’s involvement with the realm of finite reality is imaginable only as an act of divine “self-limitation,” as it were. . . . God is involved in the destiny of finite being as the result of an act of “self-denial.”⁶

Berkovits was a fierce opponent of Spinoza’s philosophy, in which there is no separateness between God and man. He believed that Spinoza’s ideas were not only non-Jewish, but anti-Jewish. According to Spinoza, there is nothing besides the Infinite. In a system where the Infinite encompasses all, the finite, or human, cannot exist and no revelation of God can take place. Spinoza’s philosophy denies the history of the Jews. Berkovits acknowledged that Kabbalah shares some pantheistic ideas with Spinoza’s philosophy. However, according to Berkovits,

Kabbalistic writers . . . make use of such ideas in order to render the historic facts on which Judaism is based—God, Israel, and Torah—more meaningful and more challenging for the individual Jew. The Ari hakadosh is a good example of how, as long as these constants were not lost sight of, even Gnostic ideas could be included within the scope of kabbalistic Jewish philosophy.⁷

Berkovits singled out Luria, the Ari *hakadosh*, as a model of mystical philosophy, as Berkovits believed that he preserved finite reality, despite his Kabbalistic concepts which bordered on pantheism. Feeling that Luria's concept of *tsimsum* was within the framework of Jewish Philosophy, Berkovits utilized it in order to establish his own philosophy.

Berkovits' conception of the purpose of *tsimsum*—that is, that God limited himself at the moment of creation so as to allow for finitude and free will – is why he viewed *tsimsum* in a positive light. He was less concerned with the *tsimsum* process itself (the “how”) than with the reason behind it (the “why”). He saw no defect in God for limiting Himself. In fact, he saw it as a merit to God. Luria, on the other hand, regarded *tsimsum* in a negative way. *Tsimsum* is not what God initially wanted, but even God, as it were, could do no better. For Berkovits, God contracted to give humans the ability to create, to be free, to aid in finishing God's creation. *Tsimsum* is therefore viewed as an ideal. Unlike Luria, he argued that *tsimsum* was the essence of creation and that the withdrawal of God was simultaneous with creation. Finitude was created at the moment of creation, when God limited Himself and was no longer in his “fullness of Being.”

Luria did not perceive this world as ideal. In his view, God is split between the *Shekhina* and the *Ein Sof* in this world, so we must repair God and the world. Lurianic Kabbalah maintains that “*devekut* was mobilized for the achievement of the main goal of kabbalistic activity: the restoration, or the *tikkun* of the supernal anthropos.”⁸ *Devekut* is an act of man cleaving to God by way of the *mitsvot*. When studying Torah “he must intend thereby to perfect the supernal tree [of *Sefirot*] and holy anthropos.”⁹

In the same footnote in which Berkovits mentioned the word “*tsimsum*,”¹⁰ he demonstrated that rabbinic literature makes reference to the concept of Divine self-limitation. In the *Talmud Bavli*, Reish Lakish interpreted the word “*Shaddai*,” one of the names of God, to mean the God who said, “Enough!,” (*dai*) to the world while creating it, so as to limit His creation and leave it incomplete.¹¹ When the mystics read “to perfect the universe through *Shaddai*'s sovereignty” in the *Alenu* prayer, they interpreted the statement as saying that only we, and not God, are the redeemers of the world. We, and

only we, must redeem and unite *Shaddai*.¹² According to Berkovits, however, humans do not fix or restore God in any way. God purposely left room so that people would have to redeem the world by finishing God's creation.

[Man] has been placed on earth that he may sanctify the secular, *letaken olam bemalkut Shaddai*, and establish the city of man as the Kingdom of God. It is not either God or man. Man, according to his own strength, continues the work of creation and becomes, urged on by God's call, a humble associate of the creator.¹³

Berkovits developed the concept of *tsimtsum* to show that God contracted in order to afford humans the ability to be ethically responsible. As he wrote, "the prototype of all ethical action is God's encountering the world with care and concern . . . in the divine prototype, care and concern for the other require self-limitation and self-denial."¹⁴ God's powerlessness was necessary to give man his freedom to be human. Goodness can emerge only if there is the possibility of evil.¹⁵ Berkovits felt that just as God limited His power and omnipotence and became "powerless," so too must the world powers limit themselves.

When man himself reaches the goal of quasi omnipotence, true might consists in the self-control of such omnipotence, in the renunciation of its use. . . . From now on, *imitatio dei* is no longer a mere religious idea, but the practical requirement of human survival. The quasi-omnipotent man must, as if, absent himself from history, as the omnipotent God is wont to do.¹⁶

Both Luria and Berkovits wrote their treatises after major catastrophes of the Jewish people; Luria, after the expulsion from Spain, and Berkovits after the Holocaust. Both responded to these calamities by saying that God was in exile with His people.¹⁷ Berkovits knew that many exiles wished to view their suffering as atonement for their sins, as they felt this would purify them and hasten the coming of the Messiah. While he understood that these explanations could provide solace and comfort, Berkovits dismissed the idea that the Jews were exiled solely because of their sins or that there could be a positive value in suffering.¹⁸ Berkovits categorizes two types of exile: national and cosmic.

National exile begins with *Hurban*, with the destruction of the sovereignty of the people and their dispersion into alien lands. However, prior to national exile, and more fundamental and universal, there is cosmic exile. National exile is a phenomenon in the history of nations; cosmic exile bespeaks the spiritual quality of the universal human condition at any time in history.¹⁹

The *Shekhinah*, according to Berkovits, is in constant exile because of God's act of self-limitation. The exile of God existed at the beginning of time. It was not a consequence of any wrong doings of man, but a result of the withdrawal of God at the creation process, which was for the benefit of mankind. For if man is to have free will then God has to be a "refugee in the world." Unlike the Kabbalists, who defined exile as "a part of God Himself is exiled from God,"²⁰ a condition which should be reversed, Berkovits felt that God wanted to go into exile and that we need not restore a cosmic condition which God willed on purpose. Both Berkovits and Luria agreed that *Shekhinta Begaluta* is a cosmic condition, but they differed as to whether this *tsimtsum* is positive or negative.²¹ Berkovits argued that God's self-hiding is a positive attribute, as Isaiah proclaimed, "Verily You are a God that hides Yourself, O God of Israel, the Saviour."²² In other words, God is the saviour because He is the self-hiding God. According to Berkovits, "God's hiding his face in this case is not a response to man, but a quality of being assumed by God on his own initiative."²³ For Berkovits, the God who hides is also the God who saves, as by hiding, God gives man the freedom to choose between good and evil. Indeed, His presence encourages man to choose good.

According to Berkovits, the Holocaust was a great evil, but it was an evil done by man to others and was in no way a punishment enacted by God.²⁴ When it comes to human history, God restrains his power and, as a consequence, some may suffer. As Berkovits wrote,

The rabbis of the Talmud saw the mightiness of the Almighty in that he controls his inclination to judge and to punish and behaves in history as if he were powerless. To curb the use of power where infinite power is at hand, to endure the mocking of one's enemies when one could easily eliminate them, that is true strength. Such is the mightiness of God. God is mighty, for he shackles his omnipotence and becomes "powerless" so that history may be possible.²⁵

The concept of *tsimtsum* informs not only Berkovits' understanding of history, but his understanding of *halakhah*, as well. According to Berkovits, God withdrew Himself from the halakhic process to give total interpretive power to the Rabbis to analyze and make decisions. The title of one of his books evokes the famous Talmudic story of the oven of Akhnai wherein Rabbi Yehoshua would not pay attention to a heavenly voice deciding a halakhic matter. "It is not in Heaven," he declared. We follow the Rabbis and not God when interpreting the *halakhah*.²⁶ Just as God, through his act of *tsimtsum* from the domain of history, provided man with the challenge of taking responsibility for good and evil in the world, so too His withdrawal

from and self-limitation in the halakhic arena imposes on man the responsibility of adjusting God's word to the human experience.

For Berkovits, with the transfer of the Torah from God's domain to the human domain, God limited his control over the Torah and handed it over to his people.

Once the Torah was revealed to the children of Israel, its realization on earth became their responsibility, to be shouldered by human ability and insight. . . . The divine truth had to be poured into human vessels; it had to be "humanized." Having left its heavenly abode, [Torah] had to be accommodated in the modest cottages of human uncertainty and inadequacy. This, in essence, is the task of the Halakha.²⁷

The freedom granted through God's *tsimtsum* is crucial for Berkovits' discussion of the paradoxical encounter between God and Man. Man is dependent on God but must be independent from God in order to have freedom. "The act of divine self-denial is the precondition of the fundamental religious experience."²⁸ In the experience of encountering the Divine there must be an "I" and an "Eternal Thou", but the "I" must be free in order to encounter God. For Berkovits, man must be independent to have an experience of the Divine. He critiques Martin Buber's argument that at the very moment of the experience of the Divine, man must be independent to have a "fellowship." According to Berkovits, only after the encounter may man have the freedom to act. "Even though the encounter has long passed, the word remains forever God's word for the human being. There is no I-Thou relation, but there is contact with God by hearing His word and doing His will."²⁹ Berkovits, in contrast to Buber, views Judaism as "a non-dialogical situation. It is living in the divine Presence, even though the Presence is hidden and, most of the time, inaccessible."³⁰

This relates to Berkovits argument that prayer can occur only when God is not present. Were God present, there would be no need for prayer during the experience, since God would be all encompassing and all human needs would disappear. This parallels Berkovits' critique of the dialogue experience described by Buber. Only after the experience is over can man choose to relate to God, as during the encounter man has no choice. Similarly, it is only after the experience, in God's absence, that one is free to pray and search for God's Presence.

Not only is God in exile, says Berkovits, but the *halakhah* is too. Though the Rabbis originally forbade transcribing *Torah Shebal Peh*, the Oral Law, for the sake of preserving it, they ultimately decided to write it down, following the dictum, 'When it is time to act for God, one may violate His commandments.' For Berkovits this is termed "*halakhah* in Exile."³¹ This exile is truly negative.

When the spoken word was forced into a straightjacket of a written mould it was an unavoidable violation of the essence of *halakhah*. It was no one's fault; nevertheless, it was a spiritual calamity of the first magnitude. Orthodoxy is, in a sense, *halakhah* in a straightjacket. . . . It is a condition we have had to accept. It is the price we have paid for the preservation of our identity and Jewish survival.³²

If evil is a possible outcome in the world as a result of creation, then, Berkovits contends, that possible outcomes of *halakhah* can be less than perfect.³³

Berkovits maintained that just as there are two types of exile, namely national and cosmic, there are also two types of redemption. There is national redemption for the national exile and universal redemption for the *galut haShekhinah*. He contended that only with universal redemption can there be a total redemption, *ge'ulah shelemah*. Any national redemption is only *athalta dege'ulah*, the beginning of redemption.³⁴

During the Holocaust, *tsimtsum* almost allowed for the destruction of Israel. Today, Berkovits said, we have witnessed the "reversal" of *tsimtsum*, so to speak. We have seen the "arousal" of God from his "slumber" with the establishment of the State of Israel. There has been a transformation in God's holiness that is apparent, as we are no longer in exile.³⁵

During Israel's exile God is silent; God does not respond, He is as if removed and apart. . . . His attribute of holiness is not activated, as if it were at rest, "asleep." But when the hour of redemption approaches, one witnesses in silent awe how God is "aroused" out of the habitation of his holiness to come and dwell in the midst of Zion.³⁶

The God who was with us in exile was silent and His attribute of holiness was at rest. But now, God dwells in the midst of Zion and His attribute of holiness has been activated and awakened.

Just as Israel emerged from its exile, said Berkovits, so too should the Jewish people remove the limitations of *halakhah* they imposed on themselves when they reduced the oral law to a written text. The *halakhah* need not remain in exile. It can re-enter history just as the State of Israel did. *Halakhah* can no longer be in a "straightjacket," but must unlock itself from the *galut* frame of mind. "Only Torah that toils and is effective—not only in the private life of Jews but within the comprehensive reality of a sovereign Jewish people—can rightly be called *Torat Erets Yisrael*."³⁷

Berkovits pointed out that just as faith is based on freedom and responsibility, the interpretation of the revealed law is contingent on these as well.

In the task of applying the law to every specific situation, man's responsibility is tested. Of course he has the law before him; but it is man who interprets, it is he who makes the decision and is responsible for his action. As is well known, the Rabbis, on one occasion, went as far in their affirmation of their responsibility to interpret and to decide in the freedom of their conscience that they defied heavenly signs which demanded a different decision."³⁸

God and *halakhah* were in exile. *Halakhah* went into exile for the preservation of the Torah, and God went into exile for the preservation of man. Both, in Berkovits' view, are now leaving their exile as the dynamic of *tsimtsum* reverses itself, shouldering man with new responsibilities.

NOTES

1. With the establishment of the Shalem Center's Eliezer Berkovits Institute for Jewish Thought in 2003, there has been renewed interest in Berkovits which has led to the republishing and translating of many Berkovits' writings. These efforts have demonstrated that his writings are as relevant to contemporary society as they were in the past. See David Hazony, *Essential Essays on Judaism* (Jerusalem 2002; Hebrew 2004). Other current releases by the Shalem Center of Berkovits' writings are *God, Man and History* (2004), *Faith after the Holocaust* in Hebrew (2006), *With God in Hell* in Hebrew (2006), *God, Man and History* in Hebrew (November 2009) and *Not in Heaven* (December 2009).
2. Y. Jacobson, *From Lurianic Kabbalism to the Psychological Theosophy of Hasidism* (Hebrew, Tel Aviv 1984); C. Schulte, *Zimzum in European Philosophy-A Paradoxical Career in Jewish Studies in a New Europe* (Copenhagen, 1998) 745-756 and C. Schulte *Zimzum in the works of Schelling in Iyyun. The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly* 41 (January 1992), 21-40. He writes in both articles that Franz Rosenzweig was the first to document the parallel between Schelling and Lurianic Kabbalah.
3. Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism* (Great Britain: Western Printing Services, 1965), 110, henceforth *On the Kabbalah*.
4. Eliezer Berkovits, *God, Man, and History: A Jewish Interpretation* (New York, 1959), 36, 64-65, 76, 50, henceforth GMH.
5. GMH, 173, ft.14. David Hazony suggested to me in a personal correspondence (December 20 2010) that the explanation for why Berkovits does not use the exact term of *tsimtsum* might be found in the fact that Berkovits was out to present the Tanakh as the key source for all Jewish theology. He would therefore not use medieval kabbalistic terms to describe a concept that he saw as clear and inherent in the Bible itself. As this essay was going to press, I was happy to read David Hazony's new book, *Theodicy and Responsibility: Eliezer Berkovits' Response to the Holocaust* (Kindle Edition April 2012), which shares some ideas with my essay.
6. GMH, 64, and see Halivni, David Weiss, "Revelation and Tzimtzum" *Judaism* 21:2

- (1972), 205-210 reviewing an older controversy of Rabbis choosing a literal explanation or a figurative translation of *tsimsum* and also his “Prayer in the Shoah” *Judaism* 50:3 (2001), 268-291 for an alternate view of *tsimsum* being “readjusted” in history. And see <http://www.sichosinenglish.org/books/letters-rebbe-1/04.htm> Letters from The Lubavitcher Rebbe “An analysis of different approaches regarding *tzimtzum*, the process of Divine Self-limitation” 19 Shvat 5699 (1939) Paris, where he goes through four approaches distinguishing the literal or metaphorical interpretations. Chabad Hasidim believe in a complete metaphorical interpretation opposed to Lurianic Kabbalah.
7. Eliezer Berkovits, “What is Jewish Philosophy” in *A Treasury of Tradition* ed. Norman Lamm and Walter S. Wurzbarger (New York, 1967), 196-197 reprinted from *Tradition* Volume 3:2 (1961).
 8. Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah New Perspectives* (Yale 1988), 57
 9. *Ibid.*, 57 and footnote on page 300 where this reference is from Vital’s *Sha’ar HaMitsvot* and Luria’s *Hanhagot*.
 10. GMH, 73, ft.14.
 11. *Hagigah* 12a and see Baruch Halevi Epstein *Torah Temimah*, on the verse in Genesis 17:1 commenting on God’s name as “Shaddai”. He asks, “What praise is there in a God who has said to the world “enough!” God’s intention in creating the world was for the merit of man to try, get involved, and excel in the doings of the world and through this, will gain the completion of the soul, and if God would not have said to the world, as it were, at the creation of the world “enough!” the creation process would have been completed and there would be no place for man to be novel in this world, and because He said “enough”, there would be no room for man to improve the creation process.” Like Rabbi Berkovits, he views *tsimsum* in a positive way.
 12. As Scholem noted, the kabbalists held that every religious act should be accompanied by saying *leshem yichud*: this is done ‘for the sake of the reunion of God and His *Shekhinah*’ See Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, 108
 13. Eliezer Berkovits, *Faith after the Holocaust* (New York 1974), 60, henceforth FATH; See Rabbi Elimelekh Weisblum of Lizhensk in his *Noam Elimelekh, Vayera* third paragraph that one who learns (*esek*) Torah is continuing Gods’ creation. He elaborates that God contracted Himself (*tsimstem et atsmo*) into the 22 letters of the Torah with which He created the world and when we learn Torah we are then continuing His creation, like in the creation process. This has kabbalistic underpinnings but I believe that the blessing that we recite in the morning before we learn “la’asok bedivrei Torah” signifies the creation process of learning as it relates to *tsimsum*, and I hope to write about this in another paper.
 14. GMH, 105. See David Hazon’s introduction to Eliezer Berkovits’ *Essential Essays on Judaism* where he writes of Berkovits’ ethical and moral vision of Judaism. I argue that morality for Berkovits stems from his interpretation of the concept of *tsimsum*. Abraham Joshua Heschel and Joseph B. Soloveichik also write of the *tsimsum*. For Heschel, it is for the sole purpose of teaching of God’s Divine Concern and Pathos. Heschel writes in *Man is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion*, (New York 1951), 149-150 “God is within the world, present and concealed in the essence of things, if not for His presence, there would be no essence; if not for His concealment, there would be no appearance.” Fritz Rothschild writes in his introduction to *Between God and Man, An Interpretation of Judaism from the Writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel* (New York 1959), 22 that Heschel “uses the terminology

of the Lurianic Kabbalah, in which *tsimtsum* (contraction) is the category that accounts for creation.” *Tsimtsum* is the catalyst for his analysis of Divine Concern and Divine Pathos. For Soloveichik, it is for the exclusive purpose of teaching that “God’s conduct provides an example for human conduct.” See David Hartman, *A Living Covenant-The Innovative Spirit in Traditional Judaism* (Woodstock, Vermont 1997), 82. Hartman writes that in some of Rabbi Soloveichik’s writings such as *Majesty and Humility* and *Catharsis* and especially in *The Lonely Man of Faith*, *tsimtsum* is discussed to teach the “ethic of retreat or withdrawal”. In contrast, in Soloveichik’s *Halachic Man*, *tsimtsum* is analyzed “as an invitation to human beings to join God in the task of creation.” Berkovits, as we shall see, also teaches us different behaviors learned from *tsimtsum* process. A separate essay could be written on the comparisons of Rabbi Berkovits and Rabbi Soloveichik’s writings in general and particularly on *tsimtsum*.

15. GMH, 76. Also see a similar explanation by Meir Simha of Dvinsk *Meshekh Hokhmah* on Genesis 1:26 “Let us make man in Our image: Free will results from divine constriction (*Me’tsimtsum HaElakut*) that God, may he be blessed, leaves room for His creatures to act in the manner of their choosing”. Free will, he believes, is the image of God in man. Both Rabbi Berkovits and Rabbi Meir Simha view free will as an amazing gift given by the “self-limiting” God.
16. FATH, 142, and see *Between Yesterday and Tomorrow Sermons by Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits* (Oxford 1945), 11 in Sermon I: “Not by Might. . .” and sermon IX titled “Triumph of the Spirit” given the day of Intercession, September, 1941.
17. *On the Kabbalah*, 110 .
18. FATH, 120-121.
19. Eliezer Berkovits, *Crisis and Faith* (New York, 1976), 154.
20. *On the Kabbalah*, 107.
21. *Ibid.*, 146-151, describing traditions of the Kabbalists who cried and lamented the exile of the *Shekhinah* displaying a negative approach towards exile.
22. Isaiah 45:15.
23. FATH, 101.
24. Berkovits preferred the Hebrew term *hurban*, annihilation, rather than *shoah* in referencing the Holocaust (*Crisis and Faith*, 158), even after the term Shoah became dominant. He does so because he considers *hurban* to be a higher degree of destruction than *sho’ah*. There were many *Shoah*/holocausts throughout Jewish history, but this is a *hurban*, an annihilation. In contrast, Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner, a late member of Agudath Israel’s rabbinical leadership, objected not only to establishing a “*Yom HaShoah*” but to the use of the very term “Holocaust”; to describe the destruction of European Jewry because “those who originated the term *Shoah* view the Holocaust as an event totally unrelated to Jewish history and therefore requiring a memorial for itself” (R. Yitzchok Hutner, “Holocaust,” *The Jewish Observer*, XII:8, (October 1977) [*Heshvan* 5738], 3-9.) Berkovits saw the destruction as related to and a component of Jewish history but nonetheless distinct in the intensity of its destruction.
25. FATH, 109, and a concurring view by Elie Weisel “A Prayer for the Days of Awe”, *New York Times*, (October 2, 1997) where he writes that after half a century of accusing God of His silence during the Holocaust, he writes “I began wondering whether I was not unfair with You. After all, Auschwitz was not something that came ready-made from heaven. It was conceived by men, staffed by men. And their aim was to destroy not only us but You as well.”

26. Eliezer Berkovits *Not in Heaven: The Nature and Function of Halacha* (New York 1983), 46- 47, quoting from *Baba Metsia* 59b. henceforth NIH.
27. *Ibid.*, 72-73, and see Ira Bedzow, *Halakhic Man Authentic Jew Modern Expressions of Orthodox Thought From Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveichik and Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits* (Jerusalem 2009), 169-174 where Bedzow categorizes Berkovits' rabbinical "humanizations" into three separate categories of reasoning behind the Rabbis interpretation of the law.
28. *GMH*, 35.
29. Eliezer Berkovits, *A Jewish Critique of the Philosophy of Martin Buber* (New York 1962), 67.
30. *Ibid.*, 70.
31. NIH, 85. "Halakha in Exile" is used as the title of the chapter.
32. *Crisis And Faith*, 95, and see Allan Nadler's Review Essay of Berkovits' "*Not in Heaven*" in *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Thought* 21:3 (Fall 1984), 95 where he critiques Berkovits' usage of "Karaitic" describing the Rabbis attitude towards the written texts of Jewish law. Nadler says "to characterize strict adherence to the codified rule of law as "Karaitic" is both mischievous and offensive." Shalom Carmy in his Review Essay titled "Eliezer Berkovits Challenge to Contemporary Orthodoxy" *The Torah uMaddah Journal* (December 2004) of David Hazony, *Essential Essays on Judaism*, defended Berkovits by requesting readers to look beyond Berkovits' attack on the "Karaism of the Oral Law."
33. An example of a change in the *halakhah* that Berkovits sought after was the case of preventing an *agunah*, when husbands refuse to grant a divorce. Berkovits tried very hard in his lifetime to solve this crisis. He wrote a book "*T'nai Bi'N'suin u'V'Get*" Conditional Marriage and Divorce (Jerusalem 5727/1967), proposing a prenuptial agreement (conditions placed into the *ketubah*, the marriage contract) and specifying cases where retroactive annulments of marriages can take place based on proof texts. Berkovits wrote in *Jewish Women in Time And Torah* (Hoboken, New Jersey 1990), 111, that he regrets that this work was not taken seriously and denies the rumors that Rabbi Weinberg (known for his responsa *Seridei Esh*) withdrew his approbation. See Shapiro, Marc B., *Between the Yeshiva World and Modern Orthodoxy the Life and Works of Rabbi Jehiel Jacob Weinberg* (Portland, Oregon 2002), 190-191, for a review of the rumors associated with this book. Shapiro's conclusion is that it is more likely that Rabbi Weinberg did not revoke his approval for Berkovits' work, as Rabbi Menachem Kasher maintained.
34. *Crisis and Faith*, 157-158.
35. Or at least, the same condition of exile, as some claim, since the Messiah has not yet come and the third Temple has not been built.
36. Eliezer Berkovits, *Man And God Studies in Biblical Theology* (Detroit 1969), 205.
37. *Crisis and Faith*, 143, and see Allan Nadler's Review Essay of Berkovits' "*Not in Heaven*" in *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Thought* 21:3 (Fall 1984), 96, where Nadler disagreed with Berkovits that the establishment of the State of Israel necessitates a radical halakhic response, thereby involving new circumstances of halakhic decision making. This, Nadler claimed, should not affect any essential change in the way we treat the halakhic process.
38. Eliezer Berkovits, *A Jewish Critique of the Philosophy of Martin Buber*, 105-106 footnote 99. This reference to "on one occasion" is to the oven of Akhnai.

The Use of the term Tzimtzum outside its kabbalistic technical term of reference was employed by Prof Weiss Halivni in explain the absence of God during the Shoah.



David Weiss Halivni on the Post-Holocaust Theological Justification of Historical- Critical Study of the Talmud

Ari Ackerman writes:²²

²²https://www.academia.edu/26916659/Reconceiving_Talmud_Torah_David_Weiss_Halivni_on_the_Post_Holocaust_Theological_Justification_of_Historical_Critical_Study_of_the_Talmud

II. Halivni's Post-Holocaust Theology

Halivni's latest work on theology, *Breaking the Tablets: Jewish Theology After the Shoah*,¹¹ seemingly addressed a new theological issue. His previous works grappled with the issue of the relationship between historical scholarship, faith and halakhah. In contrast, as the title indicates, his new work concerned itself with theological problems concerning the radical evil of the Holocaust. In particular, Halivni addressed one of the most debated questions among post-Holocaust theologians: Can the suffering of the Holocaust be explained as

10 Halivni, *Peshat and Derash*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, pp. 132-134; idem, *Revelation Restored*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997, pp. 4-5.

11 Halivni, *Breaking the Tablets: Jewish Theology After the Shoah*, ed. P. Ochs, Lanham and Boulder: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007.

punishment for sinful behavior? In response, Halivni argues vociferously against any position that would attribute the suffering of the Holocaust to punishment for sin. In attempting to refute this position, his concern is primarily exegetical. He marshals Biblical and rabbinic proof-texts in order to demonstrate that the Jewish tradition rejects the notion that God could deliver a punishment as horrific as the Holocaust.¹² Yet, despite his exegetical focus, Halivni's opposition to the explanation of the Holocaust as punishment clearly derives from a sense of moral outrage. As he asserts, "there is no sin or transgression that merits a punishment like the Shoah."¹³ He further buttresses his moral claim with the following argument: "Whoever seeks to explain the Shoah reduces it to some natural phenomenon, belittles its evil and assuages the guilt of those who perpetuated it."¹⁴

Though rejecting the explanation of the Holocaust as punishment, Halivni is unwilling to abdicate God's providential role in directing history. He must therefore provide some justification for God's lack of intervention in squashing the horrors of the Holocaust. He suggests that God's lack of involvement might be the result of the need to foster human free will. This justification, however, fails to explain God's previous involvement in Jewish history and God's failure to intercede at this juncture. To address this problem, Halivni employs the kabbalistic notion of *tsimtsum* ("divine contraction").¹⁵ He argues that periodically the need arises for God's contraction so that human autonomy can be preserved.

Halivni's treatment of this seminal issue of post-Holocaust theology can be compared with that of other post-Holocaust theologians. His vociferous rejection of the equation between suffering in the Holocaust and divine punishment is shared by many other post-Holocaust theologians such as Eliezer Berkovits, Yitz Greenberg, and Emil Fackenheim,¹⁶ and his employment of arguments concerning free

12 *Breaking the Tablet*, pp. 17-27.

13 *Breaking the Tablets*, p. 24.

14 *Breaking the Tablets*, p. 26.

15 *Breaking the Tablets*, pp. 31-34.

16 Berkovits, *Faith after the Holocaust*, New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1973, p. 89; Greenberg, "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity and Modernity after the Holocaust," *Auschwitz, Beginning of a New Era?*, ed. E. Fleischner, New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1997, pp. 7-55; Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History*, New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1970, pp. 3-8.

will resembles those of Berkovits and Greenberg.¹⁷ However, my concern here is not to gauge Halivni's contribution to post-Holocaust theology. Rather, I will confine my comments to the relationship between his theological reflections on the Holocaust and his conception of history, halakhah and faith, arguing that the former illuminates the latter. Indeed, I will maintain that his theological reflections on the Holocaust provide the Archimedean point from which to observe the core motivations and objectives of Halivni's scholarly project.

In order to understand the nexus between Halivni's post-Holocaust theology and his scholarship, we must examine his conception of the Holocaust as a "revelation of God's absence."¹⁸ For Halivni, the Holocaust signals God's ultimate withdrawal and distance during which Israel is slaughtered by its demonic enemy. The revelation of God's absence at the time of the Holocaust is contrasted with the revelation at Sinai, which signals God's presence. Yet Halivni does not view the Holocaust as rupturing the covenant established at this foundational act of revelation. He views the covenant as unbreakable even in light of the horrors perpetuated during this dark age of human and Jewish history. Instead, he views the revelation of the Holocaust as bringing about a reorientation in which we realize that God has been gradually withdrawing while augmenting human autonomy.¹⁹ By viewing this process through the lens of the Holocaust, the increased human involvement in response to divine contraction is conceived in tragic terms, as a mechanism of destruction and devastation. Thus, the Holocaust bears testimony to the destructive force that arises from God's contraction and the expansion of human freedom.

Halivni further claims that these two revelatory acts—Sinai as testifying to God's presence and the Holocaust to God's absence—should not displace one another. But they should be held together in a dialectic manner by accepting the reality of God's absence while positing the ideality of God's presence. That is, we must solemnly acknowledge that God's redemptive power has increasingly absented itself. Consequently, humanity at large and the Jews in particular are

17 Berkovits, *Faith after the Holocaust*, pp. 101-107; Greenberg, "Voluntary Covenant," *Perspectives*, New York: CLAL, 1982, pp. 33-3.

18 *Breaking the Tablets*, p. 107.

19 In this regard, Halivni's conception of revelation is similar to Irving Greenberg's notion of "orienting experience" and Emil Fackenheim's concept of "root experience." See Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History*, pp. 8-14; Irving Greenberg, "Cloud of Smoke, Pillars of Fire: Judaism, Christianity and Modernity after the Holocaust."

vulnerable to the damage incurred by human frailty and weakness. But we must also anticipate and yearn for the return of God's dominion and a restoration of the divine presence felt at Sinai.

For Halivni, Jewish existence, particularly in the post-Holocaust period, oscillates between these two revelatory moments. Halivni depicts the impact of this fluctuation on our religious orientation in the following manner:

Israel's spiritual history took place, moving between God's embracing us at Sinai and God's withdrawing from us at Auschwitz, between our sense of connection and our sense of detachment. Every aspect of spiritual life is affected by this movement: the way we believe, the way we pray, the way we study His Torah, and the way we make ritual decisions. The way we view His connection to us affects our place and purpose in the universe.²⁰

He claims that the new spiritual orientation is exemplified by prayer during the Holocaust. In particular, the blessing of *malkhut* ("Divine Sovereignty"), added to the *amidah* of the *musaf* service of the New Year, is uniquely appropriate for bringing to the surface the nature of prayer in the unprecedented situation of a Nazi concentration camp (and by extension in a post-Holocaust world).²¹ In this prayer, we beseech "God and the God of our Ancestors, rule over all the world, in Your full glory." This prayer captures our deep longing for the restoration of God's dominion at a time of divine absence. Thus, with the increase of human sovereignty and the attendant evil and suffering, according to Halivni, human beings pray for a return to Sinai, a time when God's proximity was evident.

²⁰ *Breaking the Tablets*, p. 107.

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 36.



RUPTURE, REPENTANCE AND CULTURAL MEMORY: DAVID WEISS HALIVNI AND THE USES OF TESHUVAH

David N Gottlieb writes:²³

²³https://www.academia.edu/36033340/RUPTURE_REPENTANCE_AND_CULTURAL_MEMORY_DAVID_WEISS_HALIVNI_AND_THE_USES_OF_TESHUVAH

Rupture is an essential construct of Jewish history and text. “Cosmic” rupture initiates Creation and, radically alters the ground of reality. “Cultural” rupture forms and rearticulates social structures. Cosmic rupture originates beyond even the “vertical” axis of the human-divine relationship, while cultural rupture occurs along the “horizontal” historical-cultural axis of history.¹ The *Shoah*, uniquely, is a historical event born of cosmic rupture. Its occurrence necessitates a reexamination and redefinition of repentance (*teshuvah*). After the *Shoah*, *teshuvah* must serve to reintegrate the vertical and horizontal axes of Jewish existence, facilitating the contextualization of cosmic rupture in Jewish cultural memory. David Weiss Halivni’s Kabbalistic exegesis of the *Shoah* serves as a seminal example of *teshuvah* so defined.

Introduction: Rupture and Reality

In Jewish history and sacred text, the contours of reality are shaped, ordered, directed and redirected through rupture. Rupture will be defined here, *per* the social theorist William Sewell, Jr., as “a surprising break with routine practice . . . [that] touches off a chain of occurrences that durably transforms previous structures and practices.”² A rupture may be massive—on the order of the expulsion from Spain or the *Shoah*—or extremely local, albeit of sufficient force and momentum that it transforms societies through the rearticulation of social structures (such as, for example the Berlin *Haskalah*). However, the *Shoah*, as a human experience of “cosmic” rupture, demands its own existential and theological category. As will be seen below, a mystical approach posits the *Shoah* as originating with the need for regeneration of *tsimtsum*, the divine self-contraction that makes room for human free will. The regeneration that, according to this Kabbalistic perspective, occurred (without precedent) in recent history initiated a period of unlimited human moral autonomy with disastrous consequences. Because this “cosmic” rupture occurred in a space momentarily absent divine presence and power, it requires the rupture and rearticulation of traditional Jewish modes of relating to God and the world. After the *Shoah* a redefinition of repentance, or *teshuvah*, is especially urgent. *Teshuvah* can no longer only or always emphasize the process of seeking forgiveness for sin: it must, as Fackenheim asserts, be a *tikkun*, or repair, of history,³ an urgent, incessant

¹ I am indebted to Professor Paul Mendes-Flohr for drawing my attention to this metaphor, and for his kind and instructive comments on a preliminary draft of this essay.

² William H. Sewell, Jr., “Historical Events as Transformations of Structures: Inventing Revolution at the Bastille,” *Theory and Society*, Vol. 25, No. 6 (Dec., 1996): 844.

³ Emil Fackenheim, *To Mend the World: Foundations of Future Jewish Thought* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), 320–1.

response to cosmic rupture that *rearticulates that rupture*, beginning its contextualization within Jewish cultural memory.

For the Egyptologist and social theorist Jan Assmann, cultural memory is defined as “knowledge that directs behavior and experience in the interactive framework of a society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation.”⁴ *Teshuvah*, as a human response to cosmic rupture, is not the seeking of forgiveness for sin: it is a means of gradually absorbing cosmic rupture into cultural memory by accepting responsibility for the *ikkun* of history. *Teshuvah*, in this context, is an *answer to the unanswerable*; that is, the resumption of the progress of Jewish cultural memory along not only the “horizontal” but also the “vertical” axis of history, along which the human moves in search of the divine.

Repentance after the *Shoah*

According to the sages of the Talmud, *Teshuvah*, or repentance, exists prior to time; to the 18th century Rav Nachman of Bratslav, it is “above time.”⁵ Historical events, however, happen within both “the ‘horizontal’ dimension of merely secular time” and the “vertical” vector of human-divine encounter, in what Charles Taylor calls “a multiplex vertical context.”⁶ God requires *teshuvah*, but so does history. The Hebrew word in its theological context means repentance but its root letters (ש.ו.ב) indicate an answer, response, or solution. As an attempt to responsively re-attune one’s actions to divine imperative, *teshuvah* is a turning, returning, and response: “*Teshuvah* celebrates the competence and capacity to overcome, to change, to grow, to begin and begin again.”⁷ As such, it is a step toward the reintegration and re-elevation of the vertical element of Jewish consciousness and the essential, never-ending dialectic at the heart of covenantal commitment. At the core of the traditional rabbinic definition of repentance is the climax of the “cycle of sin, violence, repentance, and return to God.”⁸ *Teshuvah* “commences with the sinner, but then compels divine response.”⁹ *Teshuvah* in its traditional sense is a return from human self-estrangement into a recommitment to God and God’s commandments, involving “not humiliation but reaffirmation of the self in God’s image, after God’s likeness.”¹⁰ Repentance forms the core of what the philosopher Karl Löwith described as “a movement progressing, and at the same time returning, from alienation to reconciliation, one great detour to reach in the end the beginning through ever repeated acts of rebellion and surrender.”¹¹

However, if during the *Shoah* God somehow was separated from humanity by an unbridgeable gulf, then repentance has lost its meaning and the covenantal relationship that made it required has been nullified. This proposition is, of course, untenable in traditional Jewish religious thought, which not only survived the *Shoah* but, in time, turned its considerable hermeneutical energies to an unflinching search for meaning in the ashes of European Judaism.¹² It is fitting, after the *Shoah*, to

⁴ Jan Assmann and John Czaplica, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” in *New German Critique*, No. 65 (1995): 126.

⁵ Ehud Luz, “Repentance,” in Arthur A. Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flohr, eds., *20th Century Jewish Religious Thought* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2009), 790.

⁶ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 57.

⁷ Harold M. Schulweis, foreword to Louis B. Newman, *Repentance: The Meaning & Practice of Teshuvah* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2010), xvii.

⁸ Luz, “Repentance,” 786.

⁹ Jacob Neusner, “Repentance in Judaism,” *Repentance: A Comparative Perspective*, eds. Amitai Etzioni and David E. Carney (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), 61.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), 183.

¹² Jewish religious thought is not monolithic on any topic, of course, let alone the *Shoah*. This essay will not engage in comparative analysis of Jewish perspectives on the *Shoah*, but will instead concentrate on the Kabbalistic approach of one particular Jewish theologian and survivor. I agree with that survivor that imputing the *Shoah* to Jewish sin is untenable.

contemplate a form of *teshuvah* that responds not only to personal sin, but also to cosmic rupture. A seminal example of this form of *teshuvah* is offered by David Weiss Halivni, a Talmudist, theologian and Auschwitz survivor.¹³ The Kabbalistic response to the *Shoah* articulated by Halivni is a direct turning toward and response to the unbearable; an attempt to both perceive and participate in the restoration of covenantal consciousness after its near-fatal submission to the effects of cosmic rupture. With his hermeneutic of rupture, Halivni contextualizes what has until now threatened to abrogate the Covenant. He demonstrates that the cause of suffering in the *Shoah* was cosmic and that the covenantal relationship, despite even the *Shoah*, endures. This hermeneutical strategy reflects precisely Assmann's delineation of cultural memory: it is "practice-reflexive in that it interprets common practice in terms through proverbs, maxims [and] rituals"; it is "self-reflexive in that it draws on itself to explain, distinguish, reinterpret, censure, control, surpass, and receive hypoleptically;" and it is "reflexive of its own image insofar as it reflects the self-image of the group through a preoccupation with its own social system."¹⁴ That is, Halivni's hermeneutic a) employs traditional textual methodology and sources; b) contextualizes rupture with respect to Jewish theology and mysticism; and c) maintains fidelity to traditional Jewish identity, even while engaging in rearticulation of that tradition. Halivni's hermeneutic of rupture thus reintegrates the horizontal and vertical aspects of Jewish cultural memory, confronting historical events by insisting on their covenantal, theological, and cultural-mnemonic contextualization.

Rupture and Cultural Memory: A Social-Theoretical Perspective

Our consideration of Halivni's contemplation of the *Shoah*, and Assmann's delineation of cultural memory, will be viewed here from a social-theoretical perspective. This is not meant to reduce the *Shoah* to a mere historical or sociological phenomenon; it is rather meant to help us seek the pattern of rupture that occurs at the intersection of mystical and social-theoretical avenues of inquiry—at the intersection, as it were, of the horizontal and the vertical axes. Such an investigation can help initiate an inquiry into the extent to which the rupture shaping and rearticulating social structures has its roots in the elemental constructs of being. In theological terms, rupture most often can be seen as a spike of "vertical" energy into the flow of "horizontal" history, where it initiates a cascade of ruptures and begins its flow toward the stream-bed of cultural memory. There, with the buffer of temporal distance, a rupture takes up residence among other "figures of memory"¹⁵ and participates in the shaping of further sociological, theological, and historical change. Halivni insists, however, that even though the *Shoah* occurred in history, it stands beyond the reach of rational explication: "one ought not, indeed one should not dare, to explain why it took place, why it happened as it did . . . it will inevitably relieve the murderers, at least partially, of their guilt and place it upon the shoulders of the victims."¹⁶

A reconsideration of *Teshuvah* is necessary in order to reorient and rearticulate the relationship between repentance and history, especially after cosmic rupture manifests in history. *Teshuvah* traditionally has served a critical function in the articulation and preservation of Jewish social structures, endowing events with transcendent significance and rupture with divine directive. The dialectical linkage

¹³ Halivni is known for his source-critical method of Talmud study, itself a form of rupture and rearticulation—a form, according to Halivni himself, born in part of his having suffered in and survived the Nazi concentration camps. See David Weiss Halivni, *The Book and the Sword: A Life of Learning in the Shadow of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 149–63.

¹⁴ Assmann, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," 132.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹⁶ Halivni, *The Book and the Sword*, 155.

of destruction and redemption passes through the concept of *teshuvah* and it is precisely within it that Judaism continually adjusts its course through the temporal plane. This temporality is readjusted with the help of the vertical markers of rupture that periodically rend and reorder Jewish reality. It is clear, however, from the definition and sources cited above, that the obligation to repent is imposed by God upon humankind. Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden is the sin that sets human history in motion.¹⁷ The temporality of *teshuvah* is thus established as the rhythm of rupture, repentance and assignment to a place in cultural memory out of the symbiotic flow of horizontal worldly events, both ruptured and secured by vertical (theophanic) events, and set beside the prophetic writings.

However, because Halivni asserts that the *Shoah* is not a theophanic manifestation, the form of *teshuvah* contemplated here is not traditional *teshuvah*; it is neither an acknowledgement of sin nor a search for forgiveness. Rather, it is a reification of *tikkun*; that is, an insistence on human (and, here, Jewish) initiative in the re-harmonization of the human and the divine. It is to take up the tools with which to repair cosmic rupture with no imputation or acceptance of human guilt in initiating that rupture.

A Kabbalistic View of the *Shoah*

The rupture of the *Shoah* was of historically unprecedented focus, order, and magnitude. To Halivni, "what happened in the *Shoah* is above and beyond measure (*l'mishpat*): above and beyond any suffering, above and beyond any punishment."¹⁸ The rupture of the *Shoah* was so great that "the Covenant God made with Israel was shaken if not totally abrogated."¹⁹ The *Shoah* constituted either an inversion of the meaning and responsibility for *teshuvah*, or else the end of *teshuvah* entirely. The *Shoah* was not punishment for sin; it was not a vertical spike of divinely-directed rupture, a thrust of theophanic energy, but an *utter absence of that energy*. An unprecedented violation of the Jewish relationship with God had occurred, posing an unbearable choice: "One can either affirm the innocence of Israel or the justice of God at Auschwitz."²⁰ The question *Why?*, Halivni admits, will echo endlessly: "there is no answer."²¹ He nonetheless finds exegetical and hermeneutical pathways to explore, if not toward comprehension, then toward the contextualization of the *Shoah* with Jewish theology and cultural memory.

Halivni sees God's renewal of *tsimtsum* (or divine self-contraction to permit the existence and exercise of human free will) as having taken place at the time of the *Shoah*. Such an event, unprecedented in history, temporarily left human free will unbounded and unchecked. This cosmic gap remained open "until the divine . . . reequalized the normal balance between humanity's bounded freedom and the absolute freedom of God."²² Halivni's depiction of the cosmic rupture caused by the regeneration of space for human free will accommodates the *Shoah*'s historical reality while locating its ultimate source in a cosmic and theological vacuum, utterly devoid of divine presence and power. Halivni's application of the hermeneutic of rupture to the *Shoah* begins the absorption of the latter into Jewish cultural memory. The inconceivable event, contextualized within both the theological and historical

¹⁷ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 8.

¹⁸ David Weiss Halivni, *Breaking the Tablets: Jewish Theology After the Shoah* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 20.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁰ Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: History, Theology and Contemporary Judaism*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 171. Emphasis author's.

²¹ Halivni, *Breaking the Tablets*, 31.

²² *Ibid.*, 33.

spheres, nonetheless stands alone in both spheres: "There were two major theological events in Jewish history: the Revelation at Sinai and the revelation at Auschwitz."²³

But if the *Shoah*, unlike Sinai, was not an intervention in history by the God of history then how could it be framed in cultural memory? If not an insertion of theophanic energy onto the horizontal plane of history by the God of history, was the *Shoah* outside the bounds of divine inception, and therefore intervention? To these questions, Halivni posits a response that owes its debt to Lurianic Kabbalah, which itself flourished after the massive rupture of the Expulsion from Spain:

Lurianic Kabbalah teaches us that, before the creation of humankind, God contracted Himself, as it were, in order to leave space for the creation of an autonomous creature—the human being. But God's presence in the formation of humankind caused the "Divine Contraction" (*tsimtsum*) itself to be contracted and thus limited, which meant that space for human freedom was also limited. In order to nurture human autonomy, it was therefore necessary to readjust the *tsimtsum*, to restore and strengthen it and, thereby, to expand the area in which humanity could exercise its free will. This readjustment was necessary because, as God contracts into Himself, He leaves a vacuum in his wake (*shilul rek*); and, since a vacuum is not self-maintaining, the divine must continually regenerate it. . . . Lest the divine presence devour the *tsimtsum* altogether and vitiate free will, the Holy One periodically regenerates the *tsimtsum*: restoring it to its original source and thus enabling free will to function as before. This occurs very rarely and has no parallel in history. However, when it does occur, humanity would be brought to the summit of its moral freedom, to be exercised for good or for evil—from the point at which there is only a minimal of intervention from Above, until the divine has reequalized the normal balance between humanity's bounded freedom and the absolute freedom of God.²⁴

Halivni, like many survivors, was silent about the *Shoah* for decades; he first spoke publicly about his experiences 50 years after his liberation from Ebensee, part of the Mauthausen complex of extermination camps in upper Austria, on May 6, 1945.²⁵ His application of a Kabbalistic hermeneutic of rupture to the *Shoah* a half century after its denouement indicates that the transition from cosmic rupture to cultural memory is an incremental one. Fifty years on, the *Shoah* has receded in time to the point at which it may begin to be confronted, contextualized, and given a place "in the culturally institutionalized heritage"²⁶ of Judaism and the Jewish societies it decimated. It took time for Halivni and other survivors to fully return to the temporal historical plane of lived experience. He suggests that "those murdered in the *Shoah* lived, as it were, outside of normal history," because "it was their misfortune to have lived at a time during which cosmic adjustments had to be made between the human creature, as a creature of free will, and the divinity that is immanent in all parts of creation, including the domain of moral choice."²⁷ The *Shoah* imprisoned its victims in a rupture beyond both the horizontal and the vertical: outside of history and beyond even God's reach. The effort to survive and to recover was all-consuming; there was no hint of a salvific vertical irruption, with the result, as Fackenheim noted even four decades later, that "Jewish life is in advance of Jewish thought . . . [it] is in the grip of, and responding to, epoch-making events."²⁸ The passage of so massive a rupture into the pathways of cultural memory is a gradual and delicate process. In Assman's conceptualization, the "concretion of identity" inherent in cultural memory requires

distance from the everyday. Cultural memory has its fixed point: its horizon does not change with the passing of time. These fixed points are fateful events of the past, whose memory is maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and

²³ *Ibid.*, x.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁵ Halivni, *The Book and the Sword*, 128.

²⁶ Assmann, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," 130. Emphasis author's.

²⁷ Halivni, *Breaking the Tablets*, 33.

²⁸ Fackenheim, *To Mend the World*, 14.

institutional communication (recitation, practice, observance). We call these 'figures of memory.'²⁹

The hermeneutic of rupture in Jewish mystical thought is a means of contextualizing rupture in cultural memory. As Rosenzweig noted, the Jewish calendar is based on figures of memory born of the intrusion of eternity into temporality³⁰. The calendar serves to summon the rupture forward into historical consciousness within an ordered, rhythmic system of referents and then return it to the horizon of consciousness and its coordinates along the horizontal, historical axis (Passover recalls the liberating rupture of the Exodus; Tisha b'Av recalls the ruptures of murder, destruction and expulsion that are recorded as having happened on that day). The junction of the horizontal and vertical axes is the *creation*, the aoriginal cosmic rupture, the archetypal, history-transcending spike of vertical energy onto the unpeopled horizontal plain of "the Great Time . . . when the order of things was established."³¹ Applying Sewell's theory of rupture to the Bible, we are compelled to consider that the creation-narrative itself is a *series of ruptures*. The creation-narrative defines the axes by setting context *prior to* creation; creation itself is set in motion at the "point when the Eternal first touch[es] the temporal."³² The Jewish calendar measures the passage of years from this seminal rupture. Post-creation ruptures recorded in the Book of Genesis are each followed by their own cascade of structural repairs and cultural rearticulations: the creation of Adam, the rupture of Adam's body to create Eve, the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, the murder of Abel, the erection of the Tower of Babel and the rupture of human linguistic unity, the Flood, and Abraham's transformative journey—far from a definitive list—each constitute a cardinal "cultural" rupture: each touches off other ruptures, durably transforms social structures, and is in turn followed by other formative and transformative ruptures within the narrative of the formation of the Hebrew nation.³³ Each of these ruptures, then, is a rearticulation of the dynamic of the cosmic rupture of creation, an echo of that disruptive event.

From both the historical and theological perspectives, Halivni's hermeneutic also has its roots in cosmic rupture: Lurianic Kabbalah saw creation itself as ruptured, and the Kabbalists' metaphysical approach to the reification of history was their principal means of responding to the rupture of the Exile from Spain.³⁴ Halivni's approach, like that of Isaac Luria and his disciples, constitutes an attempt to close the deep spiritual and existential wound caused by a historical event whose cosmic sources, its interpreters claimed, reside beyond human comprehension and divine intervention. From a theological perspective, Halivni's hermeneutic requires us to reexamine the way Judaism *must employ teshuvah to respond to the reverberations of cosmic rupture*. *Teshuvah*—here, the restoration of divine-human equilibrium after cosmic rupture—and cosmic rupture itself, *both* have their origins "beyond the ravages of time, beyond the natural processes of generation and decay."³⁵ The possibility, and the *reality*, of cosmic rupture descending into history is precisely what makes a redefined *teshuvah* essential: creation manifests in history, ordering reality by rupturing the "unformed and void" earth (Gen. 1:2). Creation is an inherently *dis-ruptive*, disorderly, and disordering process. *Teshuvah*, as a response to the presence of disruptive energy in every moment of being, must be employed in repair and rearticulation in the constant unfolding of Creation.

The seminal events in Biblical history are not summoned or preserved with historiographical precision, but with what Assmann, quoting Aby Warburg, refers to

²⁹ Assmann, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," 129.

³⁰ David Ellenson, "Eternity and Time," in *20th Century Jewish Religious Thought*, 191.

³¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 57.

³² Paul Mendes-Flohr, "History," in *20th Century Jewish Religious Thought*, 372.

³³ Sewell, "Events as Transformations of Structures," 843.

³⁴ *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. "Gershom Scholem," by Shaul Magid, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/scholem/> (accessed January 3, 2011).

³⁵ Ellenson, "Eternity and Time," 190.

as “retrospective contemplativeness,”³⁶ intended to make the meaning of an event accessible again across the historical expanses that may have intervened. The vertical pegs of theophanic intervention thus serve to mark and secure the horizontal temporal landscape with repeated manifestations of divine will. “It is above all God’s acts of intervention in history, and man’s responses to them, be they positive or negative, that must be recalled.”³⁷ It was this very perception of history that the Nazis were determined to rupture.

To defeat the Jewish messianic threat required the discrediting of history as sacred process. The Jews had had the profound audacity to offer their own tortured history as proof of this world’s promise, a challenge the Nazis accepted. If Jewish history could be aborted, then Marxists, liberal democrats, and all other adherents of ‘Judaic ideological derivatives,’ whom Hitler so despised, would not again dare to imagine a just culmination to history.³⁸

If history is discredited as a sacred process, Jewish cultural memory is delegitimized and the Covenant is rendered absurd. Can the desacralization of history and the delegitimization of Jewish cultural memory be said to have initiated with God? It is a question whose very basis Halivni rejects. “God, as it were, restrained Himself from taking part in history and gave humanity an opportunity to display its capacities, for good or for evil. It is our misfortune that, in the time of the *Shoah*, humanity displayed its capacities for unprecedented evil.”³⁹ Halivni’s view is at odds with that of Yerushalmi, who notes that the rabbis, for whom “the biblical record seemed capable of illuminating every further historical contingency,”⁴⁰ attributed suffering to sin, which was punishable *per* the terms of an eternal and unchanging covenantal relationship. The proclamation of “Scripture as the blueprint of history—past, present, and future”⁴¹ is what causes Jewish cultural memory to contextualize rupture with breaches of covenantal commitment and resultant retribution from God.

Halivni’s view suggests that the world is the way it is because divinity *acts*; it *intrudes* upon a shapeless and formless world. It manifests its actuality and its disruptive essence *prior* to human consciousness. It acts to regenerate self-contraction to permit human free will even though such self-contraction permits the full range of human moral action. Cosmic rupture, as seen from the Kabbalistic perspective articulated by Halivni, does not result from God’s abandonment but from God’s own efforts at renewal of the parameters of the Covenant. The *Shoah*, then, *requires* teshuvah to complete the renewal and rearticulation of Jewish social and theological structures—and of creation itself. Teshuvah answers the anthropotropic regeneration of *tsimtsum* with a theotropic absorption of rupture and healing of cultural memory. Halivni’s hermeneutic of rupture transforms the memory of the *Shoah* into an essential component of Jewish identity and continuity. This is the reintegration of theophanic energy and human free will around which Jewish cultural memory has been established and reestablished.

It must be reemphasized here that the only equivalence between the *Shoah* and any other rupture in history, in Halivni’s view, would be its facticity. Seeking the *Shoah*’s origins in cosmic rupture is not an attempt to find a “reason” for the murder of six million men, women and children. Nor is the repair of rupture an affirmation of that rupture, or a gnostic or nihilistic justification thereof. Again, the search for reasons, to Halivni, is obscene, as it implies that rational explanation for such monstrosity could exist. A search for concordances in social and cosmic structure, however, enables contemplating human participation in the repair and rearticulation of social structures as a means of initiating or assisting in cosmic repair.

³⁶ Assmann, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” 129.

³⁷ Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 11.

³⁸ Yossi Klein Halevi, “Survival,” in *20th Century Jewish Religious Thought*, 948.

³⁹ Halivni, *Breaking the Tablets*, 32.

⁴⁰ Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 22.

⁴¹ David G. Roskies, “Memory,” in *20th Century Jewish Religious Thought*, 582.

Rupture and Rearticulation

The centrality of rupture—the sacred status accorded the driven, vertical spike—stamps Judaism with its indelible dialectical pattern. It is only through *teshuvah* and the concomitant healing and rearticulation of rupture that “the historical event becomes a theophany, in which are revealed not only Yahweh’s will but also the personal relations between him and his people.”⁴² Judaism’s history relies on rupture and *teshuvah* for the movement and meaning of its narrative and for the making and mending of the fabric of Jewish cultural memory.

Teshuvah, a restorative force rooted beyond the “horizontal” temporal horizon, is essential for restoring divine-human equilibrium when cosmic rupture opens a chasm between humanity and God. Although the *Shoah* is an historical category unto itself, one must ask: Is there any other single event in Jewish history that bore even remote resonance—from which a cascade of ruptures descended not only upon Judaism but upon the societies in which Jewish communities existed? It is important to note that Lurianic Kabbalah fashioned its metahistorical myth in response to the unprecedented rupture of the Expulsion from Spain. The Kabbalists held that the Expulsion was a rupture that echoed the Exodus and Mt. Sinai, revealing God’s active participation in the history of Judaism and the Jews, re-revealing worldly rupture as a symptom of divine rupture. And so it was that

[a]t the end of the sixteenth century those Jews who still sought the meaning of Jewish historical suffering and of the length of exile found it in the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria and his disciples, which spread out from a Galilean hill town to rapidly conquer the Jewish world. It is surely more than coincidence that a people that did not yet dream of defining itself in mundane historical categories should now have found the key to its history in an awesome metahistorical myth of a pronounced gnostic character. That myth declared that all evil, including the historical evil that is Jewish exile, had its roots before history began, before the Garden of Eden was planted, before our world existed, in a primal tragic flaw that occurred at the very creation of the cosmos itself.⁴³

In the passage above, Yerushalmi notes that Lurianic Kabbalah identifies evil’s origins as residing *before the origins of history*, and characterizes the Expulsion, horn of evil, as an event that was “felt to have altered the face of Jewry and of history itself.”⁴⁴ That is, the expulsion from Spain spoke to the mystical Jewish exilic consciousness not only of the fractured relationship between the Jews and their God, but of the fractured nature of divinity. Expulsion was evidence not, or not simply, of God’s anger at Jewish abdication of covenantal responsibility, but of God’s own brokenness and, as such, in the context of covenant it invoked Jewish responsibility to work for *tikkun*. In other words, rupture was understood to be the intrusion of the cosmic into the cultural. To the mystical Kabbalistic conventicles of Safed, rupture inheres in culture and history *because it inheres in the cosmos*. “Kabbalah, the most theosophical genre of Jewish literature, held that forces within this world mirror those above and vice versa; the two can never be separated.”⁴⁵ Rupture, to the Kabbalists of Safed, was the price God paid for creation.⁴⁶ The Kabbalist had to take up this brokenness as a way of life, and seek to repair it through prayer, to “pray before their Master and to unify, through His commandments, the Holy One, blessed

⁴² Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 110.

⁴³ Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 73.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁴⁵ David Biale, *Not in the Heavens: The Tradition of Jewish Secular Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 4.

⁴⁶ Biale, “Jewish Mysticism in the Sixteenth Century,” in Paul E. Szarmach, ed., *An Introduction to the Medieval Mystics of Europe: Fourteen Original Essays* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 322.

be He, and His Shekhinah.⁴⁷ Covenantal commitment required Jews to enact cosmic repair as a means of regaining *shlemut*, or wholeness; of cultivating *devekut*, or cleaving to God; and of hastening redemption, that eschatological endpoint in which man would be restored to God, God to man, and God to Godself.⁴⁸ No history was merely the record of the interaction of men and of nations; no Jewish suffering was merely the result of those interactions. The “deeds of other nations that were profoundly affecting Israel’s vital interests also came to be regarded as wrought by Yahweh.”⁴⁹

For Kabbalists such as Cordovero, *teshuvah* was an essential element of restoring divine wholeness. After all, “the physical world was created with the letter *hei* [ה],” which provides a large opening (at the bottom) for sin, and a small opening (at the upper left) for *teshuvah*. “Therefore, when a person does *teshuvah*, that is to say, *tashuv hei*, when he returns the *hei* to its proper place, then the Holy One, Blessed be He, will return his *Shekhinah* to him.”⁵⁰

From Contemporary Catastrophe to Cultural Memory

The drawing of similarities between the Expulsion from Spain and the Revelation at Sinai exemplifies the use of a hermeneutic of rupture to heal radical disjunction between past and present and between memory and history; and to begin the process of *teshuvah*, that is, of turning rupture from collective trauma into cultural memory. Such a strategy retrospectively endows rupture with theophanic energy and reconfirms the applicability of sacred text to even the unthinkable made manifest. Confronted with the unthinkable, Halivni turns to the hermeneutic of rupture. Yet he refuses to attribute the rupture of the *Shoah*, “the revelation at Auschwitz,” to divine agency. In this way, he establishes covenantally-inflected connections between the *Shoah* and cultural memory while making clear that the *Shoah* was not the result of divinely initiated rupture. This eases what would otherwise be unbearable tension between sacral and cultural memory, and initiates the reintegration of human (horizontal) and divine (vertical) responsibility into harmonious relationship.

However, even though rupture inheres in the reconstitutive force of *teshuvah* in Jewish cultural memory, cosmic rupture demands the development of hermeneutical strategies to comprehend its sources and its theological significance. Halivni’s hermeneutic, initiating transformation of the unthinkable into a contextualized artifact of cultural memory, is *itself* reliant on rupture—in his particular experience of the rupture the *Shoah* caused in his life’s work, and the personal rearticulation that the *Shoah* demands of survivors:

A sensitive survivor must recognize that there was a collapse of norms. Everything we held dear, everything we thought must be, and everything we thought must be pursued turned to naught. The *Shoah* signifies that whatever one considered the pattern of life one should choose—the ideal standard—collapsed. And if you are sensitive, in the face of this collapse you must reexamine what you stood for. You can put it as a test: If not for the *Shoah*, what would you be doing? If the answer is, “The same,” then know that this is wrong. If you were teaching literature, for example, that literature failed, betrayed you. Something must be changed. Something must be different, intellectually—cannot be the same, should not be the same. So somebody who studied Talmud before and studies Talmud after has this problem. Something must be different.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Moses Cordovero, *Or Ne’erav*, 11a.

⁴⁸ R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo: Lawyer and Mystic* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1977), 94.

⁴⁹ Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Street Press, 1963), 23.

⁵⁰ Moses Cordovero, *The Palm Tree of Deborah*, trans. Rabbi Moshe Miller (Jerusalem: Targum Press 1993), 22, 26.

⁵¹ Halivni, *The Book and the Sword*, 160.

Halivni refers here to his pioneering method of text-critical Talmud study. It consists of four steps: first, learning text in the traditional manner; second, engaging in critical study of the traditional interpretation; third, determining “if the interpretations are not satisfactory, if the pieces of the text do not fit. If this is so, it is because sometime in the past an element of the text was mistransmitted or problematically arranged. All the pieces need to be reassembled differently from the way they were before.”⁵² The final, most intuitive step is one that Halivni has trouble teaching others to master. This step involves identifying compositional irregularities that may have caused or required exegetical contortion on the part of the sages who redacted the Talmud, and here Halivni is guided by the dialectical task “of criticizing tradition, but of holding steadfastly to it. Criticizing affirms that something went wrong—badly wrong, deeply wrong. Yet there must be something to come home to.”⁵³ Employing source-critical hermeneutical and exegetical methodology while remaining faithful to tradition, to Halivni, “reveals the original context and meaning of the sage’s words,” and in so doing works “to restore the dignity of our sages of blessed memory. It restores the dignity of the text, which in turn bestows dignity on its authors; but it does so at the expense of questioning traditional reliability.”⁵⁴ Halivni’s text-critical method represents the form of *teshuvah* we have explored: it is a turning of experience of rupture back toward the sacred. His Talmud study employs and explores rupture rather than engaging in rabbinic casuistry to elide its inconsistencies; and, in the process, revealing that rupture can further reveal and rearticulate the holy, not only undermine it.

Conclusion: Rupture, Response, Remembering

The trope of rupture, response, and remembering—the structure that undergirds our revised definition of *teshuvah*—is clearly present in Halivni’s response to and confrontation with the rupture of the *Shoah*, as well as in his source-critical method of Talmud study. His hermeneutic ruptures traditional modes, rearticulating Talmudic methodology while remaining firmly within the framework of tradition. It seeks to bring the reader into a search for the hidden or the lost, admitting the possibility of flaws and errors (or ruptures) in the compilation of sacred text. From a social-theoretical perspective, Halivni’s hermeneutic is rupture born of rupture. It emerges from but rearticulates existing hermeneutical methodologies, demanding rigorous critical-historical analysis without abandoning or flouting traditional spiritual perspectives. It is, to paraphrase Löwith, a progression and return from alienation to reconciliation; it is a confrontation and an embrace of traditional contextualization and precedent. In positing the source of the *Shoah* as the regeneration of the vacuum designated for human free will, Halivni demands, in essence, that the God of history be seen as having departed from history and urged also to return, or practice, *teshuvah*. The opening in the letter ה must also permit God to practice *teshuvah*, which is simultaneously theotropic and anthropotropic:

Repentance requires both a human initiative and a response from God; consider the parable of a prince who was far away from his father—a hundred days’ journey away. His friends said to him: Return to your father. He replied: I cannot, I do not have the strength. Thereupon, his father sent word to him saying: Come back as far as you are able, and I will go the rest of the way to meet you. So the Holy One says to Israel: ‘Return to me, and I shall return to you’ (Malachi 3:7).⁵⁵

Teshuvah, after the *Shoah*, must serve as a means of sustaining cultural memory by reintegrating its horizontal and vertical directionalities. Having long viewed

⁵² *Ibid.*, 150.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Midrash Pesikta Rabbati* 44:9. Viewed at http://www.hillel.org/NR/rdonlyres/82FEE6A9-FDF8-404E-ADCB-7D0280D032C9/0/YK_teshuvah2.pdf, December 19, 2010.

history as the playing out of redemption through divine intervention, Judaism was confronted in the *Shoah* with the ultimate challenge. “Parodying God, the Nazis chose the Jewish people as their testing ground to prove the absence of a historical plan.”⁵⁶ Judaism’s transcendent challenge was to experience God’s *absence* in history and *still* know God was present; to see the Covenant ruptured, if not abrogated, and to nonetheless see in the existential threat itself the possibility, the necessity of *teshuvah*, in the form of divine-human harmony inching toward restoration. If the ontological and epistemological foundations of Judaism could survive such a threat, the key to that survival would be found in the mystical understanding of the brokenness of the cosmos. It can be found in God’s own need to *maintain and periodically regenerate a rupture, devoid of God’s own saving presence*, in order to preserve space for human free will. When untrammelled human free will fills a vacuum it is no longer possible to say that “everything is in the hands of heaven except the fear of heaven.” (*Berakhot* 33b). When the vacuum is in the midst of regeneration, the hands of heaven are removed from the vertical plane of history. The abandonment of humanity to the consequences of its own unchecked free will, as during the *Shoah*, would require not only pleas to God but searches in the crevices of cosmic rupture for shards of transcendent meaning.

The *Shoah*’s origins reside in a singular form of rupture: within God’s capacity to help repair but not prevent. *Teshuvah*, under such circumstances, becomes the responsibility of both God and humanity, but, as the Midrash stipulates, humanity must ‘come back as far as it is able,’ hoping that God will ‘come the rest of the way.’ *Teshuvah*, a “return to one’s source,”⁵⁷ is critical to the re-harmonization of the horizontal and vertical planes of Jewish existence. *Teshuvah* is not only possible but vital even after—*especially* after—a rupture that occurs beyond the vertical axis of God’s dominion over creation. With his hermeneutic of rupture, Halivni has applied a mystical perspective to the impossible task of bridging the “unbridgeable distance between God’s governance of the universe and human understanding.”⁵⁸ He has demonstrated this form of *teshuvah*, lifting cultural memory from the ruins caused by cosmic rupture. He finds a means to reunite Judaism’s “horizontal” cultural memory—its self-reflexive understanding of its horizontal passage through history—with its “vertical” aspirations; that is, the mystical passages through brokenness lead, if not to wholeness, then to a recovery from rupture and a rearticulation of a Jewish understanding of the cosmos and its own role therein. Halivni’s hermeneutic of rupture simultaneously honors and rearticulates traditional exegetical strategies and theological positions. It identifies the *Shoah*’s sources without daring to assert a rationalization of its causes. And it preserves the possibility, the efficacy, the necessity of *teshuvah*, which, in the context of post-*Shoah* Judaism, is a return across the existential and theological chasm created by cosmic rupture manifest in history. It is a leap from the horizontal toward the vertical—from the world-historical toward the transcendent—and toward restored hope for a commensurate, compassionate response.

⁵⁶ Halevi, “Survival,” in *20th Century Jewish Religious Thought* (see note 2), 948.

⁵⁷ Luz, “Repentance,” in *ibid.*, 785.

⁵⁸ Jonathan Sacks, *Crisis and Covenant: Jewish Thought after the Holocaust* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1992), 35.



In Memoriam