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Tzimtzum: Making Space for T'shuvah

The 16th century mystic R. Isaac Luria had a teaching, that when God decided to create the worlds, there was no empty space in which to create them, for God was in all places. God's light flowed without limit. So God withdrew God's own light to create a space in the center in which the worlds could stand. This notion is called, *tzimtzum*, God's contracting of God's Presence, in order to make room for the works of creation.¹

In popular theology, we tell this story of God mindfully withdrawing God's Divine Presence, to make room for humankind to inhabit and to be creative partners in the world. It is a perfect story for empowering us. Embracing our free will, we continue the ongoing process of creation. We do this by our own personal, daily renewal and through the good works that we do in the world.

But I wonder if Isaac Luria, in writing about *tzimtzum*, contraction, wasn't just talking about God, but telling us something about ourselves as well. Our Talmudic sages, 1,200 years before Luria's time, said this about humankind: created in God's image, *b'tzelem Elohim*, they said, our work is to imitate God. If God clothes the naked and feeds the hungry and defends the widow and orphan, then we too are to care for the needy, sustain those who hunger and be a voice for the disempowered. ² And indeed, we do all those things...and so much more. Our days are busy with our own call to task and duty, our own will, our own unique sense of creativity and purpose. Our days are full.

But what if Luria was trying to tell us: once God contracted to make a place for us in this world- now we, in imitating God, must be mindful to practice *tzimtzum*, in order to make a place for God's Presence to exist in our lives?

Can we make that space?

A medieval sage, Bachya ibn Pakuda, tells the story of his acquaintance, a Sufi teacher, who would pray, “God save me from a scattered soul.” Centuries later, a hasidic teacher, R. Ze’ev Wolf of Zhitomir, commented that “this happens to people who have many possessions in many places; they experience the scattering of their souls, because they have to give their attention to all these different things.”³ How well this describes so many of our lives, almost at every stage of our life- overworked, over-committed- tending to the needs of children and parents, work, school, and finances; our homes and possessions. We are all jugglers, masters of the balance beam. We find ourselves trying to work against the scatteredness, to work toward wholeness. Hidden within the notion of being scattered is the reality that a part of us is shattered, not whole at all.

Yet, when something shatters, space is created. And in that space, room for something more than ourselves.

This is the season to create space. This is the season to respond to the scatteredness. This is the season to *tzimtzum*, contract our

overfull lives, to open the space within us. The Holy Days is this gift of time and place to return to the path of personal transformation. We work on our interior world so that we might elevate and purify the soul, so that we become more whole than shattered; more one than scattered.

And this is the season to begin again. We return—again-- lovingly, compassionately, honestly, to the work of inner reflection.

The Talmudic sages taught us to use these ten days of t'shuvah for repentance and for asking forgiveness for our sins. We often characterize sin in one of two ways- either like a big boulder- a transgression that weighs heavily on our heart, or as a scattering of pebbles- careless words, unthinking deeds, our daily habits that, unaddressed, cause us to fall short of our potential for goodness. This is the season of the 4-step: we reflect, we confess, we ask forgiveness, we vow to change.

But what if we understood t'shuvah, through more than the lens of annual repentance, but through the lens of daily renewal?

What if we could understand t'shuvah as an act of turning and renewing, every single day? What if t'shuvah can be a daily act of *tzimtzum*, creating space within our interior life, for God to dwell?

In our morning *Yotzer Or* prayer we pray: *HaMichadesh B'tuvo b'chol yom, tamid-* daily You renew the works of creation for good, for always.⁴ We are one of the works of creation- alive, growing, filled with *Ruach Elohim*, the breath of God. And created in God's image, *b'tzelem Elohim*, we too create. Each day we bring new ideas into the world. We share new thoughts. We practice new acts of kindness. We foster growth in others; we grow ourselves. Creation is dynamic and expansive. Creation for us is the most natural thing in the world- it is what we do day after day. Faced with endless opportunities and possibilities in the world, we start anew. We create who we are, who we want to be, every minute of every day, with every mindful choice we make.

And we are created over and over again in each moment. Rabbi Lev Yitzchak of Berdichev taught that in every moment, in the act of

breathing, God renews us and that as each moment is new, the moment before it is gone. We get the opportunity to renew, constantly, which means we get to make a new choice about life, and this is the ongoing dynamic of t'shuvah. We can begin again, not stuck in the place we are, but heading mindfully toward the person we want to be. And because the last moment is gone, God mercifully accepts our t'shuvah both as our beginning again and our moving away from our prior transgressions.⁵ God becomes our number one fan, as it were, that we can move away from our shortcomings, and begin anew.

In this season, we sing: *Hashiveinu Adonai Aleicha, v'nashuvah-* Take us back to You, O God, and we will return. *Renew our days as of old.*⁶ Lev Yitzchak of Berdichev expounds on this to say: "Renew our days" is T'shuvah, we turn back to you with each breath; and You God, regard it as if it were our first breath. Imagine if we could start each day believing this reality- that we really are a clean slate, a new being, not defined by the shortcomings of yesterday- the insensitive

word, the impatience with listening, the misdirected indulgence, the rush of gossip that slipped out. In our morning blessings, we say, *“The soul that You have given me is pure, You formed it, You created it, You breathed it into me,”*⁷ Imagine starting each day really believing not just that the day is new, but that with every breath we take, we have a chance to be new, too. Yesterday’s habits do not need to return; yesterday’s fights, and disagreements, don’t need to hold sway. We can look at things anew, consider new possibilities. It’s as if we are being granted one huge, big “do-over.” But the catch is this: we must see it this way.⁸ God will see us anew, if we see ourselves, and our possibilities anew. We can’t continue in old behaviors and say, God will forgive, and see me as renewed. We can only do the work of renewal in partnership with God- our partner in creation, our partner in renewing ourselves for good, each day, always.

This sentiment is expressed in a 19th century prayer by Reb Noson of Bratslav, who writes, “May our divine service seem new to us every day; may we begin afresh, as if we had never served you

before. May we never succumb to thinking of ourselves as old or incapable of change...”⁹ The mystics taught that t’shuvah existed before the world was even created—that is how eternal and essential t’shuvah is to the world’s existence. Human life is inconceivable without the possibility of returning to God, or restoring our lost inner balance.¹⁰

How do we return to God every day? We simply open our heart and start talking. Reb Nachman prayed: “May it be my practice, God, going out to the fields to meditate among the trees and the grass, pouring out my heart in prayer....May my words flow until I pour out my heart like water before You.”¹¹ We open ourselves to honesty. Our words can’t just be rote words of prayer- for our tradition teaches that at times the gates of prayer are open, and at times, the gates of prayer are not open- Midrash likens it to the mikveh, the bath house; at times the place is open and at times the place is not open. But if our words are focused on heartfelt renewal, on repenting and improving ourselves, our tradition says that God is

always Present. ¹² We know that within ourselves, when we pray with heartfelt desire- we know when our prayers move us, when they are not rote words we are performing, but true and meaningful. Then they have the power to transform us. And if it moves us, then it moves God.

This is t'shuvah. To come back, over and over again, to the dialogue, to the heartfelt prayer, to the reflections on self that urge us to continue to grow and deepen and wizen. This is the interior work that connects us to the dynamic daily world of creation.

HaMichadesh, Renew me-- b'tuvo, in goodness-- b'chol yom, tamid- each day, for always.

There was a woman who came to visit the King, every day. This is a benevolent King, she was told. If you request something, your wish will be granted. But she saw what happened. Each day, people would come with their requests, they would be granted, and the people would leave, never to return. I am not here to have some desire fulfilled, she said. What I wish is to be in the King's Presence

each day. That is what fills my heart and gives me strength and courage for my life.¹³

So may it be for us. To walk through life strengthened by and encouraged each day, by God's Presence in our inner world.

T'shuvah is not a season, it is a mindset, and it is ours if we bring our heartfelt desire for returning and beginning anew. Then we can make of ourselves, and thereby our community, all that we have the potential to be. Gut yuntif.

¹ Tzitzum, Hillel Zeitlin, "Hasidic Spirituality for a New Era " The Fundamentals of Hasidism, pg. 77

² imitate God- Sotah 14a; Sifre, Deut. section 49, 13:5.

³ Or Hamei'r, Pekudei , by Rabbi Zev Wolf of Zhitomir, 1787, Korentz. IJS second trimester, pg. 12

⁴ Mishkan T'filah, Daily and Shabbat Morning Service, pg. 228. Reform liturgy says "*Uv'tuvo m'chadesh b'chol yom tamid*". The phrase "*HaM'chadesh b'tuvo b'chol yom tamid*" is from the continuation of the Yotzer, found in traditional prayerbooks.

⁵ Kedushat Levi, Eichah, by R. Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, 1798, Slavuta. IJS first interim, unit one, pg. 3

⁶ Lamentations, 5:21

⁷ Mishkan T'filah, pg. 196

⁸ see footnote 5

⁹ "The Flame of the Heart: Prayers of a Chasidic Mystic", Reb. Noson of Breslov, by David Sears, pg. 4. From Likutey Tefilot 1:776

¹⁰ Genesis Rabbah 1:4. "Rabbi Abahu bar Ze'ira said: Great is *teshuvah*, for it existed in the world before Creation". Commenting on this midrash, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz writes: "The implication of this remarkable statement is that *teshuvah* is a universal, primordial phenomenon...It is embedded in the root structure of the world...Before we were created, we were given the possibility of changing the course of our lives." Arthur Green, Judaism's Ten Best Ideas, pg. 51

¹¹ see #9, pg. 57

¹² Deuteronomy Rabbah, 2:12

¹³ Degel Machaneh Efrayim, Behukotai, by R. Moshe Hayyim Efraim of Sudylkov, IJS second trimester, pg. 20