

Tzimtzum

The ***tzimtzum*** or ***tsimtsum*** (Hebrew צמצום *ṣimṣūm* "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 *ḥālāl happānuy* "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.

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Function

Because the *tzimtzum* results in the "empty space" in which spiritual and physical Worlds and ultimately, free will can exist, God is often referred to as "**Ha-Makom**" (המקום lit. "the Place", "the Omnipresent") in Rabbinic literature ("He is the Place of the World, but the World is not His Place"^[1]). Relatedly, *Olam* — the Hebrew for "World/Realm" — is derived from the root עלם meaning "concealment". This etymology is complementary with the concept of *Tzimtzum* in that the subsequent spiritual realms and the ultimate physical universe conceal to different degrees the infinite spiritual lifeforce of creation.

Their progressive diminutions of the Divine Ohr (Light) from realm to realm in creation are also referred to in the plural as secondary *tzimtzumim* (innumerable "condensations/veilings/constrictions" of the lifeforce). However, these subsequent concealments are found in earlier, Medieval Kabbalah. The new doctrine of Luria advanced the notion of the primordial withdrawal (a *dilug* – radical "leap") in order to reconcile a causal creative chain from the Infinite with finite Existence.

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^[2]

Inherent paradox

A commonly held^[3] understanding in Kabbalah is that the concept of *tzimtzum* contains a built-in paradox, requiring that God be simultaneously transcendent and immanent. Viz.: On the one hand, if the "Infinite" did not restrict itself, then nothing could exist—everything would be overwhelmed by God's totality. Existence thus requires God's transcendence, as above. On the other hand, God continuously maintains the existence of, and is thus not absent from, the created universe.

The Divine life-force which brings all creatures into existence must constantly be present within them ... were this life-force to forsake any created being for even one brief moment, it would revert to a state of utter nothingness, as before the creation.^[4]

Rabbi Nachman of Breslav discusses this inherent paradox as follows:

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 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.

— Likkutei Moharan I, 64:1 (http://breslov.com/international/likutei_mohoron/lm32.html)

Science and Kabbalah

The fundamental difference between modern science and traditional Kabbalah is the "post-Aristotelian scientific doctrine" about that space would be first created while in the Jewish religion of the Bible the faith considers that light was created before anything else.

Lurianic thought

Isaac Luria introduced four central themes into kabbalistic thought, *tzimtzum*, Shevirat HaKelim (the shattering of the vessels), Tikkun (repair), and Partzufim. These four are a group of interrelated, and continuing, processes. *Tzimtzum* describes the first step in the process by which God began the process

of creation by withdrawing his own essence from an area, creating an area in which creation could begin. Shevirat HaKelim describes how, after the *tzimtzum*, God created the vessels (HaKelim) in the empty space, and how when God began to pour his Light into the vessels they were not strong enough to hold the power of God's Light and shattered (Shevirat). The third step, Tikkun, is the process of gathering together, and raising, the sparks of God's Light that were carried down with the shards of the shattered vessels.^[5]

Since *tzimtzum* is connected to the concept of exile, and Tikkun is connected to the need to repair the problems of the world of human existence, Luria unites the cosmology of Kabbalah with the practice of Jewish ethics, and makes ethics and traditional Jewish religious observance the means by which God allows humans to complete and perfect the material world through living the precepts of a traditional Jewish life.^[6] Thus, in contrast to earlier, Medieval Kabbalah, this made the first creative act a concealment/Divine exile rather than unfolding revelation. This dynamic crisis-catharsis in the Divine flow is repeated throughout the Lurianic scheme.

Chabad view

In Chabad Hassidism the concept of *tzimtzum* is understood as not meant to be interpreted literally, but rather to refer to the manner in which God impresses his presence upon the consciousness of finite reality:^[7] thus *tzimtzum* is not only seen as being a real process but is also seen as a doctrine that every person is able, and indeed required, to understand and meditate upon.

In the Chabad view, the function of the *tzimtzum* was "to conceal from created beings the activating force within them, enabling them to exist as tangible entities, instead of being utterly nullified within their source".^[8] The *tzimtzum* produced the required "vacated space" (*chalal panui* חלל פנוי, *chalal* חלל), devoid of direct awareness of God's presence.

Vilna Gaon's view

The Vilna Gaon held that *tzimtzum* was not literal, however, the "upper unity", the fact that the universe is only illusory, and that *tzimtzum* was only figurative, was not perceptible, or even really understandable, to those not fully initiated in the mysteries of Kabbalah.^[9]

Others say that Vilna Gaon held the literal view of the *tzimtzum*.^[10]

Shlomo Elyashiv articulates this view clearly (and claims that not only is it the opinion of the Vilna Gaon, but also is the straightforward and simple reading of Luria and is the only true understanding).

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 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.^[11]

However, the Gaon and Elyashiv held that *tzimtzum* only took place in God's will (*Ratzon*), but that it is impossible to say anything at all about God himself (*Atzmus*). Thus, they did not actually believe in a literal *tzimtzum* in God's essence. Luria's *Etz Chaim* itself, however, in the First Shaar, is ambivalent: in one place it speaks of a literal *tzimtzum* in God's essence and self, then it changes a few lines later to a *tzimtzum* in the Divine Light (an emanated, hence created and not part of God's self, energy).

Application in clinical psychology

An Israeli professor, Mordechai Rotenberg, believes the Kabbalistic-Hasidic *tzimtzum* paradigm has significant implications for clinical therapy. According to this paradigm, God's "self-contraction" to vacate space for the world serves as a model for human behavior and interaction. The *tzimtzum* model promotes a unique community-centric approach which contrasts starkly with the language of Western psychology.^[12]

In popular culture

Tsimtsum is central to the plot of Aryeh Lev Stollman's 1997 novel *The Far Euphrates*.

"Tsim Tsum" is the title of a collection of vignettes by Sabrina Orah Mark (published 2009).

In Yann Martel's novel *Life of Pi* and its 2012 film adaptation, a cargo ship called the *Tsimtsum* sinks at a pivotal point of the plot, despite the name being entirely irrelevant to the Judaic concept of *tzimtzum*.

See also

- Acosmism
- Apeiron (cosmology)
- Big Bounce
- Inflation (cosmology)
- Monism
- Nondualism

Notes

- Parshat Vayeitzei: Yalkut Shimoni on the verse "He arrived..." Also, alternate sages in Midrash Bereishit Rabbah 68:9. HaMakom article (<http://www.inner.org/parshah/genesis/vayeitzei/E68-0304.pdf>), inner.org

2. Rabbi Moshe Miller. "The Great Constriction" (https://web.archive.org/web/20050124202729/http://www.kabbalaonline.org/Safedteachings/sfari/Ari_Basics_2_1st_Constriction.asp). *KabbalaOnline.org*. Archived from the original (http://www.kabbalaonline.org/Safedteachings/sfari/Ari_Basics_2_1st_Constriction.asp) on 2005-01-24.
3. see for example Aryeh Kaplan, "Paradoxes" (in "The Aryeh Kaplan Reader", Artscroll 1983. ISBN 0-89906-174-5)
4. "Chapter 2 - Shaar Hayichud VebaEmunah" (<http://chabad.org/library/archive/LibraryArchive2.asp?AID=7988>). Chabad.org. 2014-07-03. Retrieved 2015-02-25.
5. James David Dunn, *Windows of the Soul*, p.21-24
6. J.H. Laenen, *Jewish Mysticism*, p.168-169
7. "Tzimtzum: Contraction" (<http://inner.org/worlds/tzimtzum.htm>). Inner.org. Retrieved 2013-12-08.
8. Tanya, *Shaar Hayichud veHaEmunah*, ch.4 (<http://chabad.org/library/archive/LibraryArchive2.asp?AID=7990>)
9. E. J. Schochet, *The Hasidic Movement and the Gaon of Vilna*
10. Allan Nadler, *The Faith of the Mithnagdim*
11. Leshem Sh-vo ve-Achlama Sefer Ha-Deah drush olam hatohu chelek 1, drush 5, siman 7, section 8 (p. 57b)
12. "Rotenberg Center for Jewish Psychology" (http://www.jewishpsychology.org/about2_e.php). Jewishpsychology.org. Retrieved 2013-12-08.

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- Jacob Immanuel Schochet, *Mystical Concepts in Chassidism*, especially chapter II, Kehot 1979,3rd revised edition 1988. ISBN 0-8266-0412-9
- Aryeh Kaplan, "Paradoxes", in "The Aryeh Kaplan Reader", Artscroll 1983. ISBN 0-89906-174-5
- Aryeh Kaplan, "Innerspace", Moznaim Pub. Corp. 1990. ISBN 0-940118-56-4
- Aryeh Kaplan Understanding God (http://aish.com/literacy/concepts/Understanding_God.asp), Ch2. in "The Handbook of Jewish Thought", Moznaim 1979. ISBN 0-940118-49-1

External links

- Tzimtzum: A Primer (<http://chabad.org/library/article.asp?AID=361884>), chabad.org
- Tanya, *Shaar HaYichud VebaEmunah* (<http://chabad.org/library/archive/LibraryArchive2.asp?AID=6240>) Shneur Zalman of Liadi—see Lessons in Tanya (<http://chabad.org/library/archive/LibraryArchive.asp?AID=6237>), chabad.org
- *Shaar HaYichud* - The Gate of Unity (<http://www.truekabbalah.com/ShaarHaYichud.php>), Dovber Schneuri — a detailed explanation of the concept of Tzimtzum.
- *Veyadaata* - To Know G-d (<http://chabad.org/library/article.asp?AID=85424>), Sholom Dovber Schneersohn, a Hasidic discourse on the paradox of Tzimtzum
- inner.org, "Basics in Kabbalah and Chassidut" (<http://inner.org/worlds/tzimtzum.htm>)
- Tanya: Tzimtzum and armony of economy in the world with Tzedakah (www.chabad.org) (https://www.chabad.org/library/tanya/tanya_cdo/aid/1029304/jewish/Epistle-12.htm)

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