

Tanya Independent Study

Tzimtzum: reality and illusion

“Just as a vessel covers that which is within it, so does the Tzimtzum cover and conceal the light of the life-force”¹

Tzimtzum is at the center of Shaar Hayichud’s philosophical discussion of the ultimate unity of God. Tzimtzum is literally the concept of God moving his presence to create a space for the world. As a concept, however, this has far reaching consequences. Slight change in interpretations results in an emphatic difference in result. At first glance the idea of Tzimtzum does not necessarily seem that complicated, or important. The world is here and finite, and therefore God, infinite, must be separate in some respect. This is more explanatory than anything, God existed before the world, and the world all comes from God, therefore for the world to seem to exist in the absence of the *direct* presence of God, he must have shifted something about, at the very least, his nature with respect for physicality.

However, when examined this idea is at the very core of what the meaning of God’s true unity is, and, by extension, what the truth behind our worlds is. “The cause and reason for this tzimtzum and concealment the Holy One...hid the life-force of the world...is as follows: ...the purpose of creation of the creation of the world is for the sake of the revelation of his kingdom... Only ‘in a multitude of people is the glory of the

¹ Zalman, Schneur R. *Likutei Amarim Tanya*. Kehot Publication Society: London, England, 1998. P.299

king.”² Tzimtzum is the apparent separation of us from the source and true Godliness. It is the separation of an apparent finite and physical existence from an infinite God. On one, more basic level, this can be seen as an inevitable consequence if there is to be a world. For any world to exist there must be agency. Without an observer with an individualistic perception there is nothing to separate God from anything else, since everything comes from God. An infinite God must be shifted in order for something created from than infinity to appear finite, and that is tzimtzum. However, Shaar Hayichud goes on to show a much deeper side to this. There is a true unity of God that must be reconciled with the *apparent* separation caused by this concealment.

“He was alone prior to the creation of the world, so is He alone after it was created.”³ Despite an apparent self-sustaining separate existence, there is only God. Complete unity. God is the ultimate source for all existence and, “hence, there is truly nothing besides Him.”⁴ But, then what is tzimtzum? Shaar Hayichud expresses the idea of God’s unity as the purpose of creation. The reason for the concealment of this unity is to provide an opportunity for us to choose to expose that unity through physical mitzvoth and higher understanding. “The very purpose of creation is revelation.”⁵ Understanding the truth in this concealment is to understand ourselves in God, and that understanding undoes tzimtzum. On one hand, “it is not within the scope of the intellect of any creature to comprehend the essential nature of the tzimtzum.”⁶ As understanding the tzimtzum would be to actively understand the infinite, something which is by definition impossible

² Zalman, p. 307

³ Zalman, p. 311

⁴ Zalman, p. 293

⁵ Stiensaltz, Adin. *The Sustaining Utterance*. Jason Aronson inc. Northvale, New Jersey, 1989. p.78

⁶ Zalman, p. 299

for any physical finite creature, however, practically, in our world we can aim to understand to a degree the unity of God, and hence see tzimtzum for what it is.

The way Rabbi Zalman explains this is expressed in our physical world is through two levels of unity, a higher and a lower level. The higher-level unity expressed God's transcendence of our perceived reality, where as lower-level unity is rooted in God presence in our world. "Reality is nullified before God, like the light of the sun in the sun itself, and this is known as higher-level unity...The other side of this is that even though the Devine is above time and space, He is, nevertheless, present in time and in space – and this is the lower-level of unity."⁷ This concept of unity is represented in two ways, not just in how we can understand the world, but in how we act in the world. "Shema Yisrael is Yichudah Ilaah, and Baruch Shem K'vod Malchuto Leolam Vaed is Yichudah Tataah, For Vaed is Echad through the substitution of letter."⁸ Shaar Hayichud presents a deeper understanding for the basic concept of tzimtzum, expanding it to the fundamental nature of how we live. The unity of God is the ultimate truth this aims to show.

"He is not beyond the world, and we have to relate to Him accordingly."⁹ God's presence, while hidden by tzimtzum, necessitates us to strive for higher understanding. "It is incumbent upon us to believe with complete faith, matters that are revealed to us – that He and His attributes are One."¹⁰ The unity of God exists from both within the *attributes* of this world, and on a higher level. Tzimtzum, as Shaar Hayichud emphasizes, is not a creation *from* God, but a creation *within* God. A concealment that maintains its true nature of Godliness on an elevated level.

⁷ Stiensaltz p. 79

⁸ Zalman, p. 307

⁹ Stiensaltz p.87

¹⁰ Zalman, p. 329

Echad is the higher level of true *one-ness* and vaed is the presence of God in the physical universe. These two concepts are ultimately two sides of one concept. These are the two sides of creation and the two sides of the world, higher and lower unity. Both types of unity are in everything despite a preference of perspective. Just as saying the Shema is a physical act it is representative of higher unity in the same way that higher level unity exists within the physical world but is the essence of a non-physical truth. To the same end, lower level unity is represented in our actions by their very physical nature, but is not a different concept, ultimately, from when we reflect upon the oneness of God with higher unity. For the world to *appear* independent, and for us to have individual senses of self, the reality of God had to be concealed, in a way distanced. However, the essence of God must still be present in everything, and the unity of God persists. God exists on this view as not just a creator, but also the ultimate source, that which everything was *created* from. Everything is part of God, and as such is one. An infinite source can only appear to be divided and changed, but at its core must maintain its nature. That is the true nature and purpose of tzimtzum: a concealment of Godliness, but a preservation of unity.