Revelation through Concealment: Kabbalistic Responses to God’s Hiddenness

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Abstract. John Schellenberg presents an argument for atheism according to which theism would be easy to believe, if true. Since theism isn’t easy to believe, it must be false. In this paper, I argue that Kabbalistic Judaism has the resources to bypass this argument completely. The paper also explores a stream of Kabbalistic advice that the tradition offers to people of faith for those times at which God appears to us to be hidden.

I. INTRODUCTION

In addition to its Biblical and Rabbinic connotations, “Divine hiddenness” takes on a new significance in the work of John Schellenberg, which gives rise to a new argument for atheism: the argument from divine hiddenness.¹ The idea is this: given certain basic theistic assumptions, there shouldn’t be such a phenomenon as non-resistant non-belief. Roughly: The God of theism is perfectly loving and would therefore want to be available for a relationship with any person not stubbornly resisting the very idea of God. That there are people completely open to belief but who simply aren’t supplied with sufficient evidence to form it, is supposedly proof positive that God doesn’t exist.

We could debate whether Schellenberg’s argument is simply a local manifestation of the wider problem of evil. Some have argued that it is.² Why would a good God allow for the evil of innocent non-belief in him? But Schellenberg insists that it would be a mistake to assimilate his problem into the problem of evil.³ To do so, he argues, begs the question.

If Schellenberg’s argument sets out to prove the non-existence of God, then no party to the debate should assume, in assessing the argument’s merits, that God does or doesn’t exist. The happy life of a law-abiding, affluent, healthy, and successful, non-resistant atheist need manifest no obvious evils, unless you’re already committed to theism, and thus relate to her non-belief as an evil. And thus, the problem can only be considered a problem of evil if you’re already assuming the truth of theism.

In this paper, I argue that Kabbalistic Judaism, whatever it has to say about the problem of evil, doesn’t allow for Schellenberg’s problem to arise. In §1, I present his argument from hiddenness along with standard responses. In §2, I present ‘the problem of creation’, which Lurianic Kabbala tells us necessitates something called tzimtzum. In §3, I outline two ways in which to understand tzimtzum — one of which gives rise to a view that I call ‘Hassidic Idealism’. In §4, I show how Hassidic Idealism completely bypasses the argument from hiddenness. In §5, I show how it bypasses a strengthened version of the argument.

Finally, in §6, I return to one of the more traditional forms of divine hiddenness – the distance that the faithful sometimes feel from God – and I develop a Kabbalistic response.

II. THE ARGUMENT FROM HIDDENNESS

Schellenberg presents his argument as follows:

1. If a perfectly loving God exists, then there exists a God who is always open to a personal relationship with any finite person.

2. If there exists a God who is always open to a personal relationship with any finite person, then no finite person is ever nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists.

3. If a perfectly loving God exists, then no finite person is ever nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists (from 1 and 2).

4. Some finite persons are or have been nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists.

5. No perfectly loving God exists (from 3 and 4).

6. If no perfectly loving God exists, then God does not exist.

7. God does not exist (from 5 and 6).

The argument is straightforwardly valid. If all of the undischarged assumptions are true, then so is the conclusion. The question is whether or not it’s sound. The undischarged assumptions are lines 1, 2, 4 and 6. Each has been challenged, but in ways that leave Schellenberg unmoved. Let’s take them in order. Schellenberg thinks that line 1 is pretty obviously true. He writes:

[I]magine that you’re listening to your friend, who’s describing his parents: ‘Wow, are they ever great — I wish everyone could have parents like mine, who are so wonderfully loving! Granted, they don’t want anything to do with me. They’ve never been around. Sometimes I find myself looking for them — once, I have to admit, I even called out for them when I was sick — but to no avail. Apparently they aren’t open to being in a relationship with me — at least not yet. But it’s so good that they love me as much and as beautifully as they do!’ If you heard your friend talking like this, you’d think he was seriously confused. And you’d be right … They could have set their son up in the best house in town, with money and things galore. But their attitude toward him, whatever it is, doesn’t amount to the most admirable love, since they are closed to being in a personal relationship with him.

In response, lots of reasons have been given as to why a perfectly loving God might not always be open for a relationship with finite people like us. For example, it is proposed that, at times, we would be better off if we came to open ourselves up to a relationship with God, in the face of opposite inclinations. We become more refined, and make a deeper relationship possible, if we lean in and take the plunge. Alternatively, perhaps God wants to make sure that our non-resistance to belief is motivated by the right considerations, rather than by fear of punishment, or social pressures. Similarly, Howard-Snyder and Green point to Kierkegaard, who takes God’s hiddenness to help a person develop a more passionate desire for him; absence makes the heart grow fonder. Similar motifs are found in Hassidic Judaism.

4 Schellenberg, The Hiddenness Argument, 103.
5 Ibid., 41-42.
7 Howard-Snyder and Green, “Hiddenness of God”.
8 M. Y. Leiner, Mei HaShiloah (Mishur, 1990), 110.
Schellenberg is unmoved. The goods that God might secure by temporarily closing himself off to us could be had \textit{without} his closing himself off. These are "relationship-compatible goods."\textsuperscript{9} The idea isn't merely that God is \textit{good}. It's that he \textit{loves} us. If he loves us, he wants to be available for a relationship with us, and it \textit{is} possible to be in a relationship with someone while giving them the opportunity to refine themselves. Indeed, most of the goods taken to justify God's hiddenness, Schellenberg would argue, are relationship-compatible, and therefore insufficient for undermining line 1 of his argument.

We could attack line 1 in a different way. Some people simply aren't \textit{ready} for belief in God. If they believed \textit{now}, they would resent God's glory and power.\textsuperscript{10} Belief, \textit{now}, would be harmful for them. But, once again, the good in question is relationship-compatible. It is \textit{possible} for God to help a person through resentment without breaking off relations. Schellenberg illustrates:

\begin{quote}
Imagine ideally loving human parents-to-be who are aware, because of their knowledge of the unborn child's genetic constitution, that this child will be disposed to reject them... Will they exit stage left, once the baby is born, leaving it in the care of someone they think is more likely to elicit a positive response, or rather seek to devise ways of avoiding or transforming their child's negative response from within their relationship with him?
\end{quote}

Another way to deny line 1: if God's existence were too obvious, we'd find it impossible to act against his revealed will. We'd be rendered automatons. It would be toxic to human freedom. Again, Schellenberg is unmoved\textsuperscript{11}. Belief in God needn't be at all \textit{intrusive}. God could implant in us a belief in him without making his presence so tangible that we would never \textit{sin}. Indeed, as long as one isn't tangibly aware of God's presence in a given moment, then a background belief in God's existence is no impediment to freedom. We know this because we know that believers in God sin even while believing in God. Human freedom is a relationship-compatible good.

Schellenberg could even have drawn a response from the Jewish tradition. According to Rabbi Josef Albo, if and when God wants to protect our freedom in the face of awareness of God's presence, God simply hardens the heart of the person in question. On R. Albo's reading, Pharaoh's choice to let the Jewish people go could never have been a \textit{free} choice in the face of all the plagues and miracles that God wrought at that time. God's response was to harden Pharaoh's heart in order to give him a chance to act freely.\textsuperscript{12}

A more promising way to deny line 1: perfect love doesn't necessarily translate into wanting a relationship, or even into openness. Is God's perfect love like that of a parent for her child, as Schellenberg tends to assume, or is it more like the abstract sort of love we might have for distant descendants, or like the care that a good surgeon would have for her patients?\textsuperscript{13} God is described as a parent, but he's also described as a potter (Jeremiah 18:6). A parent wants a reciprocal relationship with her child; a potter doesn't feel that way about her clay. And, wanting a relationship might be a selfish and human way to love. I wouldn't deign to say that I know what exactly God's love for us is like, even if I affirm that it must be perfect. That seems to me a good reason at least to suspend judgement over line 1. But, for the sake of \textit{this} paper, let's assume line 1 is true.

Can we deny line 2? Must belief in God always be available to non-resistors if God is to be open to relationship with them? Some argue that one \textit{can} have a relationship with God without believing that God exists. We \textit{could} have a relationship with him without \textit{realizing} as much. Schellenberg replies that these couldn't be the sorts of relationship a lover desires with their beloved: these relationships aren't explicit, conscious, and reciprocal.\textsuperscript{14}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{9} Schellenberg, \textit{The Hiddenness Argument}, 62.
\bibitem{10} Travis Dumsday, "Divine hiddenness and creaturely resentment", \textit{International Journal for Philosophy of Religion} 72, no. 1 (2012).
\bibitem{11} Schellenberg, \textit{The Hiddenness Argument}, 64-8.
\bibitem{14} Schellenberg, \textit{The Hiddenness Argument}, 106.
\end{thebibliography}
Alternatively, perhaps it’s possible to have an explicit, conscious, and reciprocal relationship with someone on the basis of hope or faith or some sort of partial belief that they exist. Schellenberg replies that these are insufficient grounds for a real relationship. God doesn’t want to be our imaginary friend. Let’s grant him that too, if only for the sake of argument. Let lines 1 and 2 stand.

Can we deny line 4, which claims that at least one person in history was in a state of non-resistant non-belief? Some argue that everyone really, deep down, believes in God, even if under some other name. Others argue that receptivity to religious belief is hard-wired into our cognitive architecture, which, if true, would undermine the claim that non-resistant non-belief is widespread. Or, you could argue that all cases of non-belief flow from some sort of ethical failing. But that would be foolhardy.

All that line 4 really needs is a single case, in all of human history, of non-resistant non-belief. If it can be found, for instance, that a tribal Amazonian who failed to believe in God, without any sort of resistance or culpability, then line 4 stands. If it can be found that one single person growing up in a secular context failed to believe in God, without any resistance to such belief, then line 4 stands. We should let it stand!

Can we deny line 6, which would have God necessarily as perfectly loving? Schellenberg stipulates that perfect-love is part of the definition of God. Schellenberg is open to the idea that something perfectly good exists, as the ground of all being. He just refuses to call such a being “God”, unless that being is a person. A perfect person, he thinks, would be perfectly loving. Schellenberg calls belief in a supremely good ultimate reality, “ultimism”. He calls the belief that this ultimate reality is a perfect person, “theism”. On this stipulation, line 6 is trivially true. The argument from divine hiddenness is against what Schellenberg calls theism, and not against what he calls ultimism.

Schellenberg’s use of language here might be a little idiosyncratic. Maimonides didn’t conceive of God as a person. That would have completely undermined his negative theology (see his Guide to the Perplexed, Part I, Chapter LVI). The Kabbalists were also committed to God in his transcendence – the Ein Sof – being beyond all description, and thus being beyond the description of person or lover (See: The Zohar, Part II, Bo, 42b). Does this mean that they were all atheists, despite their “ultimism”? In Schellenberg idiolect, that follows. But that’s not how the intellectual tradition of Abrahamic monotheism has evolved. The theistic camp includes negative theologians who simply won’t accept line 6.

On the other hand, I am sympathetic to the claim that negative theology cannot be true, since even the description that God defies description is a description of God. Accordingly, I relate to such figures of speech as important and illuminating, but literally false – just as metaphors can be important and illuminating, but literally false. Moreover, and despite my discomfort with Schellenberg’s use of the terminology, I wouldn’t want to deny that God is a perfect person who loves us, even if I wouldn’t stipulate it as part of my definition of “theism”.

So far, we’ve seen no knock-down reason to give up any of the assumptions of Schellenberg’s argument, although some of his assumptions are shakier than others. Irrespective of their merits, all the escape routes we’ve investigated sound like reactions to a problem. That’s to say, once you’ve seen Schellenberg’s argument, you have to respond. You have to concoct some reason for God’s allowing non-resistant non-belief. What I present, in this paper, is a Kabbalistic theology that doesn’t respond to Schellenberg’s argument, but bypasses it altogether.

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III. THE NECESSITY OF TZIMTZUM

The doctrine of tzimtzum (Hebrew for contraction) states that God cannot create anything until he contracts himself. Rabbi Isaac Luria (the Ari Zal, 16th c.) established it as a central Kabbalistic doctrine.\(^{20}\) His disciple, Rabbi Hayyim Vital (16th-17th c.), provides the first written account: in the beginning, a sublime light filled all existence; subsequently, the light contracted uniformly away from the center, leaving an empty circle; then a beam of light extended into the center of the circle, creating a channel from the outside of the circle into the circle. By way of that channel, the rest of the creation could occur within the circle.\(^{21}\)

Elsewhere, Tyron Goldshmidt and I try to make sense of why such a process is necessary.\(^{22}\) Doing so is no easy task. One way is to take the infinitely extended divine light as a metaphor for omnipresence. We can then frame this “problem of creation”:

1. God is omnipresent.
2. If God is omnipresent, then He fills all space.
3. If God fills all space, then there is no vacant space in which creation can occur.
4. If there is no vacant space in which creation can occur, then creation cannot occur.
5. Therefore, creation cannot occur (from 1-4).

Tzimtzum is the solution to this problem. Since creation cannot occur in the face of God’s omnipresence, God has to relinquish his omnipresence. He has to contract himself.

But, this problem of creation isn’t compelling. Line 9 is suspect. God’s omnipresence needn’t entail that he fills space. God’s omnipresence can be understood in terms of his power, knowledge, or goodness extending to every place. God needn’t be located anywhere.

Even if line 9 is accepted, why grant, with line 11, that a space needs to be vacant of God in order for creation to occur in it?\(^{23}\) Who’s to say that God can’t be collocated with his creatures? Some argue that even distinct material objects can be collocated (and God isn’t even a material object).\(^{24}\) In short: God might share some of his location with his creation.

Line 11 also assumes that creation has to occur in space, and hence assumes a substantivalism about pre-creation space. The contraction of God’s omnipresence is unnecessary as a response to the problem of creation, if, instead either (1) an idiosyncratic theory of omnipresence, or (2) an unmotivated stricture upon collocation, or (3) an unsubstantiated substantivalism about pre-creation space is denied instead. Deny any one of them and the problem disappears.

Goldschmidt and I came to a more charitable reading of R. Vital: It’s not that God’s nature (or light) leaves no room in physical space for creation, but that it leaves no room in logical space. The problem of creation becomes:

1. God has a perfection, or a set of perfections, \(P\).
2. If God has \(P\), then there is no logical space for creation.
3. If there is no logical space for creation, then creation cannot occur.

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The only way for God to create, is for him to reign in, and therefore to contract perfection \( P \). The argument is valid. The question is: which divine perfection would render line 14 true? Here's an argument for the impossibility of an all-knowing, all-loving, and perfectly rational God creating a universe:25

17. A perfectly good, perfectly knowledgeable, and perfectly rational God would never create a suboptimal world.

18. All worlds are suboptimal.

19. God would create no world (from 17 and 18).

You might deny line 18 by denying that our world is suboptimal. You might deny line 17 by insisting that the God it describes could create a suboptimal world. But all three lines should be accepted.

The theist shouldn't deny line 18. No world is optimal. Imagine a universe as wonderful as you can. If God could have created it, then he could have created two of them, and stuck them together to create a larger universe. Whatever made the original one wonderful would be had in double measure. Consequently, the one you started with wasn’t optimal to begin with and it doesn’t matter how good it was. You can never imagine an unsurpassable world.

If you find this unconvincing consider another thought experiment. Start by considering the world in which we live. Could it be better than it is? If you think that it could, then try to imagine a better world. Could that world be better than it is? If it could, then think of an even better world. Do you ever get to the best, or is the goodness of worlds simply a measure with no maximum limit?

Those who deny line 17 propose that God can sort all of the suboptimal universes into those which are acceptable and those which are not.26 God can then arbitrarily choose to create one of the acceptable universes. Daniel Rubio objects: a rational God would still have to avoid the worst of what remains, i.e., the minimally acceptable world.27 After dismissing that world, he would have to dismiss the least acceptable of the new remainder. And so on. Given some very weak and very plausible assumptions about decision theory, God (given his perfect rationality and goodness) cannot create any world.

Line 19 follows from 17 and 18. These help to make sense of the earlier argument: we can now substitute perfect goodness, perfect knowledge, and perfect rationality for perfection(s) \( P \) in the earlier argument (lines 13-16). Remember: by line 19, we’ve come to see that a perfectly good, rational, and knowledgeable God would create no world. It seems clear, therefore, that there’s an important sense in which these perfections would leave no room in logical space for the creation of a universe. Consequently, the argument from 13-16 is sound. Creation cannot occur, at least not without a contraction of God’s perfection.

IV. TWO VARIETIES OF TZIMTZUM

The Kabbalistic tradition has two camps regarding the doctrine of tzimtzum. One camp takes the doctrine literally: God literally had to contract. Given the conclusion of §2, that means that God had to reign in his goodness or some other perfection in order to create. This approach leaves many theists uncomfortable.28 Schellenberg likely would not even call it ‘theism’, since, at least temporarily, God doesn’t have the perfections traditionally thought definitive for God. Yet tzimtzum taken literally, whatever other problems arise, does avoid Schellenberg’s problem. God needn’t be perfectly loving, post-tzimtzum.

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25 Goldschmidt and I proffer two other arguments, but they are less directly relevant to divine hiddenness. Goldschmidt and Lebens, “Divine Contractions”.
The other camp doesn't think that tzimtzum really occurred. They think that it merely appeared to occur. This approach leaves many uncomfortable because it seems to collapse into acosmism. If God can't create without tzimtzum, and if tzimtzum doesn't really occur, but only appears to occur, then the creation only appears to occur, but it can't really occur. And if creation only appears to occur, then our world only appears to exist. This denial of the reality of the creation amounts to acosmism.

Nevertheless, the notion of a merely apparent tzimtzum was popular with the Hassidim. Perhaps most famously in the writings of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi (18th-19th c; the Baal HaTanya) who emphasizes:

*Know this: ‘In the heavens above and on the earth below — there is nothing else [besides God]’ (Deuteronomy 4:39) …. Therefore, even the earth and that which is below it are completely nonexistent and empty from the perspective of the Holy One, blessed be He… [W]ith his attribute of Gevurah [restraint] and Tzimtzum, he hides and conceals the life-force which flows into the heavens and the earth, so that they and all their hosts should appear as if they were independently existing entities. The Tzimtzum and concealment is, however, only from the perspective of the lower realms, but from the perspective of the Holy One, blessed be He, everything before Him is considered as actually naught, just as the light of the sun in the sun.*

To discount this idea as acosmism is too quick. We can distinguish between: (1) an author writing a story, and (2) what happens in the story. In order to understand the doctrine of apparent tzimtzum, we can similarly distinguish between: (1) God imagining the world, and (2) what God imagines. The doctrine then has it that on one level of reality — the level (2) of what God imagines — finite minds and material objects exist. From that perspective, we can say that God contracted. From that perspective, God is at least imperfect enough, post-tzimtzum, to have created our suboptimal world.

Yet on a more fundamental level—the level (1) at which God is merely imagining a world — tzimtzum never occurred, and finite minds and material objects do not exist. God is unchangingly perfect. At this level, all that exists is God and his ideas of minds and of material objects. This isn't acosmism. Even at the most fundamental level, God created something — just nothing more than an idea. Just as the idea of red is not red, so too God's ideas of minds or material objects are not themselves minds or material objects.

You might object: if a perfect God would never make a certain thing, then why would he imagine making it, and thereby create the idea of an it? But note: an author who wouldn't want to make bad things real might nevertheless want to write a story about bad things. According to the doctrine of apparent tzimtzum – which I call Hassidic Idealism – our suffering isn't real from God's transcendent perspective. Our suffering is no more real to God than the suffering of fictional characters is to their author. That fictional pain is fictionally real for fictional characters creates no obligation upon real authors to refrain from imagining fictional pain. Consequently, a good reason to refrain from making something does not automatically generate a good reason to refrain from imagining it.

This might fall short of acosmism. But surely something important is lost on this picture. God's entire creation is, from his point of view, imaginary. What becomes of God's love for us, or of our relationship with God? Well, we shouldn't overlook the possibility of feeling love and compassion for a fictional creation. Upon realizing how Anna Karenina's life would end, Tolstoy is said to have cried. Furthermore: Hassidic Idealism stratifies reality into two levels, such that, even if we are imaginary from God's transcendent perspective, we are real within the world in which we live. So is our relationship with God, who appears within the story, and loves us. The objector who insists that we must have the same degree of reality as God, demands, like the builders of Babel, an ontological pedestal with the creator. The objection is, by theistic lights, impious.

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31 Lebens, “God and His Imaginary Friends”. 
V. Hassidic Idealism Bypasses Schellenberg

Let’s adopt the perspective of Hassidic Idealism. God is perfectly good and perfectly rational, but as a character in his own imaginary world, he is at least imperfect enough to have created this suboptimal world. God, as a character in his story, has contracted his perfections. God doesn’t appear in this world exactly as he is beyond this world. This is a type of Divine Hiddenness. But he hides in order to make this world possible. If God allowed us to see his full perfection, we couldn’t even be (compare: Exodus 33:20). In all his perfection God could not have created a universe like ours. And indeed he has not created it. But he has imagined diminishing himself so that such a universe could coherently be imagined to be.

Let $F$ be a sentential fictional operator, and let’s introduce a subscript letter to represent the fictional discourse that the operator is indexed to. For example, let ‘$H$’ stands for the Hamlet fiction. Accordingly, “$F_h$(Hamlet is a prince of Denmark)” says that it is true, relative to the Hamlet story, that Hamlet is a prince of Denmark.

“Hamlet is a prince of Denmark” is false. Take a look at any list of historic Danish princes – Hamlet won’t be there, even if the story was loosely based upon a Danish legend. But “$F_h$(Hamlet is a prince of Denmark)” is true; since it’s true in the story that Hamlet is a prince of Denmark. To appreciate Hassidic Idealism is to recognize that what’s true within the scope of the operators to which God’s imagination gives rise, needn’t be true simpliciter.

Hassidic Idealism is radical and weird. But literal tzimtzum waters down God’s perfections. Hassidic Idealism might be the most resolutely theistic response available in the face of the problem of creation. Furthermore, many of the most obvious objections to Hassidic Idealism can be answered. For example, it isn’t as easy as it might seem to object that Hassidic Idealism leaves us with no free will. In any case, the purpose of this paper isn’t primarily to defend Hassidic Idealism, but to show how it defuses Schellenberg’s problem.

Hassidic Idealism tells us that Line 4 (of Schellenberg’s argument) is true in the story of the world, but false simpliciter. Fundamentally, there are no persons other than God; there are only ideas of people. Line 6 may be true simpliciter, since God may be essentially good. Nevertheless: impossible things can happen in stories. In the impossible story that God’s dreamt up, a story in which, per impossible, he isn’t completely perfect, line 6 is false.

An objection: if impossible things can happen in stories, then let our world be a story in which a completely perfect God creates an imperfect world. Accordingly, even in the story, God can appear as perfect, and thus the argument from divine hiddenness still goes through. Answer: a story in which a perfect God contracts his perfections may describe something impossible, but not something obviously impossible. Some philosophers have argued that an omnipotent being would have the power to reign in its own powers. Accordingly, it’s not obviously impossible for a perfect God to constrain his perfections. But, given the problem of creation, it is obviously impossible for a perfect God to create a world. Accordingly, a story that has God contract is a better story, since it’s less obviously impossible, and therefore it’s a story that’s more befitting of God as he is in his transcendent perfection. It is a story that ultimately gets us to know God better, since it reflects his perfection as a story teller better.

Neither inside nor outside of this story is Schellenberg’s argument sound. Put all of the premises in the scope of the fiction operator, indexed to the story of this world, and line 6 comes out false. In the story, God has reigned in his perfect love so as to make room for creation. Remove the operators, and line 4 comes out false. This isn’t some ad hoc response to Schellenberg. It’s a consequence of the doctrine of apparent tzimtzum or Hassidic Idealism.

32 Lebens, “God and His Imaginary Friends”.
34 Richard Swinburne, ”Omnipotence”, American Philosophical Quarterly 10, no. 3 (1973).
35 There are other Jewish mystical responses to the problem of Divine Hiddenness. For example, Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto (18th c) argues that a kind of divine hiddenness is necessary for the revelation of divine power, and the very purpose
VI. BYPASSING A STRENGTHENED SCHELLENBERG

Perhaps Schellenberg’s argument can be strengthened in the light of Hassidic Idealism. Even if, post-
tzimtzum, God isn’t perfectly loving – that is to say, even if God, as he appears as a character in his own
story, is less than perfectly loving – he is still very loving. And so, it remains surprising that there is such
rampant non-resistant non-belief in the post-tzimtzum world – that is to say, even by the logic of the
story that God’s dreaming up, he should, as a character in the story, always be open to relationships with
the other characters.

Here are two responses. First: as soon as you recognize that God, as he appears in the story of this
world, isn’t completely perfect, then some of the strategies mentioned in §1 become more plausible. A
perfectly loving God might not hide from his beloved only in order to refine their passion, or to maxi-
mize their freedom – but a loving God who appears to be ever so slightly less than perfect might, and with
only good intentions too.

Second: although Hassidic Idealism isn’t incoherent, it is very odd! Saul Smilansky talks about a class of
paradox that isn’t logical, but existential. Logical paradoxes arise when deductive arguments seem to force a
contradiction upon us. We either have to reject one of the premises, or figure out some way of accepting the
premises without yielding the contradiction. Then the paradox disappears. An existential paradox, by con-
trast, is a sound argument for a conclusion that, despite not being contradictory in any formal sense, strikes
us as absurd, and continues to strike us as “absurd even after due reflection”, and even though we realize we
have to accept it as true in spite of its absurdity.36

Given the problem of creation and the answer of Hassidic Idealism, theism can only strike us as an
existential paradox, even if God chooses the least obviously impossible tale to tell. To come to believe
in the God of classical theism is to come to realize that we can be nothing more than a figment in the
imagination of that God; that what we have until now taken to be true is true only under the scope of a
fiction-operator; that there’s nothing God could have done to save theism from this paradoxical air be-
cause an imaginary world was all that he could possibly create. If the paradoxical air cannot be dispelled,
then we can hardly expect everyone to be a theist, unless God wants to dream up a world where people
have no problem accepting absurdities. I am glad that he didn’t.

VII. A KABBALISTIC RESPONSE TO GOD’S HIDDENNESS

So far, I’ve argued that Kabbalistic Judaism has the resources to bypass Schellenberg’s argument from
divine hiddenness. In what follows, I want to return to a more traditional sense of “divine hiddenness”,
which describes the painful feeling that God is far removed from the lives of the faithful. According to
Hassidic Idealism, God has to hide his true nature within the story of the world in order to make room in
logical space for the creation of a world. But this suggests that God reveals himself by concealing himself.

Even before the Ari Zal, Kabbalistic Judaism advanced the notion of a levush (Hebrew for garment). The
Zohar (3.152) teaches:

Rabbi Shimon said: If a man looks upon the Torah as merely a book presenting narratives and everyday
matters, woe unto him! … But the Torah, in all of its worlds, holds supernal truths and sublime secrets …
The world could not endure the Torah if she had not garbed herself in garments of this world. Thus
the tales related in the Torah are simply her outer garments, and woe to the man who regards that outer
garment as the Torah itself… The most visible part of a man are the clothes that he has on, and they who
lack understanding, when they look at the man, are apt not to see more in him than these clothes. In reality,
however, it is the body of the man that constitutes the pride of his clothes, and his soul constitutes the pride
of his body. So it is with the Torah … People without understanding see only the narratives, the garment;
those somewhat more penetrating see also the body [i.e., the laws of the Torah]. But the truly wise … pierce

36 Saul Smilansky, 10 Moral Paradoxes (Blackwell, 2008), 4.

of creation. See Moshe H. Luzzatto, The Knowing Heart — Da’ath Tevunoth (Feldheim, 1982).
all the way through to the soul, to the true Torah which is the root principle of all. These same will in the future be vouchsafed to penetrate to the very soul of the soul of the Torah.

The world couldn't contain the Torah, so the Torah had to garb itself in the body of its laws, and the garments of is narratives. But the garment and the body are both levushim, they are both garments; garments that clothe the soul of the Torah. And, the soul of the Torah itself is a levush that clothes the soul of the soul – presumably, the soul of God. In the Hassidic tradition, Rabbi Tzadok Hakohen of Lublin taught that the classical Rabbinic texts, the Oral Torah, are themselves a garment for the Pentateuch: garments clothing garments, clothing garments.37

The concept of levush is intriguing. Garments hide the body, but the way you clothe yourself also reveals a lot about who you are, and allows you to appear in public. Garments conceal and reveal, and reveal in the way that they conceal. Garments can reveal something to us, but by concealing it. We couldn't come to know the Torah had it not been veiled by a garment since it would then have overpowered us. Consequently, a Jew suffering from the pains of divine hiddenness might be counselled to take even such moments of theological darkness and despair as a religious experience — as revelation, as proximity.

The book of Isaiah contains a verse whose tense construction seems bizarre (Isaiah 66:9): “Shall I bring to the birth, and not cause to bring forth?’ the Lord shall say; ‘Shall I, the cause of birth, have shut the womb?’ said the Lord.” Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner notes how this verse starts in the future tense: the religious person is invited to walk into an open future full of doubt and hiddenness. But the transition into the past tense at the end of the verse indicates that God was actually present all along, and that the darkness and the hiddenness were a revelation.38

One day we shall understand, R. Leiner suggests. One day, we shall look back at the darkness and see God’s presence in it. We will realize that it was God’s way of refining our passions, like a lover playing hard to get in order to test and refine his beloved. This may sound like an imperfect reason for allowing such periods of darkness and absence. But how could there not have been darkness and absence, and how could there not have been imperfect reasons for hiddenness, if a perfect God can only reveal himself to us by clothing himself in worldly garments containing, concealing, and yet revealing, his other-worldly glory? And how can God ever really have been absent if, at a more fundamental level of reality, his perfection fills all of logical space? Kabbalistic theology bypasses the argument from divine hiddenness. It also relates to God’s hiding as the only possible way in which a perfect God can be revealed in an imperfect world.39

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37 T. Hakohen, Risisei Laylah (1926), §56.
38 Leiner, Mei HaShiloah, 110.
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