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TSIMTSUM IN *LIFE OF PI*

Introduction

Yann Martel's 2001 bestselling novel *Life of Pi*, later released in 2012 as a prize-winning box office hit, addresses themes such as religion, faith, imagination, and their relation to psychology and human life; hope and despair; and the struggle with human nature. The author promises that his book will bring readers to a belief in God—"Then the elderly man said, 'I have a story that will make you believe in God.' […] I agreed with Mr. Adirubasamy that this was, indeed, a story to make you believe in God."[1] The book was written in response to the author's spiritual searching and inner distress—"This book was born as I was hungry," he attests (vii)—with the aim of liberating readers from the clutches of rational skepticism, regarded by Martel as a honeytrap, "A number of my fellow religious-studies students—muddled agnostics who didn't know which way was up, […] were in the thrall of reason, that fool's gold for the bright." (5); "the agnostic […] to the very end, lack[s] imagination and miss[es] the better story." (64)

Pi, the nickname of a young Indian boy named Piscine Molitor Patel, is an active, spiritually curious child with an inclination towards religion who accepts upon himself all of the religions at hand in his childhood home of Pondicherry: Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam. He declares that "many people seem to lose God along life's way. That was not my case." (47) For him, "religion is more than rite and ritual," (48) for he senses the essence common to all religions beyond the rituals which divide them, "[for] Hindus, in their capacity for love, are indeed hairless Christians, just as Muslims, in the way they see God in everything, are bearded Hindus, and Christians, in their devotion to God, are hat-wearing Muslims." (50) But make no mistake, *Life of Pi* does not study the established religious dogmas; in fact, it shies away from them. Three representative figures—a Hindu sage, priest, and Iman—encounter Pi as he strolls on the beach with his family. Exhorting Pi to choose among their faiths, they proclaim, "[H]e can't be a Hindu, a Christian and a Muslim. It's impossible. He must choose." (69). Pi, in turn, responds, "Bapu Gandhi said, 'All religions are true.'" (ibid.) The book deals not with the content of faith, but rather with a deeper stratum; it seeks to uncover faith itself, the foundation common to all religions. In other words, *Life of Pi* does not ask "what am I to believe?" (a question which sets various faiths at odds with each other), but rather, "what is belief?" It thus directs our attention to the character of the person of faith and their relationship to the world.

[1]* This article was supported by Herzog College, to which I would like to express my sincere and deepest gratitude. I am very grateful to my student Hayim Ezra Ani, who first exposed me to *Life of Pi* and the appearance of the term *tsimtsum* within the book.
Yann Martel, *Life of Pi* (New York: Harcourt, 2001), x.

Judaism ostensibly has no place in Pi's spiritual life. It merits only a single mention in the whole book, when Pi's brother Ravi mocks his tri-religious affiliation:

> "So, Swami Jesus, will you go on the hajj this year?" he said, bringing the palms of his hands together in front of his face in a reverent namaskar. "Does Mecca beckon?" He crossed himself. "Or will it be to Rome for your coronation as the next Pope Pius?" He drew in the air a Greek letter, making clear the spelling of his Mockery. "Have you found time yet to get the end of your pecker cut off and become a Jew? At the rate you're going, if you go to temple on Thursday, mosque on Friday, synagogue on Saturday and church on Sunday, you only need to convert to three more religions to be on holiday for the rest of your life." (70)

Despite that, I wish in this paper to focus specifically on the Jewish-Kabbalistic tradition and demonstrate its centrality to the novel's plot as well as its influence over several of the book's theses and insights.

The second, larger part of the book is a tale of survival. Pi's father, Santosh, is the director of a Pondicherry zoo, and he is fortunate to be born into the world of the zoo and spend his childhood among the animals. Amidst a political crisis in India during the 1970s, Pi's parents decide to immigrate to Canada, transporting their animals with them to their destination on a Japanese cargo ship named the *Tsimtsum*. At first the journey was uneventful—"For days the ship had pushed on, bullishly indifferent to its surroundings. The sun shone, rain fell, winds blew, currents flowed, the sea built up hills, the sea dug up valleys—the *Tsimtsum* did not care. It moved with the slow, massive confidence of a continent." (100)—but disaster soon strikes—"The last trace I saw of the ship was a patch of oil glimmering on the surface of the water […] It was inconceivable that the *Tsimtsum* should sink […] 'My God! The Tsimtsum has sunk!'" (112-113)

Pi is the only human survivor, his entire family, the sailors, and other passengers having perished. He drifts across the Pacific Ocean in a lifeboat together with the sole surviving zoo animals—a hyena, a Bengal tiger, an orangutan, and a zebra hobbled by a broken leg—before washing up on the shores of Mexico. The lifeboat too, like its mother ship, is named the *Tsimtsum*, "The words *Tsimtsum* and *Panama* were printed on each side of the bow in stark, black, roman capitals." (138) Pi must survive for 227 days on board the smaller *Tsimtsum*. He witnesses, during this time, the deaths of the zebra and orangutan at the hands of the hyena, and, subsequently, the tearing apart of the hyena by the tiger. Pi is compelled to learn to live with the tiger, whose name is Richard Parker,[2] tame it, and maintain his supremacy; to fish for fish and turtles; to ration water and other supplies; and provide food for the tiger.

[2] About the meaning of this name and its significance see Florence Stratton, "'Hollow at the core': Deconstructing Yann Martel's Life of Pi," *Studies in Canadian Literature* 29, no. 2 (2004): 11-12; Hamza Karam Ally, "'Which Story Do You Prefer?': The Limits of The Symbolic in Yann Martel's Life of Pi," *Literature and Theology* 34, no. 1 (2020): 90-91.

Tsimtsum is not a Japanese name. While the ship is identified as Japanese, perhaps leading the author to choose a name with a "Japanese" ring to it, the word signifies a Jewish theological concept which emerges from the kabbalistic doctrine of R. Isaac Luria, the 16th-century Kabbalist of Safed. As I mentioned above, the author "ostensibly" does not address Judaism, but despite this one must note that the opening chapter of the book mentions this Jewish Kabbalist and his doctrine. This is the opening of the book, a highly-significant introduction which conveys a key idea:

> My suffering left me sad and gloomy. Academic study and the steady, mindful practice of religion slowly wrought me back to life. […] After one year of high school, I attended the University of Toronto and took a double-major Bachelor's degree. My majors were religious studies and zoology. My fourth-year thesis for religious studies concerned certain aspects of the cosmogony theory of Isaac Luria, the great sixteenth-century Kabbalist from Safed. (3)

The Hebrew name for Luria's theory of cosmogony is none other than *Torat ha-Tsimtsum*, the doctrine of Divine contraction. Stated otherwise, the author's usage of the Jewish concept of *tsimtsum*, a term recurrent from the beginning of the book to its end, is an intentional choice—I believe the entire book to be a brilliant psychological commentary on this concept that explores the nature of belief, the life of the faithful, their difficulties and struggles, and, with that, the benefits belief provides to the faithful.

Following 227 day of anguish, suffering, despair, and fear, Pi washes up on the shores of Mexico and is subsequently hospitalized. Representatives of the Japanese shipping company pay him a visit in order to interview him and learn why the *Tsimtsum* sank. Pi relates his tale to the Japanese representatives, but they do not believe his story, At their request, he provides another, more plausible, account.

The second version provided by Pi is quite brief and, at around fifteen pages in total, comprises the third and final section of the book (less than ten percent of the book's length). The survivors here are Pi, his mother, the ship's cook, and a beautiful sailor with a broken leg. The survivors amputate the sailor's leg in order to save him from further infection, but he dies as a result of the operation. The cook is quickly revealed to be a glutton who eats all of the food on the lifeboat and even begins to consume the body of the dead sailor, as well. In a subsequent scuffle between the cook and Pi's mother, he kills her, leading Pi to repay him in kind. Having killed the cook, Pi is compelled to consume his body in order to survive. In this account, the survivors are all human beings. It is human beings, and not the Bengal tiger, who rampage and kill. Earlier in the novel, Pi had recalled: "Just beyond the ticket booth Father had painted on a wall in bright red letters the question: DO YOU KNOW WHICH IS THE MOST DANGEROUS ANIMAL IN THE ZOO? An arrow pointed to a small curtain. There were so many eager, curious hands that pulled at the curtain that we had to replace it regularly. Behind it was a mirror." (31) Indeed, in a world compared to a zoo, it is man who is the "most dangerous animal."

As the Japanese businessmen realize, this account corresponds to the first version of the tale. The sailor with the broken leg correlates to the zebra with a broken leg; Pi's mother correlates to the orangutan; the cook is the

hyena; and Pi himself is the Bengal tiger. The sailor/zebra dies from gangrene and the amputation of his leg and is subsequently consumed by the cook/hyena. The orangutan/Pi's mother sets upon the sailor/hyena and successfully hinders him. The cook/hyena exacts swift retribution and kills her. Measure for measure, the Bengal tiger/Pi slays the cook/hyena and devours him/it. Upon concluding both accounts, Pi notes that one cannot prove which tale is "true," prompting him to ask the Japanese officials which version they prefer:

> "I told you two stories that account for the 227 days in between. […] Neither explains the sinking of the *Tsimtsum*. […] You can't prove which story is true and which is not. […] In both stories the ship sinks, my entire family dies, and I suffer. […] So tell me […] which story do you prefer? Which is the better story, the story with animals or the story without animals?"
> Mr. Okamoto: "That's an interesting question..."
> Mr. Chiba: "The story with animals."
> Mr. Okamoto: "Yes. The story with animals is the better story."
> Pi Patel: "Thank you. And so it goes with God." (316-317)

The book opens with the assurance that "I have a story that will make you believe in God," and draws to a close with two stories, the first of which—the better story, that of the animals—leads to the belief that "so it goes with God." It is not a question of which story is true, but which story is better. The recognition of the better story is portrayed in the novel as the recognition of God. Life is a story—"The world isn't just the way it is. It is how we understand it […] Doesn't that make life a story?" (302) The two stories, therefore, are two divergent approaches to life.

Surprisingly, these two stories correspond to two rival interpretations of the doctrine of *tsimtsum* disputed among kabbalists to this day. A key issue which divides kabbalistic schools is whether the doctrine of *tsimtsum* is to be understood literally [*ke-peshuto*] or figuratively [*eina ke-peshuto*]. Once, when I was young, I asked a student from the Beit El kabbalistic *yeshiva*, located in the Old City of Jerusalem, to explain to me a kabbalistic text. His first question in response to my query was "do you maintain that *tsimtsum* is literal or figurative?"[3]

The Theological Doctrine of *Tsimtsum*

The cosmogonic theory of R. Isaac Luria assumes 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.[4] While Luria left no writings, his students preserved his

[3] On the kabbalistic yeshivot of Jerusalem and the differences among them, see Jonatan Meir, *Kabbalistic Circles in Jerusalem (1896–1948)*, trans. Avi Aronsky (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016).

[4] The doctrine of *tsimtsum* predates Luria. With that, it was only fully developed in his teachings. On pre-Lurianic notions of *tsimtsum*, see Moshe Idel, "On the Concept of Ẓimẓum in Kabbalah and its Research," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 10 (1992): 59-112 [Hebrew].

teachings. One student, R. Hayyim Vital,[5] 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,[6] forming a vacuum within himself (which the Kabbalists termed "*tahiru*).[7] 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:

> Know that prior to the emanation of the emanated and the creation of the created, a simple supernal light filled all of existence and there was no empty space, like unoccupied and vacuous air, for all was filled by that simple light […] *Ein Sof* then contracted Himself within the midpoint in the very center of the light, contracting the light and displacing it to the margins surrounding the midpoint, leaving behind an vacant space and empty vacuum. […] Following this contraction, which left behind the space of the vacuum and the vacant and empty air truly within *Ein Sof*, as stated above, there was already space to contain the emanations, creations, forms, and things made. A single straight beam of the light of *Ein Sof* then proceeded downward from His encircling light, concatenating downward into the vacuum […] In this empty space He emanated, created, formed, and made all the worlds.[8]

Read in a straightforward manner, the Lurianic mythos implies the existence of a place of emptiness, that is, the "vacant place and empty vacuum." 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. Practically, the doctrine of *tsimtsum* removed the presence of the Divine from the world, relating to God, the light of *Ein Sof*, as a transcendental force nearly entirely removed from the cosmos (with the exception of the "*reshimu*").[9]

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[5] The figures of Vital and his teacher Luria were an inspiration for the Dutch author Geert Kimpen's best-selling novel *De Kabbalist* (2004), published shortly after *Life of Pi* and translated into dozens of European languages.

[6] 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 the "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* 46 (2020): 55.

[7] 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.

[8] 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* 30 (2013): 75-120.

[9] 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: Schocken Books, 1965), 109-113; Isaiah Tishby, *The Doctrine of*

This notion of Divine withdrawal from the world is inconsistent with the common mystical standpoint 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.[10] 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.

This dispute over the literal versus nonliteral, or allegorical, conception of *tsimtsum* erupted with the subsequent dissemination of Lurianic Kabbalah among early-eighteenth-century Kabbalists.[11] With that, the hasidic *tsaddikim* active from the late eighteenth century and onwards were, with no exceptions as far as I am aware, wholeheartedly of the opinion that *tsimtsum* was allegorical.

The most significant hasidic work to treat the subject is R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady's *Sha'ar Yihud ve-Emunah* (1796). R. Shneur Zalman, the founder of the Habad hasidic group, posits in the seventh chapter of his book that a literal understanding of *tsimtsum* would imply a diachronic change within the Divine—prior to *tsimtsum* the unadulterated light of *Ein Sof* filled all of existence before its subsequent evacuation from the empty space. He argued that this could not be so, pointing to the biblical verses and rabbinic teachings to the effect that God neither undergoes changes nor is subject to time. R. Shneur Zalman further draws on the writings of the great medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides, who had stated of God that "He is the Knower, He is the Subject of Knowledge, and He is the Knowledge itself—all are one." Maimonides contrasted human knowledge—which receives information from outside of itself—with divine knowledge. Seeing as nothing exists outside of God, He does not receive His knowledge from external sources, but rather through knowing Himself:

Evil and the "Kelippah" in Lurianic Kabbalism (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1984), 52-61 [Hebrew]; Yoram Jacobson, *From Lurianic Kabbalism to the Psychological Theosophy of Hasidism* (Tel Aviv: Misrad ha-Bitahon, 1984), 24-30 [Hebrew]; Lawrence Fine, *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos: Isaac Luria and his Kabbalistic Fellowship* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 128-131; Yosef Avivi, *Kabbalat ha-Ari*, vol. 3 (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 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: Routledge, 2002), 120-135.

[10] Jacobson, *From Lurianic Kabbalism*, 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: Indiana University Press, 2019), 3-6, 157-158, 304-306.

[11] R. Immanuel Hai Riki argued for a literal understanding of *tsimtsum* in his *Yosher Levav* (folio 6, §6; folio 9, §14), while R. Joseph Ergas stated in his *Shomer Emunim* (second disputation, §35) that *tsimtsum* was not to be read literally, as did R. Abraham Hirera in his *Sha'ar ha-Shamayim* (*Puerta del cielo*). On this dispute, see Avivi, *Kabbalat ha-Ari*, vol. 3, 1051-1077; Nahum Greenwald, "Ha-Or ve-ha-Tsimtsum Lefi Torat ha-Hasidut," *Pardes Habad* 7 (2002): 35-48; Moshe Idel, "Conceptualizations of 'Tzimtzum' in Baroque Italian Kabbalah," in Michael Zank and Ingrid Anderson (eds.), *The Value of the Particular: Lessons from Judaism and the Modern Jewish Experience: Festschrift for Steven T. Katz on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 28-54.

> All are equally permeated with the light of the *Ein Sof*, blessed be He… Now, from the foregoing exposition the verse, "I, Lord, have not changed," (Malachi 3:6) will be understood. This means: there is no change [in the Divine] at all; just as He was alone prior to the creation of the world, so is He alone after it was created […] without any change in His Essence, nor in His Knowledge, for by knowing Himself, He knows all created things […] And as Maimonides, of blessed memory, stated, that "He is the Knower, He is the Known, and He is Knowledge itself— all are one."[12] This is beyond the power of speech to express, beyond the capacity of the ear to hear, and of the heart of man to apprehend clearly. For the Holy One, blessed be He, His Essence and Being, and His Knowledge are all absolutely one, from every side and angle, and every form of unity. His Knowledge is not superadded to His Essence and Being as it is in the soul of man, whose knowledge is added to his essence […] The Holy One, blessed be He, however, is a perfect unity, without any composition and plurality at all. Hence, perforce, His Essence and Being and His Knowledge are all absolutely one […] for the Holy One, blessed be He, is completely One and Unique. He and His Knowledge are all absolutely one, and knowing Himself, He perceives and knows all beings.[13]

R. Shneur Zalman draws on this principle in his attack against literal conceptions of *tsimtsum*. His critique is predicated on two philosophical axioms previously advanced by Maimonides. These consist, firstly, of the complete negation of corporeality in relation to God[14] and, secondly, that nothing exists outside of God, who is omniscient in His self-knowledge, as stated above:

> 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 *tsimtsum*, 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 […] Now, aside from the fact that it is altogether impossible to interpret the doctrine of *tsimtsum* literally, [for then it] is a phenomenon of corporeality, concerning the Holy One, blessed be He, who is set apart from them by many myriads of separations ad infinitum, they also did not speak

[12] Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, "Laws of the Foundations of the Torah," 2:10. It should be noted that Shneur Zalman reading of Maimonides – in his pantheistic interpretation – is a revisionist reading and is not accepted by most modern Rambam scholars, who claim that this approach is most likely even more anathema to Maimonides. See James A. Diamond and Menachem Kellner, *Reinventing Maimonides in Contemporary Jewish Thought* (London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization in association with Liverpool University Press, 2019). On Maimonidean Hasidic Theology see Jacob Gotlieb, *Rationalism in Hasidic Attire: Habad`s Harmonistic Approach to Maimonides* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2029), 47-70 [Hebrew]

[13] R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady, *Sha'ar Yihud ve-Emenuh*, Chapter 7. Quoting above-cited Maimonides with minor changes.

[14] See commentary of Maimonides to M. *Sanhedrin* 10:1 (Introduction to chapter "Helek"), 1st and 2nd axioms in *Hakdamat ha-Rambam la-Mishnah*, ed. I. Shilat (Ma'ale Adumim: Ma'aliyot , 1992), 141.

> wisely, since they are "Believers, the sons of believers" that 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. And this is stated in *Tikunim*, *Tikun* 57: "There is no place devoid of Him."[15]

A literal understanding of *tsimtsum* constitutes a blatant corporealization of God, attributing to God qualities of space, volume, and time. In this reading, God did not have space to create the world, necessitating that He contract, that is, remove Himself in order to make space for creation. This corporealizing mythos thus portrays God as existing within space and acting within a chronological timeline (prior/subsequent to the *tsimtsum*). The weight of R. Shneur Zalman's critique, however, was directed at the premise of Divine absence from the empty space formed in the wake of the *tsimtsum*. Adopting Maimonides' conception of Divine unity alongside a notion of Divine providence maintained by subscribers of literal *tsimtsum* who are "Believers, the sons of believers that the Holy One, blessed be He, knows all the created beings in this lower world and exercises Providence over them," he deduces that God's being is indeed present within the empty vacuum of the world. If, as Maimonides stated, no distinction can be made between God's knowledge and essence of unity, then if God *knows* all that occurs within the empty vacuum, His *being and essence* are consequently present as well. One who acknowledges that God knows all that occurs within the empty space is compelled to further admit that God is found within it. If so, there is, in fact, no vacuum devoid of God, and the *tsimtsum* is merely an allegory and metaphor.

R. Shneur Zalman, and Hasidism in general, did not interpret the doctrine of *tsimtsum* as a cosmogonic myth, but rather as a metaphor for revelation. In place of a creation story, *tsimtsum* is taken as an allegory of God's revelation to man: "God, may He be blessed, contracted [*tsimtsem*] His luminosity. This may be compared to a parent who contracts their intellect and speaks simply in order that their young children might understand."[16] In other words, the *tsimtsum* is not an "removal," but rather a "concealment" or "dimming," of the Divine light. God matches His revelation (light) in accordance with the capability of the person to receive: "The Divinity did not remove its light, but rather revealed it in accordance: "Divinity did not really remove itself; it fills being with its light in accord with the abilities and mental capacity of each creature. Rather than a limiting of Divinity, what takes place is a special revelation of the Divine."[17]

This theological standpoint emerges from sensitive reflection on the paradoxical human relationship with concealment and revelation. If I were to enter my classroom in a state of undress, it is reasonable to assume that my students would experience great discomfort and swiftly leave the classroom. The act of concealment—in this case, the concealment of the

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[15] R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady, *Sha'ar Yihud ve-Emenuh*, Chapter 7.

[16] R. Dov Ber of Mezeritch, *Maggid Devarav le-Ya'akov*, ed. Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1990), 9.

[17] Hillel Zeitlin, *Hasidic Spirituality for a New Era: The Religious Writings of Hillel Zeitlin*, trans Arthur Green (Mahwah, NY: Paulist Press, 2012), 81.

body—allows us to be "uncovered," to reveal ourselves. For things to be revealed, they oftentimes, in fact, need to be concealed. One who wishes to safely observe the sun must wear special glasses containing a protective element to screen out solar radiation. This protective obscuration is what paradoxically allows the sun to be revealed before our eyes. Much like the sun, were God to be fully unveiled, "no creature would remain alive," "for no one shall see Me and live."[18] The parent or teacher must diminish themselves to match the intellectual capabilities of the young student. This is not to imply an actual change in the intellect of the teacher, but rather that the teacher who does not know to diminish themselves cannot be "revealed" and remains inaccessible to their young students. R. Shneur Zalman stresses time and again that God does undergo any change. The revelation to humankind does not infantilize the Divine—God comes to match each person while remaining the same God just as a grown teacher instructing children remains an adult.

"No two prophets prophesy in the identical phraseology."[19] The prophet (or any other person who experiences a revelation marked by a linguistic component) perceives the divine word in the language most familiar to them. Even within a common language, every prophet speaks in their own distinct style. Jeremiah's Hebrew indeed differs from that of Isaiah, "and the prophet Isaiah, a resident of the capital city, makes extensive use of imagery borrowed from urban life, while the prophet Amos, a shepherd from Tekoa, speaks in the language of the natural world in which he lived."[20] This question has been dealt with by bible commentators and scholars who point to the direct link between the prophetic language and the character and background of the prophet.[21] In other words, a given prophecy matches the prophet who utters it. The hasidic interpretation of *tsimtsum* likewise transforms the cosmogonic myth to a theory of divine revelation to humanity. The act of *tsimtsum*, in which God comes to fit every person "according to their own measure," is a necessary precursor of revelation.[22]

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[18] b.Berakhot 61b; Ex. 33:20.

[19] b.Sanhedrin 89a.

[20] Yuval Cherlow, "'Ein Shnei Nevi'im Mitnavim be-Signon Ahad': Al Atsmi'ut ve-Nevu'ah," in *Prophecy, O Son of Man: On the Possibility of Prophecy*, ed. Odeya Tzurieli (Jerusalem: Reuvan Mas, 2006), 133. See, ibid.: "If we must decide between cause and effect—did God choose to convey a certain prophecy to them on the basis of where they lived, or were their different prophetic languages formed as a result of their environment—the latter seems to be the simpler possibility. Their differences in personality result in a different prophetic style."

[21] Bible commentators are divided over the question of stylistic differences—is God responsible for the different styles, or did the prophets formulate their prophecies themselves? See the introduction of Abarbanel to Jeremiah and Malbim, who disagrees with him. In any case, there is agreement that prophetic style differs from prophet to prophet. For scholarly approaches, see Hans Walter Wolff, "Die Begründungen der prophetischen Heils und Unheilsspriiche," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 52 (1934): 1-22; Isaac Leo Seeligmann, *Studies in Biblical Literature* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1992), 171-188 [Hebrew]. On the personal language of the prophet as an independent component of the prophetic literature, see Gershon Brin, *Studies in the Prophetic Literature* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2006), 9-34 [Hebrew].

[22] See more Martin Buber, "False Prophets," in *Israel and the World: Essays in a Time of Crisis* (Syracuse University Press, 1997), 113-118, and see there p. 114: "God has truth, but he does not have a system."

The students of R. Elijah, the Gaon of Vilna, known as *mitnagdim* [opponents] due to their opposition to the Hasidic movement,[23] took issue with this understanding of *tsimtsum*.[24] The students of the Gaon of Vilna comprise several schools, a detailed discussion of which is beyond the framework of this paper.[25] With that, it may be said of the *mitnagdim* that they wished to preserve a clear dichotomy between God and the world in alignment with the words of the psalmist (Ps. 116:15), "The highest heavens belong to the Lord but the earth He has given to mankind." To the *mitnagdim*, the hasidic notion that "No place is devoid of the One" blurs the boundaries between God and the world, and, accordingly, between the sacred and the profane. The standpoint that God is found in all negates any dimension of the non-holy. This is at odds with the distinctions between pure and impure, good and evil, and commandment and prohibition that lie at the basis of the Bible and rabbinic tradition. Their concern was substantiated—the sense of absolute divine imminence, even within sin, has spurred the development of antinomian streams of thought within Hasidism.[26]

Students of the Gaon of Vilna, from his direct disciple R. Hayyim of Volozhin in his *Nefesh ha-Hayyim*, up to the early-twentieth-century writings of the Lithuanian Kabbalist R. Shlomo Elyashiv, continued to

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

[24] Allan Nadler, *The Faith of the Mithnagdim: Rabbinic Responses to Hasidic Rapture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 11-28.

[25] See Tamar Ross, "Rav Hayim of Volozhin and Rav Shneur Zalman of Liadi—Two Interpretations of the Doctrine of Zimzum," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 2 (1982): 153-169 [Hebrew].

[26] See Mendel Piekarz, *The Beginning of Hasidism: Ideological Trends in Derush and Musar Literature* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1978), 173-302 [Hebrew]; Tsippi Kauffman, *In all Your Ways Know Him: The Concept of God and Avodah be-Gashmiyut in the Early Stages of Hasidism* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2009), 523-571 [Hebrew]. Radical notions of divine imminence within sin are found primarily within the Izhbitz-Radzin school of Hasidism. See Shaul Magid, *Hasidism on the Margin: Reconciliation, Antinomianism, and Messianism in Izbica/Radzin Hasidism* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003); Morris, Faierstein, "Two Radical Teachings in The 'Mei ha-Shiloah' and their Sources," *Kabbalah; Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 21 (2010): 111-114; Ora Wiskind-Elper, *Wisdom of the Heart: The Teachings of Rabbi Ya'akov of Izbica-Radzyn* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2010), 77-111; Herzl Hefter, "Reality and Illusion: A Study in the Religious Phenomenology of R. Mordekhai Yosef of Ishbitz," MA thesis, Tel Aviv University, 2018, 18-32. Antinomian notions likewise characterized the Sabbatian and Frankist movements. Jacob Frank was active up until the end of the eighteenth century, contemporaneous to the Hasidic movement. These messianic movements advocated for notions of divine imminence and blurred the distinctions between commandment and sin to the point of permitting prohibitions. The concern on the part of the *mitnagdim* that Hasidism would usher in a new antinomian messianic movement may be understood in light of these earlier movements. See Paweł Maciejko, *The Mixed Multitude: Jacob Frank and the Frankist Movement, 1755-1816* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); idem (ed.), *Sabbatian Heresy: Writings on Mysticism, Messianism, and the Origins of Jewish Modernity*, (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2017), xii, xix.

express opposition to the hasidic conception of *tsimtsum*.[27] This latter Kabbalist approached the study of Lurianic Kabbalah as a hermetic system. By this, I mean that Elyashiv's works sought to harmonize internal contradictions within the Zoharic and Lurianic corpora by means of kabbalistic terminology alone. His approach to Kabbalah mirrored that of the mathematician, who does not employ historical or sociological considerations in order to solve mathematical problems.[28] He therefore strongly opposed any interpretation of Kabbalah which might lead to the transformation of kabbalistic terminology, as well as the translation of kabbalistic terminology to any external subjects.

Hasidism, which translated Kabbalah into psychological categories, was a target of Elyashiv's criticism.[29] He likewise opposed Kabbalists active in Jerusalem, such as R. Abraham Isaac Kook and R. Yehuda Leib Ashlag, who offered sociological or nationalistic interpretations of kabbalistic notions.[30] Elyashiv understood well the concern for corporealizing the divine which provided the impetus for metaphorical interpretations of Kabbalah, yet maintained that such approaches differed from the Kabbalah itself:

> I am particularly distressed by the words of those contemporary Kabbalists […] who took the elevated most high holy secrets and explicated them in terms of worldly happenings, as though nothing exists on high, heaven forfend, aside that which they perceive in accordance with happenings as they see them. […] Their primary intention in this is to remove and put at a distance any invalid thought of an image, form, or physical or material quality, or created being. […] They therefore compel themselves to author works and increase words. […] They lead everything stated of "emanation" to be garbed in matters of worldly comportment. They may have good intentions, but their actions are not welcome, in my opinion […] for this is far from the quintessence of the study

[27] See Ross, "Rav Hayim of Volozhin and Rav Shneur Zalman of Liadi."

[28] This stance, which characterizes Lithuanian Jewry, is well described by R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik. See idem., *Halakhic Man*, trans. Lawrence Kaplan (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1983), 49-63. Soloveitchik compares the study of Halakhah to mathematics, rejecting the consideration of any non-Halakhic parameters. This is reflective of the Talmudic methodology developed by his grandfather, R. Hayyim Soloveitchik of Brisk. Elyashiv, a staunch Lithuanian, applied this approach to the study of Kabbalah, developing an intellectual system of Kabbalah informed solely by kabbalistic language and terminology.

[29] On this act of translation, see Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1961), 341; idem., *Explications and Implications: Writings on Jewish Heritage and Renaissance* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1976), 353-354 [Hebrew]; Ron Margolin, *Human Temple: Religious Interiorization and the Structuring of Inner Life in Early Hasidism* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2005), 26-27 [Hebrew]; Daniel Reiser, *Imagery Techniques in Jewish Mysticism*, trans. Eugene D. Matanky (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 373-379.

[30] On Kook's nationalistic interpretation of Kabbalah, see Jonathan Garb, *The Chosen Will Become Herds: Studies in Twentieth-Century Kabbalah*, trans. Y. Berkovits-Murciano (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 23-29. On Ashlag's communist-socialist interpretation of Kabbalah, see Boaz Huss "'Altruistic Communism': The Modernist Kabbalah of R. Yehuda Ashlag," *Iyunim: Multidisciplinary Studies in Israeli and Modern Jewish Society* 16 (2006): 109-310 [Hebrew]. See, as well, Jonatan Meir, "The Revealed and the Revealed within the Concealed: On the Opposition to the 'Followers' of Rabbi Yehudah Ashlag and the Dissemination of Esoteric Literature," *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 16 (2007): 151-258 [Hebrew].

> of Kabbalah, for the sanctity and high standing of the study of Kabbalah is chiefly to speak upwards and not downwards, to rectify and rouse their elucidations on high.[31]

Elyashiv maintains that the study of Kabbalah meets a "higher," not a "lower," need.[32] A metaphorical interpretation of *tsimtsum* constitutes a translation of Kabbalah to "matters of worldly comportment." Kabbalah, however, is not designed for this world and does not convey worldly insights, whether pertaining to psychology, nationalism, or anything else. The words of the *Zohar*, attributed to R. Simeon bar Yochai (RaShBY), and Luria are to be understood simply, not as metaphors or allegories, "for all of the revelations of the *Idra*,[33] which are themselves the chief teachings of Luria, contain no image [i.e. metaphor or allegory] whatsoever, […] for all of RaShBY's words are in a state of revelation, not concealment […] [and the kabbalistic imagery] reflects actual true eternal entities."[34] Per Elyashiv, non-literal interpretations of *tsimtsum* lead to an acosmic perception of the world. If God is everything, then the world is rendered an illusion. This, Elyashiv argues, is an impossibility, both because it goes about our natural senses to "declare that all of existence is not a true existence, for this goes against everything, heaven forfend," and because this "stands in opposition to the entire Torah." Why should the sinner be punished if his misdeeds were only an illusion, a deception. What worth do the commandments, or reward and punishment, have if all is truly the light of *Ein Sof* and nothing else—"if so, where is the entire Torah?":

> I further saw strange remarks in the writings of a certain contemporary Kabbalist who devises subtle reasonings to the effect that […] there is no actual *tsimtsum* and nothing in the world at all. What a peculiar thing to say, may God protect us from such an opinion. They have neither understood nor perceived that they are affronting the truth of the entire Torah, may God protect us. For they state that there is no existence whatsoever, whether above or below, but rather that all is the simple light of *Ein Sof*. Everything else that appears is mere illusion but not true. If so, where is the entire Torah?"[35]

An objective examination of the matter ultimately reveals internal contradictions on every side. Those who argue for a literal understanding of *tsimtsum* preserve the biblical notion of a transcendent God and the traditional distinctions between the sacred and the profane yet are saddled

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[31] R. Shlomo Elyashiv, *Leshem Shevo ve-Ahlamah: Sefer ha-De"ah* (Petrokov: Mordekhai Tsederbaum, 1913), 113.

[32] On theurgy in Kabbalah and the Jewish tradition, see Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 173-199; Elliot R. Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia - Kabbalist and Prophet: Hermeneutics, Theosophy, and Theurgy* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2000); Menachem Kallus, "The Theurgy of Prayer in the Lurianic Kabbalah," PhD diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2002.

[33] The *Idra* is a section of the *Zohar*. It was translated from Aramaic to Judeo-Arabic in Puna, India. See Boaz Huss, "The Sufis From America: Kabbalah and Theosophy in Puna in the Late 19th Century," in *Kabbalah and Modernity: Interpretations, Transformations, Adaptations*, eds. Boaz Huss, Marco Pasi, Kocku von Stukrad (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 167-193.

[34] Elyashiv, *Leshem Shevo ve-Ahlamah*, 113.

[35] Ibid., 114.

with a mythos tainted by corporealism. Meanwhile, those who advocate for a non-literal interpretation of *tsimtsum* perpetuate the immanence of God, itself not clean of corporealism, for God is subsequently found within the empty vacuum, within the physicality of this world. Each side accuses the other of corporealizing God, yet with that fails to prove its own "innocence" in the matter.[36]

The Existentialist School of *Tsimtsum*

The metaphorical conception of *tsimtsum* has been developed further in numerous directions. Interpretations of *tsimtsum* have been offered in relation to psychology, sociology, criminology, pedagogy, familial and intimate relationships, society, and more. One school posits that we must contract ourselves in order to "create" and form healthy relationships, whether by nullifying our ego or by stepping back and allowing the formation of a free space beyond us. Only through such *tsimtsum* can we renew marital, parental, or social relationships. A healthy society is formed when individuals step back to provide room for social ideals and manage to include the "other" who does not follow a normative path.[37]

The well-known hasidic leader R. Nahman of Bratslav surpassed the psychological model, forming an existentialist interpretation of *tsimtsum*. The radical approach he developed presents religiosity in a new light. R. Nahman was well aware that the theological doctrine of *tsimtsum* irrevocably leads to insolvable paradoxes, as discussed above, and a dialectic relationship between the Divinity and the world. The world rests upon two contradictory axioms: God's transcendence beyond the world and imminent presence within the world:

> When God wanted to create the world, there was no place in which to create it, since there was nothing but *Ein Sof* . He therefore contracted the light to the sides, and through this contraction the empty space was made. Then, within this empty space, all time and space came into existence—this being the creation of the world (as explained at the beginning of *Ets Hayyim*). This empty space was necessary for the creation of the world, since without the empty space there would have been no place in which to create the world, as explained above. Yet, understanding and comprehending this contraction [that resulted in the formation] of the empty space will be possible only in the future, since it is necessary to say about two contradictory things: existence and nonexistence. The empty space is the result of the contraction; that [God], so to speak, withdrew His Godliness from that place. Thus there is, so to speak, no Godliness there. Were it not so, it would not be vacated. There would then be nothing but *Ein Sof*, with no place whatsoever for

[36] See R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady, *Igrot Kodesh* (New York: Kehot, 1987), 88 (letter 34).

[37] On psychological-therapeutic understandings of *tsimtsum*, see Mordechai Rotenberg *Dialogue with Deviance: The Hasidic Ethic and the Theory of Social Contraction* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1983); idem., *Jewish Psychology and Hasidism* (Tel Aviv: Misrad ha-Bitahon, 1997) [Hebrew]; idem., *Introduction to the Psychology of Self Contraction (Tsimtsum)* (Jerusalem: Reuven Mas, 2010) [Hebrew]; idem, *Hasidic Psychology: Making Space for Others* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2004). See, also, Israel Koren, "Martin Buber's Dialogistic Interpretation of the Doctrine of 'Tsimtsum,'" *Tarbiz* 71, no. 1-2 (2002), 115-247 [Hebrew].

> the world's creation. However the actual truth is that, even so, there is surely Godliness there as well. For there is surely nothing without His life-force. This is why it is not at all possible to comprehend the concept of the empty space until the future.[38]

Since it is "not at all possible to comprehend the concept of the empty space," R. Nahman intentionally steers the notion of *tsimtsum* to the personal-existential domain. He utilizes the notion of heresy as a means of analyzing the doctrine of *tsimtsum*, claiming that there are multiple types of blasphemy. Certain heresies are derived from theological conflict. A religiosity rooted in dogmatic beliefs will find itself in bitter conflict with modern ideologies. R. Nahman opens his discussion of *tsimtsum* specifically out of a lack of concern towards such theological discord:

> Know that there are two types of heresy. One is the heresy that stems from external wisdom. Of this it is said, "And know what to answer the heretic" (m.Avot 2:14), since this heresy has an answer. This is because it stems from external wisdom […] Therefore, although whoever succumbs to this heresy should surely flee and escape from that place, nevertheless, having fallen there it is possible for him to find the way to get free. For he will be able to find God in that place, provided he seeks and searches for Him there […] Consequently, he can find Divinity and intellect there in order to answer the questions raised by this heresy that stems from external wisdom.[39]

"External wisdom" here refers to those philosophies and sciences seen as being at odds with religion, such as science (in regard to the age of the world, evolution, etc.), political theory, and others. While R. Nahman permits engagement with questions such as these, which occupied many modern Jewish thinkers, they do not appear to have bothered R. Nahman himself. More than religious dogmas, he was concerned with the nature of religion—the question "what is belief?" interested him far more than questions of "what may be believed?"

R. Nahman identifies the experience of divine absence as a heresy which presents an existential challenge.[40] *Tsimtsum*, in this inner conflict, is neither a creation myth nor a metaphor of divine revelation, but rather the dark vacuum formed deep inside of a person at the moment of catastrophe. At times under extreme circumstances people experience a definitive absence of God. A fissure, much like a black hole in the cosmos, is rendered in the human heart petrified by the fear of death. The light of *Ein Sof*, that is, the Divine presence, is not found there. The gravity field of a black hole in outer space is so strong such that everything seized by it is inescapably drawn inwards—so too, the black hole in the heart offers no respite, no chance of escape. This is a heresy from which there is no return (R. Nahman plays on the dual meaning of the Hebrew word *teshuvah*, which signifies

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[38] R. Nahman of Bratslav, *Likkutei Moharan*, vol. 1, §64.

[39] Ibid.

[40] For an in-depth treatment of this experience in R. Nahman, see Shaul Magid, "Through the Void: The Absence of God in R. Nahman of Bratzlav's *Likkutei MoHaRan*," *Harvard Theological Review* 88, no. 4 (1995): 495-519. Magid emphasizes (ibid., 503) that "His experiences were not of the absence of God's presence but the presence of God's absence."

both "return" and "answer"). To the first type of heresy, predicated on combative atheistic claims, there is a theological response, enabling one to break free from the conflict. Yet there is another heresy which stems from the negative experience of the absence of God from reality. There is no theological method to cope with such heresy. Such an individual is not plagued by theological doubts but is rather weighed down by an experience which cannot be expressed in words. It cannot be discussed; no answer may be given. There is no return for the one who falls, willingly or not, into the black hole of the experience of absence:

> However, there is another type of heresy […] the philosophers have a number of conundrums and questions […] In truth, it is impossible to answer these questions. This is because the questions [that arise] from this heresy stem from the empty space in which, so to speak, there is no Divinity. There is therefore absolutely no way that one can find an answer for these questions that come from there, from the aspect of the empty space—i.e., [no way to] find God there. For if God were found there as well, it would then not be vacated, and there would have been nothing but *Ein Sof*, as explained above. […] Therefore, of this heresy it is said (Prov. 2:19): "None that go to her *yeShUVun* (return)." There is absolutely no *teShUVah* (answer) for this heresy since it stems from the empty space, from which, so to speak, He contracted His divinity. […] This is because these conundrums and questions [raised] by the heresy that stems from the empty space are the aspect of silence, since there is no intellect or letters to answer them, as explained above. […] This is analogous to what we find of Moses: When he asked regarding the death of Rabbi Akiva, "Is this the Torah, and is this its reward?" they answered him, "Be silent! Thus has it arisen in thought" (b.Menachot 29b). That is, you must be silent and not ask for an answer and solution for this question. […] The same is true of the questions and conundrums that stem from the empty space, where there is no spoken word or intellect, as explained above. They are thus in the aspect of silence; one must simply believe and keep silent there.

The framework of this paper does not permit a discussion of R. Nahman's notion of silence, but it is beneficial to examine the sources he cites.[41] These texts point to a heresy arising from terrible suffering. Such torment not only occludes the experience of Divinity but produces an extreme sense of absence comparable to an empty space devoid of even the slightest trace of light (note that R. Nahman does not mention the "*reshimu*"). R. Nahman cites the heart-rending story of the murder of R. Akiva, the spiritual leader of the Jewish people during the time of the Bar Kokhba revolt. The Romans brutally hacked him to death alongside several other Jewish leaders, severing his body parts in public.[42] The Talmud recounts that when God granted Moses a prophetic vision of the greatness of R. Akiva and his

[41] On this silence, see Dov Elboim, *Walk Through the Void* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2007), 52-70 [Hebrew]; Eliezer Malkiel, *Wisdom and Simplicity* (Tel Aviv: Miskal, 2005), 157-186 [Hebrew].

[42] See b.Berakhot 61b, "When R. Akiva was taken out for execution, it was the hour for the recital of the *Shema*, and while they combed his flesh with iron combs […] He prolonged the word *ehad* until he expired while saying it." This is the source for the Jewish practice to recite the verse of *Shema Yisrael* at the moment of death.

subsequent death, Moses cried out, "such Torah, and such a reward!?" "Be silent!" was God's swift response:

> Rav Judah said in the name of Rav: When Moses ascended on high […] [the Holy One, Blessed be He] answered, "There will arise a man, at the end of many generations, Akiva b. Joseph by name, who will expound upon each title heaps and heaps of laws." "Lord of the Universe," said Moses; "permit me to see him." He replied, "Turn thee round." Moses went and sat down behind eight rows [and listened to the discourses upon the law]. Not being able to follow their arguments he was ill at ease, but when they came to a certain subject and the disciples said to the master "Whence do you know it?" and the latter replied "It is a law given unto Moses at Sinai" he was comforted. Thereupon he returned to the Holy One, blessed be He. […] Then said Moses, "Lord of the Universe, Thou hast shown me his Torah, show me his Reward." "Turn thee round," said He; and Moses turned round and saw them weighing out his flesh at the market-stalls. "Lord of the Universe," cried Moses, "such Torah, and such a reward!?" He replied, "Be silent, for such is My decree."[43]

Moses witnessed the execution of a man charged—according to tradition—with publicly teaching Torah in defiance of the prohibition issued by the Roman general Quintus Tineius Rufus during the years 130-134.[44] Moses, upon witnessing the righteous man's brutal death, asked the obvious question, "such Torah, and such a reward!?" This is not a logical difficulty, nor a theological position. It is a question born of the deep trauma that emerges from the empty space, from the experience of absence. There is no answer to nor return from such a question from the empty space—God bids him to be silent, for there are no words with which to answer.

What is to be done, then? What advice does R. Nahman have for the individual who peers into the depths of the empty space which has opened in his heart? He instructs one to "pass by," that is, to leap over the empty vacuum and not fall within:

> But through faith, the Jewish people prevail over all the wisdoms and even this heresy that stems from the empty space. This is because they believe in God, without any philosophical inquiry and intellection, but only with perfect faith. […] Now, through faith—their believing that God fills all worlds and encircles all worlds, and since He encircles all worlds then also the empty space itself exists by virtue of His wisdom, and in actual truth His divinity is surely in that place, just that it is impossible to comprehend this and to find God there, as explained above—they accordingly pass by all the wisdoms, questions and heresies that stem from the empty space. […] As a result of philosophical inquiry they become submerged there, because it is impossible to find God there since it is the aspect of the empty space. Rather, a person must believe that God encircles that as well, and that in truth His divinity is certainly there as well. […] This is why the Jews are called *IVRiim* (Hebrews), because with their faith *OVRim*

[43] b.Menahot 29b.

[44] b.Berakhot 61b.

> (they pass by) all the wisdoms, and even the pseudo-wisdoms—i.e., the second heresy, which stems from the empty space.

For R. Nahman, a person must be an "*Ivri*" (both a Hebrew and passerby) who passes by the empty space without entering within. A person wavering at the abyss, pulled down by the emptiness wrought by the injustice surrounding them, may be drawn downwards—"never to return"—or, alternatively, "leap" over the vacuum. A person is not responsible for the existence of the vacuum. Suffering oftentimes occurs as the result of external factors beyond one's control. Yet we retain control over our relationship to suffering. R. Nahman's "leap of faith" does not ignore or deny the existence of evil, but rather fosters the development of a certain attitude—which he terms "faith"—towards evil. Faith allows one to leap over the vacuum. It is our decision to either enter or pass over the emptiness. This is a choice of an existential way of life. We may live with "literal *tsimtsum*" characterized by divine absence in which all is ceaselessly bad. By contrast, one may live a life of "non-literal *tsimtsum*" in which God is revealed within the absence—in the empty space. Absence or presence within absence—these are two life-stories. The question is not which of the stories is true, but rather which is better.

The Better Story

Pi, too, senses a rift within himself, much like R. Nahman's empty space, a silent vacuum devoid of any answer or possibility of (philosophical or rational) expression—"I felt a great emptiness within me, which then filled with silence." (101) God's indifference was evident throughout his journey, "For days the ship had pushed on, bullishly indifferent to its surroundings. The sun shone, rain fell, winds blew […] the *Tsimtsum* did not care. (100). Pi stood at the edge of the abyss. "God is hard to believe," he remarked, "ask any believer." (297)

Yann Martel tells two stories in *Life of Pi*. Pi, in both versions, is on the *Tsimtsum*, suffers, and experiences the absence of God. The first story, starring the animals, is a tale of "non-literal *tsimtsum*." Here the *tsimtsum* is a metaphor; God's light has only been concealed. Here Pi chooses to leap with faith. Despite the challenges, he finds presence within absence. In a list of his possessions, he writes:

> 1 boy with a complete set of light clothing but for one lost shoe
> 1 spotted hyena
> 1 Bengal tiger 1 lifeboat
> 1 ocean
> 1 God (146)

The second story, however, is one of "literal *tsimtsum*." The vacuum is indeed empty, the Divinity has evacuated, and Pi is left alone—"'We're all alone, Piscine, all alone,' she said, in a tone that broke every hope in my body." (307) Mr. Okamota and Mr. Chiba, skeptical about the first story, ask to know the "truth," the "straight facts":

> Mr. Okamoto: "But for the purposes of our investigation, we would like to know what really happened."
> "What really happened?"
> "Yes."

> "So you want another story?"
> "Uhh...no. We would like to know what really happened."
> "Doesn't the telling of something always become a story?"
> "Uhh...perhaps in English. In Japanese a story would have an element of invention in it. We don't want any invention. We want the 'straight facts', as you say in English." (302)

After Pi relates the second, "true" story, the men notice that "his stories match," (311) bringing to mind Pi's earlier observation, "Isn't telling about something—using words, English or Japanese—already something of an invention?" (302) The recognition that the stories match leads us to the realization they are both true. One is metaphorical and the other literal, yet the first one is not false. Fiction is not necessarily untrue. The two tales are simply two depictions of the same reality.[45]

Moreover, Martel, who studied philosophy at Trent University, appears to be under the influence of the Kantian revolution in Western philosophy. Per Kant, we do not view reality as it is, but only our own perception of it. Kant seeks to demonstrate that the perception of any given object is shaped by our own subjective experience. Knowledge is born of experience, and not the opposite! We do not engage, then, with nature itself, but only with various "images." The imagination participates in the acquisition of experience—there is no experience free of imagination.[46] Existence is not a transcendent source of independent meaning, as had been thought until then, but rather a product of human imagination.[47] The poet W. B. Yeats (1865-1939) gave expression to this revolution, which shifted perceptions of art and poetry, "It must go further still: that soul must become its own betrayer, its own deliverer, the one activity, the mirror turn lamp."[48] While the pre-Kantian paradigm of the imagination is represented by a mirror which reflects an external existence, the Kantian metaphor is of a lamp, whose light shines outwards creating existence.[49] From this perspective, the second story in *Life of Pi* does not possess greater reality than the first, for each story simply represents a different perspective on reality.

Martel, in his book, employs the "Rashomon Principle," a literary concept in which multiple contradictory narratives are put forward without

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[45] See, also, Gregory Stephens, "Feeding Tiger, Finding God: Science, Religion, and 'the Better Story' in *Life of Pi*," *Intertexts* 14, no. 1 (2010): 51.

[46] The central place of imagination in human consciousness appears in the first edition of *The Critique of Pure Reason*. See Shmuel Hugo Bergman, *The Philosophy of Immanuel Kant* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1991), 45-47 [Hebrew].

[47] Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination: Toward a Postmodern Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 156-158.

[48] Meyer Howard Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and The Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), front matter.

[49] This metaphor was first expressed by the British literary critic and philosopher William Hazlitt (1778-1830). See ibid., 52. The roots of this perception are located prior to Kant in seventeenth-century British poetry, and even in the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, although it did not develop into a full-fledged theory until Kant, ibid., 58-60.

determining which, if any, bears the most truth.[50] Time and again, Martel demonstrates with elegance and sophistication that a single reality may be contemplated from varying perspectives. Thus Pi's biology teacher, who had declared that "religion is darkness" (27) and that "God does not exist" (ibid.), and the baker, a Sufi mystic—who, not without reason, share the same name—have opposite reactions upon encountering the zebra in the zoo:

> "This one's a Grant's zebra," I said.
> Mr. Kumar said, "Equus burchelli boehmi."
> Mr. Kumar said, "Allahu akbar." (84)

Mr. Kumar the biologist cites the Latin name of the Grant's zebra, identifying it as the smallest of the seven subspecies of the common zebra. Mr. Kumar the Sufi, on the other hand, perceives something immense—the greatness of God.[51] Putting aside the question of scale, the biology teacher perceives a specific animal and it is important to him to categorize and describe it according to its binomial nomenclature. The Sufi mystic, by contrast, is cast into an experience of astonishment by the sight he beholds; for him, the animal is an indication of the greatness of God. One categorizes and the other stands astonished; one demarcates while the other expands. Truth and falsehood are not at play here, but rather two different mental approaches (which need not one come at the expense of the other).[52]

Beyond the question of metaphor and reality, the greatest difference between Pi's two stories is in his attitudes towards the situation in which he finds himself. God's name is invoked again and again in the first story. Pi suffers from crises and moments of doubt, yet he always remains anchored in his efforts to uncover the "presence found in absence"—"It was natural that, bereft and desperate as I was, in the throes of unremitting suffering, I should turn to God." (283-284) This foundation—his faith in God—provides him with the hope and ability to overcome the many challenges, even moments of doubt, brought about by the experience of absence:

> At such moments I tried to elevate myself. I would touch the turban I had made with the remnants of my shirt and I would say aloud, "THIS IS GOD'S HAT!"
> I would pat my pants and say aloud, "THIS IS GOD'S ATTIRE!" I would point to Richard Parker and say aloud, "THIS IS GOD'S CAT!"
> I would point to the lifeboat and say aloud, "THIS IS GOD'S ARK!"
> I would spread my hands wide and say aloud, "THESE ARE GOD'S WIDE ACRES!"
> I would point at the sky and say aloud, "THIS IS GOD'S EAR!"

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[50] See Karl G. Heider, "The Rashomon Effect: When Ethnographers Disagree," *American Anthropologist*, 90 (1988): 73–81; Valerie Alia, *Media Ethics and Social Change* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 23-33.

[51] In a deeper reading, these are in fact the same Mr. Kumar, for Pi teaches that faith and heresy are two sides of the coin. See *Life of Pi*, 28: "Atheists are my brothers and sisters of a different faith, and every word they speak speaks of faith. Like me, they go as far as the legs of reason will carry them—and then they leap. I'll be honest about it. It is not atheists who get stuck in my craw, but agnostics. Doubt is useful for a while […] But we must move on. To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation."

[52] See a similar (but also different) interpretation to "the two zebras", Karam Ally, "Which Story Do You Prefer," 96-97.

> And in this way I would remind myself of creation and of my place in it.
> But God's hat was always unravelling. God's pants were falling apart. God's cat was a constant danger. God's ark was a jail. God's wide acres were slowly killing me. God's ear didn't seem to be listening.
> Despair was a heavy blackness that let no light in or out. It was a hell beyond expression. I thank God it always passed. A school of fish appeared around the net […] Or I thought of my family, of how they were spared this terrible agony. The blackness would stir and eventually go away, and God would remain, a shining point of light in my heart. I would go on loving. (209)

Pi, in the first story, chooses to be an "*Ivri*" (in addition to Hindu, Christian, and Muslim) and take the leap of R. Nahman, electing to see God within his personal hell. R. Nahman's "leap of faith," I believe, differs from that of Søren Kierkegaard. Per Kierkegaard, faith "possesses an elevation," a leap into the absurd "because faith begins precisely there where thinking leaves off."[53] That is to say, faith involves a loss of "thinking," leading to God. Yet for R. Nahman, faith is not bound with a loss of thinking, nor does it deny or disregard the existence of evil. Man neither denies evil nor loses his mind. It is rather a matter of perspective: what mental stance do I take towards evil. Faith is an inner expression, a psychological standpoint towards the world.[54]

Life of Pi presents two stories representative of two ways of life. Ask readers the existential question—not which story is true, but which is better. The two parallel matching stories are equally true. It is not a question of "truth," but of being: What is the proper life—a life of faith or a life without faith. There is no scientific consensus preferencing a life of faith or one without. This is not a philosophical question, and certainly not a scientific query—it is an existential choice.

Yann Martel chose. He seeks to demonstrate the virtue of the first, faith-infused story and his personal preference for it (it is, he remarks, the "story that will make you believe in God). Firstly, one cannot help but notice the discrepancy in length between the stories. The first tale comprises the vast majority of the book, while the second, at around fifteen pages, is less than ten percent of the book's length. It is clear, then, which narrative is central to the story.[55] Secondly, Martel stresses time and again that a good story is one singled out by imagination, vitality, and a spark of life. The second story may be more realistic, rational, and genuine, but that does not

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[53] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013), 77, 106.

[54] On faith in the teaching of R. Nahman, see Zvi Mark, *Mysticism and Madness: The Religious Thought of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav* (London and New York: Continuum, 2009), 8-12.

[55] Unlike the film adaptation, in which Pi relates both tales, in the book Pi shares only his first story with the "virtual" writer, further evidence of which story is preferred (the second story is tracked down by the semi-fictional author, who unearthed the report from the Japanese shipping company). Furthermore, the second story is only uncovered a year after Pi shares the first version: "Nearly a year later, after considerable difficulties, I received a tape and a report from the Japanese Ministry of Transport." (xi)

make it a better story. Martel, already in the introduction, suggests that authenticity and precision are not necessarily the hallmarks of a successful story, "You've done your research, gathering the facts—historical, social, climatic, culinary—that will give your story its feel of authenticity […] but it all adds up to nothing. […] An element is missing, that spark that brings to life a real story, regardless of whether the history or the food is right." (viii-ix) That spark is the irrationality which endows rational reality with meaning. This is why the protagonist's nickname is Pi, for "in that Greek letter that looks like a shack with a corrugated tin roof, in that elusive, irrational number with which scientists try to understand the universe, I found refuge." (24)

Pi does not belittle reason; he in fact utilizes it to survive—"I applied my reason at every moment. Reason is excellent for getting food, clothing and shelter. Reason is the very best tool kit." (298) Yet to have reason without imagination is to relinquish a basic human need—the need to tell stories.[56] To give up on imagination would be to cast out the bathwater which gives life freshness and vitality. This is what leads Pi, following his rescue, to study the thyroid glands of three-toed sloths, for sloths are "wise beings whose intense imaginative lives were beyond the reach of my scientific probing." (5) Martel, from the book's beginning, discloses this affection for imagination. "The word bamboozle," he writes, "was my one preparation for the rich, noisy, functioning madness of India. I used the word on occasion, and truth be told, it served me well." (vii)

Reality without imagination, or, in other words, a narrative without metaphor, is "a flat story. An immobile story. You want dry, yeastless factuality." (302) Even more so, "if we, citizens," the author remarks, "do not support our artists, then we sacrifice our imagination on the altar of crude reality and we end up believing in nothing and having worthless dreams." (xii) A story without God or faith—the second story of literal *tsimtsum*—is a "dry, yeastless" approach to life, an empty space. Martel, then, prefers the path of the "Hasidim" over that of the "*mitnagdim*." He imparts to his readers the insight that all of life is a story, yet it is up to us to decide whether life will be dry or filled with vitality and excitement, an empty space or the light of *Ein Sof*. Martel believes that most of his readers will prefer the first story; at the very least he attempts to lead them in this direction. The book therefore comes to a conclusion with the surprising sentence issued by Mr. Okamoto. This skeptic, who had expressed a preference for the "straight facts," ultimately includes the first story in his report to the Japanese shipping company:

> Story of sole survivor, Mr. Piscine Molitor Patel, Indian citizen, is an astounding story of courage and endurance in the face of extraordinarily difficult and tragic circumstances. In the experience of this investigator, his story is unparalleled in the history of shipwrecks. Very few castaways can claim to have survived so long at sea as Mr. Patel, and none in the company of an adult Bengal tiger. (319)

[56] Stephens, "Feeding Tiger, Finding God," 50-51; Stratton, "Hollow at the core," 7-8.

The Faith of Pi

The better story is, as stated, the story of faith signified by the constant presence of God, ever-present within the *tsimtsum*. This story is marked by a leap of faith: "I pause. What of God's silence? I think it over. I add: An intellect confounded yet a trusting sense of presence and of ultimate purpose." (63)

But what is this faith? What sort of belief endows life with vitality and excitement? One should note that Pi does not address what to believe in or which dogma to accept. He never compares or contrasts religions and likewise declares that "all religions are true." (69) *Life of Pi* is concerned with the deeper underpinnings of faith. The question is not "what to believe?" but something far more fundamental—"what is it to believe?"[57]

There is a widespread conception of religion as a system resting on certain fundamental beliefs. Were these beliefs to be undermined, faith would fall with them. Religious faith is seen as a multi-story building built upon a deep foundation—were these foundations to shift the entire building would collapse.[58] Yet *Life of Pi* demonstrates the naiveté of this image—both of religion itself and its place within life. Religious socialization does not originate in fundamental beliefs. Religious education does not begin with dogmas and one must not first be convinced of such principles before taking part in religious life. People, likewise, do not leave religion solely on account of theological difficulties. Such a depiction of faith and religious life misses the mark.

Martin Buber speaks of two types of faith. He distinguishes between "belief in" and "belief that," demonstrating that the transition between these types of faith marked a dramatic turn in the history of religion.[59] A "belief that" takes a stance towards a certain claim or theological position; a weakening of one's foundations consequently threatens such a belief. Buber, however, claims that the Hebrew Bible posits no such "beliefs that," but rather a "belief in." A "belief in" is not an amalgamation of stances or positions held, but rather a giving of trust. When Abraham, who was elderly and childless, was told by God to "'Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them. […] So shall your offspring[a] be,'" he responded with an act of faith, "And [Abraham] believed the Lord, and He credited it to him as righteousness." (Gen. 15:5-6) Is this to say that God

[57] For a phenomenological study of belief and believers, see Moshe Halbertal, "On Belief and Believers," in Moshe Halbertal and Avi Sagi, eds., *On Faith: Studies in the Concept of Faith and Its History in The Jewish Tradition* (Jerusalem: Keter Press, 2005), 11-38 [Hebrew].

[58] David Hume viewed the rise of science as a replacement for religious faith. He believed that the hypothesis of "God" would be rendered superfluous in the wake of science. See David Hume, *Dialogues and Natural History of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). Many branches of atheistic thought have made great efforts to challenge religious "theology" on the premise that religion depends upon such foundations. See Michael Hunter and David Wootton (eds.), *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) and the recent Hebrew title, Aviad M. Kleinberg, *A Guide for the Non-Believer: How to Not Believe Without Apologizing* (Tel Aviv: Aviad Kleinberg, 2019) [Hebrew].

[59] Martin Buber, *Two Types of Faith*, trans. Norman P. Goldhawk (New York: MacMillan, 1951).

proposed a series of theological beliefs which Abraham then accepted? Obviously not. Abraham trusted that God would provide him with a child, even at an advanced age after many years of infertility. Abraham's belief in God was an inner state of trust, and this is what earned him God's appreciation.[60] In other words, faith is a psychological stance. Secularism, in this understanding, is a loss of trust.

William James describes things differently. He posits two types of faithful. One sort of believer is characterized by a definite stance towards the subject of belief. The other belief, however, is distinguished by a willingness to act despite immutable uncertainties.[61] The irreversible decision to have children is among the most momentous choices one may make. We do not know what the child's fate will be, its future, if we will come to regret bringing it into the world. Perhaps it will suffer a tragic death and we, the parents, will be left to mourn for the rest of our lives. This is not a decision informed by rational arguments. It is the product of a mental attitude, of a "leap of faith." One who makes such a decision is prepared to invest their entire life, even at a heavy price, without any sort of certainty. The greater "belief" a person has, the easier it will be for them to bear children; the doubter will find it more challenging. Per James, the believer maintains an advantage over the non-believer as the former is capable of risking action.[62] For James, much like Buber, belief is a psychological stance, not a position towards a certain claim. A scientist and declared atheist, then, who is prepared to dedicate his entire life to testing a scientific theory which may prove baseless acts out of an inner place of faith.

In light of this notion, namely, that belief consists of a psychological outlook on the world in which one is prepared to take action, James claims that one may willfully adopt a belief. This is reflected in the title of his lecture, "The Will to Believe," not merely "To Believe." A person chooses whether or not they will assume the psychological outlook of the believer. Theological truths are not at stake here, but rather the ethical question of how one ought to live. In other words, one must choose whether to live life in accordance with the first story of *Life of Pi* or the second. Yann Martel, asked in a 2010 interview whether he is religious, did not respond that he believes, but that he "chooses to believe," for the religious life is a more "interesting" story:

> Do you consider yourself religious? I would say yes, in the broadest sense of the term, in the sense that I *choose* to believe that all this isn't just the result of happenstance and chemistry. I find faith is a wonderful respite from being reasonable. We're so trained in the West to be reasonable. It's yielded great things—it's resulted in these great technical prolepses that are very impressive, but they in and of themselves don't give us a reason to live. In the modern Western technological society, it's very hard to have any kind of faith. And so I took on religious faith and I finally came to agree

[60] Ibid., 43-44.

[61] William James, *The Will to Believe: and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 1-31.

[62] Halbertal, "On Belief and Believers," 19.

> with what I was discussing in the book. Religious faith makes life interesting.[63]

The choice of the first story, to look at the world as a believer, has far-reaching consequences. Moshe Halbertal argues that "the position of belief is described at times as a sensitivity, a sort of attentiveness which transforms the world from a cold, alienated causal domain to one filled with mystery and wonder."[64] The draw of the mysterious is a keyword in Pi's life. The mystical way of life, in many cultures, is oftentimes premised on the notion that the world is illusory. The question of whether this is a position of extreme acosmism (that we are leaving in a "matrix"), pantheism, or panentheism does not concern us here, but rather the shared sense that the world contains an element of deception.[65] Earlier, we saw that Martel claimed the word "bamboozle" was his preparation for India and that "and truth be told, it served me well." (vii) The truth itself is, to a certain degree, a deception.

The sense of mystery and wonder does not come to exclude reason. It emerges, rather, from a place of humility which places reason in its proper proportions:

> The world of the known is a world unknown ; hiddenness, mystery. […] We explore the ways of being but do not know what, why or wherefore being is. […] What do we truly know about life and death, about the soul or society, about history or nature?[66]

Pi, in the wake of the sinking of the Tsimtsum, cries out, "What is the purpose of reason […] why can't reason give greater answers?"[67] (98)

The philosopher of language Ludwig Wittgenstein examined religious language in order to approach the concept of faith. He analyzed religious "claims" to show that they differ from scientific or logical arguments. Is a person making a claim when they state that "the world was created?" Is he offering a description? Perhaps something else is taking place. Wittgenstein develops a process by which he shows that faith is not an amalgamation of claims, but rather an expressive attitude.[68] Put differently:

> Expressions of faith do not impart information about the world, but rather convey the relationship of the believer to the world and his life. For example, a religious statement such as, "the world was

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[63] Anna M. Yeung, "15 Questions with Yann Martel," *The Crimson*, April 23, 2010, https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2010/4/23/nbsp-fm-ym-book/.

[64] Halbertal, "On Belief and Believers," 29.

[65] On the notion of illusion in Hasidism and its many interpretations, see Rachel Elior, *Freedom on the Tablets, The Mystical Origins and Kabbalistic Foundations of Hasidic Thought* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense, 1999), 101-103 [Hebrew]; Yoram Jacobson, *Truth, Faith and Holiness: Studies in Kabbalah and Hasidism* (Tel Aviv: Idra, 2018), 353-357 [Hebrew].

[66] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy), 56-57.

[67] On the relationship between faith and reason in the thought of R. Nahman, see Magid, "Through the Void, 513-519.

[68] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 53-59; idem, *Culture and Value* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 32.

> created," is not a factual description concerning the origins of the universe, but rather expresses a perspective that views life and the world as a gift. Another religious statement, such as "there will be a judgement day," is not a factual prediction of a future event, but rather expresses the perspective of the believer who relates to life with a constant mindset of judgement and evaluation.[69]

For Pi, the belief in God follows that of Buber, James, and Wittgenstein, who viewed religious faith as a psychological expression. "Faith in God," he remarks, "is an opening up, a letting go, a deep trust, a free act of love." (208) Faith does not consist of claims but rather of an inner feeling as expressed in the perspective of the believer—"When I say I saw her [the Virgin Mary], I don't quite mean it literally, though she did have body and colour. I felt I saw her, a vision beyond vision […] The presence of God is the finest of rewards." (63)[70]

Pi's approach differs from those philosophical and psychological outlooks which, viewing faith as a natural human tendency, judge it to be primitive.[71] Atheism, too, can be as "natural" as faith. The psychological response to evil is not necessarily a belief in an all-powerful God, but also a rejection of God. Both responses stand alongside each other; in many instances, it is more "natural" for Westerners—under the influence of 250 years of secularizing trends—to deny than to believe.[72] It is important to Pi

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[69] Halbertal, "On Belief and Believers," 31.

[70] See more about "belief" without belief in a transcendent power: Ronald Dworkin, *Religion Without God* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013).

[71] See Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. James Strachey (London and New York: Routledge, 2001 [1913]), 162-170.

[72] The framework of this paper does not permit a discussion of the philosophical question of whether essential or "pure" qualities or psychological experiences exist, or if every psychological characteristic is a product of the particular culture and life circumstance into which a person is born. Per the latter, it is "natural" for the traditional person to believe and for the secular person to reject belief. The "essentialist school" of William James and Evelyn Underhill (from the early twentieth century) and, later, Robert Forman views religious and mystical experience as a "natural-essential-universal" principle shared by all of humanity. Only the descriptive and explanatory accounts of experience differ on the basis of the religious, cultural, and societal context in which they operate. The Jewish mystic, for instance, experiences a "revelation of Elijah," the Christian mystic "a revelation of Jesus," and the Muslim mystic "a revelation of Muhammed." These are the same revelation, the same religious experience, expressed by each mystic in the terminology familiar to them from their culture and religion (see Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, 11-12). The "contextualist school" of Steven Katz, by contrast, looks at religious and mystical experience as constructs formed entirely by a particular culture and language which may only be studied within the context of the specific culture and society in which they are described. He thus rejects the notion of a "natural-essential-universal" religious experience. For the essentialist school, see William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002 [1902]), 266-301; Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*, (New York: Mineola, 2002 [1911]), 3-25, 70-94. For the contextualist school, see Steven T. Katz (ed.), *Comparative Mysticism: An Anthology of Original Sources* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 5-22. For a comprehensive survey of the dispute between these two schools, see Jess B. Hollenback, *Mysticism: Experience, Response, and Empowerment* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press 1996), 1-27; Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 279-325.

to stress that the possibility of belief, subject to human choice, is not easy. Having defined faith as an opening up and free act of love, he adds:

> "But sometimes it was so hard to love." (212)
> "I practised religious rituals that I adapted to the circumstances—solitary Masses without priests or consecrated Communion hosts, darshans without murtis […] acts of devotion to Allah not knowing where Mecca was and getting my Arabic wrong. They brought me comfort, that is certain. But it was hard, oh, it was hard." (ibid.)

The choice, despite all the accompanying difficulties, is ultimately an act of faith manifested foremost in a constant sense of gratitude. When Pi uncovers containers of emergency rations, he cries out, "Lord, who would have thought? […] Hallelujah! […] I repeatedly mumbled, 'Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!'" (144-145) The inner expression of gratitude exists in the most extreme circumstances of evil and suffering. The person who loses two fingers may choose whether to resent his loss or thank God for the three fingers remaining. The suffering itself is beyond our control, but we determine our attitude towards suffering. As Pi stands at the brink of death, he chooses to give himself up to God, who had abandoned him to suffer:

> I closed my eyes and waited for my breath to leave my body. I muttered, "Goodbye, Richard Parker. I'm sorry for having failed you. I did my best. Farewell. Dear Father, dear Mother, dear Ravi, greetings. Your loving son and brother is coming to meet you. Not an hour has gone by that I haven't thought of you. The moment I see you will be the happiest of my life. And now I leave matters in the hands of God, who is love and whom I love." (242)

The film adaptation of *Life of Pi* further emphasizes the gratitude expressed in the scene, as Pi declares, "God, thank you for giving me my life. I'm ready now." (minute 90). Pi, in other words, chooses, despite all of the difficulties, even at the most extreme moment of divide absence, of *tsimtsum*, to find presence within absence.

Belief in a God who is the creator and source of everything removes oneself from the center. "The obsession with putting ourselves at the centre of everything," Pi observes, "is the bane not only of theologians but also of zoologists."[73] (31) To remove oneself to the side brings forth a sense of humility and an accompanying appreciation for everything we receive. This is of a piece with Martel's strident criticism of Western society, which speaks of "rights" and "obligations" instead of "appreciation" and "amazement." The mentality of belief brings Pi to a place of boundless appreciation. Take, for example, Pi's reaction to the running tap water he encounters while hospitalized in Mexico. "The first time I turned a tap on," he recalled, "its noisy, wasteful, superabundant gush was such a shock that I became incoherent and my legs collapsed beneath me and I fainted in the arms of a nurse." (7) Experiencing oneself at the margins leads to the realization that one does not enjoy complete control over life. One tries their hardest, of course, to a certain degree, but when a situation surpasses one's abilities one learns to let go and accept life as it is, even when it is difficult.

[73] The link between religion and zoology is a recurrent theme in *Life of Pi*. See below, note 80.

"Things didn't turn out the way they were supposed to," Pi remarks, "but what can you do? You must take life the way it comes at you and make the best of it." (91)

Indeed, when Pi's life takes a difficult turn and he finds himself cast into a ferocious life-threatening thunderstorm, his reaction is quite surprising. In place of fright, he stands amazed:

> Once there was lightning. […] The downpour was heavy. […] Suddenly a bolt struck much closer. […] I was dazed, thunderstruck—nearly in the true sense of the word. But not afraid.
> "Praise be to Allah, Lord of All Worlds, the Compassionate, the Merciful, Ruler of Judgment Day!" I muttered. To Richard Parker I shouted, "Stop your trembling! This is miracle. This is an outbreak of divinity. This is...this is..." I could not find what it was, this thing so vast and fantastic. I was breathless and wordless. (232-233)[74]

This astonishment, no doubt a mystical experience which leads Pi to encounter the sublime,[75] calms him, and even brings him joy. "I remember that close encounter," he recalled, "as one of the few times during my ordeal when I felt genuine happiness." (233) There is not always a solution to suffering, but our mental response to it—whether fear or joy—is up to us.

In 2010, an elderly Holocaust survivor who had survived the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp shared with me that she suffered from terrible pain in her joints. These pains originated from her time in the camp, at age twelve, when she was required to stand for the morning roll call, day after day, in the biting cold wearing only the thin prisoner's uniform. These pains had accompanied her ever since. Every time she feels pain, she told me, she is glad and thanks God that she is able to feel pain, for the people who stood to her left and her right in the roll call did not survive. They did not "merit" to feel pain. When the pain is too much, she takes out photographs of her grandchildren and great-children and reminds herself of what she achieved, at the end of the day, and how blessed she is in life. She cannot remove the pain, but the bitterness may be ameliorated by inner expressions of gratitude. "This story has a happy ending," (93) we are told by the pseudo-author of *Life of Pi*, from whom we learn that Pi has children, a son and a daughter.[76]

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[74] If one views the tiger as a symbolic metaphor for human tendencies, then it emerges that, per Martel, the basic-animalistic response is fear. Amazement, meanwhile, is a lofty trait exhibited by the person who leverages their fear into a spiritual transformation. The link between "amazement" and "the sublime," alongside the identification of "the sublime" with the roots of fear, are developed in the philosophy of Edmund Burke. See Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 75-77.

[75] James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 119-129. Per James, a key characteristic of the religious experience is its ineffability (ibid., 295). Pi, too, describes himself as "breathless and wordless." Hillel Zeitlin, in a similar vein, characterizes the experience of astonishment as ineffable. Connected to fear, he saw it as the root of religiosity, see below, note 79.

[76] In Lurianic Kabbalah, the mother, father, son, and daughter are symbols ("*partsufim*") which together comprise a whole unit. On the Lurianic doctrine of divine

Faith, for Pi, is not a belief in a certain personal God, or even in a non-personal God. Faith is the consciousness that we do not stand in the center of everything. It is an inner expression of astonishment, appreciation, recognition, and preference for the better story even with its unresolvable pain. This is a belief in God who is revealed in the deepest part of a person. When Mr. Kumar the biology teacher, in response to his terrible experiences of suffering and persecution, declares that God is dead, Pi responds with silence, as if he stands in the empty vacuum, the place of silence as taught by R. Nahman. After this silence passes, however, Pi turns the tables with his inner expression:

> He spoke again. "Some people say God died during the Partition in 1947. He may have died in 1971 during the war. Or he may have died yesterday here in Pondicherry in an orphanage. That's what some people say, Pi. When I was your age, I lived in bed, racked with polio. I asked myself every day, 'Where is God? Where is God? Where is God?' God never came. It wasn't God who saved me—it was medicine." […]
> This was all a bit much for me. […] I said nothing. […] I was more afraid that in a few words thrown out he might destroy something that I loved. What if his words had the effect of polio on me? What a terrible disease that must be if it could kill God in a man. (27-28)

Pi's belief is not in a theological God who solves the problem of suffering, but rather in the God who dwells in man. This belief is the source of our as human beings to grapple with unexplainable hardships. This is a deeper picture of faith, predicated not on theological dogmas but on an array of human feelings. It is not concerned with "what to believe," but with the more profound question of "what is belief" and the universal characteristics of the believer. This faith demands a process of internalization. "These people fail to realize that it is on the inside that God must be defended, not on the outside. They should direct their anger at themselves," Pi tells us, "the main battlefield for good is not the open ground of the public arena but the small clearing of each heart." (71)[77]

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Is what Martel presents his readers only a pragmatic approach which demonstrates the utilitarian value of religion? Is religion "false" but nevertheless worth adopting because it provides a better (story) way of life?[78] Is God just another item on the long list of human survival skills? The

configurations (*partsufim*), see S. A. Horodetzky, *Torat ha-Kabbalah shel Rabbi Yitshak Ashkenazi ve-Rav Hayyim Vital* (Tel Aviv: ha-Hevrah la-Mifalei Sifrut, 1947), 133-149; Fine, *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos*, 138-141.

[77] This process of internalization is discussed in Martin Buber, *The Way of the Man: According to the Teaching of Hasidism* (New York: Citadel Press, 2006), 22-27. This religious approach stands at the root of the religious faith demonstrated by Etty Hillesum in the journal she wrote during the Holocaust. See Etty Hillesum, *Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum, 1941-1943* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2002); Klaas A.D. Smelik et al. (eds.) *Spirituality in the Writings of Etty Hillesum* (Leiden: Brill, 2010); idem, *The Ethics and Religious Philosophy of Etty Hillesum* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

[78] R. Judah Halevi, in the introduction his *Kuzari* attributes this utilitarian approach to Greek philosophy. In his words, "author for yourself a religion."

answer, I believe, is no. Martel is not presenting only a pragmatic approach, but rather a distinct religious principle, a fundamental experience of placing oneself outside of the center. Pi learns the hard way that one does not have complete control over life. This is no mere insight, but a fundamental experience which lies at the foundation of religiosity. This existential position places a person under the watch of, but not watching over, the sublime; listening but asking no questions. "What is the difference between wonder and astonishment?" asked Hillel Zeitlin. "Wonder asks all sorts of questions. Astonishment asks nothing. It is like 'the one who does not know how to ask.' It stands confounded, amazed, blown away, transported. Wonder indeed gave birth to inquiry and all its branches—philosophy and science. Astonishment births religion and its sisters—poetry and music."[79]

While Pi does not lose his faith in God, he does lose his faith in man. Reflecting on his despair of being found by a ship, he remarks, "In time I gave up entirely on being saved by a ship. […] No, humanity and its unreliable ways could not be counted upon." (199) Materialist human society provides every material good, yet "the abundance of all things" (Deut. 28:47) might yet bring about a person's downfall. The "floating island" which gave Pi life by day (algae and meerkats for food) turned into a murderous isle by night. (chapter 92) Over and again, Pi stresses that for all the freedom proclaimed by Western society it trumpets an illusory power. Martel, in his book, critiques the secular standpoint which seeks, in the name of freedom, to shake off religious duty yet realizes no freedom:

> Well-meaning but misinformed people think animals in the wild are "happy" because they are "free". […] This is not the way it is. Animals in the wild lead lives of compulsion and necessity within an unforgiving social hierarchy in an environment where the supply of fear is high and the supply of food low […] What is the meaning of freedom in such a context? Animals in the wild are, in practice, free neither in space nor in time. (15-16)
>
> I know zoos are no longer in people's good graces. Religion faces the same problem. Certain illusions about freedom plague them both. (19)[80]

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[79] Zeitlin, *Hasidic Spirituality for a New Era*, 131.

[80] That is to say, religious practice is compared to a zoo cage. On the one hand, it is restrictive while, on the other hand, it provides tranquility and security. The unleashed and undefined life, by contrast, is ostensibly free, yet Pi brings two argument against this freedom: (1) This is an illusory freedom as frameworks of social hierarchy continue to bind the person, who will never be truly free; (2) This freedom withholds from a person calm and security in both time and space, negating any freedom. This approach finds expression in a poem of R. Judah Halevi, "Servants of Time": "Servants of time are servants of servants / Only God's servant is free / Therefore, when every human being requests their portion / my heart says: May God Himself be my share." (Franz Rosenzweig, *Ninety-Two Poems and Hymns of Yehuda Halevi*, trans. Thomas Kovach, Eva Jospe, and Gilya Gerda Schmidt [Albany: SUNY Press, 2000], 124). Dostoevsky takes the question of freedom and religious framework to an extreme. In a phenomenological account, he describes how the church executed Jesus because the latter's call for freedom posed a danger to humanity. See Fyodor Dostoevsky, "The Grand Inquisitor," in idem., *The Brothers Karamozov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York and Toronto: Everyman's Library, 1992), 246-264.

Martel's biting criticism of secular society, it seems to me, demonstrates that he does not view religion as only having pragmatic value as a proper way of life and no more. The affront to man's place in the center constitutes the religious core of *Life of Pi*. The religious individual is driven by humility to leave room for wonder and mystery. *Life of Pi* is a statement in defense of the phenomenon of the religious person, not a metaphysical defense of God. This exoneration rests, to no small extent, on a critique of "secular man."[81]

The modern secularism which emerged from the school of Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche did not seek to discard the outdated hypothesis of God, but rather to transform man into God, to deify humanity. When man becomes God, standing in the center, he may, like a sovereign, alter the basic conditions of the universe and man within it. This outlook is the origin of political movements such as Nazism, communism, and fascism, from here they derive their murderousness. The excessive empowerment of humanity and the romantic glorification of "mankind" border on true danger. The island which gives off blessings "by day," when life is bountiful and unmarked by tension, may, in an instant, turn into a murderous isle during times of "night," or crisis. A morality derived from human reason alone may prove successful in times of economic growth and security, yet when tensions arise—even just an economic downturn—the beast within emerges and the corrupt ways of humanity are revealed.[82]

The decision to believe in the sublime, then—whether transcendental (a personal or impersonal God) or immanent (the Divine within man or any other understanding)—is no mere pragmatic choice, but rather an authentic inner expression of submission, modesty, appreciation, and an openness

[81] Such statements of defense are found in Jewish philosophy of the twentieth century (for good reason! For they are responding to the criticism of religion and secularism that spouted during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, not to classic criticisms of religion), primarily in the writings of R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, such as his *Halakhic Man*, and Abraham Joshua Heschel in his *God in Search of Man*. R. Soloveitchik writes, at the beginning of *Halakhic Man*, that "It is not the plan of this essay to discuss the millennium-old problem of faith and reason. Theory is not my concern at the moment. I want instead to focus attention on a human life situation in which the man of faith as an individual concrete being, with his cares and hopes, concerns and needs, joys and sad moments, is entangled." This is not a book concerned with theological axioms. It is interested, rather, in the character of religion in the deepest sense. It commends the "religious man," with his humility, modesty, etc., in contrast to the "secular man," while demonstrating they both dwell together in dialectical tension within the human soul. Heschel's book, meanwhile, takes a different approach in its condemnation of secular man who has forsaken the sense of amazement and attentiveness to the mystery and wonder of the world.

[82] It is common to blame religion for the largest incidents of mass-murder throughout history, yet the twentieth century—the most violent century in the annals of mankind—has demonstrated that the replacement of God with humanity not only fails to moderate violence but in fact leads to its intensification. See the remarks of Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 141n4 (penned in 1944): "The entire Romantic aspiration […] which has found its expression in the biologistic philosophies of Bergson, Nietzsche, Spengler, Klages, and their followers and in the phenomenological, existential, and anti-scientific school of Heidegger and his coterie, and from the midst of which there arose in various forms the sanctification of vitality and intuition, the veneration of instinct, the desire for power […] have brought complete chaos and human depravity to the world." For understanding *Life of Pi* as profoundly anti-Nietzschean in a different way see Karam Ally, "Which Story Do You Prefer," 92-93.

towards the wondrous. This is a resolution to overcome the mundane and transform wonder and amazement into the everyday. "I have survived so far, miraculously," Pi exclaims, "Now I will turn miracle into routine. The amazing will be seen every day. I will put in all the hard work necessary." (148) As observant Jews recite in their thrice-daily prayers, "We thank you, O Lord […] for your miracles which accompany us every day."[83] Modern man relies wholly on reason, he has lost his ability to be amazed, even by the great mystery which we call "reason." "Modern man fell into the trap of believing that everything can be explained," Abraham Joshua Heschel observed, "The most incomprehensible fact is the fact that we comprehend at all."[84] "Alas! Alas!" R. Nahman of Bratslav cried out, "The world is filled with amazing and awesome wonders and lights. But the small hand stands in front of the eyes and prevents them from seeing great lights."[85]

Postmodern *Tsimtsum*

Despite all that we have said above, we cannot entirely dodge the troublesome question of "what to believe," of what the "true" religion is. Pi appears to shy away from seeking the absolute "truth." He has no stomach for the exclusivist claims of the monotheistic religions who present themselves as possessing a monopoly on truth, "But the moment the girls become possessive," he tells us, "the moment each one imagines that Krishna is her partner alone, he vanishes. So it is that we should not be jealous with God." (49) Pi believes that God belongs to every person, not to particular zealous groups who view themselves as the sole possessors of truth to the exclusion of all others. This approach, it appears, emerges from a postmodernist position that views all "truth" as cultural constructs produced by human social conditioning.

Postmodernism is a philosophical, social, and cultural state characterized by a loss of faith in the great narratives, metaphysical goals, and sweeping depictions which distinguished modernity.[86] One of the features, or causes, of postmodernism is the sense that many of the atrocities which marked the twentieth century (carried out by movements such as fascism, Nazism, and communism) were the products of excessive devotion and enthusiasm for a single all-encompassing theory or idealistic principle. Millions were thus slaughtered in the name of the "correct ideal." The postmodernist response is an aversion to universal ideals and quests for "truth."

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83 *Shemoneh Esrei* prayer.

84 Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 43,

85 R. Nahman of Bratslav, *Likkutei Moharan*, vol. 1, §133.

86 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiii-xxv; Eliezer Schweid, *New Gordonian Essays: Globalization, Post-Modernism, Post-Humanism and the Jewish People* (Tel Aviv, Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2005), 11-16 [Hebrew]. Adi Ophir formulates nine negative defining characteristics of postmodernism: (1) There is no transcendental viewpoint; (2) There is no valid process of a priori judgement; (3) There is no ultimate meaning, etc., Adi Ophir, "Postmodernism: Emdah Filosofit," in Ilav Gur-Ze'ev (ed.), *Education in the Era of Postmodern Discourse* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1996), 135-163 [Hebrew].

Martel, on the one hand, like many postmodernist thinkers, views every system of belief as a human product and projection; each religion "invents" a narrative, that is, a story. Yet this, for him, is not a negative phenomenon. He stresses over and again the importance of imagination in the formation of human identity and the close link between religion and imagination.[87] On the other hand, the preference given to the first story over the second is not quite postmodernist. The first account related in *Life of Pi* is metaphorical, a "religious story;" the book as a whole, points to the importance of imagination in human life. Note that Pi not only claims that the first story is preferable, but that it is truly "the better story." (63, 64) Martel's criticism of Western society and man, moreover, is by no means postmodernist. Where, then, does Martel stand, and, more importantly, what message does his book impart concerning "what to believe?"

Postmodernism may easily lead, no doubt, to contempt for values and social conventions, extreme relativism, and even ethical nihilism. Yet scholars distinguish between "hard" and "soft" postmodernism.[88] Unlike hard postmodernism, soft postmodern does not deny the existence of truth and falsehood, or good and evil. Rather, it claims, "truth" or "good" are determined by human beings and do not constitute absolute values. Put crudely, we might say that per hard postmodernism there is no truth, while in soft postmodernism, by contrast, there are many truths.

A person in a culture of soft postmodernism may live their truth, operate according to its tenets, and even fight on its behalf, all while accepting the existence of other clashing truths. R. Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (Shagar) (1949-2007), an Israeli *rosh yeshiva*, was a pioneer within his Religious-Zionist community who engaged with questions of postmodernism and faith. R. Shagar accepted the principles of soft postmodernism, claiming that its point of view embodies "the perspective of the divine infinitude, which can contain all opinions."[89] With that, he is well-aware of the problems which arise if all "truths" are viewed as equals—how do we act in a collective space without infringing on the truth of the other? How do we allow ourselves to imprison, or even execute (in certain countries) an individual who has carried out an "honor killing." Such a person could claim in his defense that he acted in accordance with the imperatives of his culture and religion; to not kill in his case would, according to his culture, be immoral. To answer this question, Rav Shagar turns to the notion of *tsimtsum* as taught by R. Nahman:

> How can the two points of view coexist? How am I to harmonize my acknowledgement of the relativity of my truth with the clear conviction that I will not compromise on that truth?

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[87] See above, 124-127.

[88] See Ilan Gur-Ze'ev, *Toward a Diaspora Education: Multi-Culturalism, Post-Colonialism and Counter-Education in a Post-Modern Era* (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2004), 16-20 [Hebrew]; Rabbi Shagar [Shimon Gershon Rosenberg], *Faith Shattered and Restored: Judaism in the Postmodern Age*, trans. Elie Leshem (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2017), 97-99.

[89] Ibid., 111. Regarding postmodern trends in Judaism including in R. Shagar's and Tamar Ross's theology see, Miriam Kaye, *Jewish theology for a Postmodern Age* (London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization in association with Liverpool University Press, 2019); Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, Aaron W. Hughes (eds.), *Tamar Ross: Constructing Faith* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016).

> These conundrums have no solutions, and Rabbi Nahman proposes silence as an alternative. […] The fact that we cannot substantiate our own values, and will always doubt their truth, must not prevent us from continuing to believe in them.[90]

R. Shagar, then, utilizes R. Nahman's teaching of *tsimtsum* to present a faith compatible with the postmodern age. He claims, moreover, that it is paradoxically easier to maintain a religious atmosphere in a postmodern environment. While modernity was characterized by its criticism of religion and faith, postmodern skepticism views religious belief as an option no less valid than others.[91] Martel was raised in a secular household, and it was this very postmodern context of many truths which enabled him to choose the religious story (following his exposure to India). The selection of the religious tale is not only an adoption of values and morals; the silence, surrender, hope, and gratitude which define Pi in the first story transcend any particular ethical message. These qualities engage, rather, with human existence in its entirety:

> One can extend Rabbi Nahman's approach beyond questions of ethics and apply it to the human condition as a whole. Many people ask themselves whether their lives have value, even when they are fully aware that their very existence benefits another—supporting a dependent, educating someone, bettering the world, and so on. In the end, we all die, as do those whom we helped and who depend on us, and nothing remains. Yet we believe our actions carry eternal value. They are *our* actions, *our* faith, *our* truth, and their eternality is embodied in their very presence in the here and now. Like the postmodernist, Rabbi Nahman knows that the ultimate metaphysical questions transcend language and logic. But unlike the postmodernist, who deduces that these questions are thus meaningless, Rabbi Nahman uses this knowledge to open up the possibility of faith. Like many other religious thinkers long before him, he knows that absolute statements overstep the range of possible language games, and that silence is no less human—and no less meaningful—than speech.[92]

Like soft postmodernism, *Life of Pi* presents us with two equally valid "truths." Martel no doubt identifies with the truth of the first story without negating that of the second. Moreover, he challenges western readers to adopt the first story and the ensuing possibility of religion, this despite the ease (and even "naturalness") of choosing the second story. We may live unsubstantiated religious lives. It will always be possible to doubt, much like the agents of the Japanese Ministry of Transport question the first story, yet, as R. Shagar tells us, these doubts "must not prevent us from continuing to believe in them." The first story, from the point of view of the religious individual, is not only better but more truthful. Yet this does not come at the expense of the validity of the second story. The divine command continues to ring in the ear of the believer, "This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live." (Deut. 30:19)

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[90] Shagar, *Faith Shattered and Restored*, 112-113.

[91] Ibid., xviii-xix.

[92] Ibid., 114-115 [italics in original].

A Concluding Note on Judaism and Truth

Postmodernism is not without its critics, whether philosophical or ethical.[93] The traditional Jew, distant from the postmodern mindset, may yet identify with the message conveyed by *Life of Pi*. Judaism, unlike other monotheistic religions (or, more precisely, the other Abrahamic faiths), possesses two unique notions of "truth" and "virtue." The first is conveyed by the particularistic aspect of Judaism, while the second emerges in the performative realm.

Let's begin with the first element. The general thrust of Jewish Halakhic tradition, surprisingly, does not claim to speak in the name of an absolute or ultimate truth.[94] The Torah forbids the consumption of pork for the Jewish people, but not as a universal prohibition. In other words, eating pork cannot be construed as an unethical or wicked act. This is a tradition practiced by a particular subset of people who have no interest in imposing it on others. A non-Jew may eat pork in the home of a Jew, while a Jew may even prepare a gourmet *treif* meal for the former.[95] One of the most stringent prohibitions of the Torah, likewise, is for a Jew to eat or possess leaven on Passover, yet a non-Jewish guest on Passover may consume their own leaven at the Jew's table.[96] Religions which believe themselves to possess the "absolute truth" oftentimes seek to impose this truth on the entire world. Halakhic Judaism, on the other hand, is not interested in forcing its "truth" on others, nor, in fact, does it always look kindly on non-Jews who seek to convert to Judaism.[97]

A particularistic religion such as Judaism does not, by definition, sing the praises of a universal or ultimate truth. In religious disputes during the Middle Ages, Judaism was painted as irrelevant due to its lack of universal message, its religious laws seen as applying only to a closed group. This accusation was no doubt directed at the particularistic character of

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[93] See, for instance, Ophelia Benson and Jeremy Stangroom, *Why Truth Matters* (London: Continuum, 2006).

[94] There are of course particularistic trends in Judaism that consider it a higher truth and Jews ontologically superior, such as R. Judah Halevi and R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady, who are mentioned throughout this paper. Therefore it must be noted that I am referring to "traditional Halakhic Judaism," namely rabbinic Judaism as it has developed from the time of the Rabbis (*Hazal*, 250 BCE – 625 CE) to the halakhic decisors of our present day.

[95] R. Shmuel Eliezer Eidels, *Hidushei Maharsh"a*, vol. 1 on b.Hulin 106a; R. Menahem Meiri (on b.Hulin 13 s.v. "ha-Mishna ha-Shishit") states: "You learn [from here] that it is permitted at the outset to cook, on behalf of a gentile, a meal of pork prepared in milk."; R. Shimon ben Tsemah, *Shu"t ha-Tashbe"ts*, vol. 3, §294; R. Yehudah Asad, *Shu"t Yehudah Ya'aleh*, *Yorah De'ah* § 148; R. Aryeh Leibush Balhuver, *Shem Aryeh*, *Yorah De'ah* § 26; R. Yo'av Yehoshua Weingarten, *Helkat Yo'av*, *Yorah De'ah* § 18.

[96] R. Joseph Karo, *Shulhan Arukh*, *Orah Hayyim* §440, section 3. See the gloss of the *Mishna Berurah*, ibid., as well. A Jew is all the more so permitted to serve a non-Jew leaven in the latter's house. See R. Joseph Molkho, *Shulhan Gavo'ah*, *Orah Hayyim* §440, section 11.

[97] A sentiment expressed by the Talmudic aphorism (b.Yevamot 47b), "Proselytes are as difficult to Israel as a boil."

Judaism.[98] While this characterization is by no means accurate,[99] it nonetheless presents a subjective and communal truth which leads to tolerance, acceptance, and inclusion of the other. Per the halakhic tradition, the belief in one God does not imply only one mode of worship. The priest is bound by commandments which do not extend to the Levite or Israelite. A non-Jew, likewise, may worship God in numerous ways.[100] R. Jonathan Sacks, in his seminal work *Dignity of Difference*, claims that Judaism is the only monotheistic religion to not claim a monopoly over religion, and was consequently the first to fall victim to universal cultures and religions:

> Western civilization has known five universalist cultures: ancient Greece, ancient Rome, medieval Christianity and Islam, and the Enlightenment. Three were secular, two religious. They brought inestimable gifts to the world, but they also brought great suffering, most notably though not exclusively to Jews. Like a tidal wave they swept away local customs, ancient traditions and different ways of doing things. They were to cultural diversity what industrialization is to biodiversity. They extinguished weaker forms of life. They diminished difference.[101]

Western cultures, both religious and secular alike, are founded on the Platonic notion of a universal eternal truth. "There is something seductive about this idea," Sacks writes, "and it has held many minds captive. […] The result is inevitable and tragic. If all truth—religious as well as scientific—is the same for everyone at all times, then if I am right, you are wrong. […] From this flowed some of the great crimes of history and much human blood."[102] "Hebrew thinking," however, claims Heschel, "operates within categories different from those of Plato or Aristotle."[103]

The particularistic outlook of Judaism, the religion of the "chosen people," paradoxically allows for difference. This construct, which has been

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[98] It was in response to this accusation that R. Judah Halevi authored his *The Book of Proof and Evidence in Support of the Abased Religion*, known as the *Kuzari*. Not only does this work not refute the allegation of Judaism's particularistic nature, the book's first treatise transforms this "shortcoming" into an advantage by claiming that only a particularistic revelation—such as God's revelation at Mount Sinai to the entire Jewish people—may be verified by reason.

[99] On the universal aspects of Judaism, see Jacob Neusner, *Recovering Judaism: The Universal Dimension of Judaism* (Minneapolis, MN.: Fortress Press, 2001); Leo Schaya, *Universal Aspects of the Kabbalah and Judaism* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2014); Elisabeth Goldwyn, "The Universal Mission of the Jewish People in the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," *Iyunim: Multidisciplinary Studies in Israeli and Modern Jewish Society* 18 (2008): 79-98 [Hebrew]. See below, in the following note.

[100] Judaism identifies the covenant of Noah as a link between God and humanity, while the Jewish people are bound by the covenant of Abraham. The Noahide code consists of seven universal laws which enable each community to develop its own legal system and mode of worship. See Elijah Benamozegh, *Israel and Humanity*, trans. Maxwell Luria (Mahwah, NY: Paulist Press, 1995), 253-284; Novak, David, *The Image of the Non-Jew in Judaism: A Historical and Constructive Study of the Noahide Laws* (New York: E. Mellen Press, 1983); idem., *Natural Law in Judaism* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[101] Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), 20.

[102] Ibid.

[103] Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 15.

subject to much criticism, does not imply a racial or discriminatory preference.[104] The person who elects to marry the love of his life does not claim, in doing so, that other women are less intelligent, beautiful, or inferior in some other way. Countless others share, or even exceed, her particular qualities. One's spouse is not superior to others, yet she is "chosen," bound together by an intimate tie. The Jewish people relate to their religion and tradition in much the same way. The Sabbath, for instance, is viewed as an intimate bond between God and the Jewish people. The Torah declares that "[the Sabbath] will be a sign between me and the Israelites forever," (Exodus 31:17) implying that those outside of the collective category of Israel are not obligated in its observance. This model leads to the formation of Jewish values and truths which the rest of humanity are not obligated to accept, and Judaism does not impose its intimate practices on others. This is the secret of difference: The Jew sanctifies Saturday, the Muslim Friday, and the Christian Sunday, and the Jewish people do not seek to impose their lifestyle on others in the name of any "truth." Particularism, which certain modern European outlooks transformed into a violent nationalism, originated in Judaism as a value of tolerance, acceptance, and inclusion.

The second element to characterize traditional Halakhic Judaism is the performative aspect. Scholars and thinkers have noted that Judaism, unlike the other Abrahamic faiths, is not rooted in a system of dogmas and axioms; it has, in fact, no distinct religious tenets.[105] While Maimonides' thirteen principles of faith are well-known, [106] most authorities argue that Jews are judged by their deeds, not by their beliefs.[107] Every religion, of course, contains practices, rituals, and commandments. Yet in the case of Judaism, these are the quintessence of the religion—it is a distinctly performative religion. Every rabbinic law, Moshe Idel argues, is predicated on this notion. "In the rabbinic world, in my opinion, the performative aspect of religion is of greater importance than the interpretive […] The belief is that action, or the performance of a commandment, is the essence

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[104] See Eliezer Schweid, *Homeland and a Land of Promise* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1979), 59-60 [Hebrew].

[105] Isaac Abarbanel, *Rosh Amanah*, chapter 23; R. David ben Zimra, *Shu"t ha-Radba"z*, vols. 1-3, §344; Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*, trans. Allan Arkush (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 1983), 100-101; R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Nineteen Letters*, trans. Karin Paritsky (New York: Feldheim Publishers, 1995), 200-207; Menachem Kellner, *Must a Jew Believe Anything?*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006); Leora Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

[106] Maimonides' thirteen principles, laid out in his commentary to the Mishnah, are rendered into English in J. Abelson, "Maimonides on the Jewish Creed," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 19, no. 1 (Oct., 1906): 24-58. For the Islamic influence on Maimonides, see Sarah Stroumsa, *Maimonides in His World: Portrait of a Mediterranean Thinker* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 24-83, esp. 68-71; idem., "Was Maimonides an Almohad Thinker," in Daniel Lasker and Haggai Ben-Shammai (eds.), *Alei Asor: Proceedings of the Tenth Conference of the Society for Judaeo-Arabic Studies* (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2008), 151-171 [Hebrew]; George F. Hourani, "Maimonides and Islam," in William M. Brinner and Stephen D. Ricks (eds.), *Studies in Islamic and Judaic Traditions: Papers Presented at the Institute for Islamic-Judaic Studies, University of Denver* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 153-166.

[107] See above, note 105.

of religion […] The primary question is not, 'Why must we perform these commandments?' but rather, 'How are they to do be done?'"[108] This is not to claim that biblical and rabbinic literature are devoid of theology,[109] but rather that the theological notions which appear in these corpora may only be understood within the living context in which they were formed. The performative dimension, more than ideology or theology, shaped the Jewish way of life; theological sources must therefore be studied in light of this fabric of life, and not the opposite.

I wish to clarify that I am not presenting an Orthoprax position which views Judaism as a religion of laws but not beliefs, as argued by Spinoza.[110] I likewise do not wish to side with what is today termed "social orthodoxy,"[111] or, previously, "religious behaviorism."[112] The commandments are not barren laws demanding compliance, nor is their sole purpose to provide individual, social, or political guidance or rehabilitation. Aside from these aspects, the commandments constitute a performative system that leads to the formation of a relationship, as "the hearts follow after the actions."[113] The performance of the commandments brings about the development of an inner awareness; this is the religious characterization we discussed above. We are trained in maintaining our sense of wonder by uttering a prayer before the enjoyment of food," Heschel writes, "This is one of the goals of the Jewish way of living: to experience commonplace deeds as spiritual adventures, to feel the hidden love and wisdom in all things."[114] This notion is best expressed by Menachem Kellner:

> My argument here rests on the notion that *emunah*, faith, in Judaism is first and foremost a relationship with God, and not something defined by specific beliefs (Rambam, of course, to the contrary). Biblical and Talmudic Judaism were uninterested in theology per se, and also preferred practice for the wrong reason (*she-lo lishmah*), but only because it would lead to practice for the right reason (*li-shmah*) and this right reason certainly involved trust in God. Ruth said to Naomi: "your people are my people" but did

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[108] Moshe Idel, "On Three Models of Faith in Judaism," *Identities* 2 (2013): 15-16 [Hebrew].

[109] The classic work on biblical theology is Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, trans. Moshe Greenberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960). For rabbinic theology, see Efraim Elimelech Urbach, *The Sages, Their Concepts and Beliefs*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1975).

[110] "The aim of scripture is simply to teach obedience," Baruch Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Leiden: Brill. 1989), 221.

[111] See Jay Lefkowitz, "The Rise of Social Orthodoxy: A Personal Account," *Commentary Magazine*, April 1, 2014 (https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/the-rise-of-social-orthodoxy-a-personal-account).

[112] See Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 77-139; Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*, trans. Eliezer Goldman and Yoram Navo (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 3-29. "[…] the institutions of Judaism are constitutive. Apart from them Judaism does not exist." (ibid., 14). For a stinging criticism of religious behaviorism, see Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 320-335.

[113] *Sefer ha-Hinukh*, Positive Commandment 16; Judah Halevi, *Kuzari*, Treatise 3, §30.

[114] Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 49.

> not leave it at that; she immediately added: "your God is my God." To all intents and purposes, Maimonides sought to change Judaism from a community, in effect a family, defined by shared history, shared hopes for the future, and a never clearly defined faith/trust in God, into a community of true believers. In other words, Maimonides reversed Ruth's statement and in so doing *created* Jewish orthodoxy. For the past 800 years this *innovation* has been both accepted and resisted. Accepted, at least pro forma, by all those Jews who think that Maimonides' "Thirteen Principles" define Judaism; resisted, by all those Jews who refuse in practice to accept the consequences of this definition of Judaism, finding all sorts of excuses not to persecute (unto death) heretics.[115]

When Pi claims that "religion is more than rite and ritual," (48) he does not mean to disparage ritual or seek to form a New-Age religion free from any practices or obligations. He understands that performance does not exist for its own sake. Rituals, practices, and performances can form a hidden "conjugal relationship" of sorts, if only we might search for it—"This house is more than a box full of icons. I start noticing small signs of conjugal existence. They were there all along, but I hadn't seen them because I wasn't looking for them." (80) The connection between man and God, much like interpersonal relationships, is constructed and reinforced through actions. Yet actions may become routine, banal, and exhausting. In order to truly form a "relationship," these actions must be done with intention, attention, and a sense of appreciation.

Pi Patel offers two ways of grappling with suffering, derived from the dual interpretations of the doctrine of *tsimtsum*. Pi, over the course of 227 days, peers into the empty space, yet he manages to emerge intact and recover due to his choice of the first story, the choice to be an "*Ivri*" in the broader sense, beyond that of R. Nahman. Pi chooses the religious story despite not viewing it as an absolute truth. Pi, it seems, in a certain sense is also Jewish.

[115] Menachem Kellner, "Truth – or Consequences?" *Jewish Ideas*, accessed 27 January 2020, https://www.jewishideas.org/article/truth-or-consequences.