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THE HOLOCAUST AS AN (UN)EXCEPTIONAL PHENOMENON: DEVELOPMENT AND CHANGE IN THE LUBAVITCHER REBBE'S OUTLOOK

ABSTRACT

This article examines the evolution and transformation in the Lubavitcher Rebbe's perspective concerning the Holocaust. It traces the Rebbe's viewpoint on the Holocaust by analyzing his various insights and observations in his sermons and writings over the years, and highlights a significant shift in his stance whereby he reached the conclusion that the Holocaust is exceptional and does not fall into the terms of sin, punishment, or even Tikkun (metaphysical rectification)—concepts which he himself previously utilized in earlier stages of his life. In his most recent phase, the Lubavitcher Rebbe posited that the Holocaust is an unprecedented and exceptional occurrence, both on historical and theological grounds. This assertion is not commonly espoused by traditional Jewish theologians and orthodox rabbis, thus rendering the Lubavitcher Rebbe relatively distinctive.

Keywords: Menachem Mendel Schneerson (Lubavitcher Rebbe); Menachem Man Shach; Holocaust; theodicy; punishment; Tikkun; unprecedented

INTRODUCTION

Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902–1994), often referred to as the Lubavitcher Rebbe (or just "the Rebbe"), was a prominent hasidic leader of the Ḥabad-Lubavitch movement. As the seventh Rebbe in the Ḥabad-Lubavitch dynasty, he assumed leadership in 1951 and profoundly shaped the movement during his tenure. R. Schneerson's leadership was characterized by significant growth and expansion of Ḥabad-Lubavitch Hasidism. Through establishing educational institutions, synagogues,

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and Ḥabad Houses worldwide, he fostered a remarkable network of Jewish outreach and engagement initiatives. This expansive endeavor facilitated the dissemination of Torah knowledge and the cultivation of Jewish identity and observance among diverse populations. An erudite scholar, R. Schneerson contributed extensively to Jewish thought, particularly in the fields of philosophy, mysticism, and ethics. His teachings emphasized the fundamental value of Torah study and the significance of fulfilling the commandments (mitzvoth) and engaging in acts of kindness and social responsibility.[1]

R. Schneerson was born in 1902 in the Russian Empire and received a traditional Jewish education. After his wedding to Ḥaya Mushka in 1928, he and his wife moved to Berlin, where R. Schneerson studied mathematics, physics, and philosophy at the University of Berlin. In 1933, after the rise of the Nazi party in Germany, the Schneersons left Berlin and moved to Paris, where R. Schneerson took a two-year course in engineering. In November 1937, he enrolled in mathematical studies at the Sorbonne, and in November 1938, he registered for further studies in the exact sciences. On June 11, 1940, three days before Paris fell to the Nazis, the Schneersons fled to Vichy, and later to Nice, where they stayed until they escaped from Europe via Lisbon, Portugal, and arrived in New York on June 23, 1941.[2]

Although R. Schneerson avoided the deportations and the ordeals of the concentration and death camps, nevertheless—as someone who was in Europe at the beginning of the war and had to flee—he felt the looming threat and the arrival of ominous dark clouds. Thus, he was deeply concerned about the suffering of European Jews and worked to help them in any way he could.[3] One of the ways in which he dealt with the Holocaust was by emphasizing the importance of faith, spiritual resilience and the observance of the mitzvoth even in the darkest hours, to whatever extent possible.[4]

Throughout his lifetime, the Lubavitcher Rebbe referred to the Holocaust in letters, personal meetings, and sermons. However, he never delivered sermons that were exclusively dedicated to the Holocaust and never published a comprehensive and systematic theological study on this topic. Thus, in order to track the development of his ideas on the Holocaust, we must analyze, with caution, the various insights and observations that he interspersed throughout his sermons and writings over the years.

TRADITIONAL THEODICY

The conception of the Holocaust as an unprecedented event and *sui generis* phenomenon is fiercely debated in scholarly literature, both on historical and theological grounds. On the historical plane, many have argued that the Holocaust was a unique phenomenon that surpassed the targeted massacres of specific groups of people in the past.[5] On the theological plane, Emil Fackenheim has rejected the term "Holocaust theology." He claimed that the Holocaust yields no positive theology but threatens and negates the entire theological enterprise.[6] The Holocaust is often treated as a theological "black hole."[7] However, in traditional Orthodox Jewish theology, the Holocaust is usually depicted as a calamity, one of many catastrophes the Jewish people have endured throughout history. In the theological realm, the Holocaust is not viewed as a unique incident; rather, it is explained by resorting to traditional tropes, such as "punishment for sins"[8] or "afflictions of love,"[9] etc. and citing traditional sources such as biblical verses and Talmudic statements.[10]

In June 1967, the Lubavitcher Rebbe was asked in a letter, "where was God in the Holocaust."[11] He replied at length and declared that he does not have an answer, however, he argues that there is no room for the question itself from a theological perspective: "It makes no sense for a creature to question the ways of the Creator, since there is an absolute difference between the two," and that anything that God does is "absolutely just and righteous." Moreover, he maintained that this question is unexceptional on two accounts. On the historical plane, the Holocaust was not an unprecedented event. According to him, there were similar catastrophes in Jewish history: in the times of the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem (586 BCE) and the destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE) and in the middle-ages during the times of the Crusades (11th-13th century), etc. Thus, this is not a new historical phenomenon. R. Schneerson also emphasized that from a philosophical perspective there is no difference between the suffering of one individual and the Holocaust of six million, "there is no difference, in this regard, between the greatest Holocaust and the slightest injustice."[12]

Indeed, the Lubavitcher Rebbe recognized that theological quarrels with, and protest against, God have deep roots in the Jewish tradition.[13] Abraham already posed the question "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justice?" (Gen. 18:25); Moses confronted God saying, "O my lord, why have you done so much evil to this people?" (Ex. 5:22); Jeremiah asked, "Why does the way of the wicked prosper?" (Jer. 12:1). Moses, Jeremiah, Job, and other biblical figures stood up to God and made provocative statements of protest,[14] yet never made heretical statements. Their protest was—as Nehemia Polen phrased it—"within faith,"[15] and according to the Lubavitcher rebbe was, in the words of Gershon Greenberg, the noted scholar and authority on Ultra-Orthodox responses during and following the Holocaust,[16] "surrounded by" or "rooted in" faith.[17] In an English letter from November 1972 the Lubavitcher rebbe responded to a Harvard professor who wrote that he feels rage as a result of the Holocaust:

> There is a prevalent misconception about the Holocaust in the belief that it was something new and unprecedented and therefore requires an explanation which had never before been thought of. [...] The Jewish people had suffered holocausts before and, relatively speaking, even worse. There were the destruction of Beth Hamikdosh at the hands of the Babylonians and the second destruction by the Romans. In both cases more than 1/3 of our people, men, women and children, were brutally slain and most of the remainder uprooted and exiled or sold into slavery. This, in addition to the loss of the spiritual center in Jerusalem, loss of the country and independence, etc. There were the Crusades in the Middle Ages with the loss of countless Jewish communities and Jewish lives and more. So, why single out the recent, and let us hope the last, Holocaust? Furthermore, from the viewpoint of the question, "Shall the Judge of the earth not do justice?" (a question, incidentally, asked by our Patriarch Abraham), in other words, from the viewpoint of Divine Justice, which is clearly the basis of your rage, etc. as you state in your letter—surely there is no difference in principle between the Holocaust and seeing a child afflicted with disease (as you also mention), for the child's suffering cannot be justified punishment. Has it not occurred to you—to mention a further point—that throughout the ages there were faithful and God-fearing Jews, among them profound thinkers, who deeply thought about these and other problems, dedicating a lifetime to study and research, whose works have become the Guide to the Perplexed (the actual title of the celebrated classic by Maimonides)? Do you think that all these great minds simply ignored such a problem as the holocaust? [...] In summary, the question about the Holocaust is as old as the age-old question, Why do the wicked prosper? [...] We have not only learned to live with it, but it has not shaken the belief of the believer, for the simple reason that the human mind, even the greatest, is woefully limited and inadequate to question the Divine Mind.[18]

The only response we can learn from Jewish tradition, says the Lubavitcher Rebbe in several letters, is empowering the learning of Torah and mitzvoth exactly as it was done after every tragic incident in history. After the destruction of the Second Temple, and subsequently, after the Bar-Kokhva rebellion, the *Mishnah* and *Talmud* were written. After the Crusaders, the *Tosafoth* commentary to the Talmud was developed, and after the expulsion from Spain, the *Shulchan-'Aruch* was composed, and Kabbalah flourished:

> The terrible calamity which befell our people in our time is, unfortunately, not the first instance in the long history of the martyrdom of our people in exile among the nations of the world. Going back to the destruction of the second Bais Hamikdosh, the Jewish people suffered even a greater calamity inasmuch as there was no place of refuge at that time, since Rome's rule extended everywhere. Even percentage-wise, our Jewish people suffered more at that time than during the recent calamity. Nevertheless, it is precisely at that time that the *Torah Shebeal peh* [the tradition of "Oral Torah" ed.] flourished in the great Yeshivah of Yavneh. [...] Similarly during the Middle Ages, and especially during the

> times of the Crusades, whole communities of Jewish men, women and children were cruelly wiped out by the Crusaders. Yet, it was precisely at that time that the *Ba'alei HaTosfos* and their disciples flourished.[19]

At this stage of his career, the Lubavitcher Rebbe espoused the most traditional-orthodox response, which does not regard the Holocaust as an unprecedented phenomenon, neither historically nor philosophically. These unanswered questions are and *were always* part of life, and most importantly—they never dissuaded Jews from studying and observing the Torah (at least not on a collective level).

THE DIVINE SURGEON

Relating to the suffering of the Holocaust, the Satmar Rebbe, R. Joel Teitelbaum, claimed unequivocally and with certainty that: "sin is the cause of all suffering."[20] In a similar vein, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, the sixth Rebbe of the Ḥabad-Lubavitch dynasty,[21] and father-in-law of R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, highlighted the interrelationship between catastrophe and redemption, unfolding in terms of sin, punishment, and *Teshuvah* (repentance).[22] In contrast to them, the Lubavitcher Rebbe emphasized on several occasions that the Holocaust was not a punishment for religious sins.[23] Nevertheless, in other places, he entertained the notion of *Gilgul* (reincarnation of souls) as a possible explanation for various catastrophes including the Holocaust.[24] This would at least suggest the possibility that the Holocaust was a form of *Tikkun*, a type of rectification, for the souls of the victims. Moreover, in 1976 he presented an analogy in order to justify God's actions in the Holocaust,[25] which can be understood as employing sin as an explanation to account for the Holocaust:

> Despite the horrific pain of this tragedy, it is clear that "no evil descends from Above," and hiding within the evil and suffering is an exalted spiritual good. Although this is beyond human comprehension, it still exists in full force. Thus, it is possible for the physical Holocaust to be spiritually beneficial because the bounds of the body and the soul are not necessarily coterminous. [...] Imagine, for example, a person who happens to be in a hospital and enters an operating theater. He is confronted with a frightening spectacle: a person tied down to an operation table is surrounded by ten people or so, their faces covered with masks, wielding knives in their hands. They are about to remove one of his limbs. If the "visitor" knew nothing about modern medical practice, he would be sure he was witnessing a cannibalistic rite. He would surely start screaming and would call for help to "save" the "victim" from the "criminals." His reactions would be due to his lack of knowledge of medicine and of the patient's past, present, and future condition. Had he known that the limb to be removed was hopelessly poisoned and that its removal was

> necessary to save the patient's life and that to save his life, the doctors and the professor at their head had to operate and remove the infected limb, he would have reacted differently. [...] God, like the professor surgeon, understands the situation and knows what is good for Israel. Thus, everything that happened was for the good. Had the behavior been that of a mortal being, there would have been room for doubts and objections to his actions. However, when God is the "expert surgeon," there can be no room for questioning.[26]

This analogy of surgery disturbed many readers. One fiercely contested point was the implied comparison of Holocaust victims to an infected limb that had to be amputated to save the whole body (=the people of Israel). The analogy can be understood to mean that part of the nation has transgressed, and consequently, God had to remove them to heal the nation. Many questions can arise from such an analogy: what sin could Israel be guilty of to warrant such retribution? And is this response, which blames the victims for their destruction, reasonable?

Indeed, these words drew criticism from secular scholars and politicians, such as Ḥaika Grossman, and Yehuda Bauer.[27] Grossman challenged the Lubavitcher Rebbe publicly in the *Al-hamishmar* newspaper, the mouthpiece of the *Mapam* party, on August 22, 1980.[28] The Rebbe read her words and replied with a private letter. In response to Grossman's contention that the Rebbe presented the Holocaust (surgery) as a punishment for sins, he asserted that his words were utterly misunderstood. Indeed, the biblical prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah depicted the disaster of death, torture, and exile of Israel in the times of the destruction of the first Temple as a punishment for wrongdoings. However, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, was very cautious with his words and did not use the term "sin" and never meant to portray surgery as a punishment but rather as a *Tikkun*:

> Regarding the example of the operation that I wrote about, I have never heard anyone say that surgery is a punishment for the patient; quite the opposite [...] The difference between our generation and the aforementioned prophecies [i.e. the calamities prophesied by Isaiah and Jeremiah] is that those events were a punishment [that occurred] after numerous warnings. In our generation, however, we are compelled to say that it is a matter of an "operation," i.e. a *Tikkun* (rectification), emphasizing that this rectification is performed on behalf of those operated upon.[29]

In the context of the Rebbe's letter, it is not necessary to resort to an esoteric explanation of the Kabbalistic concept of *Tikkun*; rather, it seems that the Rebbe refers to the concept of *Tikkun* in its most basic and elementary sense, namely, as an act of fixing and repair (analogous to surgery).[30] However, for my argument, it is essential to note that the Lubavitcher rebbe disapproves of employing the concept of sin and punishment with regard to the Holocaust.

THE RETREAT FROM THEODICY AND THE UNIQUENESS OF THE HOLOCAUST

In December 1990, Rabbi Elazar Menahem Man Shach, the Rosh Yeshiva of the Ponevezh Yeshiva in Bnei-Brak and the leader of Lithuanian Jewry, and a bitter opponent of the Lubavitcher Rebbe for many years, delivered a talk, which was published in *Yated Ne'eman*, the newspaper of the Lithuanian ultra-orthodox sector of Jewry:

> I would like to pose a question that has been bothering me for many years. Several decades ago, there was a Holocaust that liquidated six million Jews... Why did this happen? Does God behave cruelly?... The answer is obvious. *God kept an accounting of each and every debt.* Israel's account extended over centuries and *accrued until it was paid with the lives of six million Jews.* This is how the Holocaust happened. A Jew must believe this, and if a Jew does not reconcile himself with this, he is a heretic. After the destruction of the six million Jews, a new reckoning began [...] Right now, things are calm and going well, but when the measure of sins reaches full capacity [...] the score will be settled anew.[31]

R. Shach was fully convinced that the Holocaust was a punishment for the sins of Israel, and that this is such a basic belief that whoever does not believe in it is a heretic. Moreover, Israel did not learn its lesson and therefore God is counting the number of sins again; one day, he will strike again if we persist in our evil ways. Presumably, the sins are secularism, and the abandonment of Torah study and observance of *mitzvoth*. After the Holocaust, Israel did not learn its lesson, as evidenced by the founding of the Jewish state as a secular enterprise. The threat that God will strike again should be understood as a call for repentance.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe immediately responded in a sermon he delivered that Sabbath.[32] I would like to point out two elements of the sermon that relate to the uniqueness of the Holocaust. The reader can hear from his words that they were said with rage:

> In our days, soon after the Holocaust, who can dare point an accusing finger at the remnants of the Jewish people, "a brand saved from the fire," and tell them that their conduct will bring about a second Holocaust, heaven forbid? May such calamities never be repeated. Such statements are more severe when, in addition to pointing an accusing finger at our generation, one desecrates the honor of the martyrs who perished *al Kiddush Hashem*, by justifying the Holocaust as if it were punishment for their sins. Heaven forbid that one utter such words.[33]

Although this statement is unequivocal and more emphatic than anything the Lubavitcher rebbe had ever said previously about the Holocaust, it is in line with his previous comments that the Holocaust is not a punishment. He emphasizes this point:

> Undesirable events sometimes occur, not as punishment for sins, but because of an unfathomable Divine decree, a dictate which transcends any explanation. Thus, our Sages relate that when Moshe protested the cruel death suffered by Rabbi Akiva, God answered, "Be silent. This is what arose in My thought." [...] The classic example is God's covenant with Avraham in which He informed him that his descendants would be enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years. Far from being a result of our people's sins, this exile was preordained by an unfathomable Divine decree.

However, in his following words, a notable development and a major change in his attitude towards the uniqueness of the Holocaust can be observed:

> The same applies to the Holocaust. The extermination of six million Jews with the greatest and most horrible cruelty—*an extermination which had no similarities throughout all the generations (and won't have in the future,* may the All-merciful protect us)—cannot be a punishment for sins. No one, not even Satan himself, could find sins that would justify such a horrible punishment.[34]

In contrast to what the Lubavitcher rebbe stated previously, namely, that the Holocaust was not an exceptional phenomenon in Jewish history, and similar catastrophes had occurred, such as in the times of the destruction of the First Temple, Second Temple, Crusades and so on—now in the 90s and during his final years—he offers an entirely different approach. The Holocaust is an unprecedented phenomenon in Jewish history and cannot be compared to any other occurrence, whether in the past or the future!

Furthermore, it should be noted that the Holocaust is an unprecedented phenomenon not just historically but also theologically. In a footnote to his sermon, the Lubavitcher Rebbe pointed out that R. Isaac Luria (the AriZal), the renowned 16th-century kabbalist of Safed, considered all exterminations until his times as a divine instrument for the rectification (*Tikkun*) of the souls who sinned in previous incarnations:

> In *Sha'ar HaTeshuvah*, the Mitteler Rebbe explains a statement of the AriZal, which states specifically that exterminations which befell the Jews in previous generations (from the Crusaders until the Expulsion of Jews from Portugal [1497]) occurred in order to allow those who perished to atone for their sins from previous incarnations. The martyrs who died '*al Kiddush Hashem* had lived in the era of the First Temple and had committed severe sins of idolatry for which they had to rectify themselves. In this case, the only way for rectification (*Tikkun*) was through giving up their lives in expression of their pure faith.... However, with the AriZal's revelation of the teachings of Kabbalah, came the era of *Tikkun* in which a different path of service was opened, and extermination was no longer called for. Therefore, the Mitteler Rebbe states that such catastrophes will never repeat themselves.[35] This serves as further

> support that the Holocaust is a unique phenomenon that is not in the scope of *punishment* or *Tikkun*, as I mentioned.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe deduced that if, after the AriZal's time, God has abandoned extermination as an instrument for *Tikkun*, then the Holocaust is exceptional and does not fall into the terms of sin or punishment or *even* Tikkun. Obviously, this is a major change in his viewpoint.

Greenberg did not understand this change as a total shift in the Lubavitcher Rebbe's approach to the Holocaust. Rather, he raised the possibility that the Rebbe expressed himself in such an extreme way, which seems to contradict his own opinion, as part of a polemical reaction to R. Shach: "Perhaps for the sake of emphasis, the Rebbe then set aside his ongoing relativizing of the Holocaust and declared to Shach that nothing in Israel's history could be compared to it. After that, excluding any amalgam of punishment with Teshuvah or punishment with Tikkun, he categorically eliminated punishment."[36] Greenberg concludes that the Rebbe understood the suffering of the Holocaust "as a Tikkun—rather than provocation to possible Teshuva."[37] Zbyněk Tarant also mentions this revision in the Rebbe's position, but does not accept the possibility that the Rebbe withdrew from his past views.[38]

However, I believe that the retreat from seeing the Holocaust as a divine act of rectification might prove that the Rebbe revised his opinion completely. In other words, up until 1990, the Lubavitcher Rebbe sought to place the Holocaust within the broader framework of theodicy. He sought to minimize the theological implications of the Holocaust by incorporating it within a long list of calamities that befell the Jewish people, who nevertheless remained resilient and resolute in their faith in the face of unspeakable horrors. The believing Jew maintains that God has His reasons even if they are incomprehensible to the human mind. Furthermore, the believer will try to justify God by blaming his sins rather than God. A more nuanced and sophisticated approach is to view God's actions as a Tikkun rather than punishment. One of the unintended consequences of this approach is that justifying God's actions can come at the expense of human compassion by blaming the victims or at least mitigating the sheer magnitude of evil by explaining it away as a higher good in disguise (as in the case of surgery). The Rebbe, in his earlier remarks, adopted this approach, which is thoroughly consistent with the traditional approach to theodicy. Furthermore, this apologetic strategy was also employed for the purpose of theological "damage control" and to stem the defection from faith that resulted from the Holocaust.

By placing the Holocaust within a pre-existing framework of Jewish suffering and theodicy the Rebbe sought to demonstrate that this problem should not pose an unprecedented theological challenge for the religious Jew. This was the approach that the Rebbe adopted until 1990;

however, in response to Rav Shach's inflammatory words—blaming the sins of the Jews as the cause of the Holocaust and threatening another Holocaust if Jews did not repent—the Lubavitcher Rebbe thoroughly revised his approach. It seems that this "fire and brimstone" approach was too much for the Rebbe to bear. Furthermore, Rav Shach's approach violated the Rebbe's deep *Ahavat Yisrael* (love of his fellow Jews). When confronted with such a stark approach that effectively pitted God against the Jews, the Rebbe was outraged. It seems that this led the Rebbe to retreat from his former approach and unequivocally proclaim that the Holocaust was an unprecedented event that cannot be attributed to the sins or deficiencies of the Jewish people, either as a punishment or even as a Tikkun.

True, thinking that the Holocaust is an unprecedented event is not common in traditional Orthodox thought and is usually associated with post-Holocaust secular approaches.[39] However, there is a precedent in the notions and sermons of another Hasidic rebbe, who stage by stage, retreated from theodicy. Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, known as the Piaseczner Rebbe (1889–1943),[40] was in the Warsaw ghetto, where he wrote a collection of sermons and titled them *Sermons from the Years of Rage*.[41] This collection is distinguished by its willingness to confront the experience of suffering:

> When we studied the words of the prophets and our sages of blessed memory regarding the tribulations of the destruction [of the Temple in Jerusalem], we thought we had some grasp of these tribulations, even crying on occasion at that time. However, now we see how great the difference is between hearing about tribulations and seeing them, and all the more so suffering them—God save us—such that they are nearly incomparable... and as much as we discuss the tribulations, we are not able to describe them as they truly are, for knowledge and discussion of tribulations cannot be compared to experiencing them.[42]

R. Shapira shared his intimate doubts and misgivings with the reader, producing a unique and moving document. Moreover, he changed his mind from year to year due to the changing reality in the Ghetto, which was tragically worsening with time.[43] On Hanukkah, December 1941, he spoke about the loss of faith in the Ghetto:

> In truth, there is no room for questioning [heaven forbid]. Truthfully, the sufferings we are experiencing are like those we've suffered every few hundred years... What excuse does one have to question God and have his faith damaged by this suffering more than the Jews who suffered in the past? Why should one's faith be damaged now when it wasn't damaged when he reads descriptions of Jewish suffering from the past? Why is it that when one reads a line from the Talmud or Midrash and hears of past sufferings in Israel, his faith is not damaged, but now [confronting the experience in the Ghetto] it is? Those who say that

> the current suffering has never happened before to Israel are mistaken. The destruction of the Temple and the massacre at Betar were like what we are suffering now. May God have mercy and call an end to our suffering.[44]

In this text, R. Shapira expressed typical Orthodox thought and opposed those whose faith weakened due to the torments in the Ghetto. He claimed that *historically* these sufferings are not exceptional and are similar to previous Jewish catastrophes. Thus, he also did not see any need to treat them *theologically* differently. A year later, however, on November 27, 1942, R. Shapira could no longer support his earlier perception and thus added a remarkable note. Reconsidering the uniqueness of Jewish suffering under the Nazis, he confessed that:

> It is only the suffering that was experienced until the middle of 1942 that was unprecedented. But the monstrous suffering (*tsarot meshunot*) and the terrible and freakish deaths (*u-mitot ra'ot u-meshunot*) that were invented by these evil and bizarre murderers on Israel from that point on [the middle of 1942]—*according to my knowledge of rabbinic literature and Jewish history in general, there has never been anything like them.* God should have mercy on us and save us from their hands in the blink of an eye.[45]

James A. Diamond noted that R. Shapira carefully weighed the Holocaust's uniqueness against both history *and* rabbinic literature. This event is not just historically unprecedented but also unparalleled from the perspective of rabbinic literature. The historical precedents R. Shapira referred to in the earlier version of the sermon are similar to the ones that the Lubavitcher rebbe referred to. There is a clear reason for that. As Diamond points out, the destruction of the Temple and later Betar by the Romans are *rabbinically* constructed as archetypal Jewish tragedies to which the classical rabbis responded legally and *theologically* in order to maintain and continue their faith, and regarding which many generations found psychological and theological comfort in times of distress.[46] R. Shapira's retreat, in late 1942, from the traditional paradigms indicates the uniqueness of the Holocaust as an exceptional phenomenon which cannot be compared to past events and which cannot be understood in conventional theological patterns such as rabbinical theodicy.[47]

We should not reject the possibility that the Lubavitcher Rebbe, in his last years, also accepted so-called post-Holocaust theories. Clearly, it marks a change and development in his approach to the murder of European Jewry, and in some ways might be similar (but by no means identical) to the change R. Shapira underwent. It seems to me that R. Shach triggered the Lubavitcher Rebbe to revise his approach and change his attitude toward the Holocaust. A former student of mine, Yehudah DovBer Zirkind, and a brilliant scholar in his own right, noted to me, in a personal conversation, that this revision was not necessarily a conscious intellectual change, that is, that the Lubavitcher Rebbe had reexamined this issue intellectually. Rather, the Rebbe's response can be understood as a spontaneous and emotional "gut reaction." Instead of viewing this as a deliberate change of mind, it can be seen more as a "change of heart." In other words, the pathos the Rebbe felt in response to R. Shach's words elicited an emotional reaction that contradicted his previous intellectual responses. Either way, whether the change is intellectual or emotional, it can demonstrate how social tension between two great leaders can contribute to the development of a position, recorded in a sermon.

THE LAST PHASE OF THE LUBAVITCHER REBBE IN A BROAD PERSPECTIVE

Eli Rubin argued that the Lubavitcher Rebbe developed through the years a metaphysical theory designed to free hermeneutics from the trap of dogma.[48] Rubin demonstrated this through an analysis of the Rebbe's understanding of the kabbalistic concept of *Tsimtsum* (Divine contraction). The *tsimtsum* is a theological concept which emerged from the cosmogonic theory of R. Isaac Luria, the 16th-century renowned kabbalist of Safed. Luria assumed that the Divine, referred to also as *Ein Sof* (The Endless), fills all space and comprises everything to the exclusion of anything else. If God is an infinite fullness, how, therefore, could something exist outside of God, how could God create anything? Luria's doctrine of *tsimtsum* emerges as an answer to this quandary.[49] While Luria left no writings, his students preserved his teachings. One student, R. Hayyim Vital, explained in the name of his teacher that in order to create the world, *Ein Sof* withdrew Himself, or His light, from His middle point,[50] forming a vacuum within himself (which the Kabbalists termed *tahiru*).[51] Following this, *Ein Sof* let a single ray of light, known as the *reshimu*—a weak impression of light—into the vacuum, by means of which all of the worlds were created.[52]

Read in a straightforward manner, the Lurianic mythos implies the existence of a place of emptiness, that is, the "vacant place and empty vacuum."[53] Devoid of what? Without what? Ostensibly, it is empty of Divinity, devoid of the light of *Ein Sof*. Furthermore, Luria contended that the world was created within this "empty vacuum." It emerges, therefore, that God is not present in the world. In practical terms, the doctrine of *tsimtsum* removed the presence of the Divine from the world. As it relates to God, the light of *Ein Sof*, as a transcendental force, is nearly entirely removed from the cosmos (with the exception of the *reshimu*).[54]

This notion of Divine withdrawal from the world is inconsistent with the common mystical standpoint, which was impowered in Hasidism, according to which God is found in all, even in the lowest of things, such that the mystic might uncover the Divine and occasionally encounter Him within the lower levels of this world.[55] This apparent contradiction spurred the development of interpretations arguing against a literal understanding of *tsimtsum*. For this school, the Lurianic cosmogony is to be read as an allegory, with an effort made to understand its metaphorical import. Mostly the hasidic *tsaddikim* (spiritual leaders) active from the late eighteenth century and onwards were wholeheartedly of the opinion that *tsimtsum* was allegorical.[56] However, some of the students of Rabbi Elijah, the "Vilna Gaon" (1720–1797), known as *mithnagdim* (opponents) due to their opposition to the Hasidic movement,[57] took issue with the Hasidic understanding of *tsimtsum*,[58] and preferred a more literal interpretation.[59]

Rubin demonstrates that the Lubavitcher Rebbe, as a Hasidic leader, also held in his early writings (the 1930s) to the allegorical interpretation of *tsimtsum* and sharply rejected all other interpretations.[60] Yet, in the 1980s, he displayed a much more open, and indeed positive, attitude to the opinion that *tsimtsum* should be interpreted literally. This is just one example of many, according to Rubin, that can indicate the Rebbe's openness/development/change in his later years to ideas he rejected in earlier stages of his life. It is important to note that such an altered attitude towards the meaning of *tsimtsum* is not just a revision in the understanding of a kabbalistic concept but, rather, might also have direct implications towards the Lubavitcher Rebbe's approach to the Holocaust. A viewpoint that sees *tsimtsum* and the "empty vacuum" as allegorical—tends to argue for divine presence in this world,[61] and to see divine providence as being present at all times and in all things. Consequently, the Holocaust is not an occurrence of an "empty vacuum" devoid of the Divine, and certain assumptions, such as *gilgul* (reincarnation) or *tikkun*, are proposed to explain divine justice. A different viewpoint, however, that interprets *tsimtsum* literally, as a world devoid of the light of *Ein Sof* (except for the *reshimu*) and shaped by human actions based on free will, may choose to avoid or even reject any theodicean explanations for God's (un)providence in the Holocaust, opting for silence or protest instead.

Furthermore, Rubin claims that after the death of the Lubavitcher Rebbe's wife, Ḥaya Mushka, in 1988, the Rebbe became much more sensitive and rejected any nature of theodicy regarding loss and death.[62] An important and very poignant example of the Rebbe's refusal to admit any theodicy during this period came after the tragic murder of Pesha Leah Lapine on February 6, 1992.[63] On the last day of the *Shiv'ah* (week of mourning) following the horrific murder, the Rebbe gave a special talk. It was a moving event in which the Rebbe spoke in great pain. In the sermon, the Rebbe said that it is not appropriate for such an event to occur during the "days of preparation for redemption," and that we should come to God with a *claim* and *demand* that such unfortunate things should not happen again.[64] Theodicean terms, such as *gilgul* or *tikkun* are not mentioned in this sermon.

I believe that preferring protest rather than theodicy points to a change or development in the Lubavitcher Rebbe's approach to suffering and can partially explain the retreat from theodicy with regard to the Holocaust, adopting instead an approach that sees the Holocaust as an unprecedented phenomenon which has no parallel in Jewish history, and has no theological justification and hence no consolation.

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NOTES

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1. For a wide ranging biography, see: Samuel Heilman and Menachem Friedman, *The Rebbe: The Life and Afterlife of Menachem Mendel Schneerson* (Princeton, 2010); Josef Telushkin, *The Rebbe: The Life and Teachings of Menachem M. Schneerson, the Most Influential Rabbi in Modern History* (New York, 2014); Chaim Miller, *Turning Judaism Outward: A Biography of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson the Seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe* (Brooklyn, 2014). Regarding universal social responsibility see Philip Wexler, Eli Rubin and Michael Wexler, *Social Vision: The Lubavitcher Rebbe's Transformative Paradigm for The World* (New York, 2019).

2. S. Heilman and M. Friedman, *The Rebbe*, ch. 5. See also: https://www.chabad.org/therebbe/article_cdo/aid/62157/jewish/1941-Flight-from-Europe.htm.

3. R. Schneerson also lost close relatives in the Holocaust. In one letter he referred to this and said: "I too lost very close and dear relatives; [including my] grandmother, brother, cousins and others in the Holocaust, *Hashem yinkom damam* (May God avenge their blood). But life according to *Mitsvoth Hashem* must go on, and the sign of life is in growth and creativity." See Gershon Greenberg, "Menachem Mendel Schneerson's Response to the Holocaust," *Modern Judaism*, Vol. 34 (2013), p. 104.

4. Ibid.

5. See Eliezer Schweid, "Is the Holocaust an 'Unprecedented Event'?" *Iyyun: The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 37 (1988), pp. 271–285 [in Hebrew]; Dan Michman, "The Jewish Dimension of the Holocaust in Dire Straits? Current Challenges of Interpretation and Scope," in Norman Goda (ed.), *Jewish Histories of the Holocaust: New Transnational Approaches* (New York, 2014), pp. 17–38; Idem., "'The Holocaust': Do We Agree What We Are Talking

About?" *Holocaust Studies*, Vol. 20 (2015), pp. 117–128; Michman presents the opposing viewpoints and argues for the uniqueness of the Holocaust. For the unexceptional approach see Annegret Ehmann, "Is the Holocaust a Unique and Unprecedented Tragedy? On Holocaust Politics and Genocide," *Dapim: Studies on the Shoah*, Vol. 25 (2011), pp. 347–357.

6. Emil Fackenheim, *To Mend the World: Foundations of Future Jewish Thought* (New York, 1982), p. 11.

7. David Weiss Halivni, *Breaking the Tablets: Jewish Theology After the Shoah* (Lanham, MD, 2007); Eliezer Berkowits, *Faith after the Holocaust* (New York, 1973). Avichai Zur, "The Lord Hides in Inner Chambers: The Doctrine of Suffering in the Theosophy of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira of Piaseczno," *Dapim: Studies on the Shoah*, Vol. 25 (2011), pp. 183–237. For some general scholarly studies on theology and the Holocaust, see Zachary Braiterman, "Philosophical and Theological Responses to the Holocaust," *Oxford Bibliographies Online in Jewish Studies*; Tamir Granot, *Faith and Man Confront the Holocaust* (Alon Shvut, 2013), 2 vols. [in Hebrew].

8. See, for example, *Leviticus* 26:14–46; *Deuteronomy* 28:15–69.

9. *B. Talmud Berakhot* 5b.

10. See James A. Diamond, "Raging Hasidic Sermons: R. Kalonymus Kalman Shapira's Halting Retreat from Theodicy," *Yad VaShem Studies*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (2021), p. 56: "Most Orthodox responses to the Holocaust fall into the category of some form of reasoned argument, generally characterized as theodicy."

11. R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Igros Kodesh*, Vol. 24 (Brooklyn, 1998), pp. 339–340 [in Hebrew]. The following translation is mine.

12. Idem.

13. G. Greenberg, "Menachem Mendel," p. 96.

14. For a selection of studies on this, see: Anson Laytner, *Arguing with God: A Jewish Tradition* (Northvale, NJ, 1990); David R. Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest* (Louisville, 1993); and Dov Weiss, *Pious Irreverence: Confronting God in Rabbinic Judaism* (Philadelphia, 2017). According to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, biblical faith is a revolutionary gesture; see Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility* (New York, 2005), pp. 17–29. On expressions of this theological attitude during the time of the Holocaust, see Steven T. Katz, Shlomo Biderman and Gershon Greenberg (eds.), *Wrestling with God: Jewish Theological Responses During and After the Holocaust* (New York, 2007), pp. 355–369.

15. On "protest within faith" see Nehemia Polen, *The Holy Fire: The Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto* (Northvale, 1994), pp. 94–105.

16. In his numerous books and articles, Gershon Greenberg surveyed the religious responses of many Orthodox rabbis and Hasidic leaders to the calamities wrought by the Holocaust. In particular, he analyzed Ultra-Orthodox responses during and following the Holocaust. Greenberg compared and contrasted the views of many rabbinic figures on the Holocaust, thereby contextualizing individual views within a wider frame of discourse.

17. G. Greenberg, "Menachem Mendel," pp. 96, 99; R. Menachem M. Schneerson, *Emunah u'mada: Igrot kodesh mikavod kedushat admo"r shlit"a milubavitch* (Kefar Ḥabad, 1976), pp. 120–122.

18. Nissan Mindel (ed.), *The Letter and the Spirit: Letters by The Lubavitcher Rebbe,* Vol. 5 (Brooklyn, 2019), p. 192; *A Chassidisher Derher,* (Brooklyn, Kislev, 5780).

19. Nissan Mindel (ed.), *The Letter and the Spirit,* Vol. 2 (Brooklyn, 2013), p. 76. This letter is dated October 6, 1964.

20. R. Joel Teitelbaum, *Va'Yoel Moshe,* Vol. 1 (Brooklyn, N.Y., 1959), p. 5. For a critique of R. Teitelbaum's views, see Norman Lamm, "The Ideology of *Naturei Karta* according to the Satmarer Version," *Tradition,* Vol. 12 (1971), pp. 38–53; Zvi Jonathan Kaplan, "Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum, Zionism, and Hungarian Ultra-Orthodoxy," *Modern Judaism,* Vol. 24 (2004), pp. 165–178.

21. Regarding R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson's escape from Europe see Bryan Mark Rigg, *Rescued from the Reich: How One of Hitler's Soldiers Saved the Lubavitcher Rebbe* (New Haven, 2004); Idem., *The Rabbi Saved by Hitler's Soldiers: Rebbe Joseph Isaac Schneersohn and His Astonishing Rescue* (Lawrence, KA, 2016).

22. G. Greenberg, "Menachem Mendel," pp. 86–94.

23. Ibid., pp. 94–95. R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson established shortly after his arrival in Brooklyn in March 1940, the *Maḥaneh Yisrael* (Camp of Israel) organization, Ḥabad's social-service agency dedicated to caring for the social and religious welfare of Jews around the world. When his son-in-law, R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, arrived on June 23, 1941, R. Yosef Yitzchak appointed him the executive director of the organization. Although this organization publicized R. Yosef Yitzchak's views and statements along with those of other ideologues in the journal *Hakeriyah vehakedushah,* it is not clear to what extent R. Menachem Mendel (later on "The Lubavitcher Rebbe") himself agreed with all the views expressed therein.

24. See, for example, R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Igros Kodesh,* Vol. 13 (Brooklyn, 2003), pp. 203–204 [in Hebrew]; Nissan Mindel (ed.), *The Letter and the Spirit,* Vol. 2, pp. 77–78.

25. It would be more accurate to say "inactions," however, the Hasidic conception that is at the foundation of the Lubavitcher Rebbe's Hasidic thought, is that God is immanent, and his presence appears in everything including in history. He is not hidden or disappears, and therefore the Holocaust and its consequences are for sure God's will and divine justice.

26. M. M. Schneerson, *Emunah u'mada,* pp. 116–117. Based on Yehuda Bauer's translation in idem., *Rethinking the Holocaust* (New Haven, 2001), p. 203. Yehuda Dov Ber Zirkind brought to my attention that the original talk was delivered on Simchat Torah 5731 (1970). Reading the original Yiddish (see *Siḥot Kodesh,* 5731, Vol. 1, pp. 157–158) reveals that surgery was only used as an analogy to explain the concept of theodicy, not to literally characterize the Holocaust as surgery. Once this sermon was published and reworked in *Emunah u'mada* the language that was employed lent itself much more to an interpretation of the Holocaust as surgery.

27. Y. Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, pp. 186–212. Bauer even considered suing the Lubavitcher Rebbe for having justified the Holocaust, see Dina Porat, "Amalek's Accomplices' Blaming Zionism for the Holocaust: Anti-Zionist Ultra-Orthodoxy in Israel during the 1980s," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 27 (1992), p. 728.

28. Grossman's main criticism, which will not be elaborated upon here, is presenting, or at least accepting, the notion of the Holocaust as part of a Divine plan, thereby justifying the Holocaust on some level. She argued that the logical extension of this approach is that whoever revolted against the Nazis fought against the Divine plan. Grossman, a veteran of the Bialystok ghetto uprising, could not tolerate such a view. Regarding the details of this controversy, see Zbyněk Trek Tarant, "Blessed Be the Surgeon? The Lubavitcher Rebbe, the Emuna u-mada' Controversy and its Legacy," *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku,* Vol. 29 (2021), pp. 159–182.

29. R. Menachem M. Schneerson, *Likkutei Siḥot ʻal Parashiot Hashavuʻa, Ḥagim u-Moʻadim,* Vol. 21 (Brooklyn, 1999), p. 398. Translated by Yehuda Dov Ber Zirkind. Emphasis is mine.

30. For the meaning of *Tikkun* see at length and detail, Z. Tarant, "Blessed Be the Surgeon," pp. 164–175; G. Greenberg, "Menachem Mendel," pp. 105–106.

31. Yated Neʻeman, December 28, 1990. Translated by Yehuda Dov Ber Zirkind. Emphases are mine.

32. G. Greenberg, "Menachem Mendel," pp. 107–109.

33. R. Menachem M. Schneerson, *Sefer Hasiḥoth 5751*, parashat vayeḥi (Brooklyn, 2003), p. 233. English translation based on: https://www.sie.org/templates/sie/article_cdo/aid/2507779/jewish/Tenth-of-Teves-and-Shabbos-Parshas-Vayechi-12th-Day-of-Teves-part-2-5751-1991.htm, with some of my modifications based on the original text.

34. Ibid. Note 116. Emphases are mine.

35. Up to this point, the Lubavitcher rebbe summarizes the words of the Mitteler Rebbe, R. Dovber Schneuri (1773–1827). From here on he adds his own words.

36. G. Greenberg, "Menachem Mendel," p. 109.

37. Ibid., p. 114.

38. Z. Tarant, "Blessed Be the Surgeon," pp. 177–182, and see there his discussion regarding current Ḥabad and their preference to depicting the rebbe as someone who rejected all theological explanations for the Holocaust—which Tarant sees as inaccurate and as a reinterpretation under changing circumstances.

39. S. Katz, *Wrestling with God*, pp. 3–26, 355–369; Shaul Magid, "Covenantal Rupture and Broken Faith in *Esh Kodesh*," in Don Seeman at al. (eds.), *Hasidism, Suffering and Renewal: The Pre-war and Holocaust Legacy of R. Kalonymus Kalman Shapira* (Albany, 2021), pp. 311–314.

40. For biographical details in English see N. Polen, *The Holy Fire*, pp. 1–14; Esther Farbstein, *Hidden in Thunder: Perspectives on Faith, Halachah and Leadership During the Holocaust* (English transl. by Deborah Stern; Jerusalem,

2007), pp. 479–488; David Biale et al., *Hasidism: A New History* (Princeton, 2018), pp. 614–616 and 660–662; Don Seeman et al. (eds.), *Hasidism, Suffering and Renewal: The Pre-war and Holocaust Legacy of R. Kalonymus Kalman Shapira* (Albany, NY, 2021), pp. 1–25.

41. R. Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, *Sermons from the Years of Rage* [in Hebrew], ed. Daniel Reiser, 2 vols. (Jerusalem, 2017).

42. The sermon of *Ki tavo* 5700 [D. Reiser, *Sermons from the Years of Rage*, Vol. 1, p. 152].

43. See Daniel Reiser, "Esh Kodesh: A New Evaluation in Light of a Philological Examination of the Manuscript," *Yad Vashem Studies*, Vol. 44 (2016), pp. 65–97.

44. The sermon of *Hanukka* 5702 [D. Reiser, *Sermons from the Years of Rage*, Vol. 1, p. 242].

45. Ibid. Emphasis is mine.

46. J. Diamond, "Raging Hasidic Sermons," pp. 81–83. See also S. Magid, "Covenantal Rupture," pp. 319–323.

47. See S. Magid, ibid. that the claim of the Holocaust as an unprecedented event makes "paradigmatic thinking" impossible, as Richard Rubenstein and other post-Holocaust theologians argue as well.

48. Eleazer Leib Rubin, "Polyontology and Synthesis in the Oracular Hermeneutics of Chabad's Seventh Rebbe," paper delivered at the International Workshop on the Hasidic Sermon, Bennett Center, Fairfield University, April 25, 2023. On the concept of *tsimtsum* in Habad's internal discourse and its ontological significance see idem., "Ṣimṣum in Habad Hasidism, 1796–1920: Thought, Literature, and History," PhD diss. (University College London, 2021).

49. The doctrine of *tsimtsum* predates Luria, however, it was only fully developed in his teachings. On pre-Lurianic notions of *tsimtsum*, see Brakha Sack, "R. Moses of Cordovero's Doctrine of Ẓimẓum," *Tarbiẓ*, Vol. 58 (1989), pp. 207–237 [in Hebrew]; Moshe Idel, "On the Concept of Ẓimẓum in Kabbalah and its Research," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, Vol. 10 (1992), pp. 59–112 [in Hebrew].

50. This proposition is unviable from a mathematical standpoint, for infinity does not have a discrete midpoint. Put differently, every point of infinity is its midpoint. For a metaphoric explanation of "middle point" see Elliot R. Wolfson, "*Malkhut de-Ein Sof* and the Temporalization of Space: *Ṣimṣum* in the Teaching of Solomon ben Ḥayyim Eliashiv," *Kabbalah*, Vol. 46 (2020), p. 55.

51. The term *tahiru* is borrowed from the *Zohar* (1:251a) and later cited by the students of Luria. See, for instance, Naftali Bacharach, *Emek ha-Melekh*, Section 1, Chapter 57.

52. See R. Hayyim Vital, *Ets Hayyim*, Gate 1, Branch 2. The term *reshimu* ("imprint") appears further on in the book, Gate 6, Chapter 4: "All that remained within it was an imprint (*reshimu*)." For an extensive and deep study of this term see Elliot R. Wolfson, "*Nequddat ha-Reshimu*—The Trace of Transcendence and the Transcendence of the Trace: The Paradox of *Ṣimṣum* in the RaShaB's *Hemshekh Ayin Beit*," *Kabbalah*, Vol. 30 (2013), pp. 75–120.

53. R. Hayyim Vital, *Ets Hayyim*, Gate 1, Branch 2.

54. Divergent theories of Lurianic *tsimtsum*, indicative of differing and even opposing conceptions, appear in the writings of another of Luria's students, Joseph ibn Tabul. Per Vital, the act of contraction formed the power of judgement, that is to say, *tsimtsum* brought about the existence of evil (which is the absence of Divinity engendered within the vacant place), while ibn Tabul reasons that it was this very power of judgement which necessitated the act of contraction. The Divine sought to be purified of the evil latent within, meaning that the act of contraction was intended to cast evil out of the Divine. On the Lurianic doctrine of *tsimtsum* and its various theories and explanations, see Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (New York, 1965), pp. 109–113; Isaiah Tishby, *The Doctrine of Evil and the "Kelippah" in Lurianic Kabbalism* (Jerusalem, 1984), pp. 52–61 [in Hebrew]; Yoram Jacobson, *From Lurianic Kabbalism to the Psychological Theosophy of Hasidism* (Tel Aviv, 1984), pp. 24–30 [in Hebrew]; Lawrence Fine, *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos: Isaac Luria and his Kabbalistic Fellowship* (Stanford, CA, 2003), pp. 128–131; Yosef Avivi, *Kabbalat ha-Ari*, Vol. 3 (Jerusalem, 2008), 1384–1388. For a remarkable attempt to narrow the gap between Vital and Ibn Tabul, see Elliot R. Wolfson, "Divine Suffering and the Hermeneutics of Reading: Philosophical Reflections on Lurianic Mythology," in Robert Gibbs and Elliot R. Wolfson (eds.), *Suffering Religion* (New York, 2002), pp. 120–135.

55. Y. Jacobson, *From Lurianic Kabbalism*, p. 27. Elliot R. Wolfson has emphasized the dialetheic paradox of concealing and revealing as a defining aspect of kabbalistic esotericism, see idem., *Heidegger and Kabbalah: Hidden Gnosis and the Path of Poiēsis* (Bloomington, 2019), pp. 3–6, 157–158, 304–306.

56. See, for example, R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady, *Sha'ar Yihud ve-Emenuh*, Chapter 7.

57. On the Vilna Gaon and his opposition to Hasidism, see Immanuel Etkes, *The Gaon of Vilna: The Man and his Image*, trans. Jeffrey M. Green (Berkeley, CA, 2002), pp. 73–150. For the response of his student, R. Hayyim of Volozhin, see ibid., pp. 151–208.

58. Allan Nadler, *The Faith of the Mithnagdim: Rabbinic Responses to Hasidic Rapture* (Baltimore, 1997), pp. 11–28; Tamar Ross, "Rav Hayim of Volozhin and Rav Shneur Zalman of Liadi: Two Interpretations of the Doctrine of Zimzum," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, Vol. 2 (1982), pp. 153–169 [in Hebrew].

59. The students of the Gaon of Vilna comprise several schools, a detailed discussion of which is beyond the framework of this paper. See Mordechai Pachter, "The Gaon's Kabbalah from the Perspective of Two Traditions," in Moshe Hallamish, Yosef Rivlin, and Raphael Shuchat (eds.), *The Vilna Gaon and His Disciples* (Ramat Gan, 2003), pp. 119–136 [in Hebrew].

60. See R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Igrois Koidesh*, Vol. 1, letter 11 (Brooklyn, New York, 1987), pp. 19–21 (letter dated February 8th, 1939): "There are four approaches [to the *tsimtsum* theory]... Indeed the

mithnagdim in the days of R. Schneur Zalman held according to the first doctrine [that *tsimtsum* is literal (*ki-peshuto*)] as it is known, and they interpreted 'Leit atar panui minei' ['there is no space void of Him,' Tikunei Zohar, 122:2] meaning that there is no space empty from divine providence [as opposed to divine essence]... The doctrine of the author of the book *Nefesh ha-Ḥayyim*, which you mentioned, is according to the third approach [that *tsimtsum* is not literal] *and by that he disagreed with his master the Vilna Gaon. And in general, it seems to me that Rabbi Ḥayyim of Volozhin saw Ḥabad literature and particularly the Tanya book, and was influenced by them, although I have no absolute proof for this*" (My emphasis).

61. See Daniel Reiser, "The Doctrine of *Tsimtsum* in Hasidic and Mithnagdic Schools of Lithuania and its Contemporary Social Implications" (forthcoming).

62. I Thank Eli Rubin for this insight, which I hope he will write and expand on in the future.

63. The sermon (in Yiddish) was recorded see: https://ashreinu.app/player?parentEvent=5806&event=5806

64. See R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Torath Menachem: Hithva'aduyoth 5752 [1992]*, Vol. 2 (Brooklyn, 1994) pp. 310–313. See also Mordechai Lightstone, "From Texas to Missouri: A Crown Heights Story of Love and Memory" http://chabad.org/5618173.