

Divine Presence and Concealment in the Therapeutic Space

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Abstract

In the space between the caregiver and the patient is a matrix depending upon your worldview of emptiness, presence (I-Thou) or divine presence. A theoretical framework for the possibility of the divine within our interactions with patients requires a basic understanding of the theological and philosophical issues.

This paper explores the complex relationship between theism, pantheism, and panentheism within Jewish mystical thought, with particular focus on the kabbalistic concept of tzimtzum (divine contraction or concealment). By examining the philosophical positions of Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook, the Rebbe Rashab (Rabbi Sholom Dovber of Lubavitch), and the Ramchal (Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto), and Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav.

This study investigates how these thinkers engaged with questions of divine immanence and transcendence, particularly in relation to Baruch Spinoza's controversial pantheistic philosophy.

The paper demonstrates how different interpretations of tzimtzum serve as the cornerstone for distinct approaches to reconciling divine unity with the apparent separateness of creation and explores the implications of these perspectives for understanding secularism, religious experience, and the nature of redemption.

Keywords: Divine Presence; Concealment; Therapeutic Space

Theism, Pantheism, and Tzimtzum in Jewish Thought



Figure 1

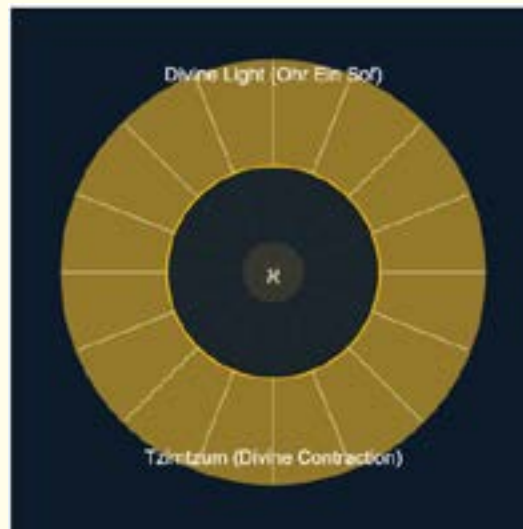


Figure 2

Introduction

The question of God’s relationship to the world stands at the heart of religious thought. Western religious traditions have generally maintained a distinction between God and creation, envisioning a personal deity who transcends the physical world while remaining actively involved in it. Eastern religious traditions, by contrast, have often emphasized divine immanence, sometimes collapsing the distinction between creator and creation. Within Judaism, this tension between transcendence and immanence has found particularly nuanced expression in mystical thought, especially in the kabbalistic concept of *tzimtzum*.

Tzimtzum, as developed in Lurianic Kabbalah, describes the paradoxical process by which the Infinite (*Ein Sof*) “contracts” or “conceals” itself to make space for finite existence. This concept has been subject to varying interpretations, with profound implications for understanding the nature of God, creation, and human experience. This paper examines how three significant Jewish thinkers—Rav Kook, the Rebbe Rashab, and the Ramchal—interpreted *tzimtzum* and engaged with questions of divine presence and concealment, particularly in relation to Baruch Spinoza’s controversial pantheistic philosophy.

Theism, pantheism, and panentheism: Conceptual framework

Before examining the specific views of our selected thinkers, it is important to clarify the conceptual framework within which their ideas operate.



Figure 3

Theism

Traditional theism, characteristic of Western religious traditions including normative Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, posits a personal God who exists separately from creation while remaining actively involved in it. As Pema Chodron critically characterizes it, theism can manifest as “a deep seated conviction that there is some hand to hold... thinking there will always be a babysitter available when we need one” (Chodron, quoted in source material). In the Jewish context, this typically involves a God who reveals divine will through Torah, establishes covenants, and serves as lawgiver and judge.

Pantheism

Pantheism, famously associated with Baruch Spinoza, identifies God with the totality of nature. In Spinoza’s formulation, “God and Nature” (Deus sive Natura) are one and the same. This perspective rejects the distinction between creator and creation, seeing divine presence as fully manifest in the natural world without remainder or concealment. Pantheism has often been viewed as heretical within traditional Jewish thought precisely because it eliminates divine transcendence and, with it, the framework for covenant, revelation, and free will.

Panentheism

Panentheism represents a middle position that affirms both divine immanence and transcendence. In this view, God interpenetrates every part of nature but is not exhausted by it, remaining greater than the sum of creation. As we will see, various forms of panentheism, informed by kabbalistic thought, characterize the approaches of Rav Kook, the Rebbe Rashab, and the Ramchal.

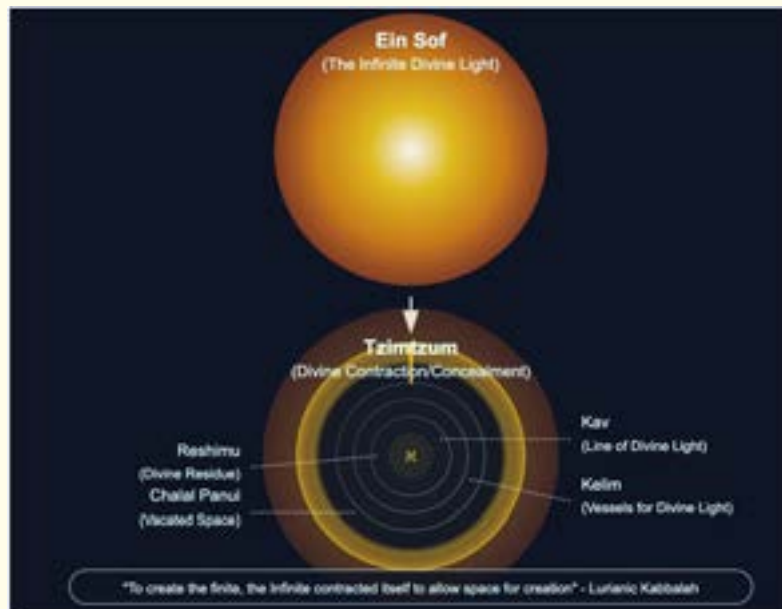


Figure 4

Tzimtzum: The cornerstone concept

The concept of tzimtzum (divine contraction or concealment) serves as the foundation for Jewish mystical understandings of divine presence and absence. Originally developed by Rabbi Isaac Luria (the Arizal, 1534-1572), tzimtzum describes how the Infinite withdraws or conceals itself to make space for finite existence. This paradoxical concept has been subject to varying interpretations, broadly categorized as either “literal” (tzimtzum kipshuto) or “non-literal” (tzimtzum lo kipshuto).

The literal interpretation suggests that God actually withdrew from a certain “space” to allow creation to exist independently. The non-literal interpretation, favored by Hasidic thinkers and others, maintains that tzimtzum is only an appearance from our perspective—God remains fully present but concealed, like the sun behind clouds.

How one interprets tzimtzum has profound implications for understanding the relationship between God and world, and for evaluating pantheistic claims like those of Spinoza. Let us examine how our three Jewish thinkers approached this concept.

Rav Kook: Tzimtzum as dynamic evolutionary process

Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook (1865-1935), first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of pre-state Israel and mystic philosopher, developed a unique understanding of tzimtzum that allowed him to engage sympathetically with secular thought while remaining firmly rooted in Jewish tradition [2].

Tzimtzum as concealment, not absence

For Rav Kook, tzimtzum represents a concealment of divine light rather than an actual withdrawal of divine presence. As he writes in *Orot HaKodesh*: “The Infinite Light (Ohr Ein Sof) is hidden within every facet of existence, and the limitation

(gevul) that appears is but a necessary condition for revelation” (Orot HaKodesh 2:319). This positions Rav Kook’s thought as a form of panentheism—God is both immanent within creation and transcendent beyond it.

What distinguishes Rav Kook’s approach is his dynamic, evolutionary understanding of tzimtzum as part of an unfolding historical process. As he writes in Orot HaTeshuvah: “The descent is for the sake of ascent... The darkness is for the sake of light, and all evil is but a path toward goodness” (Orot HaTeshuvah 4:4). In this view, divine concealment serves a pedagogical purpose, allowing humanity to develop independently and gradually uncover the divine presence that was always there.

Secularism as part of divine plan

Remarkably, Rav Kook extended this evolutionary perspective to include secularism, atheism, and even heretical philosophy as part of the divine plan. He saw secular Zionists and heretical thinkers like Spinoza not as enemies of religion but as unwitting participants in a cosmic process of revelation. Even Spinoza’s denial of divine transcendence contained, for Rav Kook, a spark of truth in its recognition of divine immanence.

As Rav Kook writes: “The world is filled with divine light; it is only the coarse shell of materiality that conceals it. When the spirit is elevated, the illusion of separation dissipates” (Orot HaKodesh 2:343). This perspective allows Rav Kook to envision a future redemption that integrates rather than rejects secular thought, raising it to a higher spiritual consciousness.

Rav Kook on Spinoza

Rav Kook had a complex relationship with Spinoza’s philosophy. While he did not challenge the cherem (excommunication) placed on Spinoza by the Amsterdam Jewish community, he recognized in Spinoza’s pantheism a partial truth—the insight that God permeates all existence. Spinoza’s error, for Rav Kook, was not in affirming divine immanence but in denying divine transcendence and rejecting the framework of Torah and mitzvot.

Rav Kook referred to Spinoza as a “soul that erred greatly” (Igrot HaRe’iyah 1:163) but suggested that his ideas contained sparks of truth that could eventually be redeemed and reintegrated into Jewish thought. This redemptive approach to heresy is characteristic of Rav Kook’s inclusive vision, which saw even negative forces as ultimately serving divine purposes.

The Rebbe Rashab: Tzimtzum as real concealment

Rabbi Sholom Dovber Schneersohn (1860-1920), the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe known as the Rebbe Rashab, developed a different approach to tzimtzum within the Chabad Hasidic tradition [3].

Tzimtzum Lo Kipshuto: Not literal but functionally real

Like Rav Kook, the Rebbe Rashab maintained that tzimtzum is “not literal” (tzimtzum lo kipshuto)—God does not actually withdraw from any space, as this would imply a limitation to the Infinite. As he elaborates in Hemshech Samech Vav (1906), divine presence remains fully intact despite its apparent concealment.

However, unlike Rav Kook, the Rebbe Rashab emphasized that this concealment creates a real experiential separation between God and creation. The world genuinely perceives itself as separate from God, and this perception serves the divine purpose of allowing for free will and moral responsibility. The concealment is real from our perspective, even if it is not an actual withdrawal from God’s.

Secularism as Klipah: Spiritual obstruction

Where the Rebbe Rashab differs most sharply from Rav Kook is in his assessment of secularism and heretical philosophy. In Kuntres U'Maayan (1903), he describes secular movements as klipot (spiritual husks or shells) that conceal holiness and must be actively opposed. Unlike Rav Kook, who saw secularism as part of a redemptive process, the Rebbe Rashab viewed it as a spiritual illness requiring correction.



Figure 5

Spinoza, (Ethics, Part I, Proposition 15)

"Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God".

Spinoza argues that everything exists within God, meaning there is no true absence of the divine. This directly contrasts with the Kabbalistic idea of tzimtzum (divine contraction), which implies a concealment or "vacated space" (*chahal hapanui*). According to Spinoza, if God is infinite and identical with Nature, then all space is filled with divine presence, leaving no room for existential "emptiness" [6].

The Rebbe Rashab on Spinoza

The Rebbe Rashab would have fundamentally rejected Spinoza's pantheism as a dangerous distortion of divine reality. In Kuntres Eitz HaChaim (1904), he explicitly warns against philosophies that blur the distinction between Creator and creation and remove the need for mitzvot and halacha—a clear reference to Spinoza-like thought.

For the Rebbe Rashab, Spinoza’s denial of tzimtzum destroyed the framework for Jewish law, responsibility, and free will. Unlike Rav Kook, who sought to redeem Spinoza’s insights, the Rebbe Rashab would have seen Spinoza’s ideas as klipah—a concealment of holiness that must be transformed through Torah rather than integrated on its own terms.

The Ramchal: Tzimtzum as structured divine order

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (1707-1746), known as the Ramchal, presented a systematic approach to Jewish metaphysics in works like Derech Hashem and Klach Pitchei Chochmah. His understanding of tzimtzum emphasizes divine order and purpose [4].

Tzimtzum as structured, purposeful process

In contrast to both Rav Kook’s dynamic evolutionary model and the Rebbe Rashab’s emphasis on experiential concealment, the Ramchal presents tzimtzum as a precise, structured divine process. As elaborated in Klach Pitchei Chochmah, tzimtzum creates a system of graduated divine revelation, allowing for different levels of spiritual reality to exist in proper order.

For the Ramchal, tzimtzum is neither an illusion to be transcended (as Rav Kook might suggest) nor a concealment to be pierced through mystical practice (as in Chabad thought), but rather a deliberate structuring of reality according to divine wisdom. This structure enables human beings to ascend the ladder of spiritual development through Torah and mitzvot.

The Ramchal would have viewed secular philosophy, particularly pantheistic thought like Spinoza’s, as a distraction from true divine wisdom. While not directly addressing Spinoza, the Ramchal emphasized in Derech Hashem that authentic knowledge of God comes only through Torah and revelation, not through unaided human reason.

For the Ramchal, divine unity is absolute, but creation exists as a structured system of divine emanations (Seder Hishtalshelut). While everything originates in God, there are real distinctions between different levels of divine light—from the highest spiritual realms down to physical reality. This structured hierarchy distinguishes the Ramchal’s approach from both Spinoza’s flat pantheism and Rav Kook’s more fluid panentheism.



Figure 6

Pantheism in light of tzimtzum: Can Spinoza be redeemed?

Having examined these three approaches to tzimtzum, we can now address the central question: Can Spinoza’s pantheism be reconciled with Jewish mystical thought? The answer depends largely on one’s interpretation of tzimtzum and approach to secularism.

Rav Kook’s evolutionary understanding of tzimtzum allows for the possibility that Spinoza’s insights could be refined and integrated into Jewish thought. By framing Spinoza’s errors as part of a hidden divine process, Rav Kook offers a mystical reconciliation where even heresy serves a purpose in revealing deeper truths.

For Rav Kook, Spinoza grasped one aspect of truth—divine immanence—but missed another—divine transcendence. In a future Messianic consciousness, these partial truths could be reintegrated into a higher Jewish spirituality that encompasses both divine immanence and transcendence.

The Rebbe Rashab’s approach leaves little room for redeeming Spinoza on his own terms. According to Chabad thought, a soul like Spinoza could only be “redeemed” through full teshuvah (return to Torah and mitzvot). There is no concept in Chabad that pure secular philosophy can be inherently holy—it must be transformed by Torah.

For the Rebbe Rashab, Spinoza’s pantheism is spiritually dangerous unless fully rejected, as it eliminates the experiential framework for free will, ethics, and divine-human relationship established by tzimtzum.

The Ramchal’s structured approach suggests that Spinoza’s pantheism represents a distortion of divine unity that fails to account for the ordered hierarchy of spiritual reality. While the Ramchal affirms that everything originates in God, he maintains that creation unfolds according to a precise divine plan with distinct levels of revelation.

From this perspective, Spinoza’s equation of God and nature flattens the rich spiritual hierarchy described by Kabbalah, reducing divine infinitude to natural processes. For the Ramchal, redemption follows a structured plan based on divine justice rather than an organic evolution of consciousness.

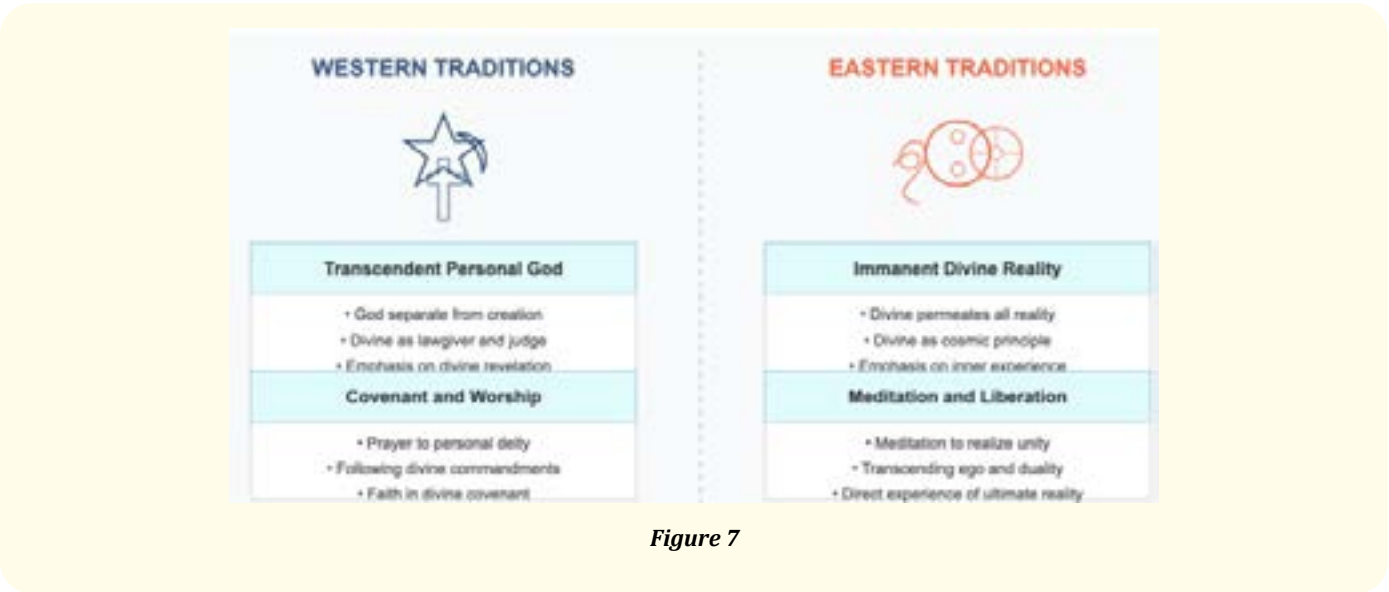


Figure 7

Eastern vs. Western religious thought: A broader context

The differences between these Jewish mystical approaches to pantheism reflect a broader tension between Western and Eastern religious thought. Traditional Western religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) emphasize divine transcendence, moral law, and covenantal relationship. Eastern traditions often lean toward divine immanence, non-dualism, and experiential unity.

As Pema Chodron articulates [1] “Non-theism is relaxing with the ambiguity and uncertainty of the present moment without reaching for anything to protect ourselves... Dharma gives us nothing to hold on to at all” (Chodron, quoted in source material). This Eastern perspective shares with pantheism a rejection of divine separateness, emphasizing instead the fundamental unity of all existence.

Jewish mysticism, particularly as developed by thinkers like Rav Kook, attempts to bridge these approaches through panentheism—affirming both divine immanence and transcendence. As articulated in the source material: “Hasidism introduces a more immanent, mystical, and personal relationship with God [while maintaining] a personal, interactive, and monotheistic concept of God rather than an impersonal force”.

Hasidism vs. traditional orthodox judaism: A parallel tension

The tension between divine transcendence and immanence also manifests within Judaism itself, particularly in the differences between Hasidic and traditional Lithuanian (Litvish/Misnagdic) approaches. As the source material notes: “Traditional Orthodoxy sees God as primarily transcendent, legalistic, and intellectual, while Hasidism sees God as immanent, experiential, and mystical... Similar to the West vs. East contrast, traditional Orthodoxy mirrors the structured, law-oriented, and transcendent view of Western religion, while Hasidism introduces an imminent, mystical, and experiential dimension, somewhat paralleling Eastern spirituality”.

These differences within Judaism replicate in microcosm the broader tensions between Western and Eastern religious thought, between theism and pantheism. Hasidism, with its emphasis on finding God in all things, represents a Jewish movement toward divine immanence without fully embracing pantheism.

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov: Tzimtzum as existential challenge

While Rav Kook, the Rebbe Rashab, and the Ramchal offer systematic approaches to tzimtzum and divine unity, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810) presents a markedly different perspective—one that emphasizes existential struggle, paradox, and the primacy of faith over intellect.

Rabbi Nachman [5] introduces the concept of “double concealment” (hester betoch hester)—not only is God hidden, but people are often unaware that He is hidden. As he teaches in Likkutei Moharan I:64, divine absence is an illusion that tests faith rather than an ontological reality.

“Even in the concealment, He is present,” Rabbi Nachman asserts, suggesting that tzimtzum represents an existential challenge rather than a metaphysical process. Unlike Spinoza, who denied divine concealment entirely, Rabbi Nachman acknowledges the experiential reality of God’s absence while maintaining that this absence is ultimately illusory—a test of faith.

Where Rabbi Nachman differs most sharply from both his predecessors and contemporaries is in his skepticism toward rational approaches to divine unity. In Likkutei Moharan I:52, he warns against what he calls “fallen wisdom” (chochmah she’nafla)—intellectual speculation that attempts to grasp God rationally but instead distances itself from Him.

Unlike Rav Kook, who sought to integrate secular philosophy into a progressive revelation of divine truth, Rabbi Nachman viewed excessive rationalism as spiritually dangerous. In Likkutei Moharan I:225, he compares secular philosophy to a “poisonous snake” that can corrupt the soul, suggesting that intellectual approaches to God often lead to spiritual darkness.

This position stands in stark contrast to Spinoza’s purely rational pantheism and aligns more closely with the Rebbe Rashab’s skepticism toward secular thought, though for different reasons. While the Rebbe Rashab opposed secularism as a klipah (spiritual husk), Rabbi Nachman rejected it as an obstacle to genuine faith and emotional connection with God.

The vacated space and personal experience

Central to Rabbi Nachman’s thought is his concept of the “vacated space” (chalal hapanui), described in Likkutei Moharan I:282. This concept mirrors Lurianic tzimtzum but emphasizes the personal, existential dimension of divine absence. Within this seemingly empty space, the individual struggles to maintain faith despite the apparent absence of God.

For Rabbi Nachman, overcoming this absence requires not philosophical systems or mystical techniques but simple faith, personal prayer, and emotional connection with God. His emphasis on the personal experience of divine presence—often through practices like hitbodedut (secluded meditation and prayer)—distinguishes his approach from the more systematic methods of the Ramchal or the historical consciousness of Rav Kook.

Rabbi Nachman’s position on divine unity and tzimtzum can be summarized in comparison to the other thinkers we have examined:

Thinker	Approach to Divine Unity	View on Tzimtzum	Response to Secularism
Rabbi Nachman	Faith and emotional experience reveal divine unity; intellectual speculation can be dangerous	Tzimtzum is an existential test—God only seems hidden but is always accessible through faith	Secular philosophy is dangerous but contains sparks of truth if subordinated to faith
Rav Kook	Divine unity is progressively revealed through history, including philosophy and science	Tzimtzum is part of history’s evolving divine revelation	Secularism is part of divine history and can be redeemed
Rebbe Rashab	Divine unity is understood through structured Chassidic contemplation	Tzimtzum is not literal but creates an experiential concealment	Secularism is a klipah (spiritual distortion) that must be rejected
Ramchal	Divine unity manifests through a structured hierarchy of spiritual reality	Tzimtzum creates an ordered system of divine emanation	Secular philosophy distracts from divine wisdom
Spinoza	Divine unity is purely rational and has no relationship with Jewish law	There is no tzimtzum—God is fully present in all things	Secular philosophy replaces religion

Figure 8

This comparison reveals the diversity within Jewish mystical thought regarding divine presence and absence. Rabbi Nachman’s existential approach, with its emphasis on faith over intellect, provides yet another lens through which to understand the complex relationship between God and creation.

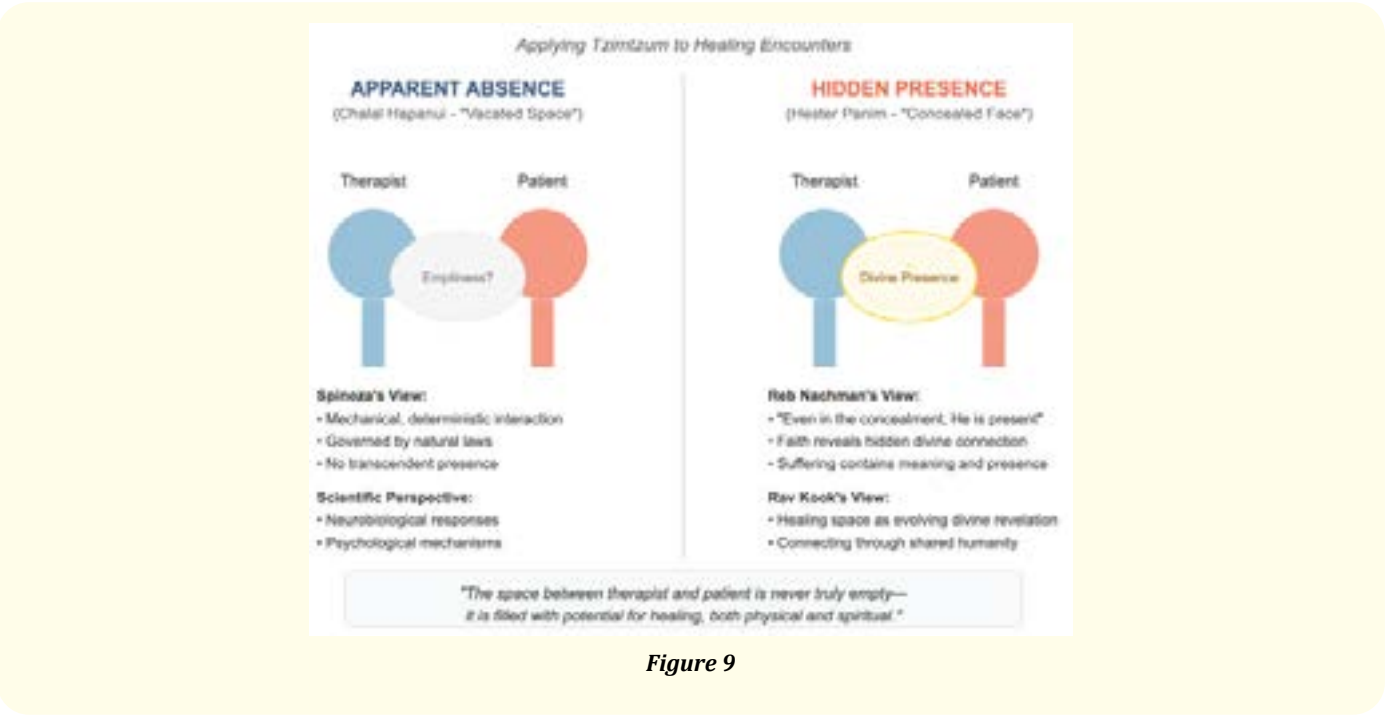


Figure 9

Conclusion: Divine presence, absence, and the search for unity

The question of divine presence and absence—whether God is separate from or identical with creation—lies at the heart of religious thought. Jewish mysticism, through the concept of tzimtzum, offers a nuanced approach that affirms both divine immanence and transcendence. However, as we have seen, different interpretations of tzimtzum lead to different assessments of pantheistic thought like Spinoza’s.

Rav Kook’s evolutionary approach sees even Spinoza’s heresy as part of a cosmic tikkun (repair) process, containing sparks of truth that will eventually be integrated into a higher consciousness. The Rebbe Rashab’s emphasis on divine concealment leads him to reject Spinoza’s denial of tzimtzum as dangerous to the framework of free will and Torah. The Ramchal’s structured hierarchy maintains that divine unity must be understood within the ordered system of spiritual reality. Rabbi Nachman’s existential perspective emphasizes the personal struggle of faith within the apparent absence of God, rejecting intellectual approaches in favor of emotional connection.

These diverse approaches reflect the ongoing Jewish engagement with the paradox of divine presence and absence, unity and separation. They remind us that the question is not simply whether God is present or absent, but how divine presence manifests within and beyond the constraints of our finite perception.

As we continue to wrestle with these profound questions, the concept of tzimtzum offers a framework for understanding how divine infinitude can be reconciled with finite existence, how transcendence and immanence can coexist, and how apparently opposing religious perspectives might ultimately be unified in a higher truth—whether through Rav Kook’s progressive revelation, the Rebbe Rashab’s mystical contemplation, the Ramchal’s structured hierarchy, or Rabbi Nachman’s leap of faith.

Implications for the caregiver

The interaction between doctor and patient can be profoundly informed by the mystical concepts of tzimtzum, divine unity, and the “vacated space” (chalal hapanui) as discussed by Rav Kook, Reb Nachman, the Rebbe Rashab, and Spinoza. The key question is: Is the space between them truly empty, or is it filled with divine presence? This has deep implications for medical ethics, empathy, and the role of spirituality in healing.

The doctor-patient space as a form of tzimtzum

In the Kabbalistic model, tzimtzum creates space for the Other—God’s withdrawal allows the world to emerge. Similarly, a doctor must create space for the patient—by listening, by not imposing their own views too strongly, and by allowing the patient’s experience to unfold.

Reb Nachman would say that even when this space feels empty (when a patient feels abandoned or unheard), it is still filled with God’s presence. Rav Kook would argue that this space is not static—it evolves as the doctor and patient connect, revealing deeper truths about healing.

Therefore, the doctor does not dominate the space but allows room for the patient’s voice, much like tzimtzum allows for human free will and the space between doctor and patient should not feel like an empty void but a dynamic, living presence. A patient suffering from illness may feel God is absent, but healing comes when they realize God is still there, even in the silence. A physician can embody this divine presence through deep listening, kindness, and faith. For example, a terminally ill patient may feel despair, believing their suffering means abandonment. So, a doctor who acknowledges their suffering while still radiating presence and hope transforms the experience from a void into a filled space. Compassionate care reveals divine presence where patients feel only absence.

A purely scientific doctor (Spinoza’s model) sees healing as biological processes—useful but emotionally distant. A mystical doctor (Reb Nachman’s model) would recognize that the interaction itself is transformative, and divine presence is always there. For me the best approach is a physician who integrates both: rational science and a deep awareness of the sacredness of the encounter.

Conclusion: Healing as Revelation

- Doctors are “co-creators” with God—they engage in tzimtzum by making space for healing.
- The space between doctor and patient is not empty but a living conduit of divine presence.

Concept	Doctor-Patient Application
Tzimtzum	The doctor creates space for the patient's voice, avoiding dominance.
Chalal Hapanui	Even in suffering or silence, healing potential exists.
Reb Nachman's Faith	The doctor brings presence to the patient, revealing hidden divine connection.
Rebbe Rashab's Chabad Thought	The doctor serves as an intermediary for divine energy.
Rav Kook's Evolutionary View	The relationship itself is part of a larger divine unfolding.
Spinoza's Rationalism	Medicine is purely scientific, with no divine presence involved.

Figure 10

- True healing is not just physical but also spiritual, existential, and relational.
- By acknowledging the divine within the doctor-patient relationship, medicine moves beyond science into the realm of emunah (faith) and tikkun (rectification).

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