

Breslov Kabbalah: Part 5 – TzimTzum / Constriction

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In Part Five of Breslov Kabbalah, we explore how God created the Universe and how this empowers our creative ability.

Before we expound on the following principles of the Kabbalah, we must recall the most important advisory issued by the Kabbalists: We must never attribute any physical form or shape either to God or to the spiritual worlds. All the anthropomorphic terminology mentioned in the Kabbalah is only employed to bring profound concepts down to a level that we can understand. Thus, we will be illustrating the Creation using figurative terms like “anger,” “patience,” “love,” “joy,” “right hand,” “left hand,” “body,” “mind,” etc. The application of these patently human terms of emotion and form do not apply literally to the Divine.

When God first conceived the Creation, the entire universe came into being both “potentially” and “actually.” Since God is not subject to the rules of form, space or time (which He Himself created), when God “thinks” of something, the potential and the actual are always one. The difference between them is only seen from our perspective. Moreover, because we are bound by form, space and time, we can only conceive of God’s thought as being “before” Creation and the

manifestation of that thought as being “after” Creation. Therefore, God “had to,” as it were, delineate the process of Creation to show us how to use our own creative powers to separate between the two.

Prior to Creation, only God existed. God is known as the *Ein Sof* (The Infinite), and He is everywhere. The concept of infinity is so impossible to grasp that the Kabbalists do not even speak of God as the *Ein Sof*. Rather, they refer to Him as the *Ohr Ein Sof* (The Light of the Infinite). We can say, though, that with only God in existence, there was no room for anything else to exist simultaneously. How, then, did the world come into being? The ARI describes how Creation took place:

Before all things were created ... the Supernal Light was simple [i.e., complete and perfect]. It filled all existence. There was no empty space which could be characterized as space, emptiness or void. Everything was filled with that simple *Ohr Ein Sof*. There was no category of beginning and no category of end. All was one simple, undifferentiated, Infinite Light.

When it arose in His Will to create worlds and emanate emanations ... He constricted (withdrew) His Infinite Essence away from the very center point of His Light. [Of course, since Infinity has no center point, this is only said from the point of view of the Space that is about to be created.] He then withdrew that Light [even further], distancing it to the extremities around this center point, leaving a Vacated Space and Hollow Void.

After this constriction, which resulted in the creation of a Vacated Space and Hollow Void in the very midst of the Infinite Light, there was a place for all the Four Worlds that were to be emanated (*Atzilut*), created (*Beriyah*), formed (*Yetzirah*) and completed (*Asiyah*). He then drew a single, straight *Kav* (Ray or Line) down from His Infinite Surrounding

Light into the Vacated Space. This Kav descended in stages into the Vacated Space. The upper extremity of this Kav touched the Infinite Light [that surrounded the Space], and extended down [into the Vacated Space towards the center] but not all the way to the bottom extremity [so as not to cause the Vacated Space to collapse and merge back into the Infinite Light]. It was through this Kav [serving as a conduit] that the Light of the Infinite was drawn down and spread out below. ... Through this Kav, the outpouring Supernal Light of the Infinite spreads forth and flows down into the universes that are located within that Space and Void (*Etz Chaim, Drush Igulim V'Yosher* 1:2).

Thus, a tiny constriction of Godliness was later expanded into a larger void of Godliness known as the Vacated Space. Only within this Vacated Space could the world come into being. In the language of the Kabbalists, the process of creating this Vacated Space was called the *Tzimtzum*—the “constriction” or “contraction” of Godliness—which God implemented in order to “make room” for the rest of Creation. Only after the *Tzimtzum* could there be a place for the Creation. Indeed, immediately after the *Tzimtzum*, God began creating, forming and making all the Supernal Universes, the Ten Sefirot and the Supernal Worlds, culminating in the creation of our physical world.

What is unique to the concept of *tzimtzum* is that although its energy represents constriction, it is that same energy that allows for creativity to burst forth into actuality, as we shall soon see.

Let us apply the Act of Creation to our personal lives (based on Rebbe Nachman's lesson in *Likutey Moharan* I, 66). As we say in our daily prayers, Creation is enacted every day (cf. “He Who renews Creation every day” [*Morning Prayers*]). Simply put, each day is a *new* day. We all wake up with fresh ideas, new insights, and projects and goals we wish to complete, whether for our family, our career, our emotional needs or our spiritual desires. Each day a person could use his creativity

to tackle an old problem from a different angle; ponder a creative way to embark on a new path; start a new diet; rearrange exercise, leisure or sleep habits; begin a new relationship, etc.

Just as the first step in Creation was God's thought to create the world, so too, our first thoughts represent our potential to turn ideas into actuality.² However, in the beginning, our thoughts aren't always focused. We may be overwhelmed by all the things we'd like to accomplish and sense that there's not enough time to do everything. Our thoughts might illumine our minds with a bright light, but they lack clear direction.

We must start by clarifying the form and the temporal and spatial nature of our intended goal. This is why the very next step after the "first thought" is the *tzimtzum*. In practical terms, this means delineating our plans. Similar to building a house, we must conceive a form, a place and a time frame within which we can shape our intentions into feasible and manageable proportions.

As we begin to develop our thoughts, however, we invariably run up against unexpected problems and obstacles. True, we accept that there will be challenges, and we are sure we can overcome them. But as soon as we actually confront the obstacles, we may begin to question our decisions, find material difficulties (e.g., time, familial or financial constraints), or get bogged down in the details. We can lose patience, become frustrated, and even become unhinged from the "impossibility" of our mission. And we might succumb to anger.

But that is exactly what is supposed to happen (not the anger or unhinging)! In the realm of potential, things seem easy enough. When we buckle down to get the job done, however, things don't go as planned. In reality, these experiences are a natural outcome of our own personal "creation" process. They represent the *tzimtzum*, those constrictions that are placed upon us as we try to transform our thoughts from potentiality

to actuality. We experience feelings of frustration and anger in particular because tzimtzum connotes restraint and can also imply anger.

One reason God created the Tzimtzum was to teach us the proper way to go about developing our potential. The constriction shows us how to separate potential from actual in order to allow the actual to emerge. The separation process is a function unto itself.

Remember that when God thought about creating the world, it was as if the world were already created. For man to exist, however, God, as it were, had to “separate” Himself from the world, so that man would not be overwhelmed by His awesome Light. That separation process is a difficult one (not for Him, but for us), yet is necessary in order to turn potential into actual.

To understand how the separation process fits in with the idea of tzimtzum, we turn to Scripture’s description of the Creation (*Isaiah* 48:13): “Even My [left] hand (*af Yadi*) has established the earth, and My right [hand] has measured the Heavens.” God formed Heaven and Earth with His “two hands.”

Imagine that you are trying to build something with your two hands. If they were joined together, would you be able to build anything? Obviously not. So when God began to create the world, although by Him everything (potential and actual) is joined together, He separated between the potential and the actual to launch the creative process. This is the allusion to God’s “right hand” and “left hand.” It refers to making a separation and/or an opening between the right and the left, between the potential and the actual.

Rebbe Nachman adds that what God did is alluded to in the beginning of the verse, “*af Yadi*.” The Hebrew word *af* also translates as anger, representing the constriction. The constrictions—the anger and the frustrations that we

experience—are what give us the energy to move towards our goals and learn how to separate between the potential and the actual.

We can all imagine an idyllic world, though we never seem to get close to it. There is just too much suffering, illness, poverty and crime standing in the way of the most utopian plans. We must make the effort to differentiate between what we truly want and what we can honestly attain. This separation can easily lead a person to frustration or anger over not being able to fulfill his goals—but that would be counterproductive. The constriction—the *tzimtzum*—provides a filter to help clarify our thoughts and bring us to face reality: “What is it that I can *really* accomplish?”

The *tzimtzum* serves to snap us out of our dream world and wake us up to real life. It alerts us to the task at hand, making us cognizant of what is available to us. Its true purpose is to create an atmosphere of tranquility *within us*, to quiet and control the flow of activity around us, and to bring us to an awareness of how much we can achieve when we get down to work.

By extension, the *tzimtzum* teaches us that the very first characteristics we want to nurture are patience with ourselves and tolerance towards others. When we exercise patience, we can control the constrictions of our lives. “I can’t lose thirty pounds in a day. But I can be patient and work on it and lose that weight in a fixed period of time.” “I can’t save a lot of money on my salary. But I can be patient and put aside a little bit from each paycheck so that after a while it will add up to a substantial sum.”

Tolerance is also integral to our goals. There are many people whom we love, whom we want to love, whom we feel indifferent about, and whom we want nothing to do with. Each of those people, in his or her unique way, can pose an obstacle to our goals. We must learn to restrain our anger and generate our own tranquil atmosphere to increase our chances of succeeding.

Certainly, the attribute of patience applies equally, if not more, to pursuing emotional and spiritual growth. A person should focus on these latter goals most of all if he wishes to become someone who is in control of himself.

“In the beginning God created the Heavens and the Earth. And the Earth was without form and desolate, with darkness upon the abyss, [but] the spirit of God hovered upon the waters. And God said, ‘Let there be light’” (*Genesis* 1:1-3).

First must come the creativity of our thoughts—the “Heavens”— where our potential lies. Afterwards, we try to turn those thoughts into “Earth”—a usable and productive venue. But first we must face the tzimtzum—the formlessness, desolation, darkness and abyss. We know that we *can* accomplish, since the “spirit of God” hovers upon us and within us, in the form of our souls (see p. 11). If we but connect to that spirit, then our souls will prod us onward until we too can declare, “Let there be light!”

2 Rebbe Nachman teaches that when one originates a thought that brings him a desire for accomplishment, he has already created a soul “in potential.” (The Hebrew word for soul, *nefesh*, also connotes “desire.”) To bring that new soul into actuality, one must articulate his desire clearly (*Likutey Moharan* I, 31:6-8).

This series is based on the book: [“Hidden Treasures”](#) by Rabbi Chaim Kramer.