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THE PSYCHOLOGY
OF TZIMTZUM

SELF

OTHER

AND

GOD

Maggid Books

Contents

Preface ix

Introduction:
What is Tzimtzum? 1

The Binding of Isaac:
The Intergenerational Dimension of Tzimtzum 13

Teshuva:
The Intrapersonal Dimension of Tzimtzum 43

Issachar and Zebulun:
The Interpersonal Dimension of Tzimtzum 75

Seeing the Voices:
The Suprapersonal Dimension of Tzimtzum 97

Appendix I:
Key Concepts in Tzimtzum 111

Appendix II:
Basic Assumptions and Questions of Therapy 125

Bibliography 129

About the Rotenberg Center for Jewish Psychology 137

Chapter 1

Introduction: What is Tzimtzum?

Sixteenth-century Safed saw the blossoming of the world of Kabbala with the arrival of the Ari HaKadosh, Rabbi Isaac Luria. The Ari joined an imposing assembly of kabbalists under the leadership of Rabbi Moses Cordovero, and he soon became a foremost teacher of Kabbala. The kabbalistic concept of *Haatzala* (Inspiration), God's transfer of part of His spirit to the world, was already an integral component of the existing body of kabbalistic thought and continued to develop during and beyond the Ari's time. *Haatzala* depicts the creation of the world as a process taking place within God Himself. What is perceived in the Bible as a single act of creation is seen by Jewish mystics as a process of empowerment and is described in kabbalistic writings as a relationship between God the Creator and His creatures. In this relationship, each generation emerges from and receives

The Psychology of Tzimtzum

something from the previous one, developing a constructive association between the two.

Building on the idea of *Haatzala* was the notion of Tzimtzum (self-contraction), propounded by the Ari and adopted by his disciples after his death. Like the entire body of kabbalistic thought, Tzimtzum featured prominently in hasidic writings. The narrative of God's creation of the world and His self-contraction is succinctly described by Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav:

Because of His mercy, God created the world; He wanted to reveal His mercy and, if He had not created the world, to whom could He show His compassion? That is why He created the world in the following manner: The starting point is Emanation (*Atzilut*) and the end point is the center of the material world. When He wanted to create the world, there was no room in which to create it because He is infinite and occupies all space. That is why God contracted the light to the margins and, through this contraction (*Tzimtzum*), an empty space was created. Inside this available space, all six days of creation and all of the world's attributes were brought into being; in other words, inside this empty space, the world was created.¹

The starting point for the world's creation is God's will to reveal His mercy. Here, however, arises a problem: since God is infinite and thus occupies the entire universe, there is simply no room for its creation! Accordingly, God creates within Himself a place where He contracts Himself, a place from which He

1. Nachman of Bratslav, *Likutei Moharan* (Jerusalem, 5740 [1979–1980]), 68:1.

removes His infinite light; inside this empty space, this vacuum, God creates the world.²

Tzimtzum generates the possibility for awareness of change, an awareness that does not reconstruct a previous situation but rather aspires to a new one. In light of the tendency of religions to encourage people to emulate God (*imitatio Dei*), this concept of God self-contracting could lead to an ideal model for human beings, according to which they contract themselves, while simultaneously giving to others, thereby mirroring God's creation of the world.

FREUD'S MYTHOLOGIES

In stark contrast to kabbalistic thought stands Sigmund Freud's depiction of the Oedipal individual. Freud transformed the story of Oedipus Rex from the well-known tale of the classical Greek playwright, Sophocles, to a now-familiar Western narrative, by placing Oedipus at the forefront of his theories. Let us briefly review Sophocles' famous drama before discussing Freud's conclusions:

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2. A concept similar to the kabbalistic idea of Tzimtzum also appears in the philosophical writings of certain Christian thinkers from the fifteenth century onward. In the Christian version of the concept, the human world and the reality surrounding human beings are described as a self-contraction in relation to God's perfection. Rather than relating to Tzimtzum *per se*, these Creation theories pertain solely to human beings because their purpose is to explain the human possibility of choosing evil. The hasidic-kabbalistic approach is the complete opposite: Tzimtzum is the result of a desire to do good, not the result of a desire to enable the existence of evil. Whereas the Christian model is intended to help people come to terms with the existence of evil in the world, the hasidic concept of Tzimtzum can be seen as a positive model encouraging believers to emulate God who contracts Himself. For an extensive discussion of this point, see M. Rotenberg, *Hasidic Psychology* (New Brunswick, 2004), pp. 9–15.

The Psychology of Tzintzum

Laius, King of Thebes, learns from an oracle about the fate of his son, who will one day kill his father and marry his mother; the king binds Oedipus' feet and orders a shepherd to hurl him from the peak of a mountain. Spared by the shepherd, who takes pity on him, Oedipus finds his way to the palace of Polybus, King of Corinth, who raises him as his son. After learning of his destiny, Oedipus escapes from the palace in order to avoid killing Polybus, believing him to be his father. On the road, he becomes involved in a dispute with someone and kills him, unaware that he has actually killed his biological father, Laius. Oedipus eventually arrives in Thebes, saves his mother, the Queen of Thebes, Jocasta, from the claws of the Sphinx, and marries her.

With his new rendering, Freud revived the tale as the basic underlying myth of Western culture, yet he gave it a distinctly new direction: the sexual craving of the child for his mother, accompanied by aggression toward and a desire to kill his father, with the result of intergenerational tension. In this new myth, a person's fate is not decreed by an oracle, but is rather to be found inside himself, an inborn element of the human personality. It is the sexual urge, which no person can resist – even by fleeing to Corinth.

If Oedipus Rex moves a modern audience no less than it did the contemporary Greek one... there must be something which makes a voice within us ready to recognize the compelling force of destiny in the *Oedipus*... a factor of this kind is involved in the story of King Oedipus. His destiny moves us only because it might have been ours; because the oracle laid the same curse upon us before our birth as upon him. It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual

impulse toward our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father.³

Assigning himself the role of oracle, Freud reveals to the members of modern Western society that intergenerational tension is their inevitable fate. This tension is thus elevated to the level of myth. Even if Sophocles does not move us as Freud claims he does, Freud has certainly moved us – so much so that there is hardly any aspect of Western culture which has not been deeply affected by the psychoanalytic myth of Oedipus. Although in Sophocles' myth only Oedipus is presented as facing his particular personal dilemma, Freud's psychoanalytic myth presents a scientific certainty; Freud's Oedipus is an Everyman. The psychoanalytic myth establishes an insoluble tension between the individual's sexual nature and his life's circumstances, his family, and his culture.

If Freud had merely created tension, however, it would have worked in two directions: just as the father is threatened by the son, so too the son is threatened by the father. If the tension were presented from both sides, alongside the fantasies of patricide we would also be hearing about fantasies of filicide; in other words, parallel to the Oedipus complex, we would also be hearing about the Laius complex. Yet Freud does more than just accentuate a myth; he points out where the solution lies. For Freud, the father's symbolic murder is the sole way for the son to become an adult, as inevitable as mythological fate. Out with the old and in with the new; the father must be done away with for the son to come into his own.

Interestingly, the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who was born nearly a century before Freud,

3. S. Freud, *Complete Psychological Works*, vol. 4 (London, 1900), p. 262.

developed the concept of progress and existence by means of patricide. At the heart of Hegel's philosophy is the idea that the human spirit develops dialectically, meaning that an entity's survival is dependent upon its victory over another entity, producing a new, stronger entity. The two original warring entities are known as the *thesis* and *antithesis*, whereas the new entity, containing elements of both thesis and antithesis, yet contradicting both, is called the *synthesis*. This continuing process of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis perfects the human spirit, and the ongoing process of perfection expresses itself in both human civilization and in nature:

The bud disappears when the blossom breaks through, and we might say that the former is refuted by the latter; in the same way, when the fruit comes, the blossom may be explained by a false form of the plant's existence, for the fruit appears as its true nature in place of the blossom. These stages are not merely differentiated, they supplant one another as being incompatible with one another... but one is as necessary as the other.⁴

Hegel presented truth as a concept that develops with time; every perception of truth exhausts itself, disintegrates, and is replaced by a succeeding one. This vision of progress and development parallels Freud's theory described above: a new spirit can develop only through the negation and erasure of the previous thesis, and the son can become an adult only at the price of erasing the father.

4. G.W.F. Hegel, *Hakdama LaFenomologia Shel HaRuach*, translated and explained by Yirmiyahu Yovel (Jerusalem, 5756 [1995-1996]), pp. 47-48.

The roots of this approach in Western society are ancient.⁵ In Greek mythology there are many instances where a generation of gods is created as the result of war and the destruction of the previous generation of gods. This mythological picture penetrated the Christian world, which dictated Europe's history for centuries. Paul, formerly Saul of Tarsus, the Jew who established Christianity, appears to follow this pattern. Paul's act can be seen as Oedipal: he killed the religion of the father (Judaism) in order to create from it the religion of the son (Christianity). This Oedipal act is also expressed in the very content of Christianity, where the religion's focus is shifted from the Father (God) to the Son (Jesus).

Similarly, we find traces of this idea in the nineteenth century. Charles Darwin's theory of evolution is a developmental approach that centers on the concept of the survival of the fittest, which represents a more advanced stage of a given species. The more developed species is able to overcome the lesser-developed species, and thus survives. Karl Marx also considered himself a disciple of Hegel; for Marx, however, historical progress is not an expression of the advancement of the human spirit, rather, the human spirit is an expression of real conflicts over the means of production. According to Marx, communism will triumph only after capitalism in its most extreme form has exhausted itself and has enraged the working class so much that the people are prepared to go to war against it.

We have presented here a brief outline of the development of dialectical thinking: the new vanquishes the old and the replacement is regarded as more desirable than its predecessor.

5. For a study that extensively surveys both the roots of the perception according to which history progresses through conflict and the broad application of that perception, see R.A. Nisbet, *Social Change and History* (New York, 1979). For a more extensive survey than the one appearing in this book, see my book: M. Rotenberg, *Rewriting the Self* (New Brunswick, 2004), pp. 72–93.

The philosophy of dialectics is totally unlike the warm, loving kabbalistic approach of Hasidism. In Hasidism, there is room for everybody. No one is pushed away, murdered, or negatively diminished. Whereas Freud assigns to each individual his specific fate from which he cannot escape, namely, a son's desire to kill his father in order to expand himself, Hasidism has created a living, breathing culture where all are encouraged to live life to its fullest, the old and young giving to and growing from each other. In addition, as we shall see, this culture even has certain methods for dealing with deviations from the social norm, including its own quasi-therapeutic customs.⁶

But how is this achieved?

THE GOD WHO CONTRACTS HIMSELF

I wish to outline here an alternative to the Oedipus model, an alternative which – inspired by the hasidic-midrashic tradition that developed in Europe during the advent of modernity – shall serve as a basis for a radically different therapeutic worldview. Hasidism posits a process of development in which intergenerational hierarchy does not give rise to conflict, and progress does not require war. Instead, Hasidism advances the possibility of a world based on intergenerational dialogue – between father and son and between teacher and student. Hasidism, with its intergenerational hierarchy, offers a process of development which need not generate a world of conflict in which progress requires war, advancing instead the possibility of a world based on intergenerational dialogue – between father and son and between teacher and student.

6. On hasidic therapeutic institutions, see my book: M. Rotenberg, *Hasidic Psychology*, and see also B. Kahana, *The Breaking [of the Vessels] and Their Repair as a Paradigm for Psychopathology and Psychotherapy* (PhD diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 5765 [2004–2005]).

This alternative I am proposing to Hegelian dialectics follows Martin Buber's concept of dialogue, by which the two dialoguing parties exist side by side.⁷ In the "I-Thou" relationship, the "I" and "Thou" remain intact and are not swallowed up in a dialectical process that must end in "I or Thou," that is, in a new entity that nullifies the previous one.⁸ In the course of this book, I will show the ramifications of the "I-Thou" dialogic model on the relationship between past and present, therapist and patient, and human relationships in general.

Buber's dialogic approach has not been accepted in practice because it exists in a world where the dominant thinking is shaped by Hegelian dialectics. Instead of the dialectical principle, where one element replaces another, I am proposing a dialogic process where two seemingly opposing elements enable one another to grow.⁹

Let us return to the myth of Oedipus and compare it to the narrative of God's creation of the universe. Laius and Oedipus both attempt to evade their fate (Laius removes Oedipus from the palace,

7. See M. Buber, *BeSod Siah: Al Adam VaAmidato Nokhaḥ HaHavaya* (Jerusalem, 5724 [1963–1964]), pp. 3–103.

8. S.H. Bergman, *HaFilosofia HaDialogit MiKierkegaard ad Buber* (Jerusalem, 1974), pp. 147–148.

9. However, I must point out that, in accordance with the dialogic formulation proposed here, "I and Thou" remain intact even at the negative level. Thus, although evil can serve as a "chair for good," to cite the Besht's famous saying, it does not become good; it contracts itself so that good can be derived from it: "The chair does not become a bench." According to the mistaken dialectical interpretation recently given to the popular concept "union of opposites," when evil becomes good, the reversal of Purim – "Cursed is Haman" to "Blessed is Mordechai" – is justified. However, this dialectical distortion of the *paradoxical* nature of midrashim runs the risk of deteriorating into something quite dangerous; according to that kind of thinking, "Heil Hitler" could eventually be justified, God forbid, on the grounds that, after all, the Holocaust contributed to the establishment of the State of Israel.

ordering his execution, while Oedipus tries to escape from the person he thinks is his real father). Both fail. Contrast their vain endeavors with God's decision to self-contract in order to make room for His creations, where He dwells in the world in all His glory, yet creates space for the work of His hands to grow and thrive. The starting point of God's Tzimtzum is not a decree of fate but rather a desire to reveal love, not a conflict between two entities but rather the desire of one of those entities to go beyond itself in order to meet the other. The hero of Tzimtzum is the father who understands that he cannot live alongside his child without contracting himself. Instead of distancing his son from him or trying to kill him, the father solves the problem by contracting himself in order to make room for the son; he thereby creates an open story, whose ending is not predetermined, a story that allows for the kind of dialogue Buber suggests. The father creates the change that enables the son to grow. Rather than having to preserve his existence by destroying his father, the son can live together with his father in peace.

In the course of this book, we will see how the concept of Tzimtzum can be realized in its different dimensions. In the second chapter, we will propose a model for intergenerational development, building on the foundations of Tzimtzum to establish an alternative to the dialectical Oedipus complex, in which father and son compete.

In the third chapter, we will propose the personal dimension of Tzimtzum as a model for relating to ourselves, to our urges, and to our past. Just as God's Tzimtzum leads to the creation of the world, the adoption of this principle can also direct us toward a personal process of positive change. We will offer midrash as an instrument for reinterpreting our personal history, a process of *teshuva* that does not cancel out the past.

Chapter four will move from the psychological sphere to the sociological one, showing how the concept of Tzimtzum can

have a profound effect on society. We will describe an interpersonal relationship that can be created when individuals fulfill themselves in different ways, making room for a range of social ideals (for example, the mercantile tribe of Zebulun supporting the scholarly tribe of Issachar), rather than placing themselves at identical starting points from which they must compete with one another. Similarly, we will consider the capacity of society to contract itself and thereby include those who do not behave normatively. This model of a community whose members contract themselves is valid not only for an entire society but also for smaller groups, such as neighborhoods, business partnerships, or even married couples.

The fifth and final chapter will deal with the dimension that I term suprapersonal and it will touch on psychology's ability to allow for religious and mystical experiences, instead of seeing those experiences as manifestations of insanity that must be overcome so that the individual can be "cured." Just as people can peacefully coexist through dialogue, psychology can peacefully coexist with suprapersonal, religious worlds without compromising its scientific methods.

In this, I seek to suggest the possibility of a different kind of psychology, one that does not compete with other theories of the ideal personality, but rather learns how to live side by side with them.