

The Perception of Reality: contrasting views of the nature of existence

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Overview

Maimonides wrote his Guide of the Perplexed ostensibly as a response to the philosophy of the *Kalam*¹³⁴, which in his view had corrupted the clear thinking of his pupil Rabbi Joseph¹³⁵. He writes in his Letter to a Student at the beginning of the Guide:

I saw that you demanded of me additional knowledge and asked me to make clear to you certain things pertaining to divine matters, to inform you of the intentions of the *Me'tukallim* (Islamic philosophers of the *Kalam*) in this respect, and to let you know whether their methods were demonstrative and, if not, to what art they belonged.... Your absence moved me to compose this Treatise, which I have

¹³⁴ The *Kalam* is a general term for Medieval Islamic philosophy as we will explain below.

¹³⁵ As Pines points out (footnote 2, p. 3) and as Rambam himself states, the Guide was written for the benefit of this pupil and for those like him. Therefore we should take seriously Rambam's description of Joseph's corruption by the *Me'tukallim*, and understand that the Guide was intended as an antidote.

“The Perception of Reality: contrasting views of the nature of existence

composed for you and for those like you, however few they are.¹³⁶

Thus begins the Guide, and thus begins an argument about the nature of the world and the nature of reality. This argument continues in a slightly differing form to this day. The main point of contention, as Rambam saw it, between himself and the *Kalam* was the nature of existence and the validity of science.

This same basic argument between Rambam and the philosophers of the *Kalam* repeated itself several hundred years later after the Arizal's revelations of the kabballah to the world. It is most clearly expressed in the fundamental dispute between the Chasidim and the Vilna Gaon (and his followers). However, the language and terminology had changed over the course of 500 years, and their prime argument was over how to understand a single line of the Arizal's book *Etz Chaim*. As we will see, this argument led to almost the same two alternative theologies with all the implications and ramifications as between Rambam and *Kalam*.

As we will show, the implications of this argument affect most aspects of Jewish philosophy and have had a major impact on current Jewish thinking.

At its most basic, the argument can be stated in words adapted from Hamlet:

“Are we, or are we not? That is the question.”

The Debate

¹³⁶ Pines translation.

Rambam disagreed fundamentally with the *Kalam*, going so far as to describe those Jewish scholars who base themselves on *Kalam* philosophy “ill with the illness of the *Kalam*.”¹³⁷

He sums up his most basic disagreement with the *Kalam* in the following short phrase:

“To sum up: I shall say to you that the matter is as Themistius puts it: that which exists does not conform to the various opinions, but rather the correct opinions conform to that which exists.”¹³⁸

For Rambam, one of the main objections to *Kalam* was that it did not view the world as really existing, which led to theology and philosophy that melded the ‘world’ (or the illusion thereof) to fit what its followers felt was the truth. No matter that they often came to the correct result, Rambam’s argument was with the methodology.

Pines¹³⁹ shows that *Kalam*, for Rambam, represents the ‘anti-reality’ philosophy, and that the main purpose in writing the Guide was to argue against that position:

It should also be noted that Maimonides’ “premises” of the *Metukallimun*, as well as his “premises” of the philosophers, are mainly, or indeed exclusively, concerned with physical science if, in accordance with the medieval classification, the concept of this science is extended so as to include the psychology of perception. But whereas the propositions of the philosophers are expound and account for the order and the causality of the cosmos, the principles of the *Metukallimun*, such as their atomist, the assumption that

¹³⁷ *Sbmonah Perakim (Introduction to Pirkei Avos)* chapter 6. He is almost certainly referring to R’ Saadiah Gaon as we will discuss later.

¹³⁸ *Guide* I: 71 p. 179

¹³⁹ Introduction to his translation of *Guide for the Perplexed* p. cxxv

“The Perception of Reality: contrasting views of the nature of existence

everything that can be imagined can happen and so on, are meant to prove that no causality and no permanent order exist in the world; all events are determined directly, without the intervention of intermediate causes, by the will of God, which is not bound by any law. In other words, there is no cosmos and there is no nature, these two Greek notions being replaced by the concept of congeries of atoms, with atomic accidents inherent in them being created in every instant by arbitrary acts of divine volition.

Rambam himself writes about the *Kalam*:

Thus there arose among them this science of *Kalam*. They started to establish premises that would be useful to them with regard to their belief and to refute those opinions that ruined the foundations of their Law.... They also selected from among the opinions of the earlier philosophers everything that the one who selected considered useful for him, even if the later philosophers had already demonstrated the falseness of these opinions – as for instance affirming the existence of atoms and the vacuum.¹⁴⁰

The *Kalam*

Kalam is the common name of medieval Islamic, mostly rationalist, sometimes apologetic (or polemic), religious philosophy. *Kalam* is the Arabic word for ‘word’ (dibbur), showing that this Islamic philosophy grew out of discussions and exchanges. The philosophers of the *Kalam* are called *Me’tukallim*, ‘speakers’ (medabrim). The *Kalam* arose as a response to debates with Christian theologians.

¹⁴⁰ *Guide* I: 71 (Pines edition pp. 177-8)

The most famous amongst the early *Kalam* groups is the *Mu'tazilites*. Only a few of the early Mu'tazilite works have survived. Most of the information concerning the positions of early Mu'tazilite thinkers comes from polemic, hostile sources (mainly Ash'arite authors) or later Mu'tazilite authors who wrote comprehensive compendia of the schools' system. They were based in Baghdad and Basra from approximately 750 – 900.

They were still active in Rambam's time, although some of their philosophy had changed due to the influence of the more dominant school of *Kalam* Islamic theology, the al-Ash'ari (Ash'arites).

The *Kalam* view of the reality of the world is explained by Frank and Leaman¹⁴¹:

“The large majority of *Me'tuzallim* tied the proofs for the created-ness of the world *ex nihilo* to a rather complex atomistic theory, which they may have derived from both ancient Greek and Indian philosophies. According to this theory, all bodies are composed of identical atoms of substance that do not have any essential characteristics, and that have been understood by many modern researchers to have no spatial dimensions. Upon these atoms reside the atoms of both physical (for example, composition and separation, motion and rest, colors) and abstract or mental properties (for example, life, knowledge, will, capacity). In many *kalam* compendia, the exposition of this theory constitutes the basis for the discussion of the createdness of the world.

The theory differs from any other atomistic theory on one important point of principle: the universe is not

141 Frank, D and Leaman, O. (eds.) (1997) *History of Jewish Philosophy*, Routledge, London and New York. p. 119.

“The Perception of Reality: contrasting views of the nature of existence

governed by chance; instead, the existence or the extinction of every single individual atom, of substance or accident, is a creation of God, whose absolute omnipotence is thus emphatically underlined.... Causality is thus denied; what appear to be laws of nature or a causal sequence of are rather a ‘customary’ recurrence of isolated, unrelated events that result from God’s unlimited will and power. Some Mu’tazilites, mainly from the Baghdad school, did not accept the atomistic theory and established a theory that recognized essential properties of species and individuals, a certain mode of causality and the laws of nature.”

Rambam himself describes the way in which the *Kalam* viewed the reality of the world:

“The proofs of the Mutakallimun, on the other hand, are derived from premises that run counter to the nature of existence that is perceived so that they resort to the affirmation that nothing has a nature in any respect.... For whereas the proof, with the aid of which some Metakallimun prove by inference the creation of the world in time and which is their most powerful proof, is not consolidated for them until they abolish the nature of all existence and disagree with everything that the philosophers have made clear, I reach a similar proof without running counter to the nature of existence and without having recourse to violating that which is perceived by the senses.”¹⁴²

Although many Jewish philosophers, including R’ Saadiah Gaon, made use of *Kalam* philosophy, when it came to the reality of existence, they abandoned the *Kalam* for a realist approach. The Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy says as follows:

¹⁴² *Guide* I: 71 (Pines edition p. 182)

Saadia Gaon makes especial use of arguments taken from the *Kalam*, as the plan of the *Amanat (Emunot v'Deot)* shows. Its first two chapters discuss the unity of God, the topic with which exponents of *kalam* usually begin their treatises, whilst the seven following chapters consider God's justice, the second main theme of the *Kalam*. None the less, Saadia does not adopt one of the central ideas of the *Kalam*, that of atomism and the renewal of creation by God at every instant (the corollary, which is the denial that there are laws of nature). He chooses instead a somewhat vague Aristotelian understanding of the physical world. ('Islamic Theology')

Rambam acknowledges the error of those Jewish philosophers who based themselves on the *Kalam* when he writes:

“It has so happened that Islam first began to take this road owing to a certain sect, namely the Mu'tazila, from whom our coreligionists took over certain things walking upon the road the Mu'tazila had taken.”¹⁴³

Rambam and the Eternity of the Universe

Rambam rejected the *Kalam's* placing of the theological cart before the scientific horse. This is most clear in his attitude to the question of the eternity of the universe. In Rambam's time, this was the major 'reality' issue, which led the philosophers of the *Kalam* to a rejection of any scientific method.

Rambam holds that the validity of the Torah would be disproved were Aristotle to be correct, and the universe would be proven to be eternal, as Rambam writes:

¹⁴³ *ibid.* (pp. 176-6)

“The Perception of Reality: contrasting views of the nature of existence

“If the philosophers would succeed in demonstrating the eternity as Aristotle understands it, the Law as a whole would become void.”¹⁴⁴

He rejected Aristotle’s eternity of the universe but is at pains to explain that he does so not because of theology, but rather because it has not been proved to be true. He writes:

“Know that our shunning the affirmation of the eternity of the world is not due to a text figuring in the Torah according to which the world has been produced in time.... Nor are the gates of figurative interpretation shut in our faces or impossible of access to us regarding the subject of the creation of the world in time. For we could interpret them as figurative, as we have done when denying God’s corporeality. Perhaps this would even be much easier to do: we should be very well able to give a figurative interpretation of those texts and to affirm as true the eternity of the world, just as we have given a figurative interpretation of those other texts and have denied that He, may He be exalted, is a body.”¹⁴⁵

Rambam is stating explicitly that theology, and even our interpretation of the Torah, must follow from scientific reality and not vice versa. In this approach, Rambam was in line with almost all his contemporaries. R’ Saadiah Gaon¹⁴⁶, Ramban¹⁴⁷, Rabbag¹⁴⁸ and others all choose to reinterpret verses in the Torah in the light of scientific knowledge.

¹⁴⁴ *Guide* II: 25 p. 330

¹⁴⁵ *ibid.* p. 327-8

¹⁴⁶ E.g. *Emunot ve-Deot* VII: 2

¹⁴⁷ E.g. commentary to Genesis 9: 12 where he interprets the Torah non-literally to accommodate the Greek scientific description of the rainbow.

¹⁴⁸ E.g. *Milchamot Ha-Shem* chapter 6. See also Feldman, S. translation (1984) Jewish Publication Society of America, p. 96

Rambam states clearly and forcefully that the search for reality must begin with an understanding of the physical world, and all theology can only grow from that:

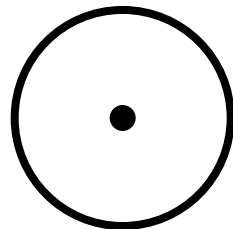
I have already told you that nothing exists except God and this universe, and that there is no other evidence for His Existence but this universe in its entirety and in its several parts. Consequently, the universe must be examined as it is: the propositions must be derived from those properties of the universe that are clearly perceived, and hence you must know its visible form and its nature. Then only will you find in the universe evidence for the existence of a Being not included therein¹⁴⁹.

The Kabbalah of the Arizal and tzimtzum

Some 350 years after Rambam and his dispute with the *Kalam*, a new revelation of Torah occurred in Tzefat. Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, the Arizal, interpreted the Zohar in new ways, leading to new ideas in Jewish philosophy. He opens his Etz Chaim with a discussion of the interaction between the Divine Infinite and the finite world. His explanation is based upon the concept of tzimtzum, a ‘contraction’ of the Infinite (Ein Sof), which allows for the existence of the world. He writes:

You should know that before His exaltedness rested and before the creatures were created, there was simple supernal light filling all of existence. There was no empty place or void vacuum because everything was filled with the simple infinite light, and there was no aspect of beginning or end. Everything was simple and even with complete evenness, and this is called the infinite light. When it arose in His simple

¹⁴⁹ *Guide* I: 71



“The Perception of Reality: contrasting views of the nature of existence

Will to create the worlds and to rest his exaltedness to bring to light the completeness of His Actions, and His Names and His Descriptions, which were the purpose of creation of the worlds, as we have explained... Then he contracted His infiniteness into a middle point which was in the absolute middle of His Light. He contracted this light and distanced it from the edges around this middle point. Then a space remained of empty space and void vacuum in the middle point like this:

The question is what did he mean by these words? Did the contraction actually happen, or is this a metaphor to describe to humanity how to live in the world and how to relate to God? Is God transcendent or immanent? In short, did God create a void in which to make a world, or is everything God, after creation just as it was before creation?

The dispute about the answer to this question is at the heart of the biggest division in Ashkenazi Jewry, the split between the Chasidim and the Mitnagdim.

Early Interpretations and Argument

The earliest two opposing views about the meaning of the AriZal's concept of tzimtzum appear in Shomer Emunim (Ha-Kadmon) and Yosher Levav. They take completely opposite approaches to understanding this paragraph, and each accuses the other of being a very dangerous opinion.

Arguing the dangers of understanding tzimtzum to mean that God is no longer present in the world, R' Yosef Irgas writes¹⁵⁰:

Anyone who wants to understand tzimtzum literally will come to make many mistakes and will come to contradict many of the principles of faith.

Presenting the opposing view, Yosher Levav states¹⁵¹:

From these things, we have learned that one who takes pity on His Creator must think in his heart that tzimtzum is literal so that he doesn't come to insult God's honour and think that God's essence is present in the lowly, dishonourable, physical and even in the lowest things, God forbid.

It is apparent that these two world views are irreconcilable. Yet, ironically, the author of Yosher Levav, Rabbi Emanuel Chai Riki, wrote approbation for Shomer Emunim (Ha-Kadmon), even though he argues strongly against that position of tzimtzum. It seems that in his mind, these two divergent opinions, though poles apart theologically, were details rather than essentials in the study of kabbalah.

Chasidut – non-literal interpretation of tzimtzum

Dresner writes about the earliest beginnings of Chasidut that:

After seven years of seclusion high up in the Carpathian Mountains amidst those fields and forests he so loved to wander in since his childhood, the Baal Shem Tov burst

150 *Shomer Emunim (Ha-Kadmon)* vikuach sheni, ot 35 ff.

¹⁵¹ 1: 1: 12

“The Perception of Reality: contrasting views of the nature of existence

upon the stage of history with a shocking cry – “*Altz iz Gott!*”
“Everything is God!”¹⁵²

Even though this was a rallying cry for the new movement and not necessarily a reasoned philosophical position, it was not long before the philosophical backing was enunciated. The clearest statement of Chasidic philosophy was written by one of the leaders of the third generation of Chasidim, R’ Schneur Zalman of Liadi. He explains:

Now, following these words and the truth [concerning the nature of the Creation], every intelligent person will understand clearly that each creature and being is actually considered naught and absolute nothingness in relation to his Activating Force and the “Breath of His mouth” which is in the created thing, continuously calling it into existence and bringing it from absolute non-being into being.... The spirituality that flows into it from “That which proceeds out of the mouth of God” and “His breath” – that alone continuously brings it forth from naught and nullity into being, and gives it existence. Hence, there is truly nothing besides Him.¹⁵³

We see here already a position similar to that of the Al Ashari *Kalam*. Everything is God, and God constantly brings the world into existence at every moment. It was this position that Maimonides had fought against with his *Moreh Nevuchim*. Yet it resurfaced a few centuries later.

Furthermore, R’ Schneur Zalman explicitly attacks any other understanding of *tzimtzum* and shows that it cannot possible by true:

152 Dresner, S (1981) ‘Hasidism and its Opponents’ in Jospe, R. and Wagner, S. (eds.) *Great Schisms in Jewish History* Centre for Judaic Studies; Denver. p. 143

153 *Likutei Amarim Tanya* Shaar Hayichud ve-Ha-Emunah Chapter 3 p. 293

In the light of what has been said above, it is possible to understand the error of some, scholars in their own eyes, may God forgive them, who erred and misinterpreted in their study of the writings of the Ari, of blessed memory, and understood the doctrine of *Tzimtzum*, which is mentioned therein literally – that the Holy One, blessed be He, removed Himself and His Essence, God forbid, from this world, and only guides from above with individual Providence all the created beings that are in the heavens above and on the earth below. Now, aside from the fact that it is altogether impossible to interpret the doctrine of *Tzimtzum* literally, [for then it] is a phenomenon of corporeality, concerning the Holy One, blessed be He, who is set apart from them [i.e. the phenomena of corporeality], many myriads of separations *ad infinitum*, they also did not speak wisely, ... [since] the Holy One, blessed be He, knows all the created beings in this lower world and exercises Providence over them, and perforce His knowledge of them does not add plurality and innovation to Him, for He knows all by knowing Himself. Thus, as it were, His Essence and Being and His Knowledge are all one.¹⁵⁴

Mangel summarizes the position of R' Schneur Zalman in contrast to that of Maimonides (and explains that the departure from Maimonides' accepted position was necessitated by Luranic Kabbalah):

Maimonides' interpretation of God's Unity emphasizes also that His Essence and Being is a simple and perfect Unity without any plurality, composition or divisibility and free from many physical properties and attributes....

154 *Likutei Amarim Tanya* Shaar Hayichud ve-Ha-Emunah Chapter 7

“The Perception of Reality: contrasting views of the nature of existence

The Chassidic interpretation of Unity, based on the Zoharic concepts of “Lower Level Unity” and “Higher Level Unity,” gives it a more profound meaning. Rabbi Schneur Zalman explains that Divine Unity does not only exclude the existence of other ruling powers besides the One God or of any plurality in Him, but it precludes any existence at all apart from Him. The universe appears to possess an existence independent from its Creator only because we do not perceive the creating force that is its *raison d’être*. All created things, whether terrestrial or celestial, exist only by virtue of the continuous flow of life and vitality from God. The creative process did not cease at the end of the Six Days of Creation but continues at every moment, constantly renewing all existence.... Thus the true essence and reality of the universe and everything therein is but the Divine power within it.¹⁵⁵

The difficulty with this position is that if everything is God, and tzimtzum is not to be understood literally, there is no room for free choice or meaningful human service to God. If everything is as it was before creation began, and everything is the Ein Sof, there can be no change, no choice, and no independent identity.

Rav Nachman of Breslav threw up his hands in despair when it came to resolving this inherent difficulty with our understanding of God and the purpose of human effort. We are forced to be either atheists or pantheists:

“Only in the future will it be possible to understand the tzimtzum that brought the 'Empty Space' into being, for we have to say of it two contradictory things... [1] the Empty

155 *Likutei Amarim Tanya*, Bi-Lingual Edition; Revised edition 1998 Kehot Publication Society New York. Introduction to Part 2 by Rabbi Nissan Mangel. p. 855

Space came about through the tzimtzum, where, as it were, He 'limited' His Godliness and contracted it from there, and it is as though in that place there is no Godliness... [2] the absolute truth is that Godliness must nevertheless be present there, for certainly nothing can exist without His giving it life”.¹⁵⁶

The Vilna Gaon and Mitnagdim: literal understanding of tzimtzum

The opposition of the Mitnagdim (led by the Gaon of Vilna) to the new **ch**asidic movement was precisely over the same issue that became Maimonides’ main attack on the *Kalam* – the nature of reality. As we have seen, according to R’ Schneur Zalman, the world does not really exist. Nature has no independent validity, and the world is constantly recreated every moment (just as the atomists had understood centuries earlier).

Although there is much discussion as to precisely why the Vilna Gaon saw fit to excommunicate the **ch**asidim (and certainly there were political and sociological reasons as well as theological), the only explicit writing we have from the Gaon on the issue seems to indicate that this was the main objection:

Into your ears I cry: Woe to him who says to his father, ‘What have you begotten?’ and to his mother, ‘What have you brought to birth?’ a generation whose children curse their fathers and do not bless their mothers; who have sinned greatly against them by turning their backs to them. Their stubborn hearts insist on rejecting good and choosing evil, transgressing the Torah and changing its laws.... They call

¹⁵⁶ *Likkutei Moharan* I, 64:1

“The Perception of Reality: contrasting views of the nature of existence

themselves Chasidim – that is an abomination! How they have deceived this generation, uttering these words on high: “These are your Gods, O Israel: every stick and stone.” They interpret the Torah incorrectly regarding the verse “Blessed be the name of the glory of God from His dwelling place” (Ezekiel 3: 12) and also regarding the verse: “... and You give life to everything” (Nehemiah 9: 6).¹⁵⁷

Even though it is not certain that this was the main objection to **ch**asidut, it was certainly understood by R’ Schneur Zalman to be the crucial issue at stake.

I would welcome [a discussion] in matters of faith. According to a report from his disciples in our provinces, it is precisely in this area that the Gaon and Hasid found objections to [my] book *Likutei Amarim* and other similar works. The teachings that God “fills the world” and that “there is no place void of Him” are interpreted [by us] in a literal sense, whereas in his esteemed opinion, it is pure heresy to hold that God, blessed be He, is to be found in the mundane matters of our world, and it is for this reason, according to your esteemed letter, that the book [*Toledot Yaakov Yosef* or *tzava’at ha-Rivash*] was burned. For they explain the passages “the whole earth is full of His glory” etc. in a figurative manner, as referring to Divine Providence. Would that I might present our case to him, so as to remove from ourselves all his philosophical censures¹⁵⁸.

157 Letter of the Gra to the rabbinic leadership of several Belorussian and Podolian communities 1796 in *The Faith of the Mitnagdim, Rabbinic Responses to Hasidic Rapture*, Allan Nadler 1997 p. 11.

158 Translation in Dresner, S (1981) ‘Hasidism and its Opponents’ in Jospe, R. and Wagner, S. (eds.) *Great Schisms in Jewish History* Centre for Judaic Studies; Denver. p. 121-2

Dresner explains:

What moved the most noted rabbinic figure of his time, the Gaon, Elijah of Vilna, to declare Hasidism to be a heretical sect and issue a ban of excommunication against its followers?... according to the testimony of a letter we possess ... by Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Ladi, the foremost philosopher of the Hasidic movement and the one most directly involved in controversy with the Gaon, the latter questioned more seriously the conceptual basis of the new movement: particularly its doctrines (1) that God was literally ‘in all things,’ and (2) that man’s task was to redeem the holy sparks, which had fallen into the *kelipot*, the husks of evil.¹⁵⁹

For the Vilna Gaon, the passage “The whole earth is full of his glory” denoted a manifestation of divine transcendence and divine providence, rather than a manifestation of divine immanence. The text was praising God for the extension of His providence throughout the world, not for the presence of His essence in places of impurity. To the Gaon, the passage spoke of the transcendence of God; to R. Schneur Zalman, it spoke of the immanence of God.

The Gaon believed in the reality of nature and that God runs the world indirectly, through natural forces, as he writes:

Elokim refers to God’s relationship with the world through nature. This world works on nature. Therefore, in creation, the only name used is Elokim, which is nature¹⁶⁰

He is explicit of his understanding of *tzimtzum* in a recently published manuscript entitled *Asarah Klalim*:

¹⁵⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ *Aderet Eliyahu* Devarim 33: 1

“The Perception of Reality: contrasting views of the nature of existence

This original contraction (*tzimtzum*) is called *Atik*. This word has two meanings. Firstly, it means ‘old’, and secondly ‘removed’. It is called ‘old’ because it is first of all the contractions, therefore it is called *Atik*. This contraction was also the removal [of God from the world], and this is the other meaning of the name *Atik*¹⁶¹.

We see clearly that through the act of *tzimtzum*, God removed Himself from the world, allowing for an existence independent of Himself.

Nefesh HaChaim: non-literal understanding of *tzimtzum*

The foremost student of the Vilna Gaon was Rav Chaim Volozhener. It is generally understood that in most areas, his opinions and Torah follow those of his teacher, the Gaon. However, when it comes to his explanation of *tzimtzum*, Rav Chaim diverges from the opinion of his teacher.

Although his explanation of *tzimtzum* almost directly opposes the description found in the *Tanya*, Rav Chaim agrees on the basic point of whether it is to be understood literally or not. He writes:

The explanation of the word *tzimtzum* here is not ‘removal’ or ‘abandoning’ from one place to another in order to come back and reconnect Himself with Himself, as it were. Nor does it mean to make a space empty [of His Essence] – Heaven forbid. Rather it means... hidden or covered.¹⁶²

Clearly, this is not the opinion of the Vilna Gaon (who does define the word *tzimtzum* as ‘removal’ and ‘abandoning’). Perhaps Rav Chaim was influenced by the opinion of the chasidim, or perhaps he

161 *Asarah Klalim* Clal 2

162 *Nefesh HaChaim* shaar 3, perek 7

was seeking a ‘middle ground’, which would avoid both the ‘pantheism’ of chasidut, and the ‘atheism’ of the mitnagdim. In any event, the author of the *Leshem* (whose opinion we will explore later) saves his strongest attack on misunderstandings of tzimtzum for this opinion of the *Nefesh HaChaim*.

Modern Opinions

In contemporary writings, we find the same argument as to how to understand tzimtzum and the nature of reality. Rav Dessler writes:

We call God’s acts “nature” when He wills that certain events should occur in a recognizable pattern with which we become familiar. This familiarity presents you with a challenge. We can choose to recognize that these events, too, have as their sole and immediate cause the unfettered will of Hashem. Or we can imagine that Hashem has delegated certain powers to “Nature”, and that within the realm of Nature man, too, has the ability to influence events by the process of cause and effect. The whole concept of “nature” is thus nothing but a test for the human being. Nature has no objective existence; it is merely an illusion that gives man a choice to exercise his free will: to err, or to choose the truth.¹⁶³

Rav Adin Steinsalz also describes the world as not having any true reality. The connection through God is through Torah, which allows us to dream God’s dream with Him:

“Intellectual and emotional immersion in Torah is therefore a way of making contact with the essence of all the worlds on various levels. For the Torah expresses the divine will, and

163 *Strive For Truth* vol. 2 p. 240

“The Perception of Reality: contrasting views of the nature of existence

wisdom itself, in all the world; whereas in the world of action the divine will express itself only in terms of the immediately surrounding reality. And the limitations of this reality in our world, which are experienced through the reign of nature, are extreme; they can be overcome only through man's freedom of choice. The relation between Torah and the world is thus the relation between idea and actualization, between vision and fulfillment. So that the intellectual study of Torah and the emotional involvement in its contents are a form of identification with the divine will, with what may be called God's dream of the existence of the world and the existence of man. One who is immersed in Torah becomes a partner of God, in the sense that man on one hand and God on the other are participating in the planning, the spinning out of the idea, the common dream of the existence of the world.”¹⁶⁴

At the other extreme, the *Leshem* claims to wear the mantle of the Vilna Gaon and attacks those who don't understand tzimtzum to be literal. He challenges not only the **ch**asidim, but primarily the Vilna Gaon's main pupil, R' Chaim Volozhiner, for not seeing existence as truly real. He writes:

I have also seen some very strange things in the words of some contemporary Kabbalists who explain things deeply. They say that all of existence is only an illusion and appearance and does not truly exist. This is to say that the *ein sof* didn't change at all in itself and its necessary true existence and it is now still exactly the same as it was before creation, and there is no space empty of Him, as is known (see *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* Shaar 3). Therefore, they said that in truth, there is

164 Steinsaltz, A. (2006) *The Thirteen Petalled Rose* pp. 66-7; Basic Books, New York.

no reality to existence at all, and all the worlds are only an illusion and appearance, just as it says in the verse “in the hands of the prophets, I will appear” (Hoshea 12: 11). They said that the world and humanity have no real existence, and their entire reality is only an appearance. We perceive ourselves as if we are in a world, and we perceive ourselves with our senses, and we perceive the world with our senses. It turns out [according to this opinion] that all of existence of humanity and the world is only a perception and not in true reality, for it is impossible for anything to exist in true reality, since He fills all the worlds....

How strange and bitter is it to say such a thing. Woe to us from such an opinion. They don't think and they don't see that with such opinions, they are destroying the truth of the entire Torah....¹⁶⁵

165 *Leshem Sh-vo ve-Achlama Sefer Ha-Deab* drush olam hatohu chelek 1, drush 5, siman 7, section 8 (p. 57b)

“The Perception of Reality: contrasting views of the nature of existence

The Claim that there is no Argument

Rav Dessler goes a step beyond any of his predecessors and claims that there is no argument about tzimtzum, and that, in essence, the Vilna Gaon and Rav Shneur Zalman agree.

I have already mentioned... that there is a doubt as to whether there is any argument between the author of the *Tanya*, may his merit protect us, and the Vilna Gaon, of blessed memory, regarding the definition of tzimtzum. That is to say, in the fundamental issues, such as the limits of tzimtzum, and whether it is literal or not, whether it was only in His light, or also in His illumination Himself, and the meaning of the concept of ‘filling the entire world’ and similar things.

In the famous letter of the Gaon, he hints that the error of the chasidim was that they thought that there was Divinity in everything, even in sticks and stones. They understood ‘filling the entire world’ as if it was referring to God’s essence, as it were. It would seem that this is very fundamental.

The truth is that these were only [unfounded] concerns, for chasidut was at its early state and had not yet been fully explained. The Baal Shem Tov holds that tzimtzum is not literal, and does not apply to God’s Essence, because ‘filling all the worlds’ and ‘there is no place empty of Him’ applies even after tzimtzum. This is one of the fundamental beliefs of chasidut. It was only that some fools made a mistake to explain it as if the Divine was literally in every place and everything. This never entered the minds of the great chasidic Masters....¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ *Mikhtav Me-Eliyahu* vol. 5 pp. 484-5

The Vilna Gaon wrote the same thing, that tzimtzum does not apply to God's Essence, in his statement about the foundation of tzimtzum. There he writes:

Know that we must not think about the *Ein Sof* at all... and what we are talking about with *sefirot* is only regarding His Will (*Ratzon*) and His Providence (*Hashgacha*), which is known from His actions. This is a basic rule in all areas of Kabbalah.... Therefore He contracted His Will in the creation and the worlds, and this is tzimtzum.¹⁶⁷

We see that the Gaon was only speaking about tzimtzum in His Will, and not in His Essence, Heaven forbid.

So the argument was not in these fundamentals at all. This argument is only how much to use these subtle concepts in the service of God. The chasidim used them widely, as is known. Rav Chaim of Volozhin warned against it in *Nefesh Ha-chaim* because they can lead to great mistakes.

This position seems truly untenable. If he is correct, why did the authors cited above argue with each other so vehemently? The simple reading of the *Tanya* and all later chasidic works is that tzimtzum occurred not only in His Will (*ratzon*) but also in His Essence (*atzmut*). And it does not seem reasonable to bring a proof from Rav Chaim to the position of the Gaon (as we have explained above, in this area, the student did not follow his teacher).

Furthermore, the last leader of Chabad chasidut, Rav Menachem Mendel Schneerson, held that the argument between the founder of his movement and the Gaon was from one extreme to the other:

The crux of the differences centres around two issues:

¹⁶⁷ *likutim on Safra de-Zneuta*

“The Perception of Reality: contrasting views of the nature of existence

a) Should the concept of Tzimtzum be understood literally or not, i.e., are we speaking about a withdrawal of the light, or merely its concealment?

b) Did the Tzimtzum affect merely God's light, or did it also affect the Source of light, [i.e., that He Himself has withdrawn or is hidden from our world]?

[In dealing with these questions,] it is possible to outline four different approaches:

1) The Tzimtzum should be interpreted literally, and moreover, it affected God's essence. The proof offered in defense of this theory is that it is impossible for the King to be found in a place of filth, heaven forbid;

2) The Tzimtzum should be interpreted literally, but it affected only His light;

3) The Tzimtzum should not be interpreted literally, but it affected the Source of light as well; and

4) The Tzimtzum should not be interpreted literally, and it affected only His light.

As is well known, the misnagdim at the time of the Alter Rebbe followed the first approach mentioned. They explained the expression, "there is no place apart from Him," meaning - apart from His providence....

[Reb Chayim of Volozhin,] the author of Nefesh HaChayim which you mentioned in your letter, follows the third approach mentioned above. In this, he differs from his master, the Gaon, Rav Eliyahu [of Vilna]....

[As chassidim,] we follow solely the fourth approach mentioned, which explains that the concept of Tzimtzum should not be interpreted literally, and that it affects only [God's] light, but not the Source of light.¹⁶⁸

R' Shlomo Elyashiv, in his sefer *Leshem*, holds that the opinion of the Gaon was that tzimtzum was only in His Will and not in His Essence.

There are three aspects, which are one. The True Hidden Essence, Blessed is He, which is everything and in everything, just as before creation, and includes within Himself every kind of perfection... the Vilna Gaon wrote in the *likutim* about this that it is forbidden even to think about it....

The second aspect is that it arose in His Will to reveal Himself, and the existence of this Will is what we call revelation.... Those parts that are before the revelation are called the *Ein Sof*... And therefore He contracted Himself, as it were, into the middle point, and this is the tzimtzum.¹⁶⁹

Nevertheless, he understands that there is a vast chasm between understanding tzimtzum literally (within His Will) and non-literally.

It is clear from what we have said that the whole concept of tzimtzum is according to the simple meaning and the straightforward interpretation. This is the opinion of the Holy Rabbi, the author of *Mishnat Chasidim* in his book *Yosher Levan*, and also the opinion of the Holy Rabbi, the author of *Mikdash Melech* in his book *Hadrat Melech*.... We have explained at length, and you will see that it is proven and

¹⁶⁸ *Igrot* section 3: 18 Kislev page 224

¹⁶⁹ *Leshem Shevo Ve-Ahlama Helek Ha-Biurim* Drushei Igulim ve-yoshar Anaf 1, Ot 1 (p. 1a-b)

“The Perception of Reality: contrasting views of the nature of existence

clear from all the writings of the AriZal regarding tzimtzum, that it is according to the simple meaning....

And that which is written in the name of the Gra in the likutim at the end of *Safra de-tzenta* printed in Vilna 5642 that tzimtzum is in the *ratzon* but not in the essence [in truth, it seems to me that all these likutim are not the words of the Gra but were written by an unknown student. This seems clear to me], it is known that His *ratzon* and He are one and the same. The intention there is to give us an understanding according to our limited capabilities since it is impossible for us to grasp the essence of tzimtzum apart from in *ratzon*....¹⁷⁰

Finally, even if Rav Dessler is correct in his understanding of this line, it seems very unlikely that we can take this one phrase (along with a note in the siddur written by someone from the Gaon's Beit Midrash) to be representative of the Gaon's position in the face of all the other sources that we have brought above. Indeed, R' Menachem Mendel Schneerson states that someone who holds that there is no argument regarding tzimtzum clearly has not studied the Kabbalistic texts. He writes:

“With regard to your comments concerning the Tzimtzum, [the initial contraction of Godly light,] and the statement of your acquaintances that all the different approaches [to the concept] flow in a single direction. I was amazed to hear such a proposition, in particular inasmuch as in your letter, you describe that person as one who has studied Kabbalistic texts. Obviously, he does not fit that description at all.”¹⁷¹

170 *Leshem Shevo Ve-Ahlama Helek Ha-Biurim* Drushei Igulim ve-yoshar introduction to Anaf 2, Ot 5

171 *Igrot* section 3: 18 Kislev page 224