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Tzimtzum in Kabbalah: Space for Another

Traditions and Worldviews

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Tzimtzum in Kabbalah: Space for Another

> *“There was now a place where emanated and created beings could exist…”*

Hayyim Vital, Etz Hayyim, 1:2:4. Editorial English rendering of the approved Russian version, translated for the article using Sefaria Community Translation and checked against the Hebrew. The passage belongs to the symbolic account of worlds coming into being.

About this article

Tzimtzum is central to Lurianic Kabbalah: an image of the limitation or concealment of infinite light through which a distinguishable world becomes possible. Jewish thought has interpreted this image differently: what is limited, does it mean actual withdrawal, and from whose perspective does the world appear separate?

We examine the original question, elements of its symbolic language and disagreement over literal interpretation. We then consider a distinct contemporary ethical application: allowing another person to exist, act and respond while maintaining our own participation. The religious teaching about creation must remain distinguishable from our analogy of human relationships. A person does not become God; a manager does not create employees; a pause in conversation does not establish mystical cosmology. Within these limits, tzimtzum helps frame a difficult distinction: presence can support another person or quietly take their place.

I. A Question Within the Tradition

Tzimtzum asks how a finite world is possible in relation to an infinite source. A similar image appears in human conversation for a different reason: one participant can occupy almost all the space for answering.

A teacher asks a question and answers it herself. She then qualifies the answer, supplies an example and explains why other examples fail. The students listen attentively; everything that might have happened between them has already happened within one speech.

Nobody in this hypothetical episode intends to suppress anyone. The teacher is prepared, engaged and generous with explanations. Yet her presence occupies almost all the available space. Another good explanation cannot, by itself, enable a student’s thought. There must be room for an answer whose content is not known beforehand.

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“Tzimtzum” did not originate in education. Its developed Lurianic version is associated with Isaac Luria and his pupils in sixteenth-century Safed; much of the written inheritance is known through Hayyim Vital. Eitan Fishbane’s survey of Safed Kabbalah presents communities of teachers, pupils, shared study and ritual. Luria was not a solitary inventor of a universal technique; his thought was transmitted within Jewish religious life.

If existence’s source is understood as limitless, how do things become distinguishable? What lets us say that this is a particular thing rather than the source’s unlimited presence? Spatial imagery expresses the difficulty, but measuring distances between objects cannot answer it.

Familiar modern translations can obscure the problem. Infinity becomes personal potential, light becomes good energy, contraction becomes modesty. A tradition supplies vocabulary for pre-existing convictions: before understanding its question, we obtain a convenient answer. We should first read the image within its history, then test a human analogy.

Readers can understand the question without sharing its religious premises. For believers, the language may remain theological reflection. In either case, retain the distinction: students exist independently of their teacher, while their opportunity to answer depends on the lesson’s arrangement. The contemporary metaphor concerns participation; the Kabbalistic teaching concerns finite being’s relationship to the Infinite. Moving between them requires explanation.

II. The Image of Infinite Light

The opening of Etz Hayyim introduces tzimtzum through light filling all reality before worlds emerge. Branch 2, passage 2, describes infinite light, a central point and vacated space. Movement and form provide a language for distinguishable creation.

Ein Sof literally indicates an absence of end or limit; Or Ein Sof is the light of the Infinite. Light here is not electromagnetic radiation, and infinity is not a quantity of energy divisible into smaller portions. This is religious cosmogony: a symbolic narrative relating a source to the emerging world.

The visual pattern is striking. Light recedes from a central point; the vacated space is circular and uniform. The circle expresses equality in every direction. Understanding this matters more than drawing an exact map of God’s “location.” Geometry conveys a relationship: before differences arise, there is no basis for declaring one edge closer and another more distant.

Readers may ask whether naming a centre and sides before space exists produces a contradiction. The question reveals the limits of literal imagination. The narrative uses familiar spatial language for something unlike a familiar spatial object. A circle, point and line do not turn it into a physical hypothesis.

Nor is tzimtzum an ancient version of the Big Bang. One inquiry addresses origins within religious teaching; the other develops testable models of physical evolution from observations. Similar words do not establish a shared method of proof. Respect for both forms of inquiry requires preserving this difference.

The narrative makes an unexpected move: a distinguishable world becomes possible through limiting manifestation rather than simply increasing presence. We are interested in this structure without immediately concluding anything about modesty. A transition from cosmogonic image to ethics must still be constructed. Otherwise, every teacher's pause appears to illustrate the universe's structure, although it remains an educational decision with earthly consequences.

III. Space Appears Alongside Connection

Vacated space in Etz Hayyim does not entail final separation from the source. In 1:2:4, a line of light—the kav—enters it, describing the emerging worlds' connection with the Infinite. The story therefore continues beyond light withdrawing and ceasing to relate to events.

This passage also introduces order: beginning and end, above and below, directions. Their distinguishability relates to how light extends through the line. Measure and arrangement are not incidental obstacles within the narrative; they belong to the possibility of a particular world.

Notice the sequence. Difference becomes possible, followed by connection that does not abolish it. Keeping only the first produces a story of disappearance. Keeping only the second makes finitude almost indistinguishable against infinite presence. The symbolic language holds both together.

No ethical rule follows automatically. Nevertheless, the popular translation "tzimtzum means leaving" is already inadequate: it stops halfway through. Supporting connection belongs beside vacated space rather than disappearing for its sake.

We can cautiously return to the lesson. The teacher stops answering for a student but continues listening. She remains available for clarification, offers a manageable task and helps identify mistakes. Participation changes form. The student receives more than empty time: an opportunity to answer independently with support still available.

The analogy immediately reaches a limit. Human support needs negotiation. One student wants a hint, another a few minutes alone; a third has not understood the task. A mystical diagram cannot determine the right amount of help. The people, task and feedback determine it.

The image asks something useful: can we limit intervention without abandoning participation? It does not specify how long to remain silent or when to correct. It distinguishes “I am present” from “I fill everything,” opening room for a decision that previously seemed unavailable.

IV. Why Literal Interpretation Has No Single Settled Answer

Tzimtzum has no uncontested interpretation throughout Kabbalah. Disagreement concerns withdrawal or concealment of light and these images’ relationship to the divine essence. Moshe Miller’s “First Constriction” presents several versions. The progression “first literal, later psychological” is therefore historically too simple.

In chapter 7 of Shaar Hayichud Vehaemunah, Tanya’s second part, Shneur Zalman of Liadi rejects God’s literal removal from the world. Concealment does not mean that the world exists independently of sustaining divine presence. This is a particular Hasidic position, rather than a neutral translation of every Lurianic text.

Disagreements persist even among authors who reject simple spatial departure. Eli Rubin’s scholarly exposition compares Shneur Zalman with Hayyim of Volozhin. Without entering every aspect of the debate, retain its question: what is concealed—light’s manifestation, the apprehensibility of divine presence, or the created world’s relationship to it? These formulations are not automatically equivalent.

Modern readers may favour the more accessible nonliteral version as the only mature answer. Yet theological disagreement is not merely choosing imagery or rationality. Authors differently describe transcendence, presence and human perception. “Literal” itself requires explanation; it need not mean physical relocation between regions of space.

This encourages distinguishing objections. When someone says “that is impossible,” which version is rejected: a body changing size, light withdrawing, God’s absence, or limited access to divine manifestation? People can dispute one word while discussing different claims.

Our conclusion is narrower than selecting the final winner or discovering a universal formula of creation. We recognise serious interpretation within the tradition. Ethical use requires a further step, rather than replacing theological disagreement with a convenient slogan.

V. Tzimtzum Begins the Story; It Is Not All of Kabbalah

Vacated space can easily become a self-contained image detached from the rest. Lurianic thought also includes the breaking of vessels and tikkun—restoration or repair. Fishbane’s survey connects these with religious practice and restoration, extending far beyond advice to control others less.

We will not reduce a complex teaching to three instructions. For our purpose, note that making room does not guarantee a good outcome. A world's possibility and its damage belong to different moments in the narrative. Making space does not secure everything that happens within it.

The human distinction is clearer. A parent lets a teenager choose an activity; the teenager may make a mistake, become disappointed or change direction. The opportunity was not false because the first attempt failed. The parent still has questions about cost, safety, accessibility and actual conditions. Freedom emerges within an environment rather than a vacuum.

This is our example, not an interpretation derived from the breaking of vessels. It examines our language: "I gave you freedom, so everything must work." Opportunity then becomes a concealed contract for infallibility. The other person may choose only if the outcome confirms the giver's generosity.

The opposite distortion is "I stepped back, so I am responsible for nothing." Freedom names abandonment without support. One gesture of withdrawal cannot distinguish the situations. Examine remaining conditions, promises, consequences and whether conversation can resume.

Kabbalistic narrative does not prove an educational model. Its complexity does prevent an abbreviated conclusion. Tzimtzum guarantees no harmony. As a contemporary metaphor, its value lies in attending to difference, connection and responsibility after an opportunity is granted, rather than promising coexistence without conflict.

VI. How an Ethical Reading Develops

Applying tzimtzum to relationships does occur in modern Jewish thought, but it is an interpretive transition. It does not permit automatically crediting Isaac Luria with every contemporary recommendation.

Shira Wolosky's study of language in Judaic culture discusses Emmanuel Levinas's use of the image. In an ethical reading, interlocutors remain distinct, and proximity does not absorb another person. Relationships do not require one will or consciousness. This philosophical development preserves tension between connection and separateness.

In another context, Menachem Creditor relates tzimtzum to leadership as service. His religious commentary contrasts concentrating power in oneself with enabling others. This is a particular author's application, rather than a historical account of Etz Hayyim's original meaning.

Such examples show that metaphor need not be arbitrary appropriation; it can continue a conversation with tradition thoughtfully. That requires attribution and willingness to let the original concept mean more than today's task needs.

Our next distinction is our own: sometimes someone limits an action, sometimes a claim to explain another person’s entire life. We can keep helping while ceasing to regard our interpretation as final. We can state a position clearly and recognise another’s right to answer differently. What recedes is a form of intervention rather than the person themselves.

This avoids demanding self-erasure. If closeness always requires one participant to speak less, want less and yield first, “space for another” may rename existing inequality. Relationships should leave room for both. Self-limitation cannot be judged separately from who is asked to practise it and how freely they can refuse.

Nor does the metaphor promise a psychological effect. It neither replaces communication research nor establishes a universal therapeutic mechanism. Its modest merit is a question often obscured by good intentions: which part of my participation supports another’s independence, and which makes it impossible?

VII. Not Every Withdrawal Liberates Another

An apparently identical pause can offer time, punish through silence or withdraw promised help. “Tzimtzum” alone cannot distinguish them. Examine the relationship and what follows the pause.

Consider a hypothetical workplace meeting. A manager invites an employee to present a plan, clarifies missing information and states budget limits beforehand. Final decisions may still require agreement, but the employee’s contribution can change them. Participation is real.

Change one condition: the manager has already chosen but invites the employee to “speak freely,” rejecting every answer except the predetermined one. Speaking time is unchanged; decision-making space never appears. The pause serves an established outcome.

In a third version, the manager disappears despite alone possessing essential information and authority. The employee receives responsibility without means. Calling this trust does not remove the mismatch between task and conditions.

Simple questions expose the difference. Which answers can change events? What is within the participant’s power? What help can they request? Can they disagree without automatically losing respect or necessary resources? These test the situation’s arrangement rather than the moral attractiveness of intentions.

Positions matter. Someone who normally sets the agenda can limit intervention and expand others’ participation. Someone routinely interrupted needs room to finish. Asking both to “make themselves smaller” equally overlooks the existing distribution of space.

Intervention is sometimes required: a clear threat, a broken obligation or an error whose consequences others will bear. Voluntary restraint does not forbid conveying essential information or stopping danger. A contemporary application is judged by whether it preserves participation and responsibility, rather than maximises silence.

The metaphor's practical meaning is therefore discernment: where presence is needed, where its form has become excessive, and where "freedom" conceals missing conditions.

VIII. How Other Traditions Change the Question

Comparison becomes substantial when a similar image reveals different questions. Emptiness, withdrawal and non-appropriation do not establish a common teaching about creation.

Chapter 11 of the Dao De Jing relates vessels' and rooms' usefulness to unfilled space. Something functions because it contains room. Beside tzimtzum, this highlights non-filling as a condition of possibility. Laozi poses a different philosophical question, however; a vessel does not illustrate Lurianic cosmogony. Even an exact structural resemblance leaves subjects distinct.

Philippians 2:5–11 describes Christ's self-emptying and taking a servant's form: kenosis. The comparison questions fullness imagined only as increased domination. Yet the Christian passage concerns Christ, incarnation and obedience, rather than vacated space for worlds. Equating them loses both meanings.

The opening of Epictetus's Enchiridion distinguishes our actions from what is outside our control. This approaches non-appropriation differently: another's answer does not become my action because I care deeply about it. Stoic judgment and the Lurianic narrative of light have different grounds. We offer a limited ethical analogy without establishing borrowing.

In Analects XV, chapter XXIII in James Legge's numbering, shu is explained through refraining from doing to others what one would not wish oneself. This also limits action, but through relating self and other within human relationships. It requires no claim to be the source of another's existence.

These distinctions return us to the lesson. A teacher benefits more from asking whether she appropriates a student's answer than declaring her pause a universal religious law. Traditions refine a question; participants remain responsible for a particular decision.

IX. Closeness That Leaves Two People

Tzimtzum highlights an unusual structure: distinguishable existence becomes possible through limitation, while connection with the source remains. Within Kabbalah, it belongs to the theology of creation and a history of disagreement. Similar words about making room across languages do not make it all religions' shared teaching.

Contemporary reflection can retain two movements together: refrain from occupying all space while participating; allow an independent answer while honouring agreed obligations; preserve closeness without claiming to explain another's inner world exhaustively.

Both extremes are easier. Complete control offers certainty: another's response cannot unexpectedly change matters while everything depends on me. Complete departure offers release from consequences. A more attentive position maintains connection while accepting something beyond the anticipated.

Another person is not a reward for our modesty. They may reject the option, feel no immediate gratitude or dispute our understanding. A real opportunity includes these outcomes. Otherwise, the offered space is a stage for an already written role.

Participation can change closeness itself. In a hypothetical editorial collaboration, an experienced editor initially explains requirements and discusses a novice's drafts in detail. After several issues, the author can independently choose structure. Continuing to approve every sentence makes earlier help obstructive; refusing to read altogether breaks a promise to check facts. They need a new discussion: which decisions now belong to the author, which checks remain the editor's responsibility, and where joint decisions are still needed.

Making room here means permitting relationships to change over time. One successful gesture does not establish their arrangement forever. Another's independence may require different work rather than merely less intervention. Revising roles need not produce symmetry: knowledge, powers and responsibilities remain different. This develops our human metaphor rather than describing stages of Kabbalistic creation. Its earthly question is whether an opportunity can alter subsequent collaboration or must forever confirm the original role of its giver.

The distinction applies to reading tradition too. We leave room when its questions change familiar categories rather than decorate them with a new word. Understanding tzimtzum begins with religious depth and internal disagreements. Applying it metaphorically requires separate responsibility for how and why we do so.

Our teacher may finally hear an unexpected answer. She need not agree, but now encounters the student's thought rather than her own spoken on their behalf. This modest result is

concrete: one person’s presence has become compatible with another’s participation. A space in which two remain begins here.

What this means in practice

Choose one episode to examine participation, rather than immediately judging whether you are sufficiently modest in life. An ordinary conversation, shared task or offer of help may work when no urgent threat exists and the attempt’s consequences are understood.

Name the action occupying space: answering for someone, correcting before hearing their thought, proposing a solution before understanding the task, or allowing only pre-approved options. Description is more useful than “I am too controlling.” It enables change without turning observation into a verdict on personality.

Then identify what should remain: availability, attention, an agreed deadline, necessary information or promised help with part of a task. Withdrawal becomes meaningful when we know what is withdrawn and what remains.

In a difficult-decision conversation, one might ask: “I can offer options. Would you like me to listen first, or discuss a solution now?” No ideal answer is guaranteed. A testable opportunity opens: the other person can influence how their interlocutor participates.

Clarify its boundaries in advance. Shared budgets, mutual agreements and safety should be named. A transparent boundary often leaves more room than “do whatever you want” followed by an undisclosed prohibition. Freedom becomes clearer when conditions are visible.

Afterwards, examine the result. Could the person finish their thought? Did unexpected information emerge? Did their answer affect the next step? Did needed support remain? Or did they feel abandoned while we merely postponed an objection to deliver it more forcefully? Answers can guide adjustment without making a first attempt definitive proof of a method.

This is our suggestion for observation, not a Kabbalistic practice or promise of changed relationships. It need not end in concession. Attentive listening can reveal real disagreement, yielding two clearer positions rather than one shared opinion.

The teacher can try one question she does not answer first. The pause’s duration does not determine quality; what matters is whether the emerging answer can enter the lesson. Space for another becomes visible in their opportunity to contribute.

Key quotation

> *“That light contracted and receded towards the sides surrounding the central point; then a free place, air and empty space remained, proceeding from the central point itself.”*

Hayyim Vital, Etz Hayyim, 1:2:2. Editorial English rendering of the approved Russian version, translated for the article using Sefaria Community Translation and checked against the Hebrew. Section II examines the ensuing image of a uniform circle; III examines the continuing line of connection. The quotation returns to the theological image; human application remains a separate interpretive step.

Connections across traditions

These are our analytical comparisons. They establish neither historical influence nor one formula encompassing different teachings.

Comparison	What it reveals	Boundary
Vital’s tzimtzum ↔ Laozi’s unfilled vessel, chapter 11	Unoccupied space expresses a condition of possibility rather than mere deficiency.	Divine light and worlds’ emergence differ from a philosophical image of vessels’ and rooms’ usefulness.
Lurianic limitation ↔ kenosis, Philippians 2:5–11	Fullness need not be pictured solely as increased domination.	A finite world’s possibility and Christ’s incarnation are different theological subjects: a limited analogy, not identical events.
Contemporary ethical tzimtzum ↔ Epictetus, Enchiridion 1	One can limit the claim that another’s answer is one’s own action.	Stoicism examines judgment and control over action; the Kabbalistic image is used here in a contemporary ethical interpretation.
Creditor on restrained leadership ↔ shu, Analects XV.XXIII in Legge	Restraining one’s action can take another’s participation into account.	The Confucian formulation relates self and other rather than narrating mystical creation.
Wolosky’s discussion of tzimtzum ↔ Levinas on another’s irreducibility, §2.3	Closeness does not require absorbing another into one’s knowledge.	This is philosophical development within Jewish and phenomenological thought; Levinas’s ethics is not a neutral translation of all Kabbalah.

Sources

1. Hayyim Vital. Etz Hayyim, 1:2:2. Primary passage on infinite light and tzimtzum. Hebrew and Sefaria Community Translation; used to examine the symbolic narrative.

2. Hayyim Vital. Etz Hayyim, 1:2:4. The line of light and the emerging worlds' order. Used to distinguish vacated space from continuing connection.

3. Eitan Fishbane. The Kabbalah of Tzefat. Jewish Theological Seminary, 14 May 2024. Safed's historical setting, transmission through pupils, and tzimtzum's connection with other Lurianic themes.

4. Moshe Miller. First Constriction. KabbalaOnline / Chabad.org. An introduction to disagreements about limiting light, from a particular interpretive perspective.

5. Shneur Zalman of Liadi. Tanya, Shaar Hayichud Vehaemunah, chapter 7. Primary text presented with English translation and Lessons in Tanya commentary; the argument against God's literal removal is used.

6. Eli Rubin. Everywhere Revealed. Chabad.org. The discussion distinguishing concealment of light and essence, comparing Shneur Zalman and Hayyim of Volozhin.

7. Shira Wolosky. The Religious Meaning of Language in Judaic Culture. St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology, 2024, section 4. Discussion of Levinas's ethical reading of tzimtzum; his works are not presented as independently read here.

8. Menachem Creditor. Not for the Sake of Heaven. Jewish Theological Seminary, 5 July 2024. Contemporary religious commentary on limiting power and leadership as service.

9. Laozi. Dao De Jing, chapters 10–11, James Legge's English translation, Project Gutenberg No. 216. Primary text on non-appropriation and unfilled space's usefulness, compared in VIII and the map. These chapters were read, not the entire Daoist corpus.

10. Philippians 2:5–11, English Standard Version, Text Edition 2025. Primary Christian passage on kenosis, originally paraphrased independently in Russian for comparison; no verbatim reproduction of the modern translation.

11. Epictetus. Enchiridion, section 1, Elizabeth Carter's English translation, Internet Classics Archive, MIT. Primary text distinguishing one's actions from another's uncontrollable response; this passage does not establish the whole Stoic school's history.

12. Confucius. Analects, Book XV, chapter XXIII in James Legge's numbering, Project Gutenberg No. 3330. Primary dialogue on shu; the locator follows the edition actually read, differing from modern numbering 15.24.

13. Bettina Bergo. Emmanuel Levinas, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, revision of 29 September 2025, §2.3. Scholarly survey supporting the boundary between knowing about another and an ethical relationship. Totality and Infinity was not independently read in full.

Tags

tzimtzum, Kabbalah, Lurianic Kabbalah, Isaac Luria, Hayyim Vital, Etz Hayyim, Ein Sof, Or Ein Sof, kav, creation, finitude, infinity, divine light, symbolic language, literal interpretation, nonliteral interpretation, Shneur Zalman, Tanya, breaking of vessels, tikkun, ethical interpretation, Levinas, other, separateness, closeness, responsibility, self-limitation, participation, support, non-appropriation, Laozi, kenosis, Epictetus, Confucius, shu

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