REVELATION THROUGH CONCEALMENT: KABBALISTIC RESPONSES TO GOD'S HIDDENNESS

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Abstract. John Schellenberg presents an argument for atheism according to which theism would be easy to believe, if true. Since theism *isn't* easy to believe, it must be false. In this paper, I argue that Kabbalistic Judaism has the resources to bypass this argument completely. The paper also explores a stream of Kabbalistic advice that the tradition offers to people of faith for those times at which God appears to us to be hidden.

I. INTRODUCTION

In addition to its Biblical and Rabbinic connotations, "Divine hiddenness" takes on a new significance in the work of John Schellenberg, which gives rise to a new argument for atheism: the argument from divine hiddenness.[1] The idea is this: given certain basic theistic assumptions, there shouldn't be such a phenomenon as *non-resistant non-belief*. Roughly: The God of theism is perfectly loving and would therefore want to be available for a relationship with any person not stubbornly resisting the very idea of God. That there are people completely *open* to belief but who simply aren't supplied with sufficient evidence to form it, is supposedly proof positive that God doesn't exist.

We could debate whether Schellenberg's argument is simply a local manifestation of the wider problem of evil. Some have argued that it is.[2] Why would a good God allow for the evil of innocent non-belief in him? But Schellenberg insists that it would be a mistake to assimilate his problem into the problem of evil.[3] To do so, he argues, begs the question.

If Schellenberg's argument sets out to prove the non-existence of God, then no party to the debate should assume, in assessing the argument's merits, that God does or doesn't exist. The happy life of a law-abiding, affluent, healthy, and successful, non-resistant atheist need manifest no *obvious* evils, unless you're already committed to theism, and thus relate to her *non-belief* as an evil. And thus, the problem can only be considered a problem of evil if you're already assuming the truth of theism.

In this paper, I argue that Kabbalistic Judaism, whatever it has to say about the problem of evil, *doesn't* allow for Schellenberg's problem to arise. In §1, I present his argument from hiddenness along with standard responses. In §2, I present 'the problem of creation', which Lurianic Kabbala tells us necessitates something called *tzimtzum*. In §3, I outline two ways in which to understand *tzimtzum* — one of which gives rise to a view that I call 'Hassidic Idealism'. In §4, I show how Hassidic Idealism completely bypasses the argument from hiddenness. In §5, I show how it bypasses a *strengthened* version of the argument.

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1   J. L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Cornell Univ. Press, 1993); J. L. Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument: Philosophy's New Challenge to Belief in God* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2015).

2   See Jonathan L. Kvanvig, "Divine Hiddenness: What is the Problem?", in *Divine Hiddenness*: *New Essays*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002).

3   See Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument*, 18-31.

Finally, in §6, I return to one of the more *traditional* forms of divine hiddenness – the distance that the faithful sometimes feel from God – and I develop a Kabbalistic response.

II. THE ARGUMENT FROM HIDDENNESS

Schellenberg presents his argument as follows:

1. If a perfectly loving God exists, then there exists a God who is always open to a personal relationship with any finite person.

2. If there exists a God who is always open to a personal relationship with any finite person, then no finite person is ever nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists.

3. If a perfectly loving God exists, then no finite person is ever nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists (from 1 and 2).

4. Some finite persons are or have been nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists.

5. No perfectly loving God exists (from 3 and 4).

6. If no perfectly loving God exists, then God does not exist.

7. God does not exist (from 5 and 6).[4]

The argument is straightforwardly valid. If all of the undischarged assumptions are true, then so is the conclusion. The question is whether or not it's *sound*. The undischarged assumptions are lines 1, 2, 4 and 6. Each *has* been challenged, but in ways that leave Schellenberg unmoved. Let's take them in order.

Schellenberg thinks that line 1 is pretty obviously true. He writes:

> [I]magine that you're listening to your friend, who's describing his parents: 'Wow, are they ever great — I wish everyone could have parents like mine, who are so wonderfully loving! Granted, they don't want anything to do with me. They've never been around. Sometimes I find myself looking for them — once, I have to admit, I even called out for them when I was sick — but to no avail. Apparently they aren't open to being in a relationship with me — at least not yet. But it's so good that they love me as much and as beautifully as they do!' If you heard your friend talking like this, you'd think he was seriously confused. And you'd be right … They could have set their son up in the best house in town, with money and things galore. But their attitude toward him, whatever it is, doesn't amount to the most admirable love, since they are closed to being in a personal relationship with him.[5]

In response, lots of reasons have been given as to why a perfectly loving God might not *always* be open for a relationship with finite people like us. For example, it is proposed that, at times, we would be better off if we came to open *ourselves* up to a relationship with God, in the face of opposite inclinations. We become more refined, and make a deeper relationship possible, if *we* lean in and take the plunge. Alternatively, perhaps God wants to make sure that our non-resistance to belief is motivated by the right considerations, rather than by fear of punishment, or social pressures.[6] Similarly, Howard-Snyder and Green[7] point to Kierkegaard, who takes God's hiddenness to help a person develop a more passionate desire for him; absence makes the heart grow fonder. Similar motifs are found in Hassidic Judaism.[8]

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4   Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument,* 103.

5   Ibid., 41-42.

6   See Frances Howard-Snyder and Daniel Howard-Snyder, "The Real Problem of No Best World", *Faith and Philosophy* 13, no. 3 (1996); Daniel Howard-Snyder, "The Argument from Divine Hiddenness", *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 26, no. 3 (1996); Daniel Howard-Snyder, "Divine Openness and Creaturely Nonresistant Nonbelief", in *Hidden Divinity and Religious Belief: New Perspectives*, ed. Adam Green and Elenore Stump (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2016); Daniel Howard-Snyder and Adam Green, "Hiddenness of God", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (2016).

7   Howard-Snyder and Green, "*Hiddenness of God*".

8   M. Y. Leiner, *Mei HaShiloah* (Mishur, 1990), 110.

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Schellenberg is unmoved. The goods that God might secure by temporarily closing himself off to us could be had *without* his closing himself off. These are "relationship-compatible goods."[9] The idea isn't merely that God is *good*. It's that he *loves* us. If he loves us, he wants to be available for a relationship with us, and it *is* possible to be in a relationship with someone while giving them the opportunity to refine themselves. Indeed, most of the goods taken to justify God's hiddenness, Schellenberg would argue, are relationship-compatible, and therefore insufficient for undermining line 1 of his argument.

We could attack line 1 in a different way. Some people simply aren't *ready* for belief in God. If they believed *now*, they would resent God's glory and power.[10] Belief, *now*, would be harmful for them. But, once again, the good in question is relationship-compatible. It is *possible* for God to help a person through resentment without breaking off relations. Schellenberg illustrates:

> Imagine ideally loving human parents-to-be who are aware, because of their knowledge of the unborn child's genetic constitution, that this child will be disposed to reject them… Will they exit stage left, once the baby is born, leaving it in the care of someone they think is more likely to elicit a positive response, or rather seek to devise ways of avoiding or transforming their child's negative response from within their relationship with him?

Another way to deny line 1: if God's existence were too obvious, we'd find it impossible to act against his revealed will. We'd be rendered automatons. It would be toxic to human freedom. Again, Schellenberg is unmoved[11]. Belief in God needn't be at all *intrusive*. God could implant in us a belief in him without making his presence so tangible that we would never *sin*. Indeed, as long as one isn't tangibly aware of God's presence in a given moment, then a background *belief* in God's existence is no impediment to freedom. We know this because we know that believers in God sin even while believing in God. Human freedom is a relationship-compatible good.

Schellenberg could even have drawn a response from the Jewish tradition. According to Rabbi Josef Albo, if and when God wants to protect our freedom in the face of awareness of God's presence, God simply hardens the heart of the person in question. On R. Albo's reading, Pharaoh's choice to let the Jewish people go could never have been a *free* choice in the face of all the plagues and miracles that God wrought at that time. God's response was to harden Pharaoh's heart in order to give him a chance to act freely.[12]

A more promising way to deny line 1: perfect love doesn't necessarily translate into wanting a relationship, or even into openness. Is God's perfect love like that of a parent for her child, as Schellenberg tends to assume, or is it more like the abstract sort of love we might have for distant descendants, or like the care that a good surgeon would have for her patients?[13] God is described as a parent, but he's also described as a potter (Jeremiah 18:6). A parent wants a reciprocal relationship with her child; a potter doesn't feel that way about her clay. And, wanting a relationship might be a selfish and human way to love. I wouldn't deign to say that I *know* what exactly God's love for us is like, even if I affirm that it must be perfect. That seems to me a good reason at least to suspend judgement over line 1. But, for the sake of *this* paper, let's assume line 1 is true.

Can we deny line 2? Must belief in God always be available to non-resistors if God is to be open to relationship with them? Some argue that one *can* have a relationship with God without believing that God exists. We *could* have a relationship with him without *realizing* as much. Schellenberg replies that these couldn't be the sorts of relationship a lover desires with their beloved: these relationships aren't explicit, conscious, and reciprocal.[14]

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9   Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument*, 62.

10   Travis Dumsday, "Divine hiddenness and creaturely resentment", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 72, no. 1 (2012).

11   Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument*, 64-8.

12   For an exposition of Rabbi Albo's position, see Shira Weiss, *Joseph Albo on Free Choice: Exegetical Innovation in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2017).

13   Michael Rea, "Hiddenness and Transcendence", in *Hidden Divinity and Religious Belief: New Perspectives*, ed. Adam Green and Elenore Stump (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2016).

14   Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument*, 106.

Alternatively, perhaps it's possible to have an explicit, conscious, and reciprocal relationship with someone on the basis of *hope* or *faith* or some sort of *partial* belief that they exist.[15] Schellenberg replies that these are insufficient grounds for a *real* relationship. God doesn't want to be our imaginary friend.[16] Let's grant him that too, if only for the sake of argument. Let lines 1 and 2 stand.

Can we deny line 4, which claims that at least one person in history was in a state of non-resistant non-belief? Some argue that everyone really, deep down, believes in God, even if under some other name.[17] Others argue that receptivity to religious belief is hard-wired into our cognitive architecture, which, if true, would undermine the claim that non-resistant non-belief is widespread.[18] Or, you could argue that all cases of non-belief flow from some sort of ethical *failing*. But that would be foolhardy.

All that line 4 really needs is a single case, in all of human history, of non-resistant non-belief. If it can be found, for instance, that a tribal Amazonian who failed to believe in God, without any sort of resistance or culpability, then line 4 stands. If it can be found that one single person growing up in a secular context failed to believe in God, without any resistance to such belief, then line 4 stands. We should *let* it stand!

Can we deny line 6, which would have God necessarily as perfectly loving? Schellenberg stipulates that perfect-love is part of the *definition* of God. Schellenberg is open to the idea that something perfectly good exists, as the ground of all being. He just refuses to call such a being "God", unless that being is a *person*. A perfect *person*, he thinks, would be perfectly *loving*. Schellenberg calls belief in a supremely good ultimate reality, "ultimism". He calls the belief that this ultimate reality is a perfect *person*, "theism". On this stipulation, line 6 is trivially true. The argument from divine hiddenness is against what Schellenberg calls *theism*, and not against what he calls *ultimism*.

Schellenberg's use of language here might be a little idiosyncratic. Maimonides didn't conceive of God as a *person*. That would have completely undermined his negative theology (see his *Guide to the Perplexed,* Part I, Chapter LVI). The Kabbalists were also committed to God in his transcendence – the *Ein Sof* – being beyond all description, and thus being beyond the description of *person* or *lover* (See: The *Zohar*, Part II, *Bo*, 42b). Does this mean that they were all atheists, despite their "ultimism"? In Schellenberg idiolect, that follows. But that's not how the intellectual tradition of Abrahamic monotheism has evolved. The theistic camp includes negative theologians who simply *won't* accept line 6.

On the other hand, I am sympathetic to the claim that negative theology cannot be *true*, since even the description that God defies description is a *description of God*. Accordingly, I relate to such figures of speech as important and illuminating, but literally *false* – just as metaphors can be important and illuminating, but literally false.[19] Moreover, and despite my discomfort with Schellenberg's use of the terminology, *I* wouldn't want to deny that God is a perfect person who loves us, even if I wouldn't *stipulate* it as part of my definition of "theism".

So far, we've seen no knock-down reason to give up any of the assumptions of Schellenberg's argument, although some of his assumptions are shakier than others. Irrespective of their merits, all the escape routes we've investigated sound like *reactions* to a problem. That's to say, once you've seen Schellenberg's argument, you have to respond. You have to concoct some reason for God's allowing non-resistant non-belief. What I present, in this paper, is a Kabbalistic theology that doesn't *respond* to Schellenberg's argument, but bypasses it altogether.

15 Ted Poston and Trent Dougherty, "Divine Hiddenness and the Nature of Belief", *Religious Studies* 43, no. 2 (2007); Andrew Cullison, "Two Solutions to the Problem of Divine Hiddenness", *American Philosophical Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (2010).

16 Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument*, 58. Even if we are his! Samuel Lebens, "God and His Imaginary Friends: A Hassidic Metaphysics", *Religious Studies* 51, no. 2 (2015).

17 William J. Wainwright, "Jonathan Edwards and the Hiddenness of God", in *Divine Hiddenness*: *New Essays*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002).

18 Justin L. Barrett, *Why would anyone believe in God?* (AltaMira Press, 2004).

19 See Samuel Lebens, *The Principles of Judaism* (Oxford Univ. Press, (forthcoming)), Chapter 1.

III. THE NECESSITY OF TZIMTZUM

The doctrine of *tzimtzum* (Hebrew for *contraction*) states that God cannot create anything until he contracts himself. Rabbi Isaac Luria (the Ari Zal, 16th c.) established it as a central Kabbalistic doctrine.[20] His disciple, Rabbi Hayyim Vital (16th-17th c.), provides the first written account: in the beginning, a sublime light filled all existence; subsequently, the light contracted uniformly away from the center, leaving an empty circle; then a beam of light extended into the center of the circle, creating a channel from the outside of the circle into the circle. By way of that channel, the rest of the creation could occur within the circle.[21]

Elsewhere, Tyron Goldshmidt and I try to make sense of why such a process is necessary.[22] Doing so is no easy task. One way is to take the infinitely extended divine light as a metaphor for *omnipresence*. We can then frame this "problem of creation":

8. God is omnipresent.

9. If God is omnipresent, then He fills all space.

10. If God fills all space, then there is no vacant space in which creation can occur.

11. If there is no vacant space in which creation can occur, then creation cannot occur.

12. Therefore, creation cannot occur (from 8-11).

Tzimtzum is the solution to this problem. Since creation cannot occur in the face of God's omnipresence, God has to relinquish his omnipresence. He has to *contract* himself.

But, this problem of creation isn't compelling. Line 9 is suspect. God's omnipresence needn't entail that he fills space. God's omnipresence can be understood in terms of his power, knowledge, or goodness *extending* to every place. God needn't be *located* anywhere.

Even if line 9 *is* accepted, why grant, with line 11, that a space needs to be vacant of God in order for creation to occur in it?[23] Who's to say that God can't be collocated with his creatures? Some argue that even distinct *material* objects can be collocated (and God isn't even a *material* object[24]). In short: God might share some of his location with his creation.

Line 11 also assumes that creation has to occur in *space*, and hence assumes a substantivalism about pre-creation space. The contraction of God's omnipresence is unnecessary as a response to the problem of creation, if, instead either (1) an idiosyncratic theory of omnipresence, or (2) an unmotivated stricture upon collocation, or (3) an unsubstantiated substantivalism about pre-creation space is denied instead. Deny any one of them and the problem disappears.

Goldschmidt and I came to a more charitable reading of R. Vital: It's not that God's nature (or *light*) leaves no room in *physical* space for creation, but that it leaves no room in *logical* space. The problem of creation becomes:

13. God has a perfection, or a set of perfections, *P*.

14. If God has *P*, then there is no logical space for creation.

15. If there is no logical space for creation, then creation cannot occur.

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20 The doctrine is also prefigured in the work of Rabbi Moses Cordovero. See Brakha Sack, "R. Moses of Cordovero's Doctrine of Ẓimẓum / תורת הצמצום של ר' משה קורדובירו", *Tarbiz / תרביץ נח*, no. ב (1989); Gershom Scholem suggests that Nachmanides (12th c.) was the first to propose it. Gershom G. Scholem and R. J. Z. Werblowsky, eds., *Origins of the Kaballah* (Princeton Univ. Press, 1987), 449–50.

21 Ḥayyim b. J. Vital et al., *The Tree of Life: Chayyim Vital's Introduction to the Kabbalah of Issac Luria: The Palace of Adam Kadmon* (Arizal Publications, 2008).

22 Tyron Goldschmidt and Samuel Lebens, "Divine Contractions: Theism Gives Birth to Idealism", *Religious Studies* (2018).

23 Inman Inman, "Omnipresence ad the Location of the Immaterial", in *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion: Vol. 8*, ed. Jonathan L. Kvanvig (Oxford Univ. Press, 2017).

24 C. Hughes, "Same-kind coincidence and the ship of Theseus", *Mind* 106, no. 421 (1997).

16. Creation cannot occur (from 13-15).

The only way for God to create, is for him to reign in, and therefore to *contract* perfection *P*. The argument is valid. The question is: *which* divine perfection would render line 14 true? Here's an argument for the impossibility of an *all-knowing, all-loving, and perfectly rational* God creating a universe[25]:

17. A perfectly good, perfectly knowledgeable, and perfectly rational God would never create a suboptimal world.

18. All worlds are suboptimal.

19. God would create no world (from 17 and 18).

You might deny line 18 by denying that *our* world is suboptimal. You might deny line 17 by insisting that the God it describes *could* create a suboptimal world. But all *three* lines *should* be accepted.

The theist shouldn't deny line 18. No world is *optimal*. Imagine a universe as wonderful as you can. If God could have created it, then he could have created two of them, and stuck them together to create a larger universe. Whatever made the original one wonderful would be had in double measure. Consequently, the one you started with wasn't optimal to begin with and it doesn't matter how good it was. You can never imagine an unsurpassable world.

If you find this unconvincing consider another thought experiment. Start by considering the world in which we live. Could it be better than it is? If you think that it *could*, then try to imagine a better world. Could that world be better than it is? If it *could*, then think of an even better world. Do you ever get to *the best*, or is the goodness of worlds simply a measure with no maximum limit?

Those who deny line 17 propose that God can sort all of the suboptimal universes into those which are acceptable and those which are not.[26] God can then arbitrarily choose to create one of the acceptable universes. Daniel Rubio objects: a rational God would still have to avoid the worst of what remains, i.e., the *minimally* acceptable world.[27] After dismissing *that* world, he would have to dismisses the least acceptable of the new remainder. And so on. Given some very weak and very plausible assumptions about decision theory, God (given his perfect rationality and goodness) *cannot* create any world.

Line 19 follows from 17 and 18. These help to make sense of the earlier argument: we can now substitute *perfect goodness, perfect knowledge, and perfect rationality* for perfection(s) P, in the earlier argument (lines 13-16). Remember: by line 19, we've come to see that a perfectly good, rational, and knowledgeable God would create *no world*. It seems clear, therefore, that there's an important sense in which these perfections would leave no room in logical space for the creation of a universe. Consequently, the argument from 13-16 is sound. Creation cannot occur, at least not without a contraction of God's perfection.

IV. TWO VARIETIES OF TZIMTZUM

The Kabbalistic tradition has two camps regarding the doctrine of *tzimtzum*. One camp takes the doctrine literally: God literally had to contract. Given the conclusion of §2, that means that God had to reign in his goodness or some other perfection in order to create. This approach leaves many theists uncomfortable.[28] Schellenberg likely would not even call it 'theism', since, at least temporarily, God doesn't have the perfections traditionally thought *definitive* for God. Yet *tzimtzum* taken literally, whatever other problems arise, *does* avoid Schellenberg's problem. God needn't be perfectly loving, post-*tzimtzum.*

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25   Goldschmidt and I proffer two other arguments, but they are less directly relevant to divine hiddenness. Goldschmidt and Lebens, "Divine Contractions".

26   Daniel Howard-Snyder and Frances Howard-Snyder, "How an Unsurpassable Being Can Create a Surpassable World", *Faith and Philosophy* 11, no. 2 (1994).

27   Daniel Rubio, "God Meets Satan's Apple: The Paradox of Creation", *Philosophical Studies* 175, no. 12 (2018).

28   Y. b. I. Irgas, "Shomer Emunim - extracts translated into English", in *Nefesh HaTzimtzum*, ed. Avinoam Fraenkel (Urim Publications, 2015).

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The other camp doesn't think that *tzimtzum* really occurred. They think that it merely *appeared* to occur. This approach leaves many uncomfortable because it seems to collapse into acosmism.[29] If God can't create without *tzimtzum*, and if *tzimtzum* doesn't really occur, but only *appears* to occur, then the creation only *appears* to occur, but it can't *really* occur. And if creation only *appears* to occur, then our world only *appears* to exist. This denial of the reality of the creation amounts to acosmism.

Nevertheless, the notion of a merely apparent *tzimtzum* was popular with the Hassidim. Perhaps most famously in the writings of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi (18th-19th c; the Baal HaTanya) who emphasizes:

> Know this: 'In the heavens above and on the earth below — there is nothing else [besides God]' (Deuteronomy 4:39) …. Therefore, even the earth and that which is below it are completely nonexistent and empty from the perspective of the Holy One, blessed be He… [W]ith his attribute of Gevurah [restraint] and Tzimtzum, he hides and conceals the life-force which flows into the heavens and the earth, so that they and all their hosts should appear as if they were independently existing entities. The Tzimtzum and concealment is, however, only from the perspective of the lower realms, but from the perspective of the Holy One, blessed be He, everything before Him is considered as actually naught, just as the light of the sun in the sun.[30]

To discount this idea as acosmism is too quick. We can distinguish between: (1) an author writing a story, and (2) what *happens* in the story. In order to understand the doctrine of *apparent* tzimtzum, we can similarly distinguish between: (1) God imagining the world, and (2) *what* God imagines. The doctrine then has it that on one level of reality — the level (2) of what God imagines — finite minds and material objects exist. From that perspective, we *can* say that God contracted. From that perspective, God is at least imperfect enough, post-tzimtzum, to have created our suboptimal world.

Yet on a more *fundamental* level—the level (1) at which God is merely imagining a world — *tzimtzum* never occurred, and finite minds and material objects do *not* exist. God is unchangingly perfect. At this level, all that exists is God and his ideas *of* minds and *of* material objects. This isn't acosmism. Even at the most fundamental level, God *created* something – just nothing more than an idea. Just as the idea of red is not red, so too God's ideas of minds or material objects are not themselves minds or material objects.

You might object: if a perfect God would never make *a certain thing*, then why would he *imagine* making it, and thereby create the idea of an *it*? But note: an author who wouldn't want to make bad things *real* might nevertheless want to write a *story* about bad things. According to the doctrine of *apparent tzimtzum* – which I call *Hassidic Idealism* – our suffering isn't real from God's transcendent perspective. Our suffering is no more real to God than the suffering of fictional characters is to their author. That fictional pain is fictionally real for fictional characters creates no obligation upon real authors to refrain from imagining fictional pain. Consequently, a good reason to refrain from making something does not automatically generate a good reason to refrain from *imagining* it.[31]

This might fall short of acosmism. But surely something important is lost on this picture. God's entire creation is, from his point of view, *imaginary*. What becomes of God's *love* for us, or of our relationship with God? Well, we shouldn't overlook the possibility of feeling love and compassion for a fictional creation. Upon realizing how Anna Karenina's life would end, Tolstoy is said to have cried. Furthermore: Hassidic Idealism stratifies reality into two levels, such that, even if we are imaginary from God's transcendent perspective, we are *real* within the world in which we live. So is our relationship with God, who appears within the story, and loves us. The objector who insists that we must have the same degree of reality as *God*, demands, like the builders of Babel, an ontological pedestal with the creator. The objection is, by theistic lights, impious.

29 S. Elyashiv, "Leshem Shevi VeAchlama - Exceprts in English", in *Nefesh HaTzimtzum*, ed. Avinoam Fraenkel (Urim Publications, 2015).

30 Shneur Z. Baruchovitch, *Likkutei Amarim Tanya: Bilingual Edition* (Kehot Publication Society, 1973), II.6.

31 Lebens, "God and His Imaginary Friends".

V. HASSIDIC IDEALISM BYPASSES SCHELLENBERG

Let's adopt the perspective of Hassidic Idealism. God *is* perfectly good and perfectly rational, but as a character in his own imaginary world, he is at least imperfect enough to have created this suboptimal world. God, as a character in his story, has contracted his perfections. God doesn't appear in this world exactly as he is beyond this world. This is a type of Divine Hiddenness. But he hides in order to make this world *possible*. If God allowed us to see his full perfection, we couldn't even *be* (compare: Exodus 33:20). In all his perfection God could not have created a universe like ours. And indeed he *has* not created it. But he has *imagined* diminishing himself so that such a universe could coherently be *imagined* to be.

Let *F* be a sentential fictional operator, and let's introduce a subscript letter to represent the fictional discourse that the operator is indexed to. For example, let 'H' stands for the Hamlet fiction. Accordingly, "F_H(Hamlet is a prince of Denmark)" says that it is true, *relative* to the Hamlet story, that Hamlet is a prince of Denmark.

"Hamlet is a prince of Denmark" is false. Take a look at any list of historic Danish princes – Hamlet won't be there, even if the story was loosely based upon a Danish legend. But "F_H(Hamlet is a prince of Denmark)" is *true*; since it's true *in the story* that Hamlet is a prince of Denmark. To appreciate Hassidic Idealism is to recognize that what's true within the scope of the operators to which God's imagination gives rise, needn't be true simpliciter.

Hassidic Idealism is radical and weird. But literal tzimtzum waters down God's perfections. Hassidic Idealism might be the most resolutely theistic response available in the face of the problem of creation. Furthermore, many of the most obvious objections to Hassidic Ideaslim can be answered. For example, it isn't as easy as it might seem to object that Hassidic Idealism leaves us with no free will.[32] In any case, the purpose of this paper isn't primarily to defend Hassidic Idealism, but to show how it defuses Schellenberg's problem.

Hassidic Idealism tells us that Line 4 (of Schellenberg's argument) is true *in the story of the world*, but false *simpliciter*. Fundamentally, there *are* no persons other than God; there are only *ideas* of people. Line 6 may be true *simpliciter*, since God may be essentially good. Nevertheless: impossible things *can* happen in stories.[33] In the impossible story that God's dreamt up, a story in which, *per impossible*, he isn't completely *perfect*, line 6 is *false*.

An objection: if impossible things can happen in stories, then let our world be a story in which a completely perfect God creates an imperfect world. Accordingly, even in the story, God can appear as perfect, and thus the argument from divine hiddenness still goes through. Answer: a story in which a perfect God contracts his perfections may describe something impossible, but not something *obviously* impossible. Some philosophers have argued that an omnipotent being *would* have the power to reign in its own powers.[34] Accordingly, it's not *obviously* impossible for a perfect God to constrain his perfections. But, given the problem of creation, it is *obviously* impossible for a perfect God to create a world. Accordingly, a story that has God contract is a better story, since it's less obviously impossible, and therefore it's a story that's more befitting of God as he is in his transcendent perfection. It is a story that ultimately gets us to know God better, since it reflects his perfection as a story teller better.

Neither inside nor outside of this story is Schellenberg's argument sound. Put all of the premises in the scope of the fiction operator, indexed to the story of this world, and line 6 comes out false. In the story, God has reigned in his perfect love so as to make room for creation. Remove the operators, and line 4 comes out false. This isn't some *ad hoc* response to Schellenberg. It's a consequence of the doctrine of *apparent tztimtzum* or Hassidic Idealism.[35]

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32   Lebens, "God and His Imaginary Friends".

33   As beautifully illustrated by Gendler. See Tamar S. Gendler, "The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance", *The Journal of Philosophy* 97, no. 2 (2000).

34   Richard Swinburne, "Omnipotence", *American Philosophical Quarterly* 10, no. 3 (1973).

35   There are other Jewish mystical responses to the problem of Divine Hiddenness. For example, Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto (18th c) argues that a kind of divine hiddenness is necessary for the revelation of divine power, and the very purpose

VI. BYPASSING A STRENGTHENED SCHELLENBERG

Perhaps Schellenberg's argument can be strengthened in the light of Hassidic Idealism. Even if, post-*tzimtzum*, God isn't perfectly loving – that is to say, even if God, as he appears as a character in his own story, is less than perfectly loving – he is still *very* loving. And so, it remains surprising that there is such rampant non-resistant non-belief in the post-*tzimtzum* world – that is to say, even by the logic of the story that God's dreaming up, he *should*, as a character in the story, always be open to relationships with the other characters.

Here are two responses. First: as soon as you recognize that God, as he appears in the story of this world, isn't *completely* perfect, then some of the strategies mentioned in §1 become more plausible. A perfectly loving God might not hide from his beloved only in order to refine their passion, or to maximize their freedom – but a loving God who appears to be ever so slightly *less* than perfect *might*, and with only good intentions too.

Second: although Hassidic Idealism isn't incoherent, it is very odd! Saul Smilansky talks about a class of paradox that isn't logical, but *existential*. Logical paradoxes arise when deductive arguments seem to force a contradiction upon us. We either have to reject one of the premises, or figure out some way of accepting the premises *without* yielding the contradiction. Then the paradox disappears. An *existential paradox*, by contrast, is a sound argument for a conclusion that, despite not being contradictory in any *formal* sense, strikes us as *absurd*, and continues to strike us as "absurd even after due reflection", and even though we realize we have to accept it 'as true in spite of its absurdity'.[36]

Given the problem of creation and the answer of Hassidic Idealism, theism can only strike us as an existential paradox, even if God chooses the least obviously impossible tale to tell. To come to believe in the God of classical theism is to come to realize that we can be nothing more than a figment in the imagination of that God; that what we have until now taken to be true is true only under the scope of a fiction-operator; that there's nothing God could have done to save theism from this paradoxical air because an imaginary world was all that he could possibly create. If the paradoxical air cannot be dispelled, then we can hardly expect *everyone* to be a theist, unless God wants to dream up a world where people have no problem accepting absurdities. I am glad that he didn't.

VII. A KABBALISTIC RESPONSE TO GOD'S HIDDENNESS

So far, I've argued that Kabbalistic Judaism has the resources to bypass Schellenberg's argument from divine hiddenness. In what follows, I want to return to a more traditional sense of "divine hiddenness", which describes the painful feeling that God is far removed from the lives of the faithful. According to Hassidic Idealism, God *has* to hide his true nature within the story of the world in order to make room in logical space *for* the creation of a world. But this suggests that God reveals himself by concealing himself.

Even before the Ari Zal, Kabbalistic Judaism advanced the notion of a *levush* (Hebrew for *garment*). The *Zohar* (3.152) teaches:

> Rabbi Shimon said: If a man looks upon the Torah as merely a book presenting narratives and everyday matters, woe unto him! … But the Torah, in all of its worlds, holds supernal truths and sublime secrets … The world could not endure the Torah if she had not garbed herself in garments of this world. Thus the tales related in the Torah are simply her outer garments, and woe to the man who regards that outer garment as the Torah itself… The most visible part of a man are the clothes that he has on, and they who lack understanding, when they look at the man, are apt not to see more in him than these clothes. In reality, however, it is the body of the man that constitutes the pride of his clothes, and his soul constitutes the pride of his body. So it is with the Torah … People without understanding see only the narratives, the garment; those somewhat more penetrating see also the body [i.e., the laws of the Torah]. But the truly wise … pierce

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of creation. See Moshe Ḥ. Luzzatto, *The Knowing Heart — Da'ath Tevunoth* (Feldheim, 1982).

36   Saul Smilansky, *10 Moral Paradoxes* (Blackwell, 2008), 4.

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all the way through to the soul, to the true Torah which is the root principle of all. These same will in the future be vouchsafed to penetrate to the very soul of the soul of the Torah.

The world couldn't contain the Torah, so the Torah had to garb itself in the body of its laws, and the garments of is narratives. But the garment and the body are both *levushim*, they are *both* garments; garments that clothe the soul of the Torah. And, the soul of the Torah itself is a *levush* that clothes the soul of the soul – presumably, the soul of *God*. In the Hassidic tradition, Rabbi Tzadok Hakohen of Lublin taught that the classical Rabbinic texts, the *Oral Torah*, are themselves a garment for the Pentateuch: garments clothing garments, clothing garments.[37]

The concept of *levush* is intriguing. Garments hide the body, but the way you clothe yourself also reveals a lot about who you are, and allows you to appear in public. Garments conceal and reveal, and reveal in the way that they conceal. Garments can reveal something to us, but *by* concealing it. We couldn't come to know the Torah had it not been veiled by a garment since it would then have overpowered us. Consequently, a Jew suffering from the pains of divine hiddenness might be counselled to take even such moments of theological darkness and despair as a religious experience — as *revelation*, as *proximity*.

The book of Isaiah contains a verse whose tense construction seems bizarre (Isaiah 66:9): "'Shall I bring to the birth, and not cause to bring forth?' the Lord shall say; 'Shall I, the cause of birth, have shut the womb?' said the Lord." Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner notes how this verse starts in the future tense: the religious person is invited to walk into an open future full of doubt and hiddenness. But the transition into the past tense at the end of the verse indicates that God was actually present all along, and that the darkness and the hiddenness were a revelation[38]

One day we shall understand, R. Leiner suggests. One day, we shall look back at the darkness and see God's presence in it. We will realize that it was God's way of refining our passions, like a lover playing hard to get in order to test and refine his beloved. This may sound like an imperfect reason for allowing such periods of darkness and absence. But how could there *not* have been darkness and absence, and how could there not have been imperfect reasons for hiddenness, if a perfect God can only reveal himself to us by clothing himself in worldly garments containing, concealing, and yet revealing, his other-worldly glory? And how can God ever *really* have been absent if, at a more fundamental level of reality, his perfection fills all of logical space? Kabbalistic theology bypasses the argument from divine hiddenness. It also relates to God's hiding as the only possible way in which a perfect God can be revealed in an imperfect world.[39]

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37   T. Hakohen, *Risisei Laylah* (1926), §56.

38   Leiner, *Mei HaShiloah*, 110.

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