

## Chesed and Gevurah and the Tzimtzum—Between Mercy and Judgment in the Theology of Healing

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### Abstract

*This essay explores one of the most profound questions in Jewish mysticism: how deeply does the dialectical interaction between Chesed (loving-kindness) and Gevurah (judgment) penetrate into the very source of divine creativity the Ein Sof and the process of tzimtzum? Through examining classical Kabbalistic sources, Chabad thought as articulated by contemporary scholar Eli Rubin and the systematic teachings of Rabbi Shalom Dovber Schneersohn (the Rebbe Rashab), alongside heretical works including Veavo Hayom el HaAyin and Jonathan Eybeschutz's radical theology, this study reveals fundamentally different approaches to understanding whether primordial creative urge itself contains essential tension or whether it emerges only with subsequent divine emanation. The analysis demonstrates that while classical Kabbalah preserves absolute unity of Ein Sof by locating dialectical tension in sefirotic emanation, Chabad thought intellectualizes this dialectic within divine cognition itself, and heretical traditions dare to locate fundamental tension within divine essence. These differences illuminate not merely theological positions but distinct approaches to understanding divine creativity, unity, and the emergence of multiplicity, with profound implications for contemporary therapeutic spirituality and post-Holocaust theology.*

**Keywords:** Jewish mysticism, Kabbalah, Chesed, Gevurah, tzimtzum, divine dialectic, Ein Sof, sefirotic emanation, classical Kabbalah, Lurianic Kabbalah Chabad thought, divine consciousness, dialectical integration, Jonathan Eybeschutz, heretical traditions, mystical psychology

### Introduction: Wrestling with the Infinite

*Chesed (loving-kindness or mercy) and Gevurah (strength, judgment, or severity) are two fundamental sefirot in the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, representing complementary cosmic forces.*

*Chesed is the expansive, giving energy that bestows grace and nurturance without bounds, associated with love and benevolence.*

*Gevurah, on the other hand, is the contracting, restrictive energy that enforces discipline, boundaries, and justice, ensuring that creation does not dissolve in the endless flow of Chesed. Their dynamic tension is harmonized in Tiferet, the balancing force that synthesizes compassion and rigor, underscoring the interplay of divine mercy and judgment in the unfolding of the cosmos and the human soul.*

The relationship between Chesed and Gevurah has long captivated students of Jewish mysticism, representing as it does the essential polarity that seems to drive all cosmic and spiritual development. Yet when we begin to probe deeper

into this relationship, we encounter a question that strikes at the very heart of monotheistic theology: if God is truly one, unified beyond all opposition, how can genuine dialectical tension exist within divine reality? And if such tension does exist, how far back into the creative process does it extend?

This question becomes particularly acute when we consider the kabbalistic doctrine of tzimtzum—divine self-contraction that creates space for finite existence. Does this first divine act reveal dialectical tension already present in Ein Sof, or does it represent the moment when such tension first emerges? The answer profoundly shapes how we understand divine creativity, human suffering, and the possibility of redemption.

What emerges from this essay is not a single answer but a spectrum of sophisticated approaches, each offering genuine insights while facing distinctive challenges. Classical Kabbalah tends toward preserving divine transcendence by limiting dialectical complexity to emanated realms. Chabad thought, particularly as developed by figures like the Rebbe Rashab, recognizes dialectical processes within divine consciousness

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itself. Heretical traditions push toward acknowledging dialectical tension within divine essence, risking conventional theological boundaries but offering potentially more coherent accounts of creative emergence.

These differences matter because they reflect fundamentally different understandings of how divine creativity operates, how human beings relate to divine reality, and how suffering and evil find their place within cosmic order. The investigation reveals that this ancient debate anticipates and illuminates contemporary discussions in philosophy of mind, process theology, and therapeutic spirituality.

### **Classical Kabbalah: The Architecture of Transcendence**

Walking through the labyrinthine passages of classical Kabbalistic literature, one encounters a consistent commitment to preserving the absolute transcendence of Ein Sof the infinite divine essence that remains forever beyond human comprehension or characterization. This commitment shapes how classical sources approach the Chesed-Gevurah dialectic, typically locating its emergence within the sefirotic system while maintaining that the source from which this system emanates remains absolutely unified.

The Zohar states with characteristic boldness: “Before the emanation of the sefirot, there was no right or left, no Chesed or Gevurah, but all was concealed in the hidden of the hidden (Zohar, 1970)”. This formulation captures the classical approach perfectly—dialectical tension emerges with emanation, but the source remains beyond all such differentiation. Daniel Matt’s translation work reveals how consistently Zoharic literature maintains this position, even while acknowledging that Chesed and Gevurah somehow reflect processes that operate throughout divine manifestation (Matt, 2017).

This classical framework faces an immediate challenge: if Ein Sof is truly without internal differentiation, what motivates or enables the first act of creation? The typical answer involves invoking divine will (*ratzon*) as an intermediate principle that emerges from Ein Sof while remaining essentially unified. Yet this solution merely pushes the question back one level—what accounts for the emergence of will itself?

### **The Lurianic Revolution**

Isaac Luria’s innovations in 16th-century Safed represent perhaps the most sophisticated classical attempt to address these challenges while maintaining fundamental commitments to divine unity. The Lurianic system recognizes *tzimtzum*—divine self-contraction—as the first creative act but understands this contraction as pure divine self-limitation rather than dialectical interaction (Luria, 1850).

The genius of Luria’s approach lies in recognizing that creation requires not merely divine emanation but divine withdrawal. The infinite divine presence must contract to create space (*chalal ha-panui*) where finite beings can exist without being overwhelmed by divine light. This insight transforms the theological problem: creation requires not divine action but divine restraint, not revelation but concealment.

Yet even within this sophisticated framework, dialectical tension emerges only with the subsequent process of emanation itself. The myth of *Shevirat ha-Kelim* (Breaking of the Vessels) locates the cosmic catastrophe that gives rise to evil in an imbalance between divine light (associated with Chesed) and divine vessels (associated with Gevurah) (Scholem, 1973). Too much light without adequate containment leads to shattering, scattering divine sparks throughout creation and creating the shells (*kelipot*) that manifest as evil and suffering.

This analysis provides profound insight into the nature of evil and redemption, but it maintains the classical commitment to divine unity by locating dialectical tension in the emanative process rather than the emanative source. As Gershom Scholem’s analysis demonstrates, even Lurianic Kabbalah’s most dialectical moments preserve “the absolute unity of the source-point from which all emerges (Scholem, 1954)”.

### **Structural Elegance and Its Discontents**

The classical approach achieves remarkable theological stability through its hierarchical structure: Ein Sof remains absolutely unified, creative will emerges as unified divine intention, intellectual sefirot (*Chochmah-Binah-Da’at*) provide cognitive framework for creation, and only with emotional sefirot (beginning with Chesed and Gevurah) does dialectical tension appear.

Moses Cordovero’s systematic exposition in *Pardes Rimonim* articulates this hierarchy with characteristic precision: “Chesed and Gevurah are the first of the middot, emerging after the establishment of the *mochin* of *Chochmah*, *Binah*, and *Da’at*. They represent the first expression of divine emotion following divine intellection (Antonio De Souza, 2024)”. This positioning preserves divine transcendence while providing sophisticated analysis of cosmic and human development.

Yet this structural elegance comes with costs that become increasingly apparent under sustained analysis. The fundamental challenge lies in explaining how genuine dialectical opposition emerges from absolute unity without compromising that unity. If Ein Sof truly transcends all opposition, how does opposition arise? And if dialectical tension is merely “reflection” of divine unity, what accounts for its apparent autonomy and mutual antagonism?

These questions prove generative for later developments, particularly in Chabad thought, which offers more dialectically sophisticated solutions, and in heretical traditions, which challenge the fundamental assumption that divine unity must be preserved at all costs.

### **Chabad Innovation: Intellectualizing the Sacred**

The emergence of Chabad Hasidism under Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi represented a revolutionary moment in Jewish mystical thought—a movement that dared to place intellectual analysis at the very center of mystical practice. Unlike other Hasidic movements that emphasized immediate emotional connection or ecstatic experience, Chabad (*Chochmah-Binah-*

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Da'at) insisted that authentic spiritual development required rigorous intellectual comprehension of mystical truths.

This intellectual emphasis had profound implications for understanding the Chesed-Gevurah dialectic that earlier approaches had not fully explored. Where classical Kabbalah located this dialectic in the emotional sefirot while seeking to preserve the absolute unity of divine intellect, Chabad thought began to recognize dialectical tension within the intellectual foundations of divine creativity itself.

Eli Rubin's contemporary scholarship illuminates the sophistication of this innovation. According to Rubin's analysis, Chabad's emphasis on the intellectual sefirot fundamentally transforms our understanding of where dialectical tension begins: "Chesed and Gevurah are never static; they are driven by intellectual foundations (Chabad) to reach higher spiritual states (Rubin, 2025)". This insight suggests that what appear as emotional attributes actually have their roots in intellectual processes, meaning the dialectic penetrates not merely into the sefirotic system but into the very cognitive structure of divine creativity.

In this book, Rubin frames *tzimtzum* as a rupture—a necessary self-limitation of infinite divine light—through which the finite world comes into being. Gevurah, often described as the attribute of severe judgment or restriction, is essential in this process. It allows the cosmos to exist by containing and limiting divine overflow; without Gevurah, creation would collapse under its own intensity.

Rubin emphasizes that Chesed (compassion, expansion) and Gevurah (restraint, boundary) are not merely moral opposites but cosmic partners crucial to the formation—and eventual repair—of existence. In Chabad thought, particularly as Rubin argues, the dialectic of these sefirot fuels not just personal spiritual striving but the ongoing "rupture and reunion" narrative at the heart of modern Hasidic consciousness.

The Alter Rebbe's Tanya provides the foundational text for understanding this intellectual revolution. Through sophisticated analysis of human psychology as reflecting divine psychology, the Tanya reveals how dialectical processes in human consciousness mirror similar processes in divine consciousness. The crucial insight lies in recognizing that proper intellectual understanding (*Haskalah*) necessarily leads to appropriate emotional response (*hergesh*), suggesting that even divine "emotion" emerges from divine "intellection" (Walters, 1981)".

This psychological sophistication allows Chabad thought to locate the roots of Chesed and Gevurah in the interplay between Chochmah (wisdom) and Binah (understanding). Chochmah represents the flash of creative insight—expansive, unlimited, Chesed-like in its boundless creativity. Binah represents the analytical development of that insight—contractive, defining, Gevurah-like in its capacity to set boundaries and make distinctions.

The Mittlerer Rebbe's elaborations in works like *Sha'ar ha-Yichud* push this analysis even further, recognizing dialectical processes within intellection itself: "Even within Chochmah itself, there is the tension between expansion and contraction—the flash of insight seeks unlimited expression, but this very seeking involves a kind of self-definition that introduces limitation (Schneersohn & Rebbe, 1986)".

This represents a significant departure from classical approaches that maintain clearer distinctions between intellectual and emotional divine attributes. For Chabad thinkers, the distinction remains valid but the separation is overcome through proper understanding of their essential interdependence.

### **Da'at as Synthetic Principle**

Central to Chabad's dialectical innovation is the crucial role of Da'at (knowledge/connection) as the mediating principle that synthesizes opposing forces. Da'at functions not merely as another intellectual sefirah but as the pivot point that allows dialectical interaction to be productive rather than destructive.

The Tanya explains: "Da'at is the bond and connection between Chochmah and Binah... without Da'at, Chochmah remains abstract and Binah remains merely analytical. Da'at creates the synthesis that allows divine intellection to become the foundation for divine emotion (Schneersohn & Rebbe, 1981)". This understanding transforms the classical hierarchy by recognizing ongoing dialectical interaction between intellect and emotion, with Da'at mediating this interaction.

Rubin emphasizes how this makes the Chesed-Gevurah dialectic both more foundational (rooted in divine cognition itself) and more accessible (comprehensible through human intellectual analysis). The dialectical tension experienced in human thought and emotion reflects genuine dialectical processes in divine cognition, not merely distant emanations of an essentially unified source.

### **Consciousness as Dialectical Process**

Rabbi Shalom Dovber Schneersohn (1860-1920), the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe, lived through a period of enormous historical upheaval that demanded increasingly sophisticated theological responses. The modernization of Eastern European Jewry, the emergence of new ideological movements, and the intellectual ferment of the late 19th and early 20th centuries created conditions requiring systematic development of Chabad thought in more philosophically rigorous directions.

The Rebbe Rashab's response to these challenges involved developing what might be called a "dialectical psychology" that traces the movement from initial divine arousal through intellectual development to emotional expression and practical action. His major works, particularly the multi-volume *Hemshech* series, represent the most systematic attempt within traditional Jewish mysticism to understand consciousness—both divine and human—as essentially dialectical in structure (Schneersohn, & Rashab, 1982).

This systematic approach reflected engagement with broader intellectual developments in European philosophy, including German Idealism and early phenomenology, while maintaining fidelity to traditional Kabbalistic categories. The result was a sophisticated synthesis that offered resources for understanding dialectical processes that parallel developments in contemporary philosophy while remaining grounded in mystical insight and practical spiritual development.

### **Divine Consciousness as Process**

The Rebbe Rashab's distinctive contribution lies in his analysis of what he calls "mochin" (divine consciousness) as inherently dialectical rather than simply unified. Building on his predecessors' innovations, he recognizes that even the initial divine arousal toward creation involves dialectical tension between the impulse to reveal and the necessity to conceal, between infinite expression and finite reception.

In his 5666 (1906) Hemshech, the Rebbe Rashab explains: "The very arousal of divine will toward creation involves tzimtzum (contraction) within hitpashtut (expansion). The divine desire to create requires both the expansive impulse to emanate and the contractive capacity to limit that emanation so it can be received (Ibid)". This analysis locates dialectical tension at the very beginning of divine creative consciousness, representing a significant development beyond classical approaches.

This insight transforms our understanding of tzimtzum itself. Where classical Kabbalah located tzimtzum as the first act following the creative urge, the Rebbe Rashab recognizes tzimtzum as inherent within the creative urge itself. Divine will toward creation cannot be simply expansive (pure Chesed) because unlimited expansion would overwhelm any possible recipients. It must be simultaneously contractive (involving Gevurah) to create the possibility of finite reception.

### **The Doctrine of Hit'havut**

Perhaps the Rebbe Rashab's most innovative contribution involves his doctrine of "hit'havut" (becoming/process), which emphasizes the dynamic, processual nature of divine consciousness. In his 5670 (1910) Hemshech, he explains: "Divine consciousness is not a static structure but a dynamic process of becoming. Even divine self-knowledge involves movement, development, dialectical interaction (Schneersohn, & Rashab, 1986)."

This processual understanding transforms how we understand the relationship between unity and dialectic. For the Rebbe Rashab, divine unity is not the absence of dialectical tension but the dynamic integration of dialectical tension. Divine consciousness maintains its unity not by excluding opposition but by integrating opposition within a higher synthesis.

The doctrine also provides foundation for understanding human spiritual development as genuinely participating in cosmic processes. If divine consciousness is essentially processual and dialectical, then human consciousness, created in the divine image, is also essentially processual and dialectical.

Human spiritual development involves learning to integrate oppositions rather than simply choosing between them.

The Rebbe Rashab's systematic analysis reveals three crucial levels of dialectical interaction that operate consistently throughout divine consciousness:

***Volitional Dialectic:*** Even divine will (*ratzon*) involves tension between the impulse to give and the recognition that giving requires appropriate limitation. Divine will cannot be simply unified because willing necessarily involves both assertion and restraint.

***Intellectual Dialectic:*** Divine intellection involves tension between creative insight (*Chochmah*) and analytical development (*Binah*). The Rebbe Rashab's innovation lies in recognizing that this tension is not merely sequential but dialectical—creative insight and analytical development mutually condition each other.

***Emotional Dialectic:*** The classical *Chesed-Gevurah* dialectic, now understood as emerging from and reflecting deeper dialectical processes in divine will and intellect.

This systematic analysis allows the Rebbe Rashab to show how dialectical tension operates consistently throughout divine consciousness while maintaining the ultimate unity of the divine source. His solution distinguishes between the "atzmut" (essence) of divine consciousness, which remains absolutely unified, and the "gilui" (revelation) of divine consciousness, which necessarily involves dialectical process.

### **The Courage of Contradiction**

The emergence of heretical mystical traditions within Judaism represents perhaps the most intellectually courageous attempt to follow dialectical thinking to its logical conclusions, regardless of conventional theological constraints. These traditions, often emerging during periods of crisis when standard religious frameworks seemed inadequate, dared to ask whether coherent understanding of divine creativity requires locating dialectical tension within divine essence itself.

The historical contexts for these developments typically involved periods when conventional religious frameworks seemed inadequate to address existential crises—the expulsion from Spain, the Sabbatean upheaval, various forms of mystical enthusiasm that challenged established authority. These movements remained marginal within mainstream Jewish development, but they offer crucial insights into the logical implications of pushing dialectical thinking beyond conventional limits.

### **The Logic of Essential Dialectic**

The heretical work *Veavo Hayom el HaAyin* ("And the Day Will Come to the Nothingness") represents the most systematic attempt within Jewish mysticism to locate dialectical tension within divine essence itself. The text's fundamental insight involves recognizing that any coherent account of the

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emergence of multiplicity from unity requires that unity itself contain the principle of its own self-differentiation.

The text argues: “If Ein Sof were truly without internal differentiation, nothing could ever emerge from it. The very fact that creation occurs demonstrates that Ein Sof must contain within itself the principle of otherness (Veavo Hayom, 1750).” This analysis leads to the radical conclusion that divine essence itself must be dialectical, containing both infinite giving and infinite withholding, infinite expansion and infinite contraction, not as opposition but as dynamic unity that makes both existence and non-existence possible.

The title itself reveals the text’s orientation toward a movement beyond even Ein Sof toward absolute nothingness (ayin) that transcends all categories, including unity and multiplicity. This points toward an ultimate reality that contains all possibilities, including the possibility of its own negation.

### **Divine Unconsciousness and the Origins of Evil**

Rabbi Jonathan Eybeschutz (1690-1764) offers perhaps the most psychologically sophisticated heretical approach to understanding dialectical tension within divine reality. His work *Va-Avo Hayom el ha-Ayin* presents a revolutionary interpretation of tzimtzum that locates the origins of evil not in divine opposition but within divine essence itself, specifically in what he terms the “thoughtless” aspect of Ein Sof.

Julian Ungar-Sargon’s contemporary analysis of Eybeschutz’s theology reveals its profound implications for understanding suffering and healing. According to Eybeschutz, “the Ein Sof comprises both ‘thoughtful’ and ‘thoughtless’ aspects, with the thoughtless dimension lacking intentionality and inadvertently giving rise to evil (Ungar-Sargon, 2025)”. This represents a revolutionary departure from traditional approaches that seek to preserve divine perfection by locating evil outside divine reality.

Eybeschutz’s innovation lies in reimagining tzimtzum as divine “sleep” or loss of consciousness (tardema), during which uncontained divine energy is released. Unlike traditional views where tzimtzum is a deliberate act to create space for finite existence, Eybeschutz portrays it as an involuntary lapse in divine consciousness. During this divine sleep, uncontrolled emanation leads to the formation of kelipot (husks), which become vessels of evil.

### **Theological and Therapeutic Implications**

The radical implications of Eybeschutz’s theology extend far beyond academic speculation into practical approaches to healing and spiritual development. If evil emerges from divine unconsciousness rather than conscious intention, then healing and redemption must involve awakening rather than simply restoring or revealing hidden divine light.

As we demonstrated, this framework provides theological foundation for therapeutic approaches that work with shadow material rather than seeking to eliminate it: “Rather than

seeking to transform evil through revelation of concealed divine light (as in Chabad theology), Eybeschutz advocates confronting and integrating the aspects of evil within oneself as a path to spiritual growth (Ibid).”

This integration model anticipates contemporary therapeutic approaches that embrace psychological shadow work as essential to healing. The insight that descent into darkness is prerequisite for spiritual ascent provides historical precedent for therapeutic modalities that work with rather than against unconscious material.

### **The Sabbatean Crisis**

Nathan of Gaza’s theological innovations, particularly his doctrine of divine “pensioner” (God’s self-exile), located dialectical tension within divine essence rather than merely divine emanation. According to Nathan’s analysis, God’s decision to create required a kind of divine self-contradiction—the infinite voluntarily accepting limitation, the perfect embracing imperfection.

The Sabbatean understanding developed the doctrine of “mitzvah ha-ba’ah ba-averah” (the commandment fulfilled through transgression), arguing that ultimate spiritual realization might require transcending conventional religious categories. If divine essence is dialectical, containing both affirmation and negation, then human spiritual development might require integrating both observance and transgression.

These heretical insights offer crucial resources for contemporary theological reflection while requiring careful attention to their potential costs. The logical coherence of locating dialectical tension *within* divine essence provides more adequate accounts of creative emergence than classical emanationist approaches. The recognition that spiritual development involves integrating opposites reflects the actual complexity of mystical experience more accurately than approaches that seek simple resolution.

However, these insights come with significant theological and practical costs. Locating dialectical tension within divine essence threatens conventional monotheistic commitments and may lead toward pantheistic conclusions. The antinomian implications pose serious challenges to normative religious practice and community stability.

### **The Cosmic Pivot**

Regardless of where different traditions locate the origins of dialectical tension, all acknowledge tzimtzum as the crucial moment when this tension becomes manifest and operative in divine creativity. Understanding how different traditions interpret tzimtzum reveals their fundamental theological commitments and their approaches to the relationship between divine unity and creative multiplicity.

The process of tzimtzum functions as a kind of theological Rosetta Stone, revealing how each tradition understands the relationship between divine transcendence and creative immanence. Classical Kabbalah sees tzimtzum as the first

divine act following unified creative urge. Chabad thought recognizes tzimtzum as inherent within divine consciousness itself. Heretical traditions suggest tzimtzum reveals dialectical tension always already present within divine essence.

### **The Paradox of Creative Love**

The relationship between the creative urge (ratzon elyon) and the necessity for self-limitation reveals the profound interdependence of what classical sources call Chesed and Gevurah. Any divine turning toward creation must involve both the expansive impulse to emanate (Chesed) and the contractive capacity to limit and define (Gevurah). This interdependence suggests that even if dialectical tension is not present in Ein Sof itself, it becomes necessary the moment Ein Sof turns toward creation.

This paradox—that love requires limitation, that giving requires restraint—illuminates something essential about the nature of creative activity itself, whether divine or human. Effective creativity cannot be simply expansive because unlimited expansion would overwhelm any possible recipients. It must integrate both generative and limiting principles to create sustainable relationships and meaningful communication.

The Lurianic insight that even divine emanation can become destructive without adequate containment (leading to Shevirat ha-Kelim) reveals that creativity itself requires wisdom about its own limits. This suggests that dialectical integration is not merely a feature of finite existence but a requirement for any creative activity that seeks to establish genuine relationship with others.

The sophisticated analysis of tzimtzum in Jewish mysticism anticipates and illuminates contemporary discussions in various fields. In psychology, the recognition that healthy development requires both expansion and limitation parallels insights about the importance of boundaries in therapeutic relationships and personal growth. In philosophy, the analysis of how unity can give rise to multiplicity without compromising essential unity provides resources for contemporary discussions about consciousness, identity, and emergence.

Perhaps most significantly, the mystical understanding of tzimtzum as revealing divine love through self-limitation offers resources for understanding how authentic care always involves a kind of “contraction”—the willingness to limit one’s own needs and desires to create space for the other’s genuine development.

### **Mapping the Spectrum**

Our investigation reveals four distinct levels at which different traditions locate the emergence of dialectical tension, each representing progressively deeper penetration into divine reality and each carrying distinct theological implications:

**Level One:** *Sefirotic Emanation (Classical Kabbalah) preserves Ein Sof’s absolute unity by locating dialectical tension only in the emanated realm. This approach maintains*

*theological stability and connection to normative religious practice but struggles with questions of logical coherence regarding creative emergence.*

**Level Two:** *Divine Cognition (Chabad Thought) recognizes dialectical tension within divine consciousness itself, specifically in the intellectual processes that underlie divine creativity. This approach provides sophisticated psychological analysis and rational accessibility while maintaining theological orthodoxy, but risks intellectualizing mystical experience and potentially compromising divine transcendence.*

**Level Three:** *Divine Volition (Transitional Approaches) locate dialectical tension at the level of divine will itself, prior to intellectual articulation but subsequent to essential divine unity. This middle way addresses problems of divine motivation while avoiding potential extremes of other approaches.*

**Level Four:** *Divine Essence acknowledge dialectical tension within divine essence itself, offering logical consistency and radical spiritual insight but potentially undermining conventional theological commitments and community stability.*

### **The Rebbe Rashab’s Synthetic Achievement**

The Rebbe Rashab’s systematic contribution emerges as particularly significant because it represents the most sophisticated attempt within orthodox Jewish mysticism to locate dialectical complexity at the foundations of divine consciousness while maintaining essential theological commitments. His doctrine of divine consciousness as processual and dialectical provides a middle way between classical approaches that may overly protect divine unity and heretical approaches that may compromise it.

His distinction between divine essence (atzmut), which remains absolutely unified, and divine revelation (gilui), which necessarily involves dialectical process, allows for recognizing genuine dialectical tension within divine consciousness while preserving ultimate divine unity. This sophisticated solution addresses the logical problems that challenge purely classical approaches while avoiding the potentially destabilizing implications of heretical alternatives.

### **Implications for Spiritual Practice**

These different approaches suggest correspondingly different methodologies for spiritual development. Classical emphasis on transcending opposition through mystical union points toward contemplative practices that seek to move beyond dialectical complexity toward simple unity. Chabad emphasis on integrating opposition through intellectual understanding suggests practices that engage both contemplative and analytical capacities. Heretical emphasis on transcending conventional categories altogether points toward more radical practices that may challenge conventional religious boundaries.

The ongoing vitality of these different approaches suggests that they may serve different spiritual needs and address

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different aspects of the complex relationship between human consciousness and divine reality. Rather than seeking definitive resolution, contemporary spiritual seekers might benefit from understanding how different approaches serve different purposes and provide different resources for navigating the challenges of spiritual development.

### **Bridging Ancient Wisdom and Modern Healing**

The spectrum of approaches to locating the Chesed-Gevurah dialectic reveals profound implications for contemporary therapeutic practice that extend far beyond academic theology. Each tradition's understanding of where dialectical tension emerges suggests corresponding approaches to healing and spiritual development. Classical Kabbalah's emphasis on transcending opposition through mystical union points toward therapeutic modalities that help clients move beyond conflicting internal forces toward integrated wholeness. Chabad thought's intellectualization of dialectical processes suggests approaches that engage both analytical and contemplative capacities, helping clients understand the cognitive foundations of emotional conflicts. Most radically, heretical traditions like Eybeschutz's recognition of divine unconsciousness within suffering itself provides theological foundation for therapeutic approaches that work with rather than against shadow material, recognizing psychological symptoms as potentially containing sacred energy requiring conscious integration rather than elimination.

These ancient insights anticipate and inform contemporary developments in trauma therapy, depth psychology, and spiritually-integrated clinical practice, as demonstrated in our work where we try to bridge mystical wisdom with modern healthcare. Understanding how different traditions locate the divine dialectic thus provides both theoretical framework and practical methodology for developing what might be called "mystical healing praxis"—approaches to healing that recognize the sacred dimensions of healing work while maintaining clinical rigor and therapeutic effectiveness.

### **Contemporary Scholarly Perspectives: The Historical Lens**

Gershom Scholem's pioneering scholarship provided the foundation for modern academic study of Jewish mysticism while revealing patterns of development that illuminate our central question. Scholem's historical approach shows how the Chesed-Gevurah dialectic functioned differently in different periods, serving various theological and social needs while maintaining essential continuity.

Scholem's analysis of Sabbateanism and Lurianic Kabbalah reveals how dialectical tension between divine mercy and judgment provided resources for understanding historical catastrophe and redemptive possibility. His insight that "the dialectic of Chesed and Gevurah underpins much of Kabbalah's messianic speculation" shows how this ancient question connects to practical concerns about suffering, justice, and hope for transformation (Scholem, 1974).

The historical perspective also reveals the progressive radicalization of dialectical thinking within Jewish mysticism, from classical sources that maintain clear hierarchy between divine unity and dialectical manifestation through Sabbatean innovations that locate dialectical tension within cosmic process itself. This historical development anticipates contemporary theological challenges while providing resources for addressing them.

### **The Phenomenological Turn**

Moshe Idel's scholarship represents a crucial development beyond purely historical approaches by emphasizing the phenomenological dimensions of mystical experience and the continuities within Jewish mystical tradition. Idel's analysis emphasizes "the fluidity of sefirot and their dynamic interplay, rejecting a static hierarchy" in ways that transform understanding of the Chesed-Gevurah relationship (Idel, 1988).

Rather than treating the sefirot as fixed divine attributes or emanative levels, Idel shows how mystical literature understands them as dynamic processes that interpenetrate and mutually condition each other. This dynamic understanding suggests that the question of where dialectical tension "begins" may itself be misconceived—perhaps we should understand the entire mystical system as dynamically interconnected, with dialectical principles manifesting differently at each level of experience and understanding.

Idel's phenomenological approach also reveals how the Chesed-Gevurah dialectic functions differently in different mystical contexts—in contemplative practice representing tension between surrender and effort, in ethical development representing tension between compassion and justice. This contextual sensitivity provides resources for understanding how ancient wisdom can address contemporary spiritual needs without losing its essential character.

### **Hermeneutical Sophistication**

Elliot Wolfson's scholarship brings sophisticated hermeneutical and deconstructive analysis to Jewish mystical texts, revealing layers of meaning that escape more conventional approaches. Wolfson's analysis emphasizes how mystical language simultaneously reveals and conceals its referents, operating at multiple levels of meaning simultaneously.

In *Language, Eros, Being*, Wolfson argues that "Chesed and Gevurah coexist and intertwine even within the highest levels (Keter as Ratzon and Ta'anug), suggesting that the tension echoes in the highest divine will (Wolfson, 2005)." This analysis supports locating dialectical tension much deeper in divine reality than classical sources typically acknowledge while avoiding potential reductionism of purely rational approaches.

Wolfson's hermeneutical sophistication reveals how different mystical authors use the Chesed-Gevurah dialectic to address different theological and experiential concerns. Rather than

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representing fixed doctrine, the dialectical relationship serves as flexible symbolic resource that can be deployed in various ways depending on context and purpose.

### **Therapeutic Applications**

The integration of these scholarly perspectives with contemporary therapeutic practice, reveals how ancient mystical insights can illuminate modern approaches to healing and spiritual development. Our concept of “dark Shekhinah” provides framework for understanding how divine presence manifests precisely within experiences of abandonment and suffering (Ungar-Sargon, 2025).

This therapeutic application of mystical dialectic transforms clinical practice by recognizing that healing relationships require a form of “therapeutic tzimtzum”—practitioners must withdraw ego-driven needs to fix or control, creating space for clients’ own healing capacity to emerge. The recognition that effective care requires both presence and restraint, both engagement and appropriate limitation, mirrors the divine dialectic revealed in mystical sources.

Our essay on “Shekhinah Consciousness” demonstrates how bearing witness to suffering becomes a form of messianic activity—helping to restore divine presence from exile by refusing to let suffering remain meaningless or invisible (Ungar-Sargon, 2025). This approach transforms therapeutic work from symptom management to cosmic participation, providing both deeper meaning and sustainable motivation for healthcare professionals.

### **Beyond the Problem of Evil-Human Suffering**

Traditional theodicies attempt to justify God’s permission of evil, typically leading to intellectually unsatisfying explanations that fail to address the experiential reality of suffering. The dialectical approaches examined in this investigation suggest a different framework—what might be called “theo-therapy”—that seeks to discern God’s presence within human suffering rather than explaining it away.

Following Eybeschutz’s radical insight that evil originates from divine unconsciousness rather than divine opposition, suffering can be understood as manifestation of divine sleep that contains within itself possibility of divine awakening through conscious integration. This framework transforms therapeutic practice from the focus on (a military model of) eliminating pathology to participating in cosmic awakening (Eybeschutz, 2014).

The recognition that creativity necessarily involves dialectical tension—both expansion and contraction, revelation and concealment—provides resources for understanding both divine and human creative processes in the therapeutic space between healer and patient. Rather than treating creative blocks or psychological/physical symptoms as problems requiring solution, dialectical approaches recognize them as containing potentially transformative energy requiring conscious integration.

### **Mystical Psychology and Clinical Practice**

The sophisticated analysis of consciousness in Jewish mystical sources provides resources for developing what might be called “mystical awareness”—approaches to healing that recognize spiritual dimensions without abandoning clinical rigor. Psychological and even physical symptoms might be read as encrypted messages about spiritual dislocation, invitations to explore how divine presence has become exiled within the psyche.

Symptoms could then represent manifestations of divine sleep—unconscious divine energy seeking conscious integration rather than elimination. Depression might indicate soul’s participation in cosmic processes of divine unconsciousness requiring awakening rather than simply medication. Anxiety might reflect soul’s intuition of uncontained divine energy requiring conscious direction.

This approach suggests that healing becomes a form of cosmic repair (tikkun olam), where personal transformation contributes to broader restoration of divine consciousness in the world. Unlike approaches that seek to eliminate shadow material, the integration model suggests that recovery involves conscious engagement with unconscious divine energies rather than their suppression.

### **Clinical Applications and Sacred Space**

The therapeutic relationship mirrors divine tzimtzum when practitioners learn to be fully present while maintaining appropriate boundaries, creating space for clients to discover their own inner resources. Rather than rushing to eliminate suffering, theologically-informed therapy learns to hold paradox—pain and healing, despair and hope, abandonment and presence—allowing transformation to emerge from within tension itself.

Medical encounters become sacred when practitioners recognize their role as witnesses to divine presence within human vulnerability, transforming clinical spaces into potential sites of revelation. Healthcare workers, therapists, and pastoral caregivers are not simply addressing human need but potentially ministering to God’s own exile and pain, as reflected in the kabbalistic teaching that Shekhinah (divine presence) goes into exile with those who suffer (Guggenheimer, 2020).

### **Implications for Post-Holocaust Theology**

#### **The Ultimate Test Case**

The Holocaust represents the ultimate challenge for any theology of suffering, forcing theological discourse to confront evil on a scale that renders traditional explanations inadequate. The industrial machinery of genocide, the systematic dehumanization of victims, and the apparent silence of divine presence during the Shoah demand theological responses that go beyond conventional theodicy toward more radical forms of theological thinking.

The dialectical approaches examined in this investigation offer distinctive resources for post-Holocaust theological reflection, not by explaining why God “permitted” the Holocaust but by

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exploring how divine presence might have been experienced within it. Drawing on our work on therapeutic spirituality and post-Holocaust consciousness, we can explore how the recognition of divine presence within apparent abandonment might provide frameworks for understanding survival, resistance, and the possibility of healing after ultimate trauma (Ungar-Sargon, 2025).

### **Divine Suffering and Human Witness**

The kabbalistic teaching that Shekhinah (divine presence) accompanies the Jewish people into exile provides a crucial framework for understanding divine relationship to ultimate suffering. Rather than viewing God as external observer who either permits or prevents human suffering, this mystical insight suggests that God experiences catastrophe from within, not as detached deity but as fellow victim.

This theological framework transforms the question from “Where was God during the Holocaust?” to “How did God suffer with us?” Survivors who maintained faith often testified not to divine protection but to divine presence within abandonment—a presence that couldn’t prevent suffering but could companion it. As Elie Wiesel wrote of his experience in Auschwitz, he saw God hanging on the gallows with the victims, sharing their fate rather than determining it.

Our concept of “dark Shekhinah” provides contemporary theological language for understanding how divine presence manifests precisely within experiences of ultimate abandonment and dehumanization (Ungar-Sargon, 2025). This framework doesn’t minimize human responsibility for evil or reduce divine mystery to human comprehension, but it relocates theological inquiry from questions of divine permission to questions of divine solidarity.

Traditional theodicy seeks to justify divine ways to human beings, typically through explanations that preserve divine goodness by locating evil elsewhere—in human free will, natural law, or divine pedagogy. These approaches consistently fail when confronted with the reality of the Shoah because they cannot account for suffering that serves no apparent purpose and destroys rather than instructs.

Our approach suggests a different theological methodology: rather than explaining suffering, theology can learn to recognize and respond to divine presence within suffering (Ungar-Sargon, 2025). This shift transforms theological inquiry from intellectual justification to practical witness, from explaining evil to accompanying those who endure it.

Following Eybeschutz’s insight that evil originates from divine unconsciousness rather than divine intention, post-Holocaust theology might understand the Shoah as manifestation of cosmic divine sleep requiring awakening through human witness and remembrance. Eli Rubin’s analysis of divine dormita in Chabad thought provides crucial support for this understanding, showing how periods of divine concealment or “sleep” create spaces where human spiritual work becomes

essential for cosmic awakening. In Rubin’s framework, divine dormita represents not divine absence but divine presence in its most hidden form, requiring human consciousness to serve as the mechanism for divine re-awakening. This theological insight transforms Holocaust remembrance from mere historical preservation into active participation in cosmic repair—each act of witness and commemoration contributing to the restoration of divine consciousness within history. The work of survivors, historians, and commemorative institutions becomes a form of theological activity—participating in the restoration of divine consciousness through refusing to let victims disappear into historical amnesia, while simultaneously serving as agents of divine awakening from the cosmic sleep that enabled such unprecedented evil.

### **Therapeutic Implications**

The integration of mystical dialectical thinking with post-Holocaust consciousness has profound implications for understanding trauma, memory, and healing. If suffering can contain divine presence in hidden form, then therapeutic work with survivors and their descendants becomes a form of sacred activity—helping to restore Shekhinah from exile by creating spaces where traumatic memory can be acknowledged and integrated rather than suppressed or explained away.

Our clinical work demonstrates how recognizing divine presence within traumatic experience can transform therapeutic relationships (Ungar-Sargon, 2025). Rather than seeking to eliminate traumatic symptoms, healers can learn to honor them as containing sacred memory and witness. The goal becomes not forgetting or “moving on” but learning to carry memory in ways that honor both suffering and survival.

This approach has particular relevance for working with intergenerational trauma, where the effects of historical catastrophe continue to manifest in subsequent generations. Understanding trauma transmission as involving not merely psychological mechanisms but also spiritual disruption—the exile of divine presence within family and community systems—provides frameworks for healing that address both individual and collective dimensions of post-traumatic stress.

The dialectical understanding of divine presence within apparent absence also illuminates the spiritual heroism of Holocaust resistance, both armed and spiritual. When survival itself becomes a form of theological testimony, every act of human dignity under dehumanizing conditions participates in cosmic repair.

The spiritual resistance documented by historians like Lawrence Langer and David Roskies—maintaining Jewish practice in ghettos and camps, preserving human relationships under impossible conditions, creating art and literature in the face of death—can be understood as forms of theo-therapeutic activity (Langer, 1991). These acts of resistance create sacred space within profane circumstances, revealing divine presence precisely where it appears most absent.

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Viktor Frankl's observation that those who survived the camps were often those who found meaning within meaningless suffering resonates with the mystical insight that divine light can be found within the deepest darkness (Frankl, 1963). The ability to maintain human dignity and spiritual awareness under ultimate dehumanization represents a form of mystical achievement that reveals resources for understanding how divine presence can manifest within extreme limitation.

These theological frameworks developed through engagement with post-Holocaust consciousness have ongoing relevance for addressing contemporary forms of collective trauma—genocide, ethnic cleansing, systematic oppression, and ecological destruction. The recognition that divine presence can be found within rather than outside situations of ultimate suffering provides resources for accompaniment and healing that don't depend on explaining why such suffering occurs.

Our work with healthcare professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates how these theological insights can inform responses to contemporary collective trauma (Ungar-Sargon, 2025). Healthcare workers experiencing moral injury, families separated by illness and death, and communities disrupted by social isolation can find resources in mystical traditions that recognize divine presence within apparent abandonment.

### **Ethical Imperatives**

The recognition that divine presence can be found within ultimate suffering creates ethical imperatives for how communities respond to contemporary forms of trauma and injustice. If God suffers with victims rather than determining their fate, then human beings bear responsibility for creating conditions where divine presence can be recognized and healing can emerge.

This framework supports activism and social justice work not as secular political activity but as forms of theological practice. Working to prevent genocide, address systemic racism, combat poverty, and protect environmental destruction becomes participation in the restoration of Shekhinah from exile—helping to create conditions where divine presence can manifest more clearly in human community.

The integration of therapeutic and theological approaches also provides resources for training healthcare professionals, social workers, and pastoral caregivers in ways that honor both clinical competence and spiritual sensitivity. Recognizing that encounters with human suffering can become encounters with divine presence transforms professional practice from technical intervention to sacred service.

### **Future Directions**

The application of mystical dialectical thinking to post-Holocaust theology raises questions that require ongoing investigation and development. How can theological frameworks that emerge from Jewish experience speak to other forms of collective trauma without appropriating or

minimizing different cultural and religious contexts? How can recognition of divine presence within suffering avoid the trap of romanticizing or justifying evil?

Our work suggests directions for continued integration of mystical wisdom with contemporary therapeutic practice (Ungar-Sargon, 2025). This ongoing work requires dialogue between theologians, clinicians, survivors, and community leaders to develop approaches that honor both intellectual rigor and experiential authenticity.

The ultimate test of any theology lies not in its theoretical coherence but in its capacity to support actual healing and prevent future atrocities. The mystical insight that divine presence can be found within the darkest circumstances provides resources for hope that doesn't depend on false optimism or theological explanations that minimize the reality of evil.

Instead, this theological framework offers what might be called "luminous darkness"—the recognition that even ultimate suffering cannot separate human beings from divine presence, and that the work of witness, memory, and accompaniment participates in cosmic processes of repair and restoration. This theological vision supports both the necessity of remembering past suffering and the possibility of working toward futures where such suffering becomes less likely.

The integration of mystical wisdom with post-Holocaust consciousness thus provides not final answers but ongoing resources for the theological work that each generation must undertake in response to the particular forms of suffering and possibility that define their historical moment.

The ancient question of how divine unity relates to apparent multiplicity and opposition finds contemporary expression in the challenge of maintaining faith and working for justice in a world where ultimate evil remains possible but where divine presence can still be encountered by those willing to develop the spiritual vision necessary for its recognition.

### **The Endless Dance**

We find ourselves not with definitive answers but with a deepened appreciation for the sophistication and ongoing relevance of an ancient question. The relationship between Chesed and Gevurah, and the depth to which their dialectical interaction penetrates divine reality, remains what we might call a "fertile mystery"—a question that generates rather than exhausts insight through sustained engagement.

Each tradition examined in this study—classical Kabbalah, Chabad thought, and heretical alternatives—offers genuine insights while facing distinctive limitations. Classical approaches excel at preserving divine transcendence and maintaining connection to normative religious practice, but struggle with questions of logical coherence regarding creative emergence. Chabad approaches provide sophisticated psychological analysis and rational accessibility while

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maintaining theological orthodoxy, but risk intellectualizing mystical experience. Heretical approaches offer logical consistency and radical spiritual insight but potentially undermine conventional religious life and community stability.

The ongoing vitality of these debates suggests that rather than representing competing truth claims requiring resolution, these different approaches may capture different aspects of a reality too complex for any single perspective to encompass fully. The classical emphasis on divine transcendence, the Chabad emphasis on dialectical consciousness, and the heretical emphasis on essential dialectical complexity each illuminate dimensions of divine creativity and human spiritual experience that the others might miss.

The sophisticated analysis of dialectical processes in Jewish mysticism provides resources for contemporary discussions that extend far beyond religious studies into philosophy of mind, process theology, therapeutic spirituality, and post-Holocaust consciousness. The recognition that creativity necessarily involves dialectical integration—both expansion and contraction, revelation and concealment—offers insights relevant to understanding human creativity, psychological development, and the structure of consciousness itself.

Perhaps most significantly, the mystical insight that authentic spiritual development requires integrating rather than eliminating opposition provides resources for contemporary therapeutic practice and spiritual direction. The work of figures like Julian Ungar-Sargon demonstrates how ancient wisdom can inform modern healing practices without losing its essential transformative power.

The integration of mystical dialectical thinking with post-Holocaust theology reveals how theological reflection must remain grounded in actual human experience of suffering and healing rather than abstract speculation. The framework of “theotherapy”—seeking divine presence within rather than outside suffering—provides resources for accompaniment and healing that maintain both intellectual honesty and spiritual depth.

### **The Enduring Question**

The question of how deep the Chesed-Gevurah dialectic penetrates into divine creativity ultimately reveals itself as a question about the nature of creativity itself, the relationship between unity and multiplicity, and the possibility of finding meaning within apparent meaninglessness. These remain perennial human concerns that each generation must address through the intellectual and spiritual resources available to them.

The Jewish mystical tradition’s sophisticated analysis of these questions provides one such resource that retains contemporary relevance while honoring the depth and complexity of ultimate spiritual inquiry. The dialectical vision that emerges from

this tradition—recognizing that apparent opposites may form deeper unities, that creative activity requires both expansion and limitation, that divine presence can be found within apparent absence—offers frameworks for understanding both cosmic process and personal development that remain intellectually credible and spiritually transformative.

### **The Dance Continues**

In the end, we discover that the relationship between Chesed and Gevurah mirrors the relationship between all the ultimate polarities that structure existence: unity and multiplicity, transcendence and immanence, presence and absence, light and darkness, expansion and contraction. The mystical insight that these polarities form dynamic unities rather than static oppositions provides resources for navigating the complexities of both spiritual development and ordinary life.

The dialectical dance between Chesed and Gevurah continues in each moment of creative activity, each relationship that requires both love and limits, each therapeutic encounter that must balance presence and boundaries, each community that must integrate mercy and justice. Understanding this dance doesn’t resolve its tensions but provides frameworks for participating in it more skillfully and recognizing its sacred dimensions.

The ancient question of how deep dialectical tension penetrates divine reality thus becomes a contemporary question about how to live creatively and compassionately in a world that requires both the courage to embrace complexity and the wisdom to discern when and how to act within it. The mystical vision that divine presence can be found within the deepest challenges provides not escape from these challenges but resources for meeting them with both intellectual honesty and spiritual depth.

The investigation continues, as it must, in each generation of seekers who discover these tensions within their own experience and seek wisdom traditions that can provide guidance for navigating them skillfully. The Jewish mystical tradition’s sophisticated analysis of dialectical integration offers one such wisdom resource that honors both the complexity of ultimate questions and the human need for practical guidance in addressing them.

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