

THE IMPERFECT GOD

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Abstract. This paper focuses on the Hasidic view, namely, that human flaws do not function as a barrier between a fallen humanity and a perfect deity, since the whole of creation stems from a divine act of self-contraction. Thus, we need not be discouraged by our own shortcomings, nor by those of our loved ones. Rather, seeing our flaws in the face of another should remind us that imperfection is an aspect of the God who created us. Such a positive approach to human fallibility arouses forgiveness, mutual acceptance, and a hope for repair, and, therefore, has much to recommend itself. In the first part of the paper, I argue that the notion of a perfect God derives from the Greeks rather than the Hebrew Bible. A review of classical philosophies and the idea of God's imperfection is followed by a consideration of several Jewish attempts to resolve the dichotomy between Divine perfection and an imperfect creation. I focus on Lurianic Kabbalah, Hans Jonas, and on the Hasidic concept of "*Ayin*" or "nothingness" as the very source of redemption. This Hasidic idea, which was further expanded upon by the Baal Shem Tov's students, appears in a tale recounted by his great-grandson R. Nachman of Bratslav called "The Hanging Lamp." I focus on the tale, which illustrates the idea that knowledge of human imperfection is itself a means of perfection and redemption.

I. INTRODUCTION

The present-day secular view that the universe came into being as a result of coincidental factors seems utterly contradicted by the mysterious processes of birth and development, devotion and love. The heart cannot accept the coldly rational or pseudo-rational assertion that existence is purely a matter of chance. A baby's response to warm benevolence assures us somehow that life has meaning, however elusive the meaning may be. The enigmas and contradictions of existence compel even the most skeptical among us to search in traditional teachings for sense and reassurance that there is some hidden principle at work behind the phenomena of visible life and that whatever it may be, it is surely not random. The complexity and variety of the biosphere, from the earliest microorganisms to homo sapiens, reveal that this is so, that the spiritual capacities of humankind display their predisposition to gentleness and nobility despite the violence that everywhere abounds. Nevertheless, the contemplation of these mysteries does not lead inexorably to faith in a perfect Being behind or within natural phenomena.

The facts of life would seem rather to negate the perfection attributed by monotheistic religions to the creator of the visible world. The violence and aggression inherent to it, the suffering brought on by the early death of loved ones, the onset of old age and disease and other forms of adversity reveal to us the evanescent beauty of our imperfect lives. An awareness of Evil erodes our faith in perfectibility, and for all our virtues, we recognize that we are flawed beings, the helpless victims of imperfection. Just as the beauty of life is seen to reflect a Divine beauty, so, too, life's imperfections would seem to imply that imperfection, no less than near-perfection, is a quality inherent to what we call God.

In this paper I shall argue that the notion of a perfect God derives from the Greeks rather than the Hebrew Bible. A review of classical philosophies and the idea of God's imperfection is followed by a consideration of several Jewish attempts to resolve the dichotomy between Divine perfection and an imperfect creation. I shall focus on Lurianic Kabbalah, Hans Jonas, and on the Hasidic concept of "*Ayin*" or "nothingness" as the very source of redemption. This Hasidic idea, which was further expanded upon

by the Baal Shem Tov's students, appears in a tale recounted by his great-grandson R. Nachman of Bratslav called "The Hanging Lamp." The tale, translated here, illustrates the idea that knowledge of human imperfection is itself a means of perfection, and therefore the imperfect God who creates an imperfect world is more like the God of the Bible than the God derived from the Greek idea of Divine omnipotence, merged with the biblical ideal of Divine righteousness.

II. THE BIBLICAL BELIEF IN AN IMPERFECT GOD AS OPPOSED TO THE GREEK IDEA OF DIVINE PERFECTION

In his well-known theological work, "The Concept of God after Auschwitz" Hans Jonas (1903–1993) proposes an alternative creation myth. Jonas' God suffers but not in the same way as the God of Christianity who redeems mankind by an exceptional act of incarnation and crucifixion suffers:

If anything in what I said makes sense, then the sense is that the relation of God to the world from the moment of creation, and certainly from the creation of man on, involved suffering on the part of the God.¹

It is clear that such an idea of a suffering God contradicts any idea of an omnipotent God. Jonas presents this contradiction not merely as a logical statement as I shall later show,² but in literary terms: "I have been speaking of a suffering God — which immediately seems to clash with the biblical conception of divine majesty."³ He follows this with a question that validates the biblical point of view:

Do we not also in the Bible encounter God as slighted and rejected by man and grieving over him? Do we not encounter Him as rueing that he created man, and suffering from the disappointment he experiences with him — and with His chosen people in particular?⁴

Jonas' reading of the Bible is indeed an attentive one. In his view, God's dissatisfaction with Creation in the story of Noah is an excellent example of the biblical cognizance of God's limitations as creator.

And it repented the LORD that He had made man on the earth, and it grieved Him at His heart. And the LORD said: 'I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and creeping thing, and fowl of the air; for it repenteth Me that I have made them.' (Genesis 6: 6–7)

According to the Noah story, God himself recognizes that His creation is flawed and as such deserving of destruction. This story like many other biblical accounts of God's disappointment with the Chosen People, reveal God's imperfection in allowing Himself to become frustrated to such an extent. Thus, from a biblical perspective, destruction and devastation reveal that God's power and ability are inherently limited.

Jonas sharply challenges divine omnipotence:

From the very concept of power, it follows that omnipotence is a self-contradictory, self-destructive, indeed, senseless concept... Absolute, total power means power not limited by anything, not even by the mere existence of something other than a possessor of that power; for the very existence of such another would already constitute a limitation, and the one would have to annihilate it so as to save its absoluteness. Absolute power then, in its solitude, has no object on which to act. But as objectless power it is a powerless power, canceling itself out: 'all' equals 'zero' here. In order for it to act, there must be something else, and as soon as there is, the one is not all powerful anymore, even though in any comparison its power may be superior by any degree you please to imagine. The existence of another object limits the power of the most powerful agent at the same time that it allows it to be an agent. In brief, power as such is a relational concept and requires relation.⁵

Jonas does not refer here to divine perfection, as did for example Pierre Bayle (1647–1706) a forerunner of the Enlightenment who spoke of God's omnipotence as an element of His perfection: "The clearest

1 Hans Jonas, *Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good after Auschwitz* (Northwestern Univ. Press, 1996), 136.

2 Jonas, *Mortality and Morality*, 138–39.

3 *Ibid.*, 136.

4 *Ibid.*

5 Jonas, *Mortality and Morality*, 138–39.

and most reliable ideas of order teach us that a being who exists of himself, and who is necessary and eternal, must be single, infinite, omnipotent, and endowed with every sort of perfection”.⁶ Therefore in his *Dialogues of Maximus and Themistius* Bayle asks how God’s conduct in permitting evil could ever be considered reasonable:

Judge whether the conduct attributed to the divinity resembles that of an insane or evil father who, because he would make his sons go on a dangerous voyage, would leave them to their own devices, and abandon them to the whims of fortune... Would that prove to a pagan philosopher that this conduct of God’s conforms to reason, or the idea of a sovereignly perfect being?⁷

Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716) discussed Bayle’s claims at length in his *Theodicy* but his direct answer to Bayle’s assertion is one which Jonas could not accept. The problem of the coexistence of Evil and God’s perfection exists only because of our limited and very partial understanding:

Every time we see such a work of God, we find it so perfect that we must wonder at the contrivance and the beauty thereof: but when we do not see an entire work, when we only look upon scraps and fragments, it is no wonder if the good order is not evident there. Our planetary system composes such an isolated work, which is complete also when it is taken by itself; each plant, each animal, each man furnishes one such work, to a certain point of perfection: one recognizes therein the wonderful contrivance of the author. But the human kind, so far as it is known to us, is only a fragment, only a small portion of the City of God or of the republic of Spirits, which has an extent too great for us, and whereof we know too little, to be able to observe the wonderful order therein... One must judge the works of God as wisely as Socrates judged those of Heraclitus in these words: What I have understood thereof pleases me; I think that the rest would please me no less of if I understood it.⁸

Leibniz argues that humanity is only one fragment of the whole of God’s work, and therefore we see only a partial picture that prevents us from seeing the entirety of God’s oeuvre, an answer based on the classical *weltanschauung* that the whole is greater than its parts.⁹ This answer, as I shall later show, is also typical of medieval Jewish thinkers, centuries before and after Leibniz. But does the biblical account in fact suggest a contradiction between God’s infinite power and His perfect righteousness?

The question Abraham puts to God in Genesis 18:25, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” voices the main problem of the story, the expectation that God should manifest perfect justice regardless of the existence or non-existence of his other attributes.¹⁰ On this issue in Judaism, the American Bible scholar G.F. Moore (1851–1931) wrote that: “The Almighty power of God was not in Judaism a theological attribute of omnipotence which belongs in idea to the perfection of God; it was, as in the prophets, the assurance that nothing can withstand his judgment...”¹¹ According to Moore, then, the God of the Bible must be understood not as omnipotent but as a perfect judge. In other words, God’s power is limited by His zeal for justice.

Could it be that Bayle, Leibniz and their various successors, confuse their faith in a God of perfect justice with belief in an all-powerful God?

In *Two Types of Belief*, Martin Buber speaks of a distinction between “belief-in” and “belief-that.”

6 Pierre Bayle, *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, 5th ed., ed. Kristen Irwin (Amsterdam, Leyde, La Haye, Utrecht, 1740) “Manicheans”, Rem. D (305a) (English translation by Kristen Irwin). About Bayle—Leibniz controversy see: Kristen Irwin, “Which “Reason”? Bayle on the Intractability of Evil”, in *New Essays on Leibniz’s Theodicy*, ed. Larry Jorgensen and Samuel Newlands (Oxford Univ. Press, 2014).

7 *Dialogues of Maximus and Themistius*, II, xiv; in: Pierre Bayle, *Oeuvres Diverses* (G. Olms, 2001), IV: 58b-59a. Quote by Irwin, *ibid*, 53.

8 Gottfried W. Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil* (Yale Univ. Press, 1952) (1710), part two, 146. More about Leibniz and God’s perfection see Mark O. Webb, “Natural Theology and the Concept of Perfection in Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz”, *Religious Studies* 25, no. 4 (1989).

9 See following notes 16, 17.

10 About Theodicy in the Pentateuch see: Cornelis Houtman, “Theodicy in the Pentateuch”, in *Theodicy in the World of the Bible*, ed. Antti Laato and Johannes C. d. Moor (Brill, 2003).

11 G. F. Moore, *Judaism Vol. I* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1966), 375. About Theodicy and the prophets see: James L. Crenshaw, “Theodicy and Prophetic Literature”, in *Theodicy in the World of the Bible*, ed. Antti Laato and Johannes C. d. Moor (Brill, 2003).

Both can be understood from the simple data of our life: the one from the fact that I trust someone, without being able to offer sufficient reasons for my trust in him; the other from the fact that, likewise without being able to give a sufficient reason, I acknowledge a thing to be true.¹²

According to Buber, the Hebrew Bible does not proclaim the omnipotence of God as a dogma; rather, it is committed to God's righteousness. It was only later, particularly under the influence of Hellenism, that a belief in the omnipotence of God took root. Kenneth Seeskin offers an important insight about this: "The Bible speaks of God's majesty and authority, but it nowhere ascribes to Him the property of being omnipotent."¹³ Seeskin goes on to explain that the Hebrew name *Shaddai*, one of God's divine titles in the Bible was rendered as "Almighty" (Pan-to-kra'tor) by Greek translators and as *omnipotens* in the Vulgate.

Israeli biblical scholar Yair Hoffman suggests further that

the Bible focuses mainly on the personal and national rather than the universal-theological-philosophical aspects of the problem. It seems that Job and Qohelet are the only books interested in the theoretical dilemma of the co-existence of evil and the omnipotent God of justice, and none of these books advocates any theodicy solution to it.¹⁴

According to Hoffman, however, the book of Job offers the ironic solution that even God has no suitable answer to the problem of the suffering of the righteous in the world.¹⁵ Indeed, the Bible, time and again represents God as limited in power, as an imperfect creator, raging and jealous.

How may we understand Leibnitz's commitment to divine perfection? I maintain that the conflation of a personal, biblical God of creation with the Greek *weltanschauung* of order and perfection evolved into the doctrine of a perfect God.

Cicero, in book two of *The Nature of the Gods*¹⁶ gives eloquent expression to the Stoic monism that led to a complete identification of the cosmos with the divine:

Therefore the cosmos must also be wise, for that substance which encompasses and holds all things must excel in the perfection of its reason; and this means that the cosmos is God and that all its particular powers are contained in the divine nature.¹⁷

In so saying, Jonas holds, Cicero accords a theological status to the visible universe, since:¹⁸

This world is the All, and there is nothing beside it; it is perfect, and there is nothing equaling it in perfection; it is perfect as the whole of its parts, and the parts participate in degrees in its perfection; As a whole it is ensouled, intelligent, and wise, and something of these attributes is also exhibited in some of its parts; the evidence of its wisdom is the perfect order of the whole (especially the eternal harmony of the celestial motions); the parts are necessarily less perfect than the whole: this applies also to man, who, though sharing in the highest cosmic attributes of soul and mind, is not the most perfect of beings, since he is not by nature but only potentially wise, while the intelligence of the cosmos is perpetually in the state of wisdom; but man in addition to the natural share he has as a part in the perfection of the divine universe has also the capacity to perfect himself by assimilating his being to that of the whole through contemplating it in his understanding and imitating it in his conduct.¹⁹

The stoics, held Jonas, brought the Greek concept and belief in perfection to its consummate form. And this merging of the cosmic with the divine, in my view, made its way into the medieval belief in a personal God of creation who imbues human life with meaning, and who is both divine and perfect.²⁰

12 Martin Buber, *Two Types of Faith* (Macmillan, 1951), 7.

13 Kennet R. Seeskin, "The Perfection of God and the Presence of Evil", *Judaism* 31, no. 2 (1982): 204.

14 See Yair Hoffman, "Theodicy and Protest in Michah 7", in *Theodicy and Protest, Jewish and Christian Perspectives*, ed. Beate Ego et al. (Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2018), 46.

15 Yair Hoffman, *A Blemished Perfection: The Book of Job in Context* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 250, see chapter 7, 222–53.

16 Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* II. 11–14.

17 *Ibid.*, 11.

18 See Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (Beacon Press, 1963), 243.

19 Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 245–46.

20 More about the Greek Dogma that as a perfect being, God must be totally unchanging in every conceivable respect see Rem B. Edwards, "The Pagan Dogma of the Absolute Unchangeableness of God", *Religious Studies* 14, no. 3 (1978).

In *Athens and Jerusalem*, Lev Shestov mentions Dilthey's admission "that the modern age received the philosophy of antiquity through Cicero and Seneca, and that it is with their eyes that we see the ancients... better than [through] the works of Plato and Aristotle".²¹ Later, however, he quotes Etienne Gilson's assertion that:

Platonism and Aristotelianism continued to live in a new way by collaborating in a work for which they did not know themselves destined. It is thanks to them that the Middle Ages could have a philosophy. It was they who taught the idea of "the perfect work of reason"; they pointed out, along with the master problems, the rational principles which govern their solution and the techniques through which they are justified.²²

The "perfect work of reason" was conceived in Christianity as well as in medieval Jewish and Muslim philosophies as the perfect work of God. In these monotheistic philosophies the logical contradictions between God's perfection and reality became crucial and led to the full articulation of Theodicy. As Gilson writes: "If it is to the Bible that we owe a philosophy that is Christian, it is to the Greek tradition that Christianity owes the fact that it has a philosophy".²³

The Kabbalistic alternative to the medieval/stoic concept of divine perfection emerged from Neoplatonic theosophy, as we shall presently see. Its cornerstone was the principle of emanation, but it gave rise to an altogether different world view with the idea of *Tzimztum* (Contraction).

III. THE KABBALISTIC IDEA OF TZIMZTUM AND GOD'S IMPERFECTION

Although the term Kabbalah refers to Jewish mysticism in general, its main writings are in fact theosophical and these, at a later stage of development, introduced revolutionary ideas concerning divine perfection. Isaac ben Solomon Luria Ashkenazi known as the Ari (1534–1572), resolved the dilemma of Divine perfection in an imperfect world with the unique idea of *Tzimztum*, Divine contraction. According to the book *Etz Hayim*, written by Luria's student Hayim Vital, Creation began with the self-contraction of the Godhead. God, the infinite light, contracted Himself in order to create a void which enabled the creation of the worlds.

The idea of creation through the contraction of the infinite light is a complete departure from the medieval idea of creation ex nihilo and from previous Kabbalistic ideas of emanation influenced by Neoplatonism.²⁴ According to the doctrine attributed to Luria, finite and limited worlds cannot be created directly from an infinite and unlimited divinity. Therefore, creation occurred through a divine contraction that enabled the creation of the imperfect worlds. In contrast, according to the Neoplatonic idea, the origin of the worlds must be higher than the worlds themselves, and emanation proceeds from the higher to the lower, from the infinite to the finite.

It would be hard to find a better description for the Lurianic idea of contraction than Gershom Scholem's:

Luria begins by putting a question which gives the appearance of being naturalistic and, if you like, somewhat crude. How can there be a world if God is everywhere? If God is 'all in all', how can there be things which are not God? How can God create the world out of nothing if there is no nothing? This is the question. The solution became, in spite of the crude form which he gave it, of the highest importance in the history of later Kabbalistic thought. According to Luria, God was compelled to make room for the world by, as it were, abandoning a region within Himself, a kind of mystical primordial space from which he withdrew in order to return to it in the act of creation and revelation. The first act of *En-Sof*, the Infinite

21 Lev Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem*, ed. Martin Bernard (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1966), 87.

22 Etienne Gilson, *L'esprit de la philosophie médiévale*, II, 224. (Quoted in Lev Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem*, 274).

23 Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem*, 224. In the context of this paper philosophy corresponds to theodicy.

24 About the idea of contraction in Kabbalah and western philosophy see Christian Schulte, *Zimzum: Gott und Weltursprung* (Jüdischer Verlag, 2014). About previous Kabbalistic texts which were dealt with contraction (*Tzimztum*) See Moshe Idel, "Conceptualizations of Tzimztum in Baroque Italian Kabbalah", in *The Value of the Particular: Lessons from Judaism and the Modern Jewish Experience: Festschrift for Steven T. Katz on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Michael Zank and Ingrid Anderson (Brill, 2015).

Being, is therefore not a step outside but a step inside, a movement of recoil, of falling back upon oneself, of withdrawing into oneself. Instead of emanation we have the opposite, contraction.”²⁵

Luria’s ideas are a kind of fusion between Neoplatonic thought and a form of Gnosticism. Indeed, Scholem acknowledges the phenomenological resemblance between classical Gnosticism and Lurianic ideas. There is no absolute dualism here, but the optimism of Genesis 1, “And God saw that it was good”²⁶, is replaced by a more complex interpretation of Divine immanence:

The first act, the act of *tzimtzum*, in which God determines, and therefore limits, Himself, is an act of [strict judgment] *Din* which reveals the roots of this quality in all that exists; these ‘roots of divine judgment’ subsist in chaotic mixture with the residue of divine light which remained after the original retreat or withdrawal within the primary space of God’s creation. Then a second ray of light out of the essence of *En-Sof* brings order into chaos and sets the cosmic process in motion, by separating the hidden elements and moulding them into a new form. Throughout this process the two tendencies of perpetual ebb and flow –the Kabbalists speak of *hithpashtut*, egression, and *histalkut*, regression- continue to act and react upon each other. Just as a human organism exists through the double process of inhaling and exhaling and the one cannot be conceived without the other, so also the whole creation constitutes a gigantic process of divine inhalation and exhalation. In the final resort, therefore, the root of all evil is already latent in the act of *Tzimzum*.²⁷

The idea of *Tzimztum* in *Veyakhel Moshe* (Dassau 1669) written by the Kabbalist and Rabbi Moses ben Menachem of Prague (1574–1641) may be understood as an emergence — a splitting of Godhead through which all imperfections flow:

Know that before the world was created... all was En Sof, there was no empty space in which to create the world for it expanded in perpetuity. And as you know by this time, every activation generates movement and every movement generates *Tzimzum*, for movement always proceeds from one place to another.²⁸

The primal state before a world of any sort was created is described in this literature as a static egression of the light of *En Sof* pervading All in such a way that, in order for anything to exist beyond it, activation is necessary; activation becomes possible only if some distance lies between one space and another. To shatter *En Sof* with additional space requires the *Tzimztum* of divine abundance:

And in every instance *Tzimzum* occurs as a *Pargod* (curtain). It [En-Sof] tells itself: contract yourself, go no further than this lest you continue to spread. And as you now know, the spreading of Light always comes from the side of *Hesed* (Loving Kindness), the proof of this being that it is the nature of water which is *Hasadim* (acts of Loving Kindness) to spread as far as it can. And all reflections when the Light contracts itself to avoid spreading out comes from the side of *Din* (Judgment), proof of this being that it is the nature of fire to contract itself and to rise to its source above and not below.²⁹

Din as contraction is likened to a rising fire; it leaves the world less perfect, whereas the *Hesed* of *En Sof* is likened to water spreading through every space, which is why only the state of being that preceded the creation of the worlds can abide in a state of perfection and fullness.

According to Moses of Prague the goodness attributed to Creation in the Book of Genesis should not be understood simplistically. Goodness in effect abides in *Tzimztum*.

Know my beloved brother that the world was created in *Din*. The gematria of *teva* (Nature) is *elohim* (God) and that is why the Bible opens with the words ‘In the beginning Elohim created’ (Genesis 1:1) just as the light of the blessed *En Sof* exists and the worlds can only delight in It with clothing, and curtains (*Pargodim*) and *Tzimzum*, as is known...and the creation of the world could take place only through the *Tzimzum* of the Great Light...but this is hard as is written ‘the world is built of *Hesed*’ (Psalm 89:3) and therefore ... every tree branch partakes of the power of the root and the root is discernible only by its branches. Such is the *Hesed* of *Tzimzum* of Blessed *En Sof*, that its Great Light spreads through the raiments and curtains so that the worlds may delight in it even though *Tzimzum* comes from the side of *Din*.³⁰

25 Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Schocken Books, 1965), 260–61.

26 Genesis 1: 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31.

27 Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 263.

28 Moses ben Menachem of Prague, *Veyakhel Moshe (Hebrew)* (1860), 14 a.

29 *Ibid.*, 15b.

30 *Ibid.*, 13a.

Because the existence of the world is made possible only by dint of *Tzimtzum*, which is essentially the limitation of *Hesed* and divine abundance, the imperfection brought about by *Tzimtzum* is evidence of the *Hesed* and perfection which preceded it and activated the process. The hidden foundation of the world is the infinite *Hesed* which must contract itself and hide behind the curtains of constraints and contractions.

Understanding contraction as a positive and necessary imperfection that enables the world to exist became the cornerstone of the new Hasidic approach I shall elucidate below.

From a Kabbalistic point of view, it is impossible to find perfection in this world. Rather, one must work actively to overcome the world's imperfections. In Lurianic Kabbalah the classical idea of perfection was replaced by the revolutionary concept of restoration and repair, *Tikkun*, based on a Rabbinic Jewish belief.³¹ The mission of humanity is not to imitate the perfect cosmos as the Greeks held but to repair the flaws that came about with the creation of the finite world. According to Luria, a second catastrophe occurred in the process of creation: the shattering of the vessels and the fall of the divine sparks into matter where they remain trapped until human beings elevate them to their roots and unify them with their divine source in infinity. The picture this explanation evokes is mythic and phenomenologically akin to Gnosticism, but in Kabbalah, *Tikkun* and the elevation of the sparks embedded in corporeality became the very mission of humanity.

IV. HANS JONAS'S IDEA OF A WEAK GOD AS A MODERN THEOLOGICAL EXTENSION OF KABBALISTIC TZIMTZUM

Hans Jonas described the Lurianic idea of *tzimtzum* as a “highly original, very unorthodox speculation in whose company mine would not appear so wayward after all”.³² But Jonas's theology is not so far from the dead God of radical theology.³³

My myth goes farther still. The contraction is total as far as power is concerned; as a whole has the Infinite ceded his power to the finite and thereby wholly delivered his cause into his hands. Does that still leave anything for a relation to God?³⁴

Jonas's answer summarizes the alternative myth he invented in a last attempt to give meaning to the idea of God, the creator, after the trauma of the Holocaust.

By forgoing its own inviolateness, the eternal ground allowed the world to be. To this self-denial all creation owes its existence and with it has received all there is to receive from beyond. Having given himself whole to the becoming world, God has no more to give: it is man's now to give to him. And he may give by seeing to it in the ways of his life that it does not happen or happen too often, and not on his account, that it ‘repented the Lord’ to have made the world.³⁵

According to Jonas, in our technological age, humankind must take on the responsibility for the future existence of the world. Jonas's God whose infinity is seemingly limited by the finite reality created by his

31 “The evil Turnus Rufus asked Rabbi Akiva, ‘Which are better, things made by the Almighty or things made by flesh and blood?’ He replied, ‘Things made by flesh and blood are better!’ Turnus Rufus said to him, ‘But heaven and earth, can a human being make anything like these?’ Rabbi Akiva said, ‘Don't talk to me about things that are above created beings, that can't be controlled; rather talk to me about things that are to be found amongst man.’ He [Turnus Rufus] said, ‘Why do you circumcise?’ He replied, ‘I knew you would ask me about that, which is why I pre-empted and told you that things made by man are better than things made by the Almighty.’ Rabbi Akiva brought him wheat and cakes and said to him, ‘These are made by the Almighty and these are made by man. Aren't these [cakes] better than the wheat?’ Turnus Rufus retorted, ‘If God wanted circumcision, then why doesn't the baby come out circumcised from his mother's womb?’ Rabbi Akiva responded, ‘Because the Almighty didn't give commandments to the Jewish People for any reason but to improve ourselves with them.’ *Midrash Tanchuma*, Parashat Tazria, 8, (Hebrew).

32 Jonas, *Mortality and Morality*, 142.

33 See Richard Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz, History, Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (The Johns Hopkins Unive. Press, 1992), 247–65.

34 Jonas, *Mortality and Morality*, 142.

35 Ibid.

Tzimtzum, is weak and helpless. He has relegated all responsibility for the universe to a humanity that is liable to bring on devastation through the misuse of technology and the failure to protect the planet. Jonas does not try to hide the impact of the Holocaust on his alternative myth. His God may not be dead yet, but he is dying.

Jonas's alternative myth, speculative though it may be, carries a profound meaning as Jonas explains in his introduction to the essay.³⁶ He expresses the imperative of responsibility in mythical terms, as a struggle between constructive and destructive forces within man. Jonas's myth adds a spiritual dimension and challenge to humanity, namely, the idea of responsibility as our gift to God, our reimbursement to the infinite, the source of our finite existence in a finite world. Such a myth, however, offers no religious comfort and no opportunity for any real bidirectional dialogue between man and God. Granted that the God of the philosophers is not the God of the Patriarchs, can there be a truly religious response to the question of faith after Auschwitz?

The following Hasidic interpretation of *Tzimtzum* as the cosmic origin of human imperfection offers a meaningful way of coping with our imperfect world.

V. THE HASIDIC UNDERSTANDING OF IMPERFECTION IN RELATION TO THE PROBLEM OF A PERFECT GOD

The Kabbalists of the Zohar and the Lurianic Kabbalists engaged in a sublime search for the sacred design of the universe by studying the simple words of the Torah as concealing profound knowledge. Kabbalistic interpretations of Torah and its rituals sought the spiritual meaning behind the laws and precepts, any of which might play a role in the vast project of cosmic *Tikkun*. Although this imbued the lives of the Kabbalists with meaning as servants of God, a lesser emphasis was placed on mending (*Tikkun*) the human condition as such.

The grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, Moshe Hayim Ephraim of Sdytkov, transformed the Lurianic idea of *Tzimtzum* from divine contraction, to human imperfection and regression,³⁷ as he wrote in *Degel Mahane Efrayim*:

'I will lift up my eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help' [a play on an alternative meaning of the Hebrew word *me'ayin* — read as *me-ayin* = from *nothingness*]. 'My help cometh from the Lord who made heaven and earth' (Psalms 121:4). Hills are the minds of our forefathers and when I sense my distance [from God] (*histalkut*) then my help cometh from nothingness (*me-ayin*), because when I sense this, my heart breaks and becomes as nothing, thus said my grandfather the Baal Shem Tov, 'from *ayin* (*me-ayin* = from nothingness) cometh my help'.³⁸

In Hasidism, then, Lurianic cosmic regression (*histalkut*) becomes a personal regression from the Godhead, a state of lowness, *Qatnut*, or constricted consciousness. *Qatnut* comes about through God's contraction, which enables the *Ayin*, infinite-nothingness, to fill and sustain the world. The verse "then in my flesh shall I see God" (Job 19, 26) which the Baal Shem Tov had interpreted as denoting that all we know of God is based on our own inner knowledge became a Hasidic principle. Thus the worshipper who meditates on his remoteness from the Godhead becomes aware of his state: instead of falling into depression, such awareness transforms his broken heart into a source of redemption. This is the meaning of Martin Buber's observation that in Hasidism, "mysticism has become ethos".³⁹ A theological idea, in this case the abstract idea of God's contraction, is reflected in the human condition and becomes a key to introspection and change.

The human condition, like the whole of creation, emerges out of the state of nothingness or *Ayin*, and just as the world is sustained and fulfilled by invisible sparks of the Divine, so too, according to the

36 Ibid., 132.

37 About the two main ways of interpreting *tzimtzum* in Hasidism see Moshe Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (State Univ. of New York Press, 1995), 89–95.

38 Moshe Ephraim of Sdytkov, *Degel Mahane Efrayim (Hebrew)* (1963), 266.

39 Martin Buber, *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism* (Horizon Press, 1960), 198–99.

Baal Shem Tov, are human beings able to ascend from their broken-hearted state and thereby raise the divine sparks to their divine source. Such is the Hasidic understanding of Psalm 130: “Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord”. The Baal Shem Tov’s teaching that “The whole earth is full of His glory, and no place is void of it” may seem at first to contradict Luria’s concept of the void as nothingness, but the divine light, however, is everywhere: in every aspect of corporeality there is a divine spark that infuses it with vitality. Vitality is the divine spirit that animates all matter and therefore, its Goodness is present even in Evil. The Baal Shem Tov gave this idea a new sense by merging it with the Lurianic concept of *Tzimtzum* where the personal state of *Qatnut* reflects divine contraction. God’s *histalkut* or withdrawal becomes interiorized. Divine immanence, the Baal Shem Tov teaches, means that God is never totally absent. Thus, *Tzimtzum* presents a paradox. God is hidden yet His sparks are everywhere and therefore “The whole earth is full of His glory, and no place is void of it.” In the Hasidic world view, perfection is not the principle of creation. On the contrary, it is by contemplating the inherent imperfection of the human condition as a reflection of God’s *Tzimtzum* that one can find redemption.

A person whose consciousness is cut off from the divine abides in a state of *Tzimtzum* and therefore the whole world assumes the semblance of corporeality; but when the person’s consciousness is rejoined to the divine root of corporeality the world becomes identified with and illuminated by divinity. Rabbi Pinhas Shapira of Koritz (1726 –1791), one of the first Hasidic teachers, interpreted the story of Jacob’s dream as an inner progression from dark obliviousness of the divine to the bliss of remembering God:

‘And Jacob departed from Beersheba, and set off toward Haran’ (Genesis 28:10–12). He said: When a man departs from the House of Study, the *beit midrash*, that is, Beersheba, the well of living water, and sets off for Haran, that is, the market place, a free and open place, and alights there, that is, in the market place and it grows dark along the way and he lies down to sleep, and abandons all thought and does set his mind in order because the sun has set, then, after reason departs, he dreams, *holem*, which recalls him to himself in the sense of *‘hihlim*’ ‘he was healed and restored to health and spiritual vigor,’ and he beholds a ladder set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven, that is, in man’s eyes it appears a small thing but in truth it is a very great thing, because the gematria [the numerical equivalent] of ‘ladder’ is ‘mammon’ and the angels of God ascend and descend upon it, that is even the *zaddiqim* ascend and descend upon it.⁴⁰

Beersheba is the place of learning which makes self-recollection possible in the sense of an inner connection with the divine source. Self-recollection is thus the measure of closeness or distance from God, the sense of inner-meaning behind outward phenomena. This is what creates the ladder, the ability to transform the market place which symbolizes the corporeal world into the dimension where Godhead dwells. R. Pinhas interprets the concept of *halom*, dream, as *hahlama*, or healing. The inner meaning of Jacob’s dream is the ongoing process of going back and forth (*razo wa-shov*) between corporeality and the divine essence within the soul. Outward reality brings an inward awakening, self-recollection and change. The market place becomes *makom*, God’s place. The contemplation of sanctity and man’s true state turns the darkness of the market into a place of illumination. The process itself brings healing to the soul. Money (*Mammon*) and Jacob’s ladder are not opposites but rather, through contemplation, become a bridge or ladder from corporeality to *En Sof*.

This is Hasidism’s method of dealing not only with the subjective experience of distance from God and the resulting depression, but also with the experience of flaws in our fellow beings. When we observe imperfections in others we should not castigate them, but rather turn inward to examine ourselves, and correct and transcend our own imperfections. In the writings of R. Ya’aqov Yosef Kats (1695–1782) who was influenced by the Baal Shem Tov and had published the first Hasidic book in 1780, we discern a change in the concept of human relationships as a whole:

And I heard in the name of my teacher of blessed memory [The Besht] the explanation of the Mishna ‘Who is wise? He who learns from all men’ [Chapter 4, Sayings of the Fathers]: Just as one who looks in the mirror recognizes his own flaws there, so too in seeing the flaws of the other one may recognize a trace of it in himself as well.⁴¹

40 Pinhas of Koritz, *Imrei Pinhas* (Hebrew) (2003), 40.

41 Ya’aqov Yosef of Polnoy, *Toledot Ya’aqov Yosef*, (Hebrew) Section Pequdei, (1973), 259.

One who dwells in the realm of Divine thought and never descends to the human world may be likened to a person who has never seen himself in the mirror, for it is others who mirror back our own imperfections.⁴² Passages of this type reveal a new spirit of openness to life among the early followers of the Baal Shem Tov. Personal flaws are viewed as fundamental facts of life, not as a barrier between human imperfection and a perfect God, for God himself is imperfect and the whole of creation is based on the divine act of self-contraction. Seeing one's own flaws in the face of the other should remind us that imperfection is an aspect of the God who created us and thus we need not be discouraged by our own shortcomings. Such a positive approach to human fallibility arouses forgiveness and acceptance of other wrongdoers and a hope for their repair.

One of the more important figures among the Hasidic leaders who developed this new direction in Judaism was Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav (1772 — 1810), the great-grandson of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov. R. Nachman echoes the profound meaning of *Tzimztum* in his book *Likutey Moharan*:

Now, one must also know that '[God's] Glory fills the whole world' (Isaiah 6:3), and there is no place empty of Him (Tikkuney Zohar #57, p.91b). He fills all worlds and surrounds all worlds (Zohar III, 225a)... For our Sages have already revealed to us that Godliness is to be found in all corporeality and in all the languages of the nations. For without His Godliness, they have no life-force or existence whatsoever. As is written, 'You keep them all alive' (Nehemiah 9:6). It is just that this life-force and Godliness are there in a very contracted and limited manner: only enough to ensure its existence, to keep it alive and no more.⁴³

The imperfection derives from the contraction of the Godhead in order to allow the world to exist, since without *Tzimztum* the corporeal world could not have come into being. Perfect divinity, however, exists within the imperfection of corporeality since it is the Godhead, which animates and sustains the corporeal world. Thus, the flawed is perfect since there is nowhere devoid of the Godhead even though the world is only possible through a divine contraction that creates vacated space for its existence. The paradox, says R. Nachman, is that despite the *En Sof*, God's self-withdrawal in order to create the world, the world is not devoid of the Godhead, which exists in corporeality, however flawed and incomplete it may appear to us:

This Vacated Space was necessary for the creation of the world, since without the Vacated Space there would have been no place in which to create the world, as explained above. Yet, understanding and comprehending this contraction [that resulted in the formation] of the Vacated Space will be possible only in the Future, since it is necessary to say about it two contradictory things: existence and nonexistence.

The Vacated Space is the result of the contraction; that [God], so to speak, withdrew His Godliness from that place. Thus there is, so to speak, no Godliness there. Were it not so, it would not be vacated. There would then be nothing but Ein Sof, with no place whatsoever for the world's creation. However the actual truth is that, even so, there is surely Godliness there as well. For there is surely nothing without His life-force. This is why it is not at all possible to comprehend the concept of the Vacated Space until the Future.⁴⁴

Because this is logically inconsistent, the solution is delayed to a future time, the time of the Messiah, and all that the teacher of Hasidism can do for now is to explain the claim indirectly by means of ordinary, everyday concepts that are more and less simple and tangible.

R. Nachman reveals his solution to the paradoxical imperfection of human life through the following parable, "The Tale of the Hanging Lamp" where what appears as natural proof of imperfection is in reality perfection itself:

The Tale of the Hanging Lamp

A man left his father and went off to foreign lands to sojourn among strangers. When he returned to his father after some time he proudly told him that he had learnt the great art of lamp-making and that now

⁴² The source for this idea is the Talmud b. (Qiddushin 70a): "Whoever alleges that others are genealogically invalid is himself invalid and never says a good thing about other people. And said Samuel, 'By reference to a flaw in himself he invalidates others.'"

⁴³ Nachman of Bratslav, *Likutei Moharan*, (Hebrew) (1968), 33:2.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 64:1.

he wished to invite all the craftsmen of the town to see his beautifully made lamps. His father agreed and invited all the town's craftsmen to come and admire the great skill his son had acquired abroad.

But when the son showed them all a lamp he had made they only disparaged it. The father had asked them to tell his son the truth and so they were obliged to say that it was indeed crudely made. In reply however the son boasted: 'I have shown you the wisdom of my art.' But the father informed his son that in the eyes of the other craftsmen the lamp was ugly. The son replied: 'As a matter of fact I have shown them my greatness. I made this lamp to reflect the flaws of all the craftsmen here and as you see, what seems flawed to one person may seem good to another, and vice versa. That which seems ugly to one may seem beautiful and marvelous to another and that which seems ugly to oneself may seem beautiful to another. It is generally true that something may appear evil to one person and good to another.

I made this lamp out of their imperfections in order to show them that everyone is imperfect and that what may appear beautiful to one may appear ugly to another and this is why I make lamps as I do, the proper way.

Had they been aware of own their flaws and shortcomings they would have understood the essence of this even if they had never seen them before.'

Great are God's deeds. No man is like another and all forms existed in primordial Adam. That is, the word Adam is comprised of all forms. Likewise with regard to other things: all light is comprised in the word 'light', yet every leaf on a tree is unlike any other...⁴⁵

According to this tale, then, perfection is the aggregate of all flaws rather than a whole made up of perfect pieces. Every piece of the lamp can be compared to a piece of this world. Perfection is not the summit of a hierarchy but the sum total of its pieces, however imperfect. There is no perfection in the world beyond. Perfection can be achieved in this world when we acknowledge the flaws and imperfections that comprise it. True perfection is not utopian. It requires an understanding of the defective nature of the world. Flaws are perfect in that they reveal our own imperfections and the limited nature of our existence, deterring pride and the illusion of perfection. God is found in modesty. Plato taught that the whole is greater than its parts because the parts as such are imperfect.⁴⁶ But in Rabbi Nachman's tale, the knowledge that no part of the whole can ever be perfect and that it will always be found defective is the key to real perfection. The world was created not through divine perfection, overflowing to the world and sustaining it, but through the self-contraction of the divine. In contrast to the medieval and Neo-Platonic thinking that largely influenced theosophical Kabbalah, Hasidism released adherents from the profound frustration of seeking unattainable perfection. By seeing the divine imperfection of *Tzimztum* reflected in the human condition, Hasidism offered adherents a new and positive approach that enabled them to overcome feelings of depression, *Qatnut*, and distance from God.

In contrast to the classical *weltanschauung* that "there is nothing anywhere in the cosmos which is not part of the whole",⁴⁷ Rabbi Nachman sees the parts that make up the whole as perfect because there is no ideal of perfection to which they can be compared. This view is that the true essence of perfection is the imperfection of everything in existence. And this is the meaning of the dictum, "The whole earth is full of His glory, and no place is void of it". If God is everywhere, nothing is imperfect, not even the simplest artifact made by a lowly craftsman. The friends of the father in the story judge the son's lamp according to an abstract ideal of perfect beauty but the story is antithetical to such a Platonic view. The impossibility of perfection reflects a Hasidic revolution against the traditional conception of Platonic ideas called *Sephirot* in theosophical Kabbalah. The father's friends view outward beauty as conforming

45 Zvi Mark, *The Complete Stories of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav* (Hebrew) (Miskal, 2014), 185.

46 The best expression of this approach is found in Plato's *Laws*: "The ruler of the universe has ordered all things with a view to the excellence and preservation of the whole, and each part, as far as may be, has an action and passion appropriate to it. Over these, down to the last fraction of them, ministers have been appointed to preside, who have wrought out their perfection with infinitesimal exactness. And one of these positions of the universe is thine own, unhappy man, which, however little, contributes to the whole; and you do not seem to be aware that this and every other creation is for the sake of the whole, and in order that the life of the whole may be blessed; and that you are created for the sake of the whole, and not the whole for the sake of you". Plato, *Laws* X. 903 B-D; tr. Jowett.

47 Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* II. 11.

to an ideal, but Rabbi Nachman's story views the beauty of things as they are in essence, an indwelling spark of the divine, a hidden aspect of existence whether in human beings or in simple matter. The sparks of divine vitality that animate creation are invisible and therefore admit of no comparison.

VI. SUMMARY

A comparison of Jonas's perception of Kabbalistic *Tzimztum* with the Hasidic view of it reveals an essential difference. Jonas holds to the external meaning of the creation myth which gave rise to the idea of *Tzimztum* while Hasidism interiorizes the idea, infusing it with personal meaning so that it may become a source of religious regeneration.

Because our own imperfections partake of divine imperfection, we can take heart in our competitive daily lives as we encounter imperfections in our friends and find solace in the midst of our greatest sufferings. According to the Lurianic Kabbalah, the world did not come into being by way of a perfect act of creation and therefore life is not perfect either. We are wrong to imagine salvation as euphoric, for there is greater salvation in sobriety, once we release ourselves from a view of external perfection and learn to find perfection even in grief and bereavement. What seems forever shattered may ultimately bring fulfillment because imperfection makes us yearn to be restored.⁴⁸ Hasidism, unlike theosophical Kabbalah, does not aspire to solve metaphysical contradictions but rather to redeem human beings from the pain of their distance from God and to enable them to achieve a direct connection with the Divine through humility. A profound spiritual yearning compelled the followers of early Hasidism to meditate on life as it is, not as a metaphysical speculation. Some Hasidic teachers came to understand that meditating on the imperfections of human life is the best way to understand the Lurianic idea of contraction. The Hasidic withdrawal from the systematic view of Kabbalistic metaphysics which Gershom Scholem considered to be a mere popularization of Kabbalistic ideas, can be examined anew in light of an existential religiosity suitable to the post-Kantian revolution and the positivist prohibition on metaphysics. The idea of cosmic perfection as testifying to God's perfection is a source of great suffering. The view of human imperfection as a natural state reflecting the imperfection of God and the emphasis of human responsibility, enhance the understanding that imperfection is a call to repair the world. It reveals that the presumed dichotomy between perfectionism and nihilism is a false one. The Hasidic acceptance of human limitation as a reflection of an imperfect God strengthens the desire for *Tikkun*.

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⁴⁸ See Iddo Landau, *Finding Meaning in an Imperfect World* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2017), 31–64. Landau discusses various philosophical definitions of perfection but not divine perfection. Nevertheless his discussion reveals a deep frustration in western life with the impossible implications of the idea of perfection due to the gap between an imperfect life and an unattainable ideal of perfection.

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