

***Tzimtzum*: Humility in Creation**

Rosh Hashanah Learning 5781

Congregation Kehillath Israel
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Opening Discussion:

- On Rosh Hashanah, we commemorate the creation of the world. What images/stories/traditions come to mind regarding Jewish teachings of creation?
 - How do these impact your theology or conception of the Divine?
 - How do you imagine them at play for you during the High Holidays?
- What do you know of the *kabbalistic* (Jewish mystical) notion of *tzimtzum*? How does this idea impact your theology or conception of the Divine?

***Tzimtzum*: Contraction / Concealment**

Rabbi Gershon Winkler with Lakme Batya Elior, *The Place Where You are Standing Is Holy: A Jewish Theology on Human Relationships*

In the creation myth of ancient Judaic mysticism, God creates the universe by a process dubbed *tzimtzum*, which in Hebrew means a sort of stepping back to allow for there to be an Other, an Else, as in something or someone else.

The Judaic notion of a world of Free Will is deeply rooted in this concept, in the understanding that in creating life, the *Eyn-Sof*, or the Endless One, subdued the omnipotent, all-embracing Divine Presence for the sake of the realization of the Divine Will that there be other beings (Etz Chaim 1:1:2.)

Our world, then is the sacred space that the Great Spirit gave as a gift to us, a space in which to be as human as divinely possible, and as divine as humanly possible. A space to err, to fall, to believe, to doubt, to cry, to laugh. Our space, created by the simple motion of stepping back, the humble act of honoring the separate reality of an Other.

- How is the above description of *tzimtzum* familiar or new to you?
- What does the above say about Free Will? Do you agree? How do you understand Free Will and *tzimtzum* as (dis)connected?
- How does the image of God as stepping backward feel theologically?
- How does this image challenge you? Inspire you?
- How does it feel connected to the High Holiday season?
- Some *kabbalistic* teachers speak of *tzimtzum* as “concealment” rather than “contraction,” emphasizing that the Divine didn’t withdraw, but rather concealed God’s self among creation, with the material world functioning as a kind of covering or “husk” around sparks of the Divine. How does this notion of *tzimtzum* shift things for you? In what ways does it resonate (or not)?

Shevirah: Brokenness

Excerpt from “Nothing More Whole Than a Broken Heart (Rosh Hashanah 5778)” Rabbi Angela W. Buchdahl

Tonight, we celebrate the birthday of the world, which is Five thousand, Seven hundred and Seventy-eight years old! (Give or take a few billion years.) Even Mother Earth is a little sensitive about her age.

When we think of the birth of the world, most of us recall the creation story found in Genesis: First God creates celestial Lights. Creatures existing in Harmony. Adam and Eve living in the Garden of Eden. God creates a world of perfection. But soon enough, there is trouble in paradise, and—Fast-forwarding past the serpent, the forbidden fruit, and the sudden shame in nudity—we humans find ourselves kicked out of the Garden. We then spend our lives trying to get back to where we began—to Gan Eden—which was Paradise.

In my experience, however, this creation narrative does not ring exactly true. Every creation project that I’ve ever experienced, from childbirth, to home renovations, to... writing high holiday sermons, is much messier than that. And if we have to measure ourselves against an original state of perfection, we would never escape our own deficiency and inadequacy. We would live lives of apology for all that we are not, or of anger for all that was lost...now that we are no longer...in Eden.

But Kabbalah, our Jewish mystical tradition, offers a very different creation narrative, one that acknowledges the very impossibility of perfection. In the beginning—God’s presence filled the universe. Because God was everywhere, there was no room for anything else. So God had to contract, like a deep inhale, in order to make space in which to create the world. The mystics called this divine contraction *tsimtsum*. In that newfound space, God created darkness. God then poured a stream of Divine Light into ten vessels. But these vessels could not withstand such awesome, primordial energy. They shattered, showering holy sparks everywhere. Human beings were created to find these splinters of divine light, to make a *tikkun*—a repair—by helping God gather them together and lifting up these broken pieces, to restore and re-create the world.

What a strange, chaotic and beautiful narrative our mystical tradition has left us. One that acknowledges without apology today’s imperfect world. One that asserts that brokenness—not perfection, is our true inheritance. With this story of creation as our guide, our task is not to search in vain for some lost paradise, but to seek out tiny sparks of light in the divine debris that is all around us. To find holiness in the broken and imperfect.

- How does the above reflection on imperfection resonate (or not) with you right now?
- What stands in your way of lifting up Divine sparks in our world?
- How might you find holiness around you this Rosh Hashanah?
- The blast of the shofar is comprised of three kinds of sounds—a whole, unbroken sound; a tripartite sound; a broken staccato of sounds—and each series begins and ends in wholeness. How do you hear the Divine calling to you this Rosh Hashanah?