

## Review Essay

*Tsimtsum and Modernity: Lurianic Heritage in Modern Philosophy and Theology*, edited by Agata Bielik-Robson and Daniel H. Weiss (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2021), 472 pp.

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### Western Philosophy's Sources in the Lurian Kabbalah

R. Joseph Dov Soloveitchik was, to my knowledge, the first to observe that the concept of negation in *tsimtsum* has a parallel in Hegel's dialectic,<sup>1</sup> in lectures delivered at Yeshiva University in 1950 (of which a transcript is published in this issue of *Hakirah*).<sup>2</sup> Seven years later, the Israeli historian of *tsimtsum*, Gershom Scholem, made the same observation in lectures not published until 1970.<sup>3</sup> Scholem was not only his generation's outstanding scholar of kabbalistic sources, but also a student of Gottlob Frege, the founder of mathematical logic. It is fortunate that we have R.

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<sup>1</sup> Except perhaps for Hegel himself. See Note 9.

<sup>2</sup> "Aristotle said that history is not a science because it does not deal with the eternal and the immutable. This holds only when history is regarded as a series of facts. But if history has meaning, then Aristotle's words are nonsensical. In history there is necessity and rationality. If history is not sensation [forced on the human] but an experience [where the human participates], then evil must be weaved into it and consequently evil too is endowed with method and purpose. It was Hegel and Heraclitus who believed that the negation of life and evil is a creative force."

<sup>3</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Über einige Grundbegriffe des Judentums* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), p. 74. English speakers know Scholem's work mainly through his 1938 lectures collected in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Shoken, 1946). During the subsequent twenty years, Scholem's view of Lurian *tsimtsum* changed. In 1938 he saw the Safed Kabbalists as a response to the disaster of the 1492 exile from Spain; in 1957 he saw the Lurian *tsimtsum* as a revolutionary solution to the philosophical riddles that plagued neo-Platonism.

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Robert Blau's transcript of R. Soloveitchik's 1950 lectures, and it is unfortunate that Scholem's lectures are not available in English.

I will argue (following suggestions in R. Soloveitchik's lectures) that this parallel is profound: Hegel's concept of limitation, delineated most clearly in his mathematical writing, parallels the Arizal's doctrine of Divine self-contraction. Where Hegel looks for a "border" between the finite and the infinite, the Lurian Kabbalah investigates the boundary between an infinite God and finite creation, and between the holy and profane. In an earlier essay for *Hakirah*, I reported that R. Soloveitchik drew extensively on Hegel's *Science of Logic* in his 1947 Lectures on *Bereishis*.<sup>4</sup> R. Soloveitchik's presentation of Kabbalah helps clarify the parallels as well as the deep divergences between rabbinic and Western philosophical sources. It also helps clear away a great deal of confusion on the subject, reflected in the volume of essays under view.

So-called Christian *tsimtsum*—a contradiction in terms—has been a source of misdirection since the Lutheran Hebraist Johann Reuchlin wrote *De Arte Cabalistica* in 1517.<sup>5</sup> Christian Knorr von Rosenroth published Latin translations of Hebrew sources in 1684, which had an enormous and not entirely wholesome influence on subsequent German philosophy. Scholem argues convincingly that the intrusion of neo-Platonic thinking into medieval Jewish sources is responsible in large measure for the confusion, which continues to the present day and the present volume of essays.

Prof. Bielek-Robson, the book's co-editor, wants to Christianize the Lurian *tsimtsum*, for example by conflating the Arizal's concept of Divine self-contraction (*tsimtsum*) with the wholly unrelated Christian notion of *kenosis* (Jesus' "self-emptying" of his divinity). Even worse, Bielek-Robson and many of the contributors to this farrago construe the Lurian *tsimtsum* as a variant of the ecstatic *Schärmerei* of Gentile mysticism, of which R. Soloveitchik said in the newly published lectures: "The mystic freezes his own personality and receives. He does not act. Peace is the motif of the mystic. The catalytic dizziness is one of the methods the mystic employs to attain Divine association. A mystic is self-enveloped by an infinite selflessness. The mystic becomes part of infinity."

This confusion goes as far as to conflate the Arizal with the Nazi philosopher Martin Heidegger, along with the German Idealists who preceded him (like Schelling) and the post-modernists who followed him (like Derrida). As the old joke says, anti-Semitism was getting nowhere until

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<sup>4</sup> David P. Goldman, "The Rav's Uncompleted Grand Design," *Hakirah* 29.

<sup>5</sup> Goodman, Martin, and Reuchlin, Johann, *On the Art of the Tsimtsum* (University of Nebraska Press, 1993).

the Jews got behind it, and some of the most egregious violations of scholarly standards in the book come from Jews, for example, Prof. Eliot Wolfson, author of a recent book on Heidegger and *tsimtsum*.

The term “halakhah” is mentioned only twice and in passing in the volume’s nearly 500 pages, evidence enough of the authors’ lack of elementary comprehension of Jewish sources. As R. Soloveitchik explains in his 1950 lectures:

The Kabbalistic perspective rests on Halakhah. Even theology was Halakhic to the Jewish mystic: his fulcrum is to be found in Halakhic law. The religious commandment was interpreted by the Kabbalistic mystic not allegorically, but as Divine order impregnated with transcendental and cosmic significance and endowed with meaning of cosmic proportions. A mitzvah has universal meaning and forms a miraculous bridge spanning the gap between finitude and infinity.

Bielek-Robson and her collaborators misappropriate a radiant body of Jewish thought for purposes antithetical to Judaism, without the remotest understanding of what they have made away with. It is the equivalent of an illiterate butcher stealing a *Sefer Torah* to wrap pork chops.

More is the pity, because Lurian *tsimtsum* has adumbrations in secular philosophy that help illuminate the content of the Arizal’s teaching. When R. Soloveitchik lectured on Genesis at Yeshiva University in 1947,<sup>6</sup> he paraphrased Hegel’s *Science of Logic* to illuminate the nature of creation,<sup>7</sup> as I noted in an earlier essay in *Hakirah*.<sup>8</sup> Gershom Scholem’s magisterial account of the contention between neo-Platonic and Jewish thought in the history of *tsimtsum* explicates *tsimtsum* convincingly in Hegel’s dialectical framework (his 1970 German-language monograph is mentioned nowhere in the present volume). On this more below.

*Bereishit*, the Rav explained, delineates the boundary line between non-Being leading into Being:

God introduced the system of a continuum. The transformation was not made in an instantaneous leap but by conditioning. Nihilism became positioned into non-Being, which is in the boundary of Being.

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<sup>6</sup> “Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s Lectures on Genesis: I through V,” in *Hakirah* 27; “Lectures on Genesis: VI through IX,” *Hakirah* 29.

<sup>7</sup> See Lecture VII: “Via the principle of Bereishit, God created heaven and earth. Meaning that there is a continuum from infinity to finitude. Bereishit is not Beginning but positionality of nihilism into non-Being delineating the boundary line leading into Being.”

<sup>8</sup> David P. Goldman, “The Rav’s Uncompleted Grand Design,” *Hakirah* 29. See p. 73.

Non-Being is the boundary condition of Being. The point is the boundary position of a line. Non-Being is not beyond Being but a boundary condition of Being and following a continuum. In non-Being there is the positionality of Being, as in rest—there is the positionality of motion (Newton). Boundary condition means that there is no instantaneous leap.

Hegel himself understood *tsimtsum* as a boundary between Being and Non-Being in his passing mention of *tsimtsum* in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*.<sup>9</sup> Hegel employs the Greek term *horos* to denote boundary, a word he elsewhere translates as “determinateness.”<sup>10</sup> The Rav’s understanding of Hegel coheres with Hegel’s understanding of the Lurian *tsimtsum*.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> “Das Eins ist als Princip aller Dinge ausgesprochen, wie das selbe auch der Urquell aller Zahlen ist. Wie die Zahleneinheit selber keine von allen Zahlen ist, so verhält es sich auf gleiche Weise mit Gott, dem Grund aller Dinge, dem Ensoph. Die damit zusammenhangende Emanation ist die Wirkung aus der ersten Ursache, durch Einschränkung jenes ersten Unendlichen, des fen Grenze (*horos*) sie ist.” (“The ‘One’ is expressed as the beginning of all things, just as the number ‘one’ is the original source of all numbers. Just as numerical unity itself is not one of the numbers, the same is the case with God, the ground of all things, or the En-Sof. The emanation that goes together with this is the effect of the first cause, through the contraction of this first infinite, whose boundary [*horos*] it is.”) GWF Hegel, *Vorlesungen Über die Geschichte der Philosophie, Band III* (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1844), p. 25 (author’s translation). Hegel knew the Lurian *tsimtsum* through secondary sources such as Abraham Herrera’s *Puerta Del Cielo* (1616). Herrera’s work is devoted to “fitting the Lurianic idea into the philosophical mold, i.e. of adapting En-sof to [Plotinus’] One,” as Alexander Altmann argues (see Altmann, “Lurianic Kabbala in a Platonic Key: Abraham Cohen Herrera’s *Puerta del Cielo*,” In *Hebrew Union College Annual*, vol 53 (1982).

<sup>10</sup> See Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Germany: Duncker und Humblot, 1841), p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> Hegel wrote in *The Science of Logic*: “It is customary to oppose nothing to something. Something is however already a determinate existent that distinguishes itself from another something; consequently, the nothing which is being opposed to something is also the nothing of a certain something, a determinate nothing. Here, however, the nothing is to be taken in its indeterminate simplicity. – If it is deemed more correct to oppose non-being to being, instead of nothing, there is no objection to this as regards the result, since in non-being there is contained the reference to being. Non-being is both, being and its negation as said in one: nothing as it is in becoming. But the issue, first of all, is not the form of opposition, which is at the same time the form of reference, but the abstract, immediate negation, the nothing purely for itself, negation devoid of reference – and this can also be expressed, if one so wishes, simply by saying ‘nothing.’”

Setting boundaries is the quintessence of Torah. Rav Soloveitchik wrote, “God had to emphasize to Moses that the whole Torah is contained in the words, ‘*al yebersu*,’ do not let them break through (Exodus 19: 24).”<sup>12</sup> He wrote:

A priest who enters the Heichal, the Sanctuary, is flogged, but if he enters the Holy of Holies he is punishable by death at the hands of God. He must not enter the place where the Shechinah is located... The halakha, in its sober, simple way, expresses a sublime metaphysical idea: sometimes it is necessary for there to be a tension of great fear that is manifested in retreat. God constructs universes and destroys them, says the Midrash (*Bereishis Rabbah* 3:7). YHWH is both a noun and an adjective, and in its adjectival form it expresses two ideas: the coming into being of what exists, and the annihilation of what exists.

The *tsimsum* has revealed to us the secret of the breaking of the vessels and the story of the seven “kings” (from *chesed*, lovingkindness, to *malchus*, kingdom) who ruled and “died” because they were unable “to tolerate the light that spread within them from sphere to sphere” (Eitz Chaim of R. Chaim Vital *Sha’ar Ha-kehalim*). Covering the lights streaming from the Infinite makes it possible for worlds to exist. The Divine separateness protects being.<sup>13</sup>

It is clear from the above that R. Soloveitchik’s well-known discussion of the unity of Jewish time<sup>14</sup> is a special case of finitizing the Infinite.

The most characteristically Jewish idea is the assertion that finite created man can engage the infinite creator God, and become the co-creator of the world in partnership with the infinite, uncreated God. Unlike Christianity, where God must first become something that is not God in order to engage with men, the God of Judaism never forswears his infinitude; instead, God delimits his infinity. Man can encounter God’s infinitude

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“The Eleatics were the first to give voice to the simple thought of pure being – notable among them Parmenides, who declared it to be the absolute and sole truth. In his surviving fragments, he did it with the pure enthusiasm of thought which has for the first time apprehended itself in its absolute abstraction: only being is, and nothing is not absolutely. In the oriental systems, essentially in Buddhism, it is well known that nothing, the void, is the absolute principle. – Against that simple and one-sided abstraction, the profound Heraclitus proposed the loftier, total concept of becoming and said: being is no more than nothing; or also, all flows, that is, all is becoming.” *Science of Logic* section 21.70, trans George di Giovanni (Cambridge: 2010), p. 133.

<sup>12</sup> *Festival of Freedom*, p. 71.

<sup>13</sup> Soloveitchik, *From There You Shall Seek*, p. 64.

<sup>14</sup> See Goldman 2018, pp. 118–120.

only within divinely prescribed limits. God contracts himself (*tsimtsum*) within the Holy of Holies of the Mishkan. When the Kohen Gadol enters the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur, he is separated from the Shechinah by a screen of incense. Before God appeared before all Israel at Horeb he twice (*Shemot* 19:12–13 and 19:21–22) set boundaries at the foot of the mountain and warned that to break through meant death.

The world could not exist without the boundary between the Infinite and the finite. In Heraclitus' *bon mot*, the undifferentiated, eternally unchanging One of Parmenides is indistinguishable from Nothing, because it has no differentiation, no distinguishing characteristics. That is a Greek way of viewing the issue, within the confines of the Hellenic acceptance of an uncreated world. The Jewish concept is far more radical: Man participates in the act of creation by setting boundaries that allow the world to exist, and the Halakhah determines the creative acts that specify these boundaries.

*Tsimtsum* as contraction is only one moment of the Divine encounter with the created world. Without the concept of boundary implicit in the *Sh'ar Ha-kehalim*, the act of contraction by itself does not give a complete account of the finitization of the Infinite. The undifferentiated, inaccessible Infinite as such appears to man as a *Deus Absconditus*, as non-Being.<sup>15</sup> “Inasmuch as *tsimtsum* signifies an act of negation and limitation it is also an act of judgment. It must be remembered that to the Kabbalist, judgment means the imposition of limits and the correct determination of things,” Scholem observes.<sup>16</sup>

The history of *tsimtsum* is “a struggle between the Biblical God and the god of Plotinus,” as Gershom Scholem explained in a seminal essay.<sup>17</sup> Scholem blames some of the early Kabbalists including Asriel of Gerona for adopting neo-Platonic notions. He observes that Ramban “keeps a distance from neo-Platonic language while his older countryman Asriel

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<sup>15</sup> See Soloveitchik, *Out of the Whirlwind* 136-137: “Judaism introduced the catastrophic revelation, such as experienced by Job, when God addresses Himself to man through the whirlwind... to phrase this idea in paradoxical terms – the revelation of God through His alleged abandonment and absenting Himself from man who finds himself suddenly tete-a-tete with nothingness. ....The whole idea of prayer rests upon the premise that God meets man through the latter’s encounter with non-being.”

<sup>16</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Schocken 1946) p. 335 and 411 n56.

<sup>17</sup> “Das Ringen zwischen dem biblischen Gott und dem Gott Plotins in der alten Kabbala,” (The struggle between the biblical God and the God of Plotinus in the Older *Tsimtsum*) in Scholem 1970.

[of Gerona] revels in it. It is [Asriel] who in fact introduced negative predication as a kabbalistic name of God, and laid bare the numinous halo.” Scholem adds that Asriel’s texts “were known to Johannes Reuchlin, who first undertook a more exact representation of kabbalistic doctrines in the Christian world.... Reuchlin, himself a great admirer of Nicholas of Cusa and his doctrine of the *coincidentia oppositorum* in God, sensed the relationship between the Spanish Kabbalist and the German cardinal.”<sup>18</sup>

Nonetheless, the Biblical God triumphs in the Lurian *tsimtsum*, which—as Scholem explains—resolves the nagging logical failure of Greek-derived Christian theology. If the world is not created *yesh m’ayin* (*ex nihilo*), as in Plotinus’ system, the notion of a God who intervenes in history is impossible. But if God created the world *yesh m’ayin*, another problem presents itself: God Himself was always there, and whatever He created must also come from God. The result is pantheism, as in Spinoza: The world is composed of a single infinite substance that is indistinguishable from God.

Because some of Scholem’s key work remains unavailable in English, a few key citations are worth presenting in translation:

The first act of creation cannot be an egression of God out of Himself—rather in the sense of the Thomistic formula of the *processio dei ad extra*...but rather must be God’s going into Himself, which presents the possibility a priori of a world in the first place. To be sure, God sent a ray of emanation of his light to this primal space, which arose from the act of *tsimtsum*. But at every stage this emanation is also an always-renewed, continuous self-concentration and self-withdrawal of the Divine. For if this *tsimtsum*, this contraction of God into Himself, were not continuous, there would be nothing but God himself. All Being that was not God would *eo ipso* disappear with the cessation of *tsimtsum*. In that sense, a deep dialectic thus arises after *tsimtsum*: the Nothing that arises from *tsimtsum* everywhere is entangled with Being. There is no pure Being and no pure non-Being. All that exists results from this double movement.<sup>19</sup>

And further:

If God represents perfect Being, then by his nature he cannot tolerate Nothing. If there were Nothing, then God Himself must be there. A fortiori must we ask: How can things arise which aren’t God Himself? This line of questioning led to the idea of *tsimtsum* in the thought of Isaac Luria, the most important of all the later Kabbalists,

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<sup>18</sup> Scholem 1970, pp. 24–25.

<sup>19</sup> Scholem 1970, pp. 86–87.

and his pupils. The Hebrew word *tsimtsum* means literally “contraction.” What is meant is a concentration of God’s essence into itself, a descent into His own depths, a contraction of His essence into Himself, which uniquely can represent creation *ex nihilo*, in this interpretation. Only where God withdraws ‘of himself into himself’ (in the formula used by many Kabbalists) can anything be called forth that is not itself God’s essence and God’s being... In the self-contraction of God’s essence, which in its first action turns toward itself rather than working outwards, Nothingness comes to be. Here we have an act in which Nothing is called forth.<sup>20</sup>

Scholem continues:

The Kabbalists were not at all unclear about the boldness of this apparent paradox; nonetheless this concept of a God who contracted into Himself to allow room for creation ran contrary to the concept that God himself frowns upon any movement. God as the eternally Unmoved is of course a treasured heirloom of all theology. Only at the price of a conflict with such an orthodox interpretation was it possible to realize this new concept. Now it is certain that the orthodox formula of an unmoved God has its origin in Aristotle rather than in Biblical revelation, which knows less about such an unmoved God than the theologians would have liked... The Divine as something lively is in the final analysis incompatible with the unmoved God. Such a thought could only arise when Greek thought overpowered monotheistic Biblical thinking.

In the idea of *tsimtsum* we have an infinitely bold expression for this profound turbulence in divinity itself. Only through this idea did the later Kabbalists believe it possible to attain a concept of the world in which things outside of the Divine essence could exist. In other words, *tsimtsum* in the sense of the Kabbalists provided a determination that made sense of the notion of the absolute freedom of God in creation to begin with... The first action of creation therefore cannot be an egression of God from himself—something like the Thomistic formula of *processio dei ad extra*... rather, it must be God’s going into Himself.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Gershom Scholem, “Schöpfung aus Nichts und Selbstverschränkung Gottes,” in *Über einige Grundbegriffe des Judentums* (Suhrkamp: 1970), pp. 85–86. Author’s translation.

<sup>21</sup> Scholem, op. cit., pp. 86-87.



The parallels between the Lurian *Tsimtsum* and Hegel's dialectic, Scholem notes, are striking.<sup>22</sup> R. Soloveitchik declared, "there is much truth to the fundamental contention set forth, by the dialectical philosophies of Heraclitus and Hegel," reading the fragmentary legacy of the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher as an anticipation of Hegel, as did Hegel himself.<sup>23</sup> Scholem contends, "Greek philosophy could not have thought of this concept of a creation *ex nihilo*, indeed, its premises prevented it from conceiving of it. For Plato, Aristotle and their successors through Plotinus, this thought cannot be put into force.... The unmoved Mover, as Aristotle conceives of God, and the shaper of inchoate material, as Plato knows him—both have nothing of the nature of a God who calls from his world from Nothing."

Lurian *tsimtsum* broke decisively with two elements of Jewish medieval philosophy adapted from the Greeks. The first is Aristotle's God of the Philosophers, reflected prominently in Maimonides' rehearsal of Aristotle's proofs of the existence of God. The second is Plotinus' theory of emanation.

Scholem's summary of the Lurian *tsimtsum* in terms of the interplay of Being and non-Being draws verbatim on Hegel's *Science of Logic*. We saw earlier how R. Soloveitchik drew on Hegel to instantiate the concept of

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<sup>22</sup> R. Meir Triebitz makes the same observation as Scholem but adds an important qualification. "These dual aspects of thought, unification and negation, are the basis of Hegel's philosophy of mind. In his *Logic* he writes that the pure thought of the being of things in abstraction from all further determination, is the thought of 'the pure nothing... perfect emptiness... or rather empty imitation of thought itself.' The clash between the two lights of *chesed* and *din* results in the creation of the first vessel. The purpose of this vessel is to contain the original illumination of light. After this there is a second expansion which does not leave an impression, a *reshimu*, like the first, but its external dimension accommodates itself perfectly in the first vessel. This second dichotomy of *chesed* and *din* which is an expression of the dichotomy from the human subject and external object is now mediated through this vessel. It would appear that this is analogous to Hegel's third syllogism in his *Encyclopedia – The Philosophy of Mind*. There, the dialectic of nature and logic are mediated by mind, or spirit. The tripartite of nature, logic and spirit was, for Hegel, the phenomenology of the mind which brings man to God and transcendence. It is however at this point that Hegel and the Arizal take different paths. Hegel called his philosophy the final philosophy, whereas for the Arizal, it was only the beginning. Hegelian philosophy is primarily Christian in nature — it is based upon the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Ghost. The Arizal's *tsimtsum*, conversely, is an expression of the inevitable self-destruction of Christianity, and the triumph of Yaakov over Esav." Reshimu, <http://www.hashkafacircle.com/reshimu-24>

<sup>23</sup> "The Rav's Uncompleted Grand Design," *Hakirah* 29 (2021), p. 82.

creation *ex nihilo* in his 1947–1948 lectures on Genesis at Yeshiva University. I am aware of no interaction between Scholem and R. Soloveitchik, but the similarity of their view is not surprising given their education in philosophy in 1920s Germany. Scholem is perhaps *too* Hegelian. His student Moshe Idel and other scholars of the next generation criticize him for proposing a philosophical interpretation of Kabbalah at the expense of the living tradition in Jewish communities, with some justification. Formally, the Hegelian dialectic of Being and non-Being maps onto the Lurian account of *yesh m'ayin*. Missing from Hegel, though, is any notion of God's intervention in history. "When does the antithesis become creative?" the Rav asked in his 1950 lectures. "For Hegel it was metaphysical: evil negates itself and drives itself to absurdity. But antithesis can become creative only if man understands its meaning. Marx and Hegel did not answer why the result of an antithesis is better than the evil itself."

Scholem's explanation of *tsimtsum* as a resolution of the apparent logical inconsistency embodied in creation *yesh m'ayin* (if nothing but God existed before the act of creation, how could there be anything that is not God?) is unexceptionable. "In the idea of *tsimtsum* we have an infinitely bold expression for this deep turbulence (*Bewegtheit*) in divinity itself. And with this idea it was possible for the later Kabbalists to have a concept of the world in which things outside of God's essence could exist."<sup>24</sup>

But if *tsimtsum* were nothing more than the solution to a logical problem in theology, we would expect non-Jewish philosophers to consider it. Some researchers claim to detect a notion of "contraction" which can be found in early neo-Platonic sources.<sup>25</sup> The indifferent, remote One of Plotinus contemplates itself and emanates thought, and subsequent philosophers of his school described this primeval self-movement with the Greek term *stasis*, translated into Latin as *contractio*. A century before Isaac Luria, the Catholic philosopher Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464) proposed a "metaphysic of contraction,"<sup>26</sup> mistakenly cited as a precedent for *tsimtsum* by

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<sup>24</sup> Scholem 1970, p. 86.

<sup>25</sup> See Leo Catana, *The International Journal of the Platonic Tradition* 7 (2013): "Thinkers like Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464) and Giordano Bruno were certainly aware of a hierarchy of being in the Platonic tradition (including Plotinus' contribution, in the case of Bruno), but their critical and innovative attention was not directed against a stratified system, but against the concept denoting the relationship between the One, Intellect, Soul and matter, namely the Latin noun *contractio*, translated from the Greek noun *systasis*, denoting an enfolded relationship between these realities."

<sup>26</sup> See Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa's Metaphysic of Contraction* (Arthur J. Banning: Minneapolis 1983).

several writers including Hans Blumenberg.<sup>27</sup> Cusa envisions the God of Plotinus “expanding” to generate the unity of all things and “contracting” to make possible the differentiation of individual things; it is an interesting and original solution to the one-and-many problem of Parmenides, but is a footnote in the history of philosophy that has little to do with the Lurian *tsimtsum*. Christian missionaries nonetheless cite these seeming precedents to discredit *tsimtsum*; according to one prominent missionary proselytizing in Israel, “Kabbalistic teaching is largely incompatible with Scripture and sound philosophy, and it does not have the Jewish pedigree it claims for itself.”<sup>28</sup>

But *tsimtsum* is more than the logical resolution of a philosophical problem; that is only its external, formal expression. “Creation to *tsimtsum* is a great Divine tragedy, the true unity of God was disturbed by the introduction of a diversity of aspects by which we can see Him,” said R. Soloveitchik in the 1950 lectures. Non-being for Judaism is not the verbal game of Greek philosophy.<sup>29</sup> It is a terrifying encounter with the void, as the Rav wrote:

Judaism introduced the catastrophic revelation, such as experienced by Job, when God addresses Himself to man through the whirlwind. This doctrine of the catastrophic is the most unique in the history of the philosophy of suffering: God’s revelation in the dark night of existence, or—to phrase this idea in paradoxical terms—the revelation of God through His alleged abandonment and absencing Himself from man who finds himself suddenly tête-à-tête with nothingness... Through the catastrophe, God reveals Himself to man, and man, out of the depths and darkness, calls out and discloses his heart

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<sup>27</sup> Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (MIT Press, 1985), p. 661 n. 95. Blumenberg writes of “the ‘restriction’ that the Cusan conceives the Infinite and Indefinite as undergoing, in order to become a universe, a maximum contractum that, although it is an ‘everything,’ a universe, still only represents a possibilitas contracta with its gradus contractionis; the posse fieri contractum ad id quod fit (De venatione sapientiae 38, 114; also see De docta ignorantia II 4–8). A century later the concept of contractio recurs in the ‘Zimzum’ of the Kabbalist Isaac Luria, the self-restriction of God in which ‘of His own accord he draws Himself into Himself’ and thus makes it possible for something to exist that is not Himself.”

<sup>28</sup> Brian Crawford, “The Worldview of Tsimtsum: A Brief Guide for the Perplexed.” *Chosen People Ministries*. <https://www.lcje-na.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Crawford.Worldview-of-Tsimtsum.pdf>.

<sup>29</sup> See Kahn, Charles H., “The Greek Verb ‘To Be’ and the Problem of Being” (1965). *The Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Newsletter*. 95. <https://orb.binghamton.edu/sagp/95>

to God. The whole idea of prayer rests upon the premise that God meets man through the latter's encounter with non-being.<sup>30</sup>

The vessels of the world broke apart when the primal Divine light filled them. Prayer is the human response to catastrophe, but this response must be bounded by Halakhah: "...it is normally only in the context of *Shimonei Esrei* that we are allowed to pray at all. The approach to the infinite God engendered by prayer is a brazen act, and only through specific halachic authorization does prayer have legitimacy."<sup>31</sup>

Under the broad heading of Kabbalah, to be sure, neo-Platonic notions appear that are alien to the Lurian concept of *tsimtsum*. These alien elements in turn were appropriated by Christian writers under the rubric of "Christian kabbalah." Plotinus' thinking is alien to Judaism. "God is too distant and abstract to concern Himself with man's existence," R. Soloveitchik explains in the 1950 lectures. "Plotinus describes God as the primordial Oneness devoid of all anthropomorphic characteristics. He is beyond existence and activity and is the root of everything. God is the unconditional One because He is beyond everything, being the root of everything. Man must sink into selflessness, the apathy of endlessness, to experience God." The Lurian Kabbalah proposes halachic activity rather than the passive contemplation of Plotinus, and the reasoned exactitude of Jewish law rather than the mystical notion of ecstasy.

R. Soloveitchik's sketch of a Jewish philosophy rooted in halakhah shows a remarkable affinity to Scholem's observation that phenomenology would have served *tsimtsum* better than the emanation theory of Plotinus. But I do not know whether the Rav would have accepted the radical dictum that Scholem offered in an enigmatic set of "ahistorical aphorisms":

One might view the doctrine of emanation as the actual misfortune of *tsimtsum* (as in the case of many unrealized forms of mysticism). The insights of the Kabbalists pertain to the structures of Being. There was nothing more disastrous than to confuse these structures with the doctrine of emanation. The confusion perverted their most perspicacious approaches, in favor of the most complacent and intellectually lazy of all theories. [The 16<sup>th</sup>-century Kabbalist Moses] Cordovero would have brought his work to fruition better as a Phenomenologist than as a pupil of Plotinus. The attempt to construct the thought of the Kabbalists without using emanation theory and to bring it to its conclusion would have been the settlement of a debt that a true student of Cordovero would have had to take upon himself, if such a student there ever should be. The objective content of

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<sup>30</sup> *Out of the Whirlwind*, pp. 136–137.

<sup>31</sup> *Before Hashem You Will Be Purified*, p. 55.

Kabbalistic literature is inaccessible in the form of theosophical typography in which it is taken up in the literature. The conflict between mystical Nominalism and light-symbolism in the Kabbalistic writings arises from this unresolved tension between its most significant intentions and its inability to bring them to pure expression.<sup>32</sup>

Hegel's philosophy of history, which we know from posthumously published student notes, presents a progression to a State guided by reason, a concept banalized in Francis Fukuyama's celebrated term "the end of history." Notionally a Christian, Hegel was thoroughly secular, and his dialectic when applied to the progress of humanity became an empty formalism. Hegel shone in the philosophy of mathematics (and it is in that capacity that R. Soloveitchik cited him in the Genesis Lectures). His explication of the concept of the limit of a convergent infinite series in the Calculus exercised a deep and beneficial influence on the mathematical discoveries of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the estimation of recent research, as I reported in an earlier essay.<sup>33</sup> The setting of a boundary between the Infinite and the finite—the most characteristic of all Jewish actions—has a striking parallel in this paramount discovery of modern mathematics.

The simplest and clearest example of a boundary between finite and infinite is the concept of limit in calculus, for which Hegel offered a spirited philosophical defense. This stands in contrast to the fuzzy, almost

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<sup>32</sup> "Als das eigentliche Unglück der Kabbala darf man vielleicht (wie bei vielen nicht nach Hause gekommenen Formen der Mystik) die Emanationslehre betrachten. Die Einsichten der Kabbalisten betrafen Strukturen des Seienden. Nichts verhängnisvoller, als den Zusammenhang dieser Strukturen mit der Emanationslehre zu konfundieren. Diese Konfusion. pervertiert ihre aussichtsreichsten Ansätze zugunsten der bequemsten und denkfaulsten aller Theorien. Cordovero wäre als Phanomenologe eher nach Hause gekommen denn als Schuler Plotins. Der Versuch, das Denken der Kabbalisten ohne Benutzung der Emanationslehre aufzubauen (und zu Ende zu denken), wäre [should be wäre] die Begleichung der Schuld, die ein echter Schuler Cordoveros auf sich zu nehmen hatte, wenn es einmal einen geben sollte. In der Form der theosophischen Topographie, die die kabbalistischen Lehren in der Literatur angenommen haben, bleibt ihr sachlicher Gehalt unzugänglich. Der Widerstreit des mystischen Nominalismus und der Lichtsymbolik in den kabbalistischen Schriften stammt aus dieser unausgetragenen Spannung zwischen ihren bedeutendsten Intentionen und ihrer Unfähigkeit, ihnen zu reinem Ausdruck zu verhelfen." Number seven of Scholem's "Ten Ahistorical Aphorisms on Tsimtsum," quoted in David Biale, "Gershom Scholem's Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms on Tsimtsum: Text and Commentary," in *Modern Judaism*, Vol. 5, No. 1, *Gershom Scholem Memorial Issue* (Feb., 1985), pp. 67–93.

<sup>33</sup> Goldman 2021.

mystical notion of the infinitesimal. The incomprehensible notion of a series of numbers too small to be perceived, but which nonetheless added up to a finite sum, confused the mathematicians and their attendant philosophers, including Kant, Salomon Maimon, and Hermann Cohen.<sup>34</sup> The mathematician does not contemplate the ineffability of the infinitesimals, but rather derives a limit for a convergent infinite series. The elements of the series remain finite; the series itself remains infinite; and the limit finitizes the infinite series.

Removed from the context of Hegel's exposition of mathematics, his concept of "limitation" seems obscure. Below for example is Sir Roger Scruton's summary of Hegel's dialectic:

Of necessity, it begins from the single most indeterminate concept—that which is contained in all concepts and yet which is logically precedent to them, the concept of being. But what is being, considered as 'unmediated' by reflection, and as free from extraneous determinations? It is, surely, nothing, or (as the English translators of Hegel prefer to write it) Nothing...Hence the concept of being contains within itself its own negation—nothing—and the dialectical opposition between these two concepts is resolved only in the passage to a new concept. This concept is 'becoming', which captures the truth contained in that previous opposition, the truth of the passage of being into nothing and nothing into being. To our impersonal thinker the world now appears as becoming rather than as being, and this perception is 'truer' than the preceding one, although as yet far short of that absolute truth in which all such oppositions will be resolved. Becoming seems to be a specifically 'temporal' characteristic, but we cannot assume at this stage that the 'temporal' character of Hegel's logic is anything more than a metaphor. From the point of view of logic 'becoming' suffers from the same defects as 'being'; it generates its own contradiction out of 'the equipoise of arising and passing away'. So it gives way to a higher truth, which is that of 'determinate being', in which being and nothing are finally reconciled. Determinate being is that more familiar, less abstract, form of existence of which our world presents us with examples: being becomes determinate by being limited and so, as it were, incarnate in a certain identity.<sup>35</sup>

Scruton's use of the passive voice ("being becomes determinate by being limited") is confusing. Hegel's prime example of limitation is the

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<sup>34</sup> See Goldman 2021, pp. 77–78.

<sup>35</sup> Sir Roger Scruton, *A Short History of Modern Philosophy* (Routledge, 1984), p. 179.

concept of the limit in the Calculus, that is, the mathematician's act of determining a limit. Limitation is an intentional act (to borrow Husserl's later use of the term).<sup>36</sup> The mitzvot are intentional acts of delimitation between the finite and the infinite, between the profane and the holy. In that sense the halakhist is comparable to a mathematician.<sup>37</sup>

Did the Arizal inspire Hegel? We cannot say with any certainty. Prof. David Biale has argued that the Lurian Kabbalists and Hegel reached the same conclusion independently but as a matter of logical necessity:

Centuries before Hegel's *Logik*, the Kabbalists understood the importance of a dialectical logic of creation. It was not so much that they anticipated Hegel as that the theological necessity of avoiding pantheism and maintaining God's transcendence led to dialectical thinking: "without transcendence, Nothingness extends down into Somethingness." In this way, mystical and rational modes of thought converged in a remarkably similar logic.<sup>38</sup>

The concept of creativity is wholly Jewish in origin; the Biblical account of creation of the world *yesh m'ayin* is the premise for human creativity that becomes possible when mortal man becomes God's partner in the continuing work of creation. The Gentile world in different ways embraced the Jewish concept of creativity, too often in a perverse fashion. Without the boundaries of *kedushah*, human creativity can become a raging, uncontrolled force that wreaks destruction in its path.

As the Rav wrote:

God never requires of man what He does not exact of Himself. The mekubalim discuss how the creation of the world is based on the concept of *tsimtsum*, or contraction. God, the Infinite, the *Ein Sof*, contracted Himself in order to allow the existence of the world. Otherwise, a finite world could not coexist with the Infinite. In keeping with the imperative of and walk in his ways (Deut. 28:9), man must also engage in *tsimtsum*. The first redemption *perutah* that God exacts

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<sup>36</sup> R. Meir Triebitz explained Husserl's importance for R. Soloveitchik's *hashkafah* in a presentation to *Hakirah's* August 30, 2020 symposium, "A New World View Out of the Sources of Halakhah."

<https://hakirah.org/Triebitz%20Hakirah%20Seminar%202020%2008%2030.mp3>

<sup>37</sup> Cf. *Halakhic Man*, p. 19.

<sup>38</sup> David Biale, "Gershom Scholem's Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms on *Tsimtsum*. Text and Commentary," in *Modern Judaism* Vol. 5, No. 1, *Gershom Scholem Memorial Issue* (Feb., 1985), pp. 67–93. The author gratefully acknowledges Prof. Biale's comments in private correspondence.

from us is our own “contraction.” Just as God Himself engages in *tsimtsum*, so must we.<sup>39</sup>

Creativity without boundaries, by contrast, turns destructive:

This concept of the obligatory nature of the creative gesture, of self-creation as an ethical norm, an exalted value, which Judaism introduced into the world, reverberates with particular strength in the world views of Kierkegaard, Ibsen, Scheler and Heidegger. In particular, the latter two set the idea of creation at the very center of their philosophies... these ideas, which were pure and holy at their inception, were profaned and corrupted in modern culture. The will was transformed by Schopenhauer into a “blind” will, while for Nietzsche it was embodied in the “superman.” Similarly, the longing for creation was perverted into the desire for brutal and murderous domination. Such views have brought chaos and disaster to our world, which is drowning in its blood.<sup>40</sup>

We can trace with some precision how the Jewish concept of creativity was “profaned and corrupted” by Gentile philosophers. A principal culprit was Hegel’s roommate at the Tübingen Stift, F.W.J. Schelling, who embraced the so-called Christian Kabbalah in the context of what he called “intellectual intuition,” that is, a mystical power of the mind to form concepts without the benefit of empirical data. A brief summary of the background is helpful at this point.

Immanuel Kant argued in his 1781 *Critique of Pure Reason* that the metaphysics of the Neo-Platonists and the Aristotelians led to “antinomies,” or irresolvable paradoxes. Reason cannot determine whether or not the world had a beginning in time and a limit in space; whether or not all substance is composed of simple parts; whether or not all events are caused by a deterministic process; and whether or not there exists a necessary being, namely God. It cannot speak of Being without distinguishing between essence and existence, but it cannot describe existence without treating it like an essence. These paradoxes were well known to the ancient Greeks, and their most vivid presentation remains the Plato dialogue “Parmenides.” They persist in the paradoxes that bedevil Set Theory to the present day. I reviewed the crisis of classical ontology in a 2015 essay for *Hakirah*.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps the single most remarkable outcome in the long history of philosophy is that the Lurian Kabbalah resolved the ontological paradoxes that stymied Greek as well as Christian metaphysics, and that

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<sup>39</sup> *Derashos HaRav*, pp. 22–33.

<sup>40</sup> *Halakhic Man*, p. 164.

<sup>41</sup> David P. Goldman, “The Jewish Idea of Freedom,” in *Hakirah* 20 (2015).



this solution cohered with—and perhaps inspired—a revolution in our understanding of nature.

One of Kant's great contributions was to demonstrate the inherent contradictions of classical metaphysics. German philosophy split in two directions in response to Kant. For Hegel, the antinomies were not a subject of static contemplation, but rather the spur to formulate better hypotheses. Every thesis will eventually run into contradictions, Hegel argued, and the task of reason (*Vernunft*) is to interrogate our present beliefs, identify their inconsistencies, override<sup>42</sup> them, and formulate a new thesis that resolves the contradictions. Correspondingly, "Being" is not a fixed condition, but a perpetual transition between Being and non-Being. At each moment of this process there must be a boundary that differentiates particular states or objects.

J. G. Fichte (1762–1814) and his student Schelling proposed instead a mystical form of contemplation of "the absolute unity of contradictions" through "intellectual intuition." In Fichte's formulation, the mind "hovers" (*schweben*) between the poles of Kant's antinomies and intuits a resolution. Hegel regarded this notion with contempt. He quotes Schelling's dictum that "intellectual intuition" cannot be expressed through reason, but rather through art: "The objectivity of intellectual intuition is art. The work of art alone reflects to me what is otherwise reflected through nothing—that absolute identical which has already separated itself in the ego itself." Hegel comments, "To the extent that the precondition for philosophy is that the individual has an unmediated intuition of the identity between subject and object, philosophy would have to be an artistic talent, a form of genius restricted to gifted children."<sup>43</sup>

"You can't say anything more than, 'You don't have intellectual intuition if this seems wrong to you.' Intellectual intuition is Fichte's power of the imagination, hovering in both directions. That eliminates the need to prove something, to make it comprehensible," Hegel concluded. The all-encompassing intellectual intuition that absorbs contradictory elements into a visionary whole confronts a homogenized landscape in which everything somehow is part of God, or as Hegel quipped in his *Phenomenology*, "a night in which all cows are black." As Rabbi Alex Ozar of Yale reports in his contribution to the present volume:

Schelling's God is intimately entwined with all there is. Every thing is as a thing dependent on God; sever the tie, interrupt the ever-

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<sup>42</sup> Hegel's verb is *Aufheben*, usually translated with the incomprehensible Latin term "sublate."

<sup>43</sup> Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie* (Germany: Duncker und Humblot, 1844), pp. 592–593.

renewing, sustaining creativity, and the thing is no more.<sup>43</sup> This he says is the correct version, or aspect, of what has come to be known as pantheism: all that there is, is in and depends on God. Thus, if “pantheism denotes nothing more than the doctrine of the immanence in things in God, every rational viewpoint must be drawn to this doctrine.”

A visionary mind fixes its attention on a world which is no more than undifferentiated manifestations of the Divine. It is not surprising that pantheism lends itself to cults of personality.

By the 1830s Schelling was a figure of ridicule. Heinrich Heine wrote, “Herr Schelling is one of those creatures to whom nature gave more inclination towards poetry than poetic potency, and who, incapable of satisfying the daughters of Parnassus, fled into the forests of philosophy and there made a barren marriage with abstract Hamadryads... The derision that the prophetic and poetic school of Herr Schelling occasioned should not be rung up to its own account, for Schelling’s idea of natural philosophy is at boom nothing other than the idea of Spinoza, namely pantheism.”<sup>44</sup>

Schelling nonetheless has an able defender in Prof. Paul Franks, an academic philosopher who learned at the Gateshead Yeshiva. Among the German Idealists, Schelling was most influenced by *tsimsum*, although the wholesomeness of this influence is debatable. Franks has examined Schelling’s influence on Jewish thinking in a series of academic papers.<sup>45</sup> “Schelling is not only the most explicitly kabbalistic of the German Idealists; he is also profoundly Lurianic,” Franks writes.<sup>46</sup> He was “also independently familiar with Christian *tsimsum* through his family.” Schelling averred that in human life, “to limit oneself, to concentrate oneself in One point, yet also to hold onto the latter with all one’s might and not to let go until it has been expanded into a world, constitutes the greatest power and perfection.... Contraction, then, is the beginning of all reality... It is exactly the descent of God that is the greatest, even in Christianity.”<sup>47</sup> The German scholar Christian Schulte, whose groundbreaking work identified the influence of *tsimsum* on German Idealism, believed “that Schelling’s

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<sup>44</sup> Heinrich Heine, *Religion and Philosophy in Germany*, Trans. John Snodgrass (SUNY Press 1986), p. 150. My translation from the original appears in the text.

<sup>45</sup> See for example Paul Franks (2019), “Mythology, essence, and form: Schelling’s Jewish reception in the nineteenth century,” *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology*, 80:1–2.

<sup>46</sup> *Tsimsum and Modernity*, p. 54.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* p. 58.

conception of contraction is based on a misunderstanding or is discontinuous with *tsimtsum*,” Franks observes, but blames this on the influence of Gershom Scholem.

Franks takes Scholem to task for ignoring Midrashic sources that characterize *tsimtsum* as “concentration” (as in the presence of the *Shekhinah* in the Holy of Holies) rather than “contraction.” Franks also asks why Scholem should accept the authority of Chaim Vital’s *Etz Hayim* at the expense of Isaac Luria’s other prominent exponent Israel Sarug. Franks inveighs: “Scholem’s opposition to philosophical interpretation of *tsimtsum* is, I suspect, one reason why he besmirches Sarug’s authenticity; Scholem wants to establish *tsimtsum* as an independent discipline with its own register of meaning.” What he means (but does not spell out) is that Scholem sought to strip *tsimtsum* of its Neo-Platonic scaffolding. Franks sees in *tsimtsum*, by contrast, “a tradition that is intimately related to Neo-Platonism, which is also animated by the problem of the emanation of multiplicity from the One, and the emanated world of the primordial human is clearly related to the emanated intellect of Plotinus.”<sup>48</sup> Where Scholem saw a “struggle between the Biblical God and the God of Plotinus in the older *tsimtsum*,” the title of a chapter in his *Grundbegriffe*, Franks sees an identity.

Franks’ defense of the Neo-Platonic presentation of the Lurian Kabbalah prepares the ground for his defense of Schelling, whose Christian kabbalah saw *tsimtsum* through a Neo-Platonic lens. The question that Franks does not address is why Vital’s presentation of Luria’s thought became standard in the Torah world rather than Sarug’s. Sarug’s pupil Abraham Herrera cast *tsimtsum* in neo-Platonic terms, and Knorr von Rosenroth’s *Kabbala Denudata* in turn cited Herrera at length.<sup>49</sup> But in the Jewish world, as Scholem reports:

The influence of the Lurianic *tsimtsum*, which from about 1630 onwards became something like the true *theologica mystica* of Judaism, can hardly be exaggerated. It taught a doctrine of Judaism which even in its most popular aspects renounced nothing of the Messianic pathos. The doctrine of *Tikkun* raised every Jew to the rank of a

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>49</sup> Yosha, Nissim. Herrera, Abraham Cohen de (c.1562–c.1635), 1998, doi:10.4324/9780415249126-J033-1. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Taylor and Francis, <https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/biographical/herrera-abraham-cohen-de-c-1562-c-1635/v-1>.

protagonist in the great process of restitution, in a manner never heard of before.”<sup>50</sup>

It is true as Franks observes that “Franz Rosenzweig drew attention to the kabbalistic dimension of Schelling’s philosophy, specifically his conception of *tsimtsum*,” as Paul Franks observes in his contribution to the Bielek-Robson book.<sup>51</sup> Rosenzweig was a great mind, but his mid-life *teshuvah* suffered from a fatal omission, namely the mitzvot, which did not enter into his system. After publishing his masterwork, *The Star of Redemption*, in 1919, he was asked if he had accepted the mitzvot. He replied, “Not yet.”

As R. Soloveitchik explains, halakhah responds to *tsimtsum* by drawing the boundaries which make possible human engagement with the Divine. Human initiative—the performance of mitzvot—sets the boundaries in partnership with God. Scholem emphasized the halakhic dimension of *tsimtsum*.<sup>52</sup> Schelling construed Divine contraction as the withdrawal from the world of an angry God; the Lurian Kabbalah rather depicts a benevolent God who bounds His own infinity so that His creatures may approach Him.

Franks in my view fails to grasp how pernicious were Christianized *tsimtsum* and Romanticized Neo-Platonism at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Another Fichte student and fellow member with Schelling of the Jena Romantics circle of the 1790s, the poet-philosopher Novalis, put it more enthusiastically: “Fichte doesn’t understand the *hypostasis*, and for this reason he lacks the other half of the creative mind. Without *Ekstase*—gripping, all-displacing consciousness—you can’t get anywhere with all of philosophy.”<sup>53</sup> Novalis sought the ecstatic state in sensual stimulation: “. . . In

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<sup>50</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Schocken: 1946), p. 284.

<sup>51</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, “‘Urzelle’ des Stern der Erlösung,” in Rosenzweig, *Zweistromland: Kleinere Schriften zu Glauben und Denken*, eds. Reinhold and Anemarie Mayer (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1984), 125; Rosenzweig, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, trans. and ed. Paul W. Franks and Michael L. Morgan (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2000), 57.

<sup>52</sup> “Alexander Altmann. . . is quite justified in regarding as one of the decisive weaknesses of classic Jewish philosophy the fact that it ignored the problem presented by the Halakhah,” wrote Scholem in 1941. . . . To the philosopher, the Halakhah either had no significance at all, or one that would diminish rather than enhance its prestige in his eyes. Entirely different was the attitude of the Kabbalists. For them the Halakah never became a province of thought in which they felt themselves strangers.”

<sup>53</sup> Hegel was at pains to distinguish Plotinus’ concept of the ecstatic state from the Romantic version. See Hegel 1844, pp 51–52.

decisive moments the process comes to a head in a comprehensive look backwards and forward, which brings together all times. Through dreams, feasts, delirium, pleasure, love and poetic inspiration, every consciousness breaks its boundaries and is lifted up over continuous time.”<sup>54</sup> Heidegger drew directly on Novalis’ notion of *Ekstase*, as well as his fascination with death. I discussed the origins of Heidegger’s Nazi philosophy in the early Romantic Novalis in an earlier essay for *Hakirah*.<sup>55</sup>

Schelling attempted to Christianize *tsimtsum* by attributing the notion of Divine contraction to an angry Jewish God who would be superseded by the Christian Messiah. Bielek-Robson noted in an earlier article that the “Marcionite” tendency in German Protestant theology “was very strongly informed by Schelling and his rival adoption of *tsimtsum*: not as the kenotic self-effacement of the Infinite, but as the wrathful contraction of God-in-Anger, the hidden, irrational and jealous God the Father who forms the ‘dark ground of being’ and only then, in the second instance, becomes capable of the saving grace and love, taking the form of Christ the Redeemer.”<sup>56</sup> The title of the article—“God of Luria, Hegel, Schelling”—encapsulates Bielek-Robson’s confusion. Hegel, as noted, had contempt for Schelling’s mysticism, and as noted, had no God to speak of.<sup>57</sup> In her introduction to the present book, she observes that Schelling adopted *tsimtsum* to describe “a gesture of God’s angry contraction into himself, which removed his presence from the world.”

Bielek-Robson’s effort to Christianize *tsimtsum* betrays incomprehension of the Jewish sources. She has read Gershom Scholem, but Scholem captures only the philosophical, not the halakhic dimension of *tsimtsum*. She cannot comprehend how God can remain Infinite and yet grant existence to a world and its creatures. Absent here is the halakhic (as well as Hegelian) concept of a boundary between the finite and the Infinite. She

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<sup>54</sup> Quoted in David P. Goldman, “The Destructive Impact of Cultural Heideggerianism,” *Law & Liberty*, February 22, 2022 (<https://lawliberty.org/book-review/the-destructive-impact-of-cultural-heideggerianism/>).

<sup>55</sup> David P. Goldman, “Rav Soloveitchik’s New World View,” *Hakirah* 24 (2018), pp. 110–112. See also the *Law & Liberty* essay cited in the previous note.

<sup>56</sup> Agatha Bielek-Robson, “God of Luria, Hegel, Schelling,” in *Mystical Theology and Continental Philosophy: Interchange in the Wake of God*, edited by David Lewin, Simon D. Podmore, & Duane Williams (London & New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 30–52.

<sup>57</sup> Hegel’s friend and student Heinrich Heine reports a conversation in which the poet enthused that the stars must be the abode of the Blessed. Replied Hegel: “The stars? Humph. The stars are just luminous spots of leprosy on the firmament.” *Heinrich Heine’s Sämtliche Werke, Band 8* (Hoffman und Campe, 1885), p. 157. Author’s translation.

states: “By pulling in and limiting his original Infinity, God ceases to overshadow finite existence and grants it reality, autonomy, and freedom.” As noted, she attempts to conflate *tsimtsum* with the Christian notion of *kenosis*, or Jesus’ emptying himself of divinity. She detects a “link between the two ‘deaths of God,’ Jewish-kabbalistic and Christian: the radical kenosis-in-creation as juxtaposed with (but not necessarily opposed to) the radical kenosis-in-incarnation.”

As Prof. Bielek-Robson writes in her introductory essay:

For the paradoxical—and most interesting—aspect of the conceptual reception of *tsimtsum* is that it did not follow the well-trodden paths of Neoplatonism (represented by Leon Modena), but attempted to give philosophical articulation to what at the beginning must have appeared as stubbornly mythic and simply unthinkable in late-medieval theological terms: the idea that God Himself may be subject to crisis, harm, even catastrophe.<sup>58</sup>

Two paths emerge out of the cosmic event of Divine self-withdrawal, Bielek-Robson observes. The first (as sketched by Scholem) grants independent being to God’s creature and endows him with the capacity to engage the Infinite. The other leads to Nihilism:

Although Scholem defined *tsimtsum* as God’s withdrawal ‘away from the point,’ thus emphasizing the moment of Divine generosity, not all scholars agree that this account corresponds with Luria’s original intentions—at which we can only guess, considering the fact that he mistrusted written publications, and all we know about him is mediated by his two most distinguished pupils, Hayyim Vital and Israel Sarug, who frequently disagree with one another. After all, *tsimtsum* is also connected with the opposite connotation of anger and wrath, implied by the *sefirah* of *Din*, that of ‘severe judgment.’ We can thus find numerous occurrences of God’s contraction-in-anger and ‘to the point’: in the Lurianic heritage itself, as well as in Böhme, Christian *tsimtsum*, and Schelling, particularly in *The Ages of the World*.

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<sup>58</sup> Bielek-Robson continues: “It is precisely this mythical lore which first gave rise to the early-modern theosophical speculation (Böhme, Rosicrucians, Pietists) and then spurred modern philosophers to try a ‘sublation of theosophy into philosophy’ (Hegel), thus creating German Idealism.” There is a vast literature attempting to derive Hegel’s dialectic from any number of predecessors, from the mystical Böhme to Nicholas of Cusa. Bielek-Robson’s claim that Hegel transformed theosophy into philosophy is not a mainstream view. Hegel himself says of Böhme: “On the one hand, Böhme did not deserve the contempt [of the Enlightenment], but on the other hand, he doesn’t deserve the high honor to which he has been elevated, either.” Hegel 1844 p. 284.

The concept of *tsimtsum*, therefore, contains a troubling ambiguity. Is it, as Scholem intended, a gesture of God's generous withdrawal for the sake of the world—or, as Schelling envisaged it, a gesture of God's angry contraction into himself, which removed his presence from the world? Are these two completely separate modern traditions of the Hidden God? And—can this difference be reconciled?

Bielek-Robson adds:

Philosophically speaking, it could be the first ever radical implementation of the thesis of the univocity of being: by pulling in and limiting his original Infinity, God ceases to overshadow finite existence and grants it reality, autonomy, and freedom.

What Robson-Bielek finds troubling is not a Jewish, but rather a Christian preoccupation. She seeks a parallel between *tsimtsum* and the Christian concept of *kenosis*, that is, Jesus of Nazareth's renunciation of his Divine nature through the Incarnation.

The desire to be means that the Ein Sof, the original Godhead 'without limits,' is not yet being proper and this creates a longing to become such: it thus makes the world by pouring itself into finite existence which it subsequently finds either a disastrous error to be canceled (Böhme) or a chance to be continued (Rosenzweig). The desire to invent the other may be closely associated with the former, but it also stresses a different aspect of creation, which points to God's original self-sacrifice for the sake of alterity—a motif which will put Lurianic *tsimtsum* in close vicinity to the Christian notion of *kenosis*.

From there, Bielek-Robson looks for a red thread that runs "from Luria and his students, via Hegel and [Ernst] Bloch, up to [Jacques] Derrida, [Thomas] Altizer, [Slavoj] Žižek, and [Jürgen] Moltmann" in so-called "death-of-God theology."

It is not hard to understand why Christian adaptations of *tsimtsum* should take a detour into obscure speculation about the nature of evil. Christianity begins with the premise that a loving God undertakes to save humanity by sacrificing Himself, bestowing grace irrespective of human merit. If God is so inclined, Christian theology asks, why should there be evil to begin with? Why should God set loose evil in the world and then take the burden of the world's sin upon himself after the fact? That

prompted Friedrich Schelling's interest in *tsimtsum*, opening an unwholesome chain of thought that culminates in Heidegger.<sup>59</sup>

Bielek-Robson has it wrong. God does not “cease to overshadow finite existence” by withdrawing into Himself so that other things than God might exist. She is wrestling with the paradoxes posed by Christian theology, which posits a dual Divine-human nature for Jesus, and asserts that God sacrificed Himself to take away the sins of the world. How this leaves room for human agency remains a conundrum. Over the centuries, Christian theologians have argued that few are saved (Calvin), everyone is saved (Hans Urs von Balthasar), some are saved by the authority of the Catholic Church, or some are saved by embracing Jesus as a savior (Arminius). We do not need to follow Bielek-Robson down the rabbit hole of Christian post-modernism; we have had two millennia to observe the wranglings of Christian theologians with a problem that has no inherently logical solution.

Elsewhere in this volume, the heterodox Jewish scholar Elliot Wolfson notes correctly in his contribution that Schelling is the direct precursor of Heidegger, although he thinks this is a good thing. Wolfson had written in a 2019 book, “Scholem's approach is close to my own, but there is a decisive difference: when Scholem writes that the concealment of the Divine revelation is a revelation of the Divine concealment, he has in mind something akin to Hegel's dialectic, which posits the sublation of antinomies such that there is in a synthesis in which one thing becomes its opposite; my hypothesis, by contrast, is more consistent with Heidegger's idea of the belonging together of opposites that remain opposite in their juxtaposition as opposed to the *coincidentia oppositorum* from which one may infer the identity of nonidentity and the nonidentity of

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<sup>59</sup> See Paul Frank, *Rabbinic Idealism and Kabbalistic Realism: Jewish Dimensions of Idealism and Idealist Dimensions of Judaism*,

<https://yale.academia.edu/PaulFranks>, forthcoming in *The Impact of Idealism*, general editor Nicholas Boyle. Frank writes, “When he broke with Fichte, Schelling moved in a recognizably Lurianic direction.” Seeking to explain what creation must be if the freedom to do evil is to be possible, Schelling resolved the Jacobian problem differently in 1804: “In a word, there is no continuous transition from the Absolute to the actual; the origin of the phenomenal world is conceivable only as a complete falling-away from absoluteness by means of a leap. Thus, the fall of the human is an image of the fall that is creation itself, which is an exile of divinity from the world, demanding reparation. Schelling took a further step in 1809 when he considered divinity prior to creation. If the freedom to do evil is to be possible, then there must be a dark ground that is in the One but that is not (yet) the One: the yearning of the One to give birth to itself, to reveal itself, to become God.”



identity.”<sup>60</sup> In his present essay, Wolfson asserts that “continuity and difference form one pulsating totality which the human mind can contemplate only if it maintains itself in this subtle paradox.” This is a *tsimtsum* infused with the Romantic distortion of Neo-Platonism and filtered through the sewer pipe of Heidegger’s Nihilism.

“In a manner that is consonant with the kabbalists, Heidegger grasped that the supreme manifestation of the hidden essence of being consists of its refusal to be manifest, and hence it can be said of being that it reveals itself as the nihilation of being. A likely channel to explain the affinity between Heidegger and the kabbalists on this matter is Schelling. More specifically, Heidegger advances Schelling’s insight that *the ground of revelation is precisely what negates all revelation*,” Wolfson avers.<sup>61</sup> He is reading the *tsimtsum* backward from Heidegger through the distorting mirror of Schelling. This is more hallucination than scholarship, but Wolfson is correct to identify Schelling as the link between “Christian *tsimtsum*” and 20<sup>th</sup>-century Nazi Existentialism.

Let us unpack Wolfson’s panegyric to Heidegger in plain English. Being “refuses to be manifest” because the notion is paradoxical, as philosophers have known since the middle of the first millennium B.C.E. Parmenides taught that the eternal One must be unchanging and undifferentiated, because change would require a new state that entailed Non-Being with respect to a previous state, and it is impossible to either think or speak of Non-Being. The moment we try to think of non-Being, we find ourselves thinking of a something, that is, of Being. Heraclitus observed that an eternal undifferentiated One with no defining characteristics is indistinguishable from Nothing, so that Non-Being is the alter ego of Being. The more we dig into the problem, the more paradoxes we encounter. Being, Aristotle taught, has two facets, namely Essence and Existence. We can describe a mythical creature in as much detail as we please, and thus define its essence, but what we know about its essence has nothing to do with whether the creature exists or not. And if we ask what Existence is, we are talking about the qualities of a thing, namely its Essence. In classical ontology, Essence and Existence chase each other in a circle of infinite regress. To make matters worse, Being means many things, as Aristotle observed. I can say that an apple “is red,” or that an apple “is there,” but the “is” in both statements has a different meaning. Aquinas argued that all the meanings of Being are in some way analogous, but that is only a place-maker for a solution.

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<sup>60</sup> Elliot R. Wolfson, *Heidegger and Tsimtsum: Hidden Gnosis and the Path of Poiesis* (Indiana University Press, 2019).

<sup>61</sup> *Tsimtsum and Modernity*, p. 146.

In Hegel's dialectic, Being is not an abstraction to be analyzed at arm's length. Rather, his notion of limitation implies that Being is constituted by intentional acts. That is to read Hegel in the light of Husserl's later thought, to be sure, but that is how R. Soloveitchik understood the matter by no later than his 1930 doctoral dissertation.<sup>62</sup> By contrast, Heidegger offered a solution born of Nihilism and despair. His starting point is Schelling's "intellectual intuition,"<sup>63</sup> The Being of humankind is "Being-there," or *Dasein*, Heidegger argued in *Being and Time* (1927). Our Being-there is defined by our non-Being, namely our inevitable death, the permanent and irrevocable annihilation of our existence. Our *Dasein* therefore is Being-towards-Death. What Heidegger called "Authenticity"—the positive quality that replaces virtue, morality, and sanctity in his philosophy—rests on our resoluteness (*Entschlossenheit*) in embracing death. Where Torah instructs us to choose life, Heidegger dares us to choose death. Authenticity, he explained, simply means to be "free for death." As he wrote in *Being and Time*, resoluteness "takes over the heritage... that has come down to us."

This means that in anticipating death it understands itself unambiguously in terms of its own most distinctive possibility the more unequivocally does it choose and find the possibility of its existence... This is how we designate *Dasein's* primordial historicizing, which lies in authentic resoluteness and in which *Dasein* *hands* itself *down* to itself, free for death, in a possibility which it has inherited and yet has chosen.

This assertion that "authenticity" means to be "free for death" clarifies why Heidegger the philosopher and Heidegger the Nazi functionary who expelled the Jewish faculty of the University of Freiburg were the same man. Wolfson has nothing to say about Being-unto-death in his present essay (nor indeed in his voluminous writing on Heidegger over the past two decades). What interests Wolfson is the later Heidegger, who abandoned *Being and Time's* attempt to reconstruct metaphysics in favor of poetic rhapsodizing. In his 1929 essay "The Essence of Cause," he offered that "transcendence" is the gateway to Being. In the poetry of Hölderlin and other artistic sources, Heidegger sought a mystical unity

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<sup>62</sup> See the author's "The Rav's Uncompleted Grand Design," in *Hakirah* 29, pp. 68–70.

<sup>63</sup> See Michael Vater, "Heidegger and Schelling: The Finitude of Being," in *Idealistic Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (January 1975): 20–58.

between the antinomies that inevitably appear in any philosophical framework that draws a bright line between truth and falsity.<sup>64</sup>

As we have seen, the direct influence of the Lurian *tsimtsum* on Christian thought was pervasive, through the “Christian *tsimtsum*” of Reuchlin, Knorr von Rosenroth, Schelling, and others. We cannot speak authoritatively of kabbalistic influence on Hegel, who knew the Jewish sources only through the Neo-Platonized versions of Herrera and others. Hegel, moreover, evinced antipathy towards Judaism and its traditional sources. As noted, Hegel in his *History of Philosophy* points directly to the definitive concept of Lurian *tsimtsum*, namely the setting of boundaries on the Infinite. But the philosopher simply may have noted a Jewish idea consonant with his own thinking *sui generis*, as Prof. Biale argues.

Nonetheless, as R. Soloveitchik wrote:

It is Judaism that has given the world the secret of *tsimtsum*, of ‘contraction,’ contraction of the infinite within the finite, the transcendent within the concrete, the supernal within the empirical, and the Divine within the realm of reality. When the Holy One, blessed be He, descended on Mt. Sinai, He set an eternally binding precedent that it is God who descends to man, not man who ascends to God.<sup>65</sup>

The “secret of *tsimtsum*” implies no less than the dethroning of the self-contemplating God of the Philosophers and the coronation of the God of the Bible, and a change of intellectual regime from Divine passivity to Divine turbulence, in Scholem’s felicitous phrase.

Christian *tsimtsum* was a blind alley at its best and a septic tank at its worst. But that does not begin to exhaust the question of kabbalistic influence on Western culture. “Christian” *tsimtsum* may be a self-contradiction, but the Jewish claim that finite man can engage the infinite God nonetheless made its way into the broader culture. The finitization of the Infinite, the “secret” that Judaism imparted to the world through *tsimtsum*, is the defining characteristic of what for lack of a better word we call the “modern.” In the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the West began to see the world differently thanks to perspective in painting, and to hear the world differently thanks to tonal counterpoint in music. By the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, we understood the universe in an entirely new way, through

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<sup>64</sup> See the author’s “The Destructive Impact of Cultural Heideggerism,” *Law & Liberty*, February 22, 2022 (<https://lawliberty.org/book-review/the-destructive-impact-of-cultural-heideggerianism/>).

<sup>65</sup> *Halakhic Man*, p. 47.

the laws of planetary motion and the infinitesimal calculus. All of this presumes a Creator God who makes this engagement possible by contracting his finitude.

The ancient world, to be sure, recognized the infinite in the irrational numbers, whose discovery is attributed to Hippasus of Metapontum in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. Zeno's paradox of motion, in Archimedes' approximation of the Calculus, in the Babylonian discovery of the Mean Speed Theorem, and—most notably in my view—Augustine's identification of “numbers of the intellect” in his *De Musica*. But these intimations are a perception of something beyond ordinary calculation, in contrast to our modern capacity to act upon infinite space, infinite time, and infinite series of numbers.

The finitization of the infinite is the foundational concept of modern mathematics (in the calculus), of visual arts (in linear perspective), of music (in the plasticity of time in modern counterpoint), and of philosophy, most prominently in Kant's aesthetics and the Hegelian dialectic. The contraction of the infinite within the finite is the definitive move of modern thought. In the medieval representation of space in painting, objects simply coexist on a surface with no defined relation to each other. The linear perspective invented by Brunelleschi in 1415 established a hierarchy of proportions that gave order to objects in representational space, and it did so by organizing space around the “vanishing point” of the lines of perspective, that is, the point of convergence of the lines at infinity. The geometry of perspective is a minor event in the history of mathematics but an enormous event in human consciousness. Music counterpoint matured in the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, creating plasticity in time, making it possible for the finite time of music to evoke the infinitude of sacred time. The defining characteristic of Western tonal music, namely the association of the resolution of dissonance into consonance through metrical stress and relief, made musical time plastic. The prolongation of dissonance and the delay of resolution in tonal music enabled higher orders of musical time, and allowed the great composers to convey a sense of the infinite within the finite time of music. Kant's distinction between the Beautiful that arises from the harmonious ordering of the finite and the Sublime evoked by our perception of the Infinite linked the mathematical infinite and the awe that the infinite inspires in human emotions.<sup>66</sup> The

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<sup>66</sup> Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Sections 25 and 26. “Erhaben ist das, mit welchem in Vergleichung alles andere klein ist,” and “Erhaben ist, was auch nur denken zu können ein Vermögen des Gemüts beweiset, das jeden Maßstab der Sinne übertrifft.”

ancient Greeks identified the Beautiful with the Good; the moderns starting with Kant and Schiller distinguished the Beautiful from the Sublime on the foundation of the definitive modern insight, that finite man using finite means can engage the infinite.

Soloveitchik's formulation—"the contraction of the infinite within the finite"—aptly characterizes the defining characteristic of modernity. The finitization of the infinite frames the whole experience of modern man. The history of *tsimtsum* and its impact on the thinking of the West remains to be written. 