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I See Angels

Eric Suben is the author of numerous children's books, co-author of three writer's guides, and his articles have appeared in periodicals ranging from newspapers to scholarly journals

I.

In Wim Wenders' film *Wings of Desire*, which I recently re-watched after many years, angels are handsome, moody, Armani-clad beings, elaborately bewinged when aloft among Berlin's spires, unseen by human eyes when below riding the subway or walking the streets or crammed into the back of an ambulance with those in distress. They can hear human thoughts, though, and they can grant unexpected solace to those whose thoughts are troubled. Their touch, though unfelt, can even ease physical pain and renew hope. The film makes angels seem so cool.

When I first saw *Wings of Desire* in a black-box theater in mid-city New Orleans, I was far from recognizing angels in my own life. I was a freshly divorced, newly minted lawyer, adrift in the Big Easy, where I had wandered far from my native New York. I knew only that I would love to feel comforted as those in the film had been, but I was painfully conscious of the absence of even an evanescent angel presence in my own life. The movie (even if not an actual angel) brought me the idea of solace, though. Angels could be out there somewhere, and one could be drawn to my need, if great enough, and if the angel happened to be nearby. (Curiously for winged creatures, Wenders's angels seemed stuck in Berlin.)

This was in the early 1990s, when angels seemed to be everywhere (including arty films). But I wasn’t someone who went out and bought winged figurines or dashboard statuettes. The angel trend made me uneasy then. Unlike Wenders’ cool Continental wingmen, angels as popularly depicted seemed kind of saccharine and aesthetically suspect. On hearing the word, I would think of a Christmas tree topper used by my boyhood friend Timmy’s family—a sort of cardboard cone covered in white satin, trimmed with gold rickrack, with little wire wings covered in gauze stapled in back, topped with a face-painted Styrofoam ball, tiny blond wig, and a halo of stiff golden thread. Not insignificantly, in my view, the angel was hollow inside.

This view of the thing surely had something to do with my being a Jew, which made that sort of depiction feel foreign to me from the start. And it had a lot to do with my being an intellectual snob. I could admit to having been charmed, as an undergraduate English major at NYU, by John Milton’s depiction of angels (the good ones) in *Paradise Lost*. They seemed relatable, and had character and warmth. Professor Low, the instructor who taught the Milton colloquium, had the demeanor of a Presbyterian minister, but even he glowed slightly at the angel Raphael’s description of angel sex in response to Adam’s inquiry:

> Whatever pure thou in the body enjoyest,
> (And pure thou wert created) we enjoy
> In eminence; and obstacle find none
> Of membrane, joint, or limb, exclusive bars;
> Easier than air with air, if Spirits embrace,
> Total they mix, union of pure with pure
> Desiring, nor restrained conveyance need,
> As flesh to mix with flesh, or soul with soul....

What a vision for a bashful undergraduate! Raphael even blushes as he tells it. To experience ecstatic union without the inconvenience, the uncertainty, the mess of a corporeal body (even a young one)!

I never got to have that angelic experience, but I did get to sit at the seminar table while Professor Low taught John Donne’s songs and sonnets. In one of these sonnets, “The Ecstasy,” the metaphysician ruefully observes, “Love’s mysteries in souls do grow, /But yet the body is his book.” A mere mortal man, alas, I would have to look there. And that was the quest the failure of which had landed me in a black-box theater in New Orleans, alone, tearing up at *Wings of Desire*.

II.

The only reliable information I had about angels came from the Hebrew Bible, or illustrated versions I'd read as a boy in religious school. Those angels generally looked just like the humans they were sent to visit, usually with a message about a miraculous birth, or the destruction of a sinful city.

There are the three angels who visit Abraham, announcing the birth of Isaac to his ninety-year-old wife, Sarah. Two of those angels go on to visit Abraham's nephew, Lot, living in Sodom, to warn him of the city's destruction. The men of Sodom demand that Lot send the strangers out to be victimized and assaulted. Lot actually offers to send out his own daughters to the rapacious crowd rather than the angels. It doesn't come to that, but only because the angels themselves pull Lot back inside.

These angels truly live up to their Hebrew name, *malakhim*, which translates as "messengers." Angels of a different kind put in an appearance before that, in one of the weirder episodes of Genesis. Just before Noah's flood, the Torah tells us that the *b'nai elohim*, finding the daughters of men fair, coupled with them, and begat a race of giants or supermen of some kind.

I read the story as an allegory, and one that refracts and possibly harmonizes all these visions: angels and humans are combined, conjoined, and inhabit each of us (albeit in varying proportions).

Maybe it took this insight to see there had been angels in my life. Each had a message to impart at a crucial time, and each message redirected me, for lasting good, I believe. My angels were real enough, visible, palpable—and all were female. All my angels were *malakhim*, in the literal sense, although the word is male-gendered. Perhaps each would be described in modern Hebrew as a *shlihah*, that is, a woman carrying a message, although this leaves out the mystical dimension at work.

III.

When I try to describe my experiences of angel visitations, they tend to sound prosaic. But ultimately, without all the set decoration—the unleavened bread, the terebinth of Mamre—what were the angels visiting Abraham really saying? "You're going to have a baby." Words someone out there gets to hear on any given day of the year. This is not to diminish that Sarah, listening behind the tent flap, had been waiting to hear these words for most of her ninety years, but still: these thrilling words are said every day.

What were the two angels telling Lot? "Get out of town." Okay, maybe not as common as what their colleague had told Abraham, but not exactly exotic, if you discount the fire, brimstone, and salt pillar that ensued.

If I try to describe my angel visitations with some approximation of Biblical diction and syntax, perhaps I can convey some of how they feel to me.

Marcy

As I wandered disconsolate among the milling throng outside the examination room, my feet, seemingly of their own accord, began moving me toward the building exit. Leaving now, the pain of failure could be stemmed.

Behold! A being with golden hair blocked my path. “Have faith!” the angel exhorted, appearing in the guise of Marcy, my law school friend, she of the flowing garments, carmine lips, and ruby fingernails. “Thou shalt succeed in all thine endeavors.”

(Commentary: Feeling sure I had just failed the Corporations section of the Louisiana bar exam, I convinced myself there were not enough points in the remaining sections for me to pass the test as a whole, even if I scored every point.

“Marcy,” I said, “I failed. I’m going home now. There’s no point in finishing the test.”

What Marcy said, actually, was, “March yourself in there and take that test.”

Two months later, the annunciation behind her actual words came to pass.)

Fran

Entering the seminary door, I gazed about me at the groups of happy chatterers. My heart dropped in my breast to think that once again, I was alone in a throng. I would be ever a seeker of companionship, never a finder.

A melodious voice reached me from close behind. I turned, and there stood one with black hair, bright red lips, and quivering earrings. “You shall wed again,” she declared. “Your return from your sojourn as a stranger in a strange land shall not have been in vain!”

(Commentary: I ran into Fran, an author from my publishing days, at a Jewish Theological Seminary program entitled, “How Jewish Do You Want to Be?” Though I often went to events like that in hopes of finding my bashert (or at least a date), the effort had started to feel futile.

This was our first encounter since I’d returned to New York two years before. Fran’s exact words were, “Look at you. Still handsome. And a lawyer! You won’t have any trouble finding someone.”

Bolstered, I met Beth during a workshop later that afternoon. Although Beth was not my bashert, our liaison steered me in the direction that would ultimately lead me to her.)

Thea

The table was laid with flatbread, sheep’s milk cheese, and olives. The presence before me, pale-skinned, dark-haired, addressed me thus: “Leave this land and travel to the land of your forefathers, the land promised to Abraham, Issac, and Jacob. There you shall see signs and wonders.”

(Commentary: Dining at a Greek restaurant with Thea, a publishing friend, I told her the woeful tale of my breakup with Beth, the sting of which was exacerbated by my approaching fortieth birthday.

Thea said, "Forty is the new thirty. You have plenty of time."

"But I don't know what to do for my birthday," I said. "I was planning to go on a singles retreat to Israel. But last week they told me the retreat was cancelled, and returned my deposit."

"You should go anyway," Thea said. "Tomorrow morning, just pick up the phone, call the airline, and go."

I did just that. And two weeks before my trip, I met my bashert, named Marina. The limo from Ben Gurion Airport trailed a truck bearing the logo "Marina" all the way to Jerusalem. There was my sign and wonder.)

IV.

After I left New Orleans, but before my encounters with Fran and Thea, I was synagogue shopping around my new neighborhood in Manhattan's East Twenties. One random Saturday, I wandered into a rabbi's sermon about Joseph and his brothers, who sold him into slavery in Egypt. At the start of that episode, Jacob instructs young Joseph to seek his brothers. The King James Version continues the story thus:

> And a certain man found him, and, behold, he was wandering in the field: and the man asked him, saying, What seekest thou? And he said, I seek my brethren: tell me, I pray thee, where they feed their flocks. And the man said, They are departed hence; for I heard them say, Let us go to Dothan. And Joseph went after his brethren, and found them in Dothan.

Joseph follows the man's direction and finds his brothers, with the well-known consequences.

The point the rabbi made was that the man is nameless and never mentioned again. But his single act of giving Joseph directions changes the course of Joseph's life and, indeed, of history. So can each person's smallest action be changing the world in ways perhaps only G-d can see in that moment.

Shortly after I heard this sermon, I was walking on lower Broadway, near City Hall, when a stranger stopped me for directions.

"How do I get to West Broadway and Chambers?" he asked.

Pointing west, I said, "That way one block, then turn right."

I had walked a block or two downtown before I realized I had steered him wrong. West

Broadway was *two* blocks from where I had pointed the way. If he turned where I said, he would find himself on Church Street.

I was annoyed with myself but shrugged it off. Thinking about the episode that evening, my mind returned to the man who gave Joseph directions. Maybe in some way, I had been this stranger's angel. By misdirecting him at the moment I did, perhaps I prevented his being—I don't know, crushed by a falling crane, struck by a speeding taxi. Maybe when he turned on Church Street, he bumped into his bashert, whom he would have missed otherwise.

Or maybe not. The point is, it's possible I was his angel in that moment. It's even possible that my slight misdirection somehow altered the course of human history. If so, I can't take credit for being the angel in that moment. It just happened.

IV.

While Marcy, Fran, and Thea were all friends, they were not intimate friends. And the angels who visited Abraham and Lot were nameless apparitions. Joseph's angel was just a random stranger along the road, as I was to the wanderer on lower Broadway. Wenders's and Rilke's angels are unnamed, and felt rather than seen. I find it curious that the angel never seems to be someone close to you in your life.

Although Beth turned out not to be my bashert, she gave me one pertinent lover's gift, a Sarah MacLachlan CD containing the song "Angel." This slow, sad melody, sung in MacLachlan's soaring soprano, touched that place in me that vibrates to the idea of angels as I conceive them. She sings:

> You are pulled from the wreckage
> Of your silent reverie
> You're in the arms of the angel
> May you find some comfort here

Many was the night, after my breakup with Beth and before my meeting with Marina, that I found some comfort in this song.

My wife, my brother, my aged parents, all have a need for my tenderness and compassion, which comes and goes. I reassure myself that giving all the time would not make me an angel. Giving in the right moment, when the other is ready to receive, can make me the angel, though neither of us may know it at the time.

VI.

On Friday nights, welcoming the Sabbath, many Jewish people sing "Shalom Aleichem," a song welcoming angels into the home for the evening meal. Last High Holidays, our rabbi, in his sermon, suggested that the angels returning from synagogue with us are our children. Uncharacteristically for him, he seemed to tear up as he said this. He is the father of eight.

I am the father of three. And it's true, they are angels to me. As infants, they showed me the well of my own tenderness, as an angel showed Hagar the well of water that would save her child. Now, as young adults, they argue me out of my misconceptions, as Uriel argued with Ezra.

And, like angels, they will not be with me always. Unlike the other angels in my life, though, they were constant presences for a long time, bringing solace, joy, vision, and healing. Now they are moving out into the world, bringing (I pray) their gifts where needed.

They may not know it, and the receivers of their angel messages may not know it. But I know the angels are there in them, and I pray that in the right moment, they will find a world ready to receive.

Divinity and History in the World of Chabad

Chesky Kopel is an editor at The Lehrhaus and a lawyer, writer, and lecturer living in Philadelphia with his wife Talya and their two children.

Review of Eli Rubin, *Kabbalah and the Rupture of Modernity: An Existential History of Chabad Hasidism* (Stanford University Press, 2025).

I have a theory that most observant Jews perceive Chabad primarily as a culture. Chabad represents a highly visible archetype of a Jew, not only with a unique religious orientation but also with a distinct tradition of given names, distinct *nusah* of prayer, distinct institutions, and with its own unquestionable center of gravity in the Crown Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn. Recognition of Chabad as a unique culture does not necessarily inspire antagonism; instead, the most common relationship today is one of appreciation, but from a distance. We speak of Chabad with grateful cliches, referring to its global footprint and its relentless commitment to outreach. In the words of a recent Prime Minister of Israel, "there is no one like Chabad in the world. Whenever Jews are thrust into distress, no matter where in the world this happens, you will find there angels of Chabad showing up to assist."

This association of Chabad with a contemporary set of people and practices makes it more difficult for non-Hasidim to encounter Chabad as an intellectual and literary tradition. The disconnect is especially pronounced in the contemporary "neo-hasidic" flourishing of engagement with hasidic textual traditions, a trend driven by the popular conviction that "the insights of Hasidism are too important … to be left to the Hasidim alone." [1] To be sure, neo-hasidic thought has engaged with Chabad ideas, but these are mostly likely to focus on the vision and personality of Chabad's seventh and final rebbe, R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson ("Ramash"), and less likely to engage with the full corpus of Chabad's tradition. Material published here in *The Lehrhaus* provides a highly unscientific but hopefully useful illustration: The four *Lehrhaus* articles about Chabad thought all confine their analysis to the last rebbe.[2] In contrast, at least seven articles address elements of the Izhbitz-Radzyn "school" of hasidic philosophy.[3] Unlike in the Chabad case, modern Jews' ability to conceive of and grapple with an existentially compelling Izhbitz-Radzyn body of ideas is generally uncomplicated by interaction with contemporary Radzyner *hasidim*.

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[1] Arthur Green and Ariel Evan Mayse, eds., *A New Hasidism: Roots* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2019), xvii.

But Chabad thought, too, is rich, sophisticated, and systematic. It would be a gross understatement to say that its corpus of ideas is underexplored by today's neo-hasidic searchers. I can speak only for myself, but I have been waiting for a book to come along and invite the Chabad-curious into this edifice of meaning, much as Chabad's *shluchim* warmly invite all comers into their homes. Eli Rubin, a prolific writer of Chabad philosophy, holder of a PhD in Hasidism from University College London, and a contributing editor at Chabad.org, is the man for the job.

A Cosmology Defined by *Tzimtzum*

Rubin's new book, *Kabbalah and the Rupture of Modernity*, offers, per its subtitle, "An Existential History of Chabad Hasidism." Rubin organizes this history around the central motif of *tzimtzum*, God's contraction of God's infinite light to enable the creation of a finite cosmos. R. Hayyim Vital famously summarized the Lurianic conception of *tzimtzum* as follows:

> Before the emanations were emanated and the creations created there was a simple supernal light that filled all existence, and there was no cleared place, empty space, and void at all. Rather all was filled with that simple infinite light, and there was neither beginning nor end… And when it arose in His simple will to create worlds and emanate emanations…He then contracted (*ṣimṣem*) Himself within the central point in Him, in the very center of His light…and contracted that light to the parameters around the central point, and then cleared a place and space, and an empty void

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[2] See Ariel Evan Mayse, "Coherence, Contradiction, and the Philosophy of Chabad" (Dec. 19, 2024); Ilan Fuchs, "The Lubavitcher Rebbe's Theory of Education" (Feb. 11, 2021); Yosef Bronstein, "Selflessness and the Self in the Teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe" (July 4, 2019); Eli Rubin, "The Giving of the Torah and the Beginning of Eternity: Reflections on Revelation, Innovation, and the Meaning of History" (June 5, 2019).

[3] See Reuven Boshnack, "Man vs. Prophecy? A New Look at the Classic Discussion of Predetermination in the Izhbitz School" (Jan. 8, 2025); Aton Holzer, "On Yom Kippur, Determinism and National Unity" (Oct. 9, 2024); Batya Hefter, "An Ishbitz-Radzyn Reading of the Judah Narrative: Binah Ba-Lev–An Understanding Heart" (Jan. 1, 2024); Batya Hefter, "An Ishbitz-Radzyn Reading of the Joseph Narrative: The Light of Reason and the Flaw of Perfection" (Dec. 14, 2023); Jennie Rosenfeld, "Sin-a-gogue: A Must-Read for the Yamim Noraim" (Sept. 24, 2019); Batya Hefter, "Peshat and Beyond: The Emergence of a Reluctant Leader" (Jan. 13, 2019); Batya Hefter, "Peshat and Beyond: How the Hasidic Masters Read the Torah" (Nov. 7, 2018).

> was left from the central point…and then a single straight line (*kav*) was drawn from the infinite light, from His spherical light, from above to below, and it devolves and descends within that void (7, translating *Eitz Hayyim 1:2*).[4]

Lurianic *kabbalah* generally provided important source material for early hasidic thought, and, in Rubin's telling, this account of *tzimtzum* in particular is essential to the Chabad tradition. "To be a Chabad thinker is to think through the prism of *ṣimṣum*" (45).

The book's aim is not merely to explore the meaning of *tzimtzum* in Chabad texts and in the texts of each of its seven rebbes, but to frame how this feature of world-creation has shaped Chabad, both as an intellectual tradition and as a community. Beginning with the founding rebbe, R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi ("Rashaz"), *tzimtzum* provided "a central conceptual prism through which [Chabad's rebbes] negotiated existential questions relating to being, meaning, and purpose, and also social questions of legitimacy, authority, and succession" (ibid.).

Rubin begins the historical journey by considering the Lurianic idea of *tzimtzum* alongside the "rupture between spirit and matter" popularized during the same period by modern Cartesian philosophy (11). The parallels did not go unnoticed by western philosophers, whose early attempts to grapple with Lurianic *kabbalah* prefigured later hasidic adaptations. The most striking example is the seventeenth century English philosopher Anne Conway, who saw in *tzimtzum* a potential blueprint for the (metaphorical) rupture and reunification of spirit and matter: After *tzimtzum* reduces the "intensity of divine revelation" in the cosmos, humans are charged with rediscovering and sacralizing "matter's essential spirituality" (12). Conway's insight is given powerful expression in Rashaz's *Tanya* and the subsequent literature of Chabad; to our chagrin, however, Rubin doubts that Rashaz ever encountered her work.

The central concern of *Kabbalah and the Rupture of Modernity*, however, is the changing appearance of *tzimtzum*, redefined in novel expressions by Chabad's seven rebbes. Although Rubin did not arrange his chapters along these lines, they may be understood as asserting eight distinct conceptions of *tzimtzum*:

1) ***Tzimtzum* as an Act of Love:** In the work of Rashaz, God's self-contraction "emerges as a process in which God is simultaneously rendered distant and near. The rupture of creation nourishes the passions of love, desire, and union through which that rupture is rapturously undercut and overcome" (26). The love between God and humans is only one facet of this act, however. God is near only when divine love is extended through charity among the

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[4] Parenthetical number citations are to Rubin's book.

creations: “[W]hen engaged with true compassion—compassion for the spark of the divine that ‘journeys in the dark vanities of the world’ and compassion ‘for those who have nothing of their own’—material existence is actually revealed to be saturated with divine significance” (58).

2) ***Tzimtzum* as Divine Communication:** According to Chabad’s third rebbe, the earlier R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson (known as “*Tzemah Tzedek*”), “the infinite radiance that is prior to the *ṣimṣum* obscures the essential language of God. To conceal that infinite stream of divine consciousness, and to externalize God’s essential language via the finite prism of divine speech, is therefore to rediscover the intimate self of God that is otherwise unarticulated” (101).

3) ***Tzimtzum* as Divine Will, Calling for Human Fulfillment:** According to the fourth rebbe, R. Shmuel Schneerson (“Maharash”), “the entire will for Torah and *mitzvot* is synonymous with *ṣimṣum*…”[5] “The investment of divine will in a set of precepts governing human activity traverses the gap between infinite transcendence of the cosmos and finite immanence within the cosmos” (138).

4) ***Tzimtzum* as the Negation of Divine Will, Calling for Human Rectification**: Perhaps paradoxically, Ramash saw within *tzimtzum* “an aspect that is counter to the will [of God], for it is the opposite of the primordial will that luminosity shall radiate” (255). Negation of divine will leads to “the general possibility of sin, and ultimately the sin of the tree of knowledge, and the sins that follow it throughout the ages” (ibid.) As a result of this dynamic, however, “the possibility is given for human work to transform the nature of the *ṣimṣum*” (257). [6] As Rubin memorably summarizes this point: “[It] is not God who will rescue humanity from evil, but humanity who will rescue God” (ibid.).

5) ***Tzimtzum* as Innovation**: According to the fifth rebbe, R. Sholom DovBer Schneerson (“Rashab”), “the sense of futurity insinuated by the leap of *ṣimṣum* is not merely the resuscitation of metacosmic primordiality within the cosmos. The future heralded by *ṣimṣum* is rather an utterly original elicitation of unprecedented revelation from the essence that is otherwise undisclosed and undisclosable… in the aftermath of *ṣimṣum*, a ‘new’ revelation of the essence becomes possible that is more than a

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[5] Quoted from *Torat Shmuel*, *Sha’ar* 19, 5637 II–*Ve-Kakhah*, at 16-18.

[6] Quoted from Ramash’s *Sefer Ha-Ma’amarim* 5731, 394.

retrieval of the revelatory radiance that was hidden by *ṣimṣum*" (186). Rashab also analogized and applied this conception to the personal process of *teshuvah*, in which "one's entire devotional life is infused with the new luminosity that is drawn from the essence, and which stands beyond the dynamic of revelation and concealment" (199).

6) ***Tzimtzum*** **as Reflection of, and Model for, Personal Adversity**: As part of his efforts to rally Chabad *hasidim* in Russia facing the threat of Soviet persecution, as well as Chabad *hasidim* in the United States facing the threat of materialism, the sixth rebbe, R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson ("Rayatz"), clarified that *tzimtzum* occurred "in order that each person, according to their own capacity in Torah study and *mitzvah* observance…will thereby strip away the concealment of the world and disclose the revelation of divine light concretely in the world" (225).[7] For Rayatz, the parallel of world and soul flowed naturally from the numerical link between the "six hundred and thirteen *mitzvot* that delineate and fuel the soul's transformative mission" and the six hundred and thirteen "stations of the cosmos" (238).

7) ***Tzimtzum*** **as Death and Legacy of the *Tzaddik*:** In the immediate aftermath of his predecessor Rayatz's passing, Ramash theorized that "[t]he nonliteral ascent of the *ṣadik* parallels the nonliteral ascent of God from the void in which the worlds are emanated and created" (250). As a result of this dynamic, the departed *tzaddik* leaves a lasting intellectual and spiritual legacy within the void, and Ramash accordingly "denied that there was any need for anyone to succeed Rayatz" as rebbe (ibid.). Of course, this teaching was ultimately applied to Ramash himself, leading "Chabadniks [to] continue to see Ramash as their rebbe in the present, three decades after his death" (ibid.).

8) ***Tzimtzum*** **as Subjectivity**: In the notes of the American abstract expressionist painter Barnett Newman, whose hasidic influences Rubin addresses in a surprising and delightful postscript, we find intimations that "[w]ithout *ṣimṣum*, being remains fundamentally impersonal, irrespective of any aesthetic merits it might have. *Simṣum* transforms the aesthetic object, indeed cosmic being itself, into a dynamic 'place' of numinous exaltation that can be subjectively

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[7] Quoted from *Iggerot Kodesh* I (Brooklyn: Kehot, 2011), 166-67.

> experienced. Since art depends on subjectivity, without *ṣimṣum* art simply isn't possible. *Simṣum* enables the being of art and the art of being" (281).

Is this the inviting course on pan-Chabad thought for which I hoped? In most ways, absolutely. The richness of Rubin's analysis heightens the urgency of every text, every layer of meaning. But "inviting" may not be the correct word. The popular appeal of Rubin's book will be limited by the fact that it is written in a style reminiscent of Heschel, combining scholarly erudition with devotional drama. Of course, the form of Rubin's writing is inseparable from its content. Choice of elevated language like this operates as an important signifier of sophistication, conveying to the broader readership of English-language philosophical texts, including those outside provincial *batei midrash*, that Chabad offers something carrying high stakes and worth taking seriously.

A History Defined by *Tzimtzum*

Kabbalah and the Rupture of Modernity does more than provide an introduction to Chabad thought, however. The book advances at least two original claims that ought to be assessed in light of the evidence. First, Rubin argues that Chabad's figurative interpretation of *tzimtzum*—according to which God is *concealed in*, but not literally *absent from*, the created cosmos—was a major factor in Chabad's institutionalization as a movement (chapters 3-4). He adduces textual evidence that Rashaz's chief ideological opponent, R. Eliyahu of Vilna ("Gra"), regarded the figurative interpretation of *tzimtzum* as dangerous heresy, and even ordered the public burning of hasidic texts in Vilna in 1796 (28-35). As a corollary to Ada Rapoport-Albert's observation that it was the resistance of anti-hasidic *mitnagdim* that "generated 'the new consciousness of hasidism as a movement'" (44),[8] Rubin concludes that Gra's fierce opposition to Chabad's interpretation of *tzimtzum* led to the emergence of Chabad as a distinct "intellectual institution" (45). This argument is well supported by evidence that Gra likely encountered *Tanya*, and apparently alluded to its formulations in his written campaign against hasidism (31).

Second, Rubin argues that the intra-Chabad dispute over the meaning of *tzimtzum* constituted an "inescapable factor in the…succession controversy" of 1866 (147). Following the death of *Tzemah Tzedek* in that year, Chabad underwent a schism: the dynastic seat in Lubavitch was assumed by *Tzemah Tzedek*'s youngest son Maharash, while followers of his older brother R. Yehudah Leib Schneerson ("Maharil") flocked to a competing court in Kopust (126). (The Kopust branch remained separate from Chabad-Lubavitch until 1923.)[9]

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[8] Quoted from Ada Rapoport-Albert, *Hasidic Studies: Essays in History and Gender* (Liverpool: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2018), 77.

Rubin ties the Chabad schism to the debate over *tzimtzum* by juxtaposing the following pieces of evidence: (a) In a sermon first developed during the life of *Tzemah Tzedek* and supplemented following his passing, Maharash proposed a “theological and existential recalibration of Chabad thought” (123), according to which the post-*tzimtzum* physical cosmos is construed as “a direct manifestation and realization of ultimate reality” (125); (b) Maharash’s recalibration clashes with the view that this world is a lower realm, inferior to pre-*tzimtzum* luminosity, a view apparently shared by Maharash’s rival and brother, Maharil, who “long[ed] to transcend the constraints of the physical”(126); and (c) A letter written to Maharash by his father *Tzemah Tzedek* towards the end of the latter’s life suggests that Maharash required encouragement to wage his disputes with ideological detractors (123). While it is plausible based on this evidence that the meaning of *tzimtzum may* have been a factor in driving the brothers apart, and *may* have helped Maharash earn the Lubavitch seat, I believe that it does not justify Rubin’s confident conclusion that “Chabad’s internal split was deeply enmeshed with a split over how *ṣimṣum* should be interpreted, and over the ontological consequences of *ṣimṣum*’s interpretation” (158).

More broadly, Rubin oversells the relationship between *tzimtzum* and “[q]uestions of legitimacy, authority, and succession” in Chabad (xviii). For instance, any contention that the Chabad chain of succession was determined by views on *tzimtzum*, or by the rebbes’ general commitment to an “intellectual tradition of intergenerational intertextuality” (231), must contend with the simple fact that four out Chabad’s six successions ran from father to son, and the other two ran to sons-in-law. This trend is not exceptional; on the contrary, it is one of the few respects in which Chabad *does not* differ from other hasidic movements. But Rubin’s attempts to downplay the importance of father-son heredity in Chabad’s successions (see 45, 79) is difficult to accept in light of the simple fact that sons regularly succeed their rebbe fathers.[10]

Finally, although *Kabbalah and the Rupture of Modernity* explicitly aims to contribute to historiography regarding Chabad succession, it makes no attempt to address the lack of any post-Ramash succession. I do not wish to advance any original opinion on this, nor do I want to give the impression that every Chabad book must be about the same topic. More than enough has been said, written, explained, speculated, and accused regarding the nature of Chabad's ongoing commitment to its long-deceased seventh rebbe. For these purposes, however, it is fair to ask that a book that seeks to interpret what drove succession forward in Chabad should also provide some account of what made succession cease.

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[9] See “Kopust and Lubavitch, 120 Years Later,” *Anash.org* (May 21, 2020).

[10] Although the Chabad succession controversy of 1866 concerned competing claims to the leadership by two different sons of the deceased rebbe, a previous succession controversy in 1812 (discussed by Rubin in his Chapter Seven–”Being, Nothing, and Chabad’s First Succession Controversy”) pitted son against student. Rubin acknowledges that the winning successor, R. DovBer Schneuri, was Rashaz’s oldest son, but argues that “this distinction alone did not carry sufficient weight to guarantee his place as the unrivaled leader of Chabad” (79). Again, this may be a correct interpretation of the events of 1812. Still, the picture that emerges from Chabad’s full succession history is that the mantle of leadership *never* left the family. An examination of Chabad’s succession history cannot plausibly treat this fact as coincidental.

Ultimately, I have the luxury of highlighting these quibbles only because *Kabbalah and the Rupture of Modernity* is, all considered, a stunning, important, and challenging work. Alongside its deep elaboration of philosophical and theological principles, Rubin's book is attentive to historical methods, even offering original analysis of archival primary source material in its comparison of competing manuscripts of *Tzemah Tzedek*'s will held in, respectively, the National Library of Russia in St. Petersburg and the Russian State Library in Moscow (118-22). For initiated and uninitiated readers alike, Rubin's work provides an invaluable introduction to the evolving mystery of *tzimtzum* in Chabad thought, and to the thought of Chabad's five middle rebbes, who receive comparatively little attention outside the community. My sincere hope is that this book shall be the first of many, for both the author and his sacred genre.

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