

Metaphoric Literality: Rabbi Shlomo Elyashiv and Lurianic Kabbalah

Mamesh, Kivyahol.

Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Tanya*, 1:2

Hayyim of Volozhyn, *Nefesh HaHayyim*, 4

All these parables really set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and we know that already. But the cares we have to struggle with every day: that is a different matter.

Concerning this a man once said: Why such reluctance? If you only followed the parables you yourselves would become parables and with that rid yourself of all your daily cares.

Another said: I bet that this is also a parable.

The first said: You have won.

The second said: But unfortunately only in parable.

The first said: No, in reality: in parable you have lost.

Franz Kafka, *On Parables*

When R. Issac Luria (1534-1572) known as the Arizal, developed his theosophical system often referred to as Kabbalat Ha-Ari or Lurianic Mysticism, he

initiated a revolution within the Jewish mystical tradition. In the margins of his predecessor and teacher R. Moshe Cordovero (1522-1570) and through a highly innovative form of Zoharic hermeneutics, the Arizal established a radical approach to the ancient theories of Jewish cosmology (*tzimtzum*, *shevirat ha-keilim*), theurgy (*kaavanot*) and eschatology (*tikkun*). Codified by his various disciples, primarily R. Chaim Vital (1542-1620) and R. Yisrael Sarug (1590-1610), the Lurianic system took form in the work *Eitz-Chaim* and the eight volumes of collected teachings known as *Shemoneh-Shearim*¹. After the Arizal's passing, it was generally agreed upon that the Lurianic corpus should, and would remain a closed system, one in which novelty and creativity from future scholars was discouraged and even prohibited². Once codified, Lurianic Kabbalah subsequently became widely accepted, forming a sacred textual matrix whose influence on various trends within Jewish history is nearly unprecedented³.

As a mystical doctrine that describes the origins as well as the telos of a transcendent creator and the movement of history, the “intensely dramatic” Lurianic Kabbalah contains a complex and integrated theurgical and psychological system wherein the individual is tasked with self-actualization through religious ritual now endowed with mystical significance. Through a series of catastrophic beginnings the embodied soul finds itself thrown into the coarser realms of existence that comprise our material world. In order so that the broken realm of this-worldliness may rectify and elevate itself back to its primordial source of perfection, the Lurianic subject is tasked with the “restoration of the ideal” which forms both “the original aim of creation” and “the secret purpose of existence” (scholem mt 268). Formed in the image of the supernal realms, the individual

¹ On the formulation of the Lurianic corpus, see Yosef Avivi, *Kabbalat HaAri* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2008), three volumes.

² See Rav Chaim Vital, *Hakdamah li-Shaar HaHakdamot*, printed in R. Chaim Vital Sefer Eitz Chaim (Jerusalem, 1985), 5-24; Louis Jacobs, *Turn Aside From Evil and do Good: An Introduction and a Way to the Tree of Life* (London: Littman Library, 1995).

³ See Lawrence Fine, *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos: Isaac Luria and His Kabbalistic Fellowship* (Stanford University Press, 2003); Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Schocken, 1978)244-286; Isiah Tishby, *Torat HaRah we-Klippah bi-Kabbalat Ha-Ari* (Hebrew University, 1962), 21-52; Shaul Magid, *From Metaphysics to Midrash: Myth, History, and the Interpretation of Scripture in Lurianic Kabbala* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 16-33.

serves as mediator between the spiritually refined worlds and the “fiendish nether-worlds of evil”. On a whole Lurianic Kabbalah attempts to describe and demarcate the architectonics of the Godhead as it manifests itself through and within the hierarchical unfolding of existence; and the practical role the individual plays within this cosmological drama.

In tracing the transition of the Divine from nothingness into something, Lurianic Kabbalah describes the triadic movement of *Tzimtzum*, *Shevira* and *Tikkun*, or contraction, shattering and restoration. According to Luria the inception of beings potential is within the undifferentiated light of *Ein Sof* wherein difference is negated by the infinite Nothing. To allow the play of difference in which something can come to be, Luria defines the initial movement within the undifferentiated and infinite light of the Divine as an act of *tzimtzum*, roughly defined as either withdrawal or contraction. Prior to the initial opening in which the other-than-God could exist, the fullness of the Divine plenum prevented the capacity of any being other-than-God. In order to create a space in which otherness could take root, God performed an act of self-contraction through which a vacant space (*chalal ha-panui*), or void could form. This space, devoid of presence could now serve as a potential space for the eventual unfolding of existence. This withdrawal or concealment of God’s unlimited presence is concurrently the disclosure of God’s delimitation. The eventual unfolding of existence is therefore predicated on the absence, or concealment of Godly presence. The next stage described in Lurianic Kabbalah, the shattering of the vessels (*shevirat ha-keilim*) symbolizes the traumatic collapsing of the initial structure of reality. After the *tzimtzum* through which the vacant space was disclosed, a ray (*kav*) of Infinite light (*ohr ein-sof*) was reintroduced into the *chalal ha-panui*. The divine potency of the *kav* was too concentrated and thus the other-than-God could not sustain an individualized existence. To affect the necessary grounds for creation, a dynamic-equilibrium of divine disclosure and concealment was established. The instrument for the disclosure of divinity is referred to as lights (*orot*) while the mechanisms of divine concealment are referred to as vessels (*keilim*). The *orot* invest themselves within the *keilim* and the *keilim* reveal the *orot* in a paradoxical act of concealment for the sake of disclosure. With the initial investiture of the *orot* within the *keilim* the overabundance of divinity within the lights exceeded their containment, thus

shattering the vessels. As a result, the broken remnants of the vessels fell into the potential space in which the concatenation of worlds would eventually unfold. Prior to the shattering of the vessels, the initial structure of reality existed within the realm of emanation (*Atzilut*), a liminal space that serves to bridge the worlds-of-the-infinite (*Olamot Ein-Sof*) and the finite worlds wherein the other-than-God can manifest. As a result of the shattering the fragments of the *keilim* fell to what would eventually become the realm of separation comprised of the triadic world of creation (*Briah*), formation (*Yetzirah*) and action (*Asiyah*) that depict a procession of simulacrum . These worlds of separation- with physical existence being the nethermost region-are comprised of the fragmented vessels that fell from the world of *Atzilut*. Thus, devoid of divinity these worlds of separation represent the “world of destruction and death” in which the husks of impurity (*klippot*) come to be. However, according to Lurianic Kabbalah, due to the divine properties of *orot*, their initial investiture within the *keilim* left traces of light within the broken remnants of the vessels thus retaining a covert connection between the worlds of separation and divine vitality. For Luria these traces (*Roshem*) or sparks (*Nitzotzot*) of light are engaged in a paradoxical process in which their exile and entrapment within the worlds of separation serves to enliven those same worlds so that they may eventually be rectified and elevated back into their initial source in *Atzilut*. After the shattering of the vessels and the ensuing world of chaos (*Tohu*) and separation, it arose within the recesses of the Divine Will to repair the world of *Atzilut* with a series of configurations (*Partzufim*) through which the delicate balance of *orot* and *keilim* was restored. These highly integrated *partzufim*; the ancient days (*Atik Yomin*); the long face (*Arik Anpin*); the supernal father (*Abba Illah*); the supernal mother (*Immah Illah*); the small face (*Zeir Anpin*) and its feminine counterpart (*Nukvah d'Zeir Anpin*) form the newly restored world of *Atzilut* or, as it is referred to in Lurianic Kabbalah, the world of restoration (*Olam HaTikkun*). Formed at the inception of historical creation, human beings are tasked with retaining and adding to the world of restoration by engaging and refining the coarse nature of the worlds of separation. With a particular emphasis on *Asiyah*, the worlds of separation become the field in which the individual is tasked with the third stage of the Lurianic drama, namely the act of human restoration (*Tikkun*). Through ritual acts and theurgical contemplation the Lurianic subject refines and elevates

the fallen fragments thus redeeming the traces of divine light and enabling their return back towards *Atzilut*. As a result of this human effort the individual adds and maintains the world of restoration that was formed through an act of Divine grace.

Arranged through the interrelation of the newly formed *partzufim* the world of *Atzilut* becomes the interface between the Lurianic subject and the realm of Divine Nothingness. With access to the infinite Nothingness barred, the individual is called to engage ritual acts from within the worlds of separation in order to stimulate the configurations of *Atzilut*, which in turn draw forth vitality (*hiyut*) and effulgence (*shefa*) from the realm of *Ein-Sof*. The *partzufim* of *Atzilut* serve as conduits through which the Lurianic subject may reach beyond being thus paradoxically bridging the gap separating Nothingness (*Ayin*) and something (*Yesh*) while maintaining their difference. With its unique role in joining that which cannot be joined the world of *Atzilut* is depicted as being both nothing and something. Meaning, as a container for the infinite, the world of *Atzilut* is nothing other than the Divine Nothing that enlivens it; yet simultaneously the interdependent lights and vessels that comprise the *partzufim* represent the something through which the worlds of separation interact. This paradoxical state of nothing that is something is captured by the author of the *Tikkunei Zohar* with the phrase, “*ihu v’hiyuhu had,ihu v’garmeihu had b’hon*, He and His vitality are one, He and His causations are one”⁴. In the world of *Atzilut* “*ihu*” or the ungraspable essence, “*hiyuhu*” divine vitality as manifested in *orot* and “*garmeihu*” the *keilim* that serve to conceal the *ohr*, are unified.

As a form of Jewish mysticism in which the monotheistic belief in a singular and unified creator is the driving force, Lurianic Kabbalah traces the fine line between the incorporeal and imageless God of the Bible and the imaginal anthropomorphization of God as depicted through the humanized *partzufim*. Through his attempt to depict the invisible while maintaining the invisibility of the Divine, Luria describes a highly complex system of finite configurations that somehow remain separate yet incorporated within the infinite.

With the general acceptance of Lurianic Kabbalah within the context of Jewish mystical thought the question that arose with subsequent generations was whether the Lurianic system was meant as a figurative, or metaphorical (*mashal*) framework to be

⁴ *Tiqqunei Zohar*, Introduction, 3b; See also R. Hayyim Vital, *Eitz Hayyim*, 42:4.

interpreted in a process of demetaphorization; or as a literal system in which the various configurations and anthropomorphizations were to be seen as actual mechanisms of the divine⁵. Are the Lurianic symbols a representation of the things themselves, a literal depiction of that which cannot be depicted; or are they figurative tropes whose meaning exceeds the symbolic casing, waiting to be discarded by the adept capable of revealing their true meaning (*nimshal*). This question can be understood within a philosophical register as well, namely, do the symbols depicted by Luria serve as figurative images which the individual must move through and beyond towards the ungraspable space of *Ein-Sof*, thus relegating their function to epistemological tropes which the Lurianic subject must deconstruct to properly grasp the essential meaning; or are these symbols self-contained depictions of an ontological real by which the individual may observe the movement of the divine.

Though the distinction between a figurative/metaphorical and literal interpretation of Lurianic Kabbalah has been subject to various treatments- both traditional and scholarly⁶- the approach of R. Shlomo Elyashiv, hitherto unanalyzed, is unique in its contextual framework as well as its highly polemical nature⁷. Elyashiv, who has

⁵ Regarding the nature of the Kabbalistic symbol see Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Schocken, 1978), 20-28; Susan Handelman, *Fragments of Redemption* (Indiana University Press, 1991), 102-116; Boaz Huss, "Hag'darat ha-Samal shel R. Yosef Gikkali we-Gilgulo bi-Safrut ha-Kabbalah" in *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* (12, 1995), 157-176; Avraham Elkayam, "Bein Referentialism li-Bitzuah: Shtei Gishot bi-Havanat ha-Samal ha-Kabbali bi-Sefer "Maarechet Eloket", ;

⁶ For a comprehensive overview of the varying positions within the literal/figurative debate see Yaakov Moshe Hillel, *Ad Ha-Gal Ha-Zeh* (Ahavat Shalom, 2004), 97-132. While most discussions on the figurative/metaphoric nature of Lurianic Kabbalah are centered around *tzimtzum* and its (non)literality, the logic and considerations may be applied to the entire Lurianic project as well, see Shaul Magid, "Origin and Overcoming the Beginning: *Zimzum* as a Trope of Reading in Post-Lurianic Kabbalah", in *Beginning/Again: Toward a Hermeneutics of Jewish Texts*, ed. A. Cohen and S. Magid, (Seven Bridges, 2002); Tamar Ross, "Two Interpretations to the Doctrine of *Tzimtzum*", in *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* (2, 1982). Rachel Elijor, "Ha-Zika ha-Metaphoric Bein ha-El li-Adam we-Retzifuta Shel ha-Mamashut ha-Chezyonit bi-Kabbalat ha-Ari" in *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* (10, 1993), 47-57.

⁷ Eliezer Baumgarten has discussed Elyashiv's engagement in the literal/figurative discussion as a voice espousing a quasi-literal approach, albeit parenthetically, see Eliezer Baumgarten, "History and Historiography in the Doctrine of R. Shlomo Elyashiv," (MA thesis, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 2006), 25-39; E. Baumgarten, "R. Menahem Mendel of Shklov and Interpretation of the Symbol Within The Students of The Gr"a in The Eighteenth Century", in *The Students of The Gr"a In The Land of Israel* (Mihlalat Efrat, 2011), 33-51. Generally speaking Elyashiv's complex view of the literal/figurative nature of Lurianic Kabbalah has been overly simplified as strictly literal due, in part, to his adherence to the Vilna Gaon's school of Kabbalistic interpretation which was viewed as espousing a demetaphorization of

traditionally been seen as a literalist aggressively fighting the proclivity of “certain thinkers⁸” in his generation to interpret Lurianic Kabbalah as a series of figurative metaphors (*mashal*) in need of demetaphorization (*nimshal*), advocates for a literal, antimetaphoric reading in which the Lurianic symbols depict the ontological reality of *Atzilut*. What remains to be shown, however, is that Elyashiv’s literalist interpretation is far from a simple foreclosure on the metaphoricity at play within the Lurianic system. For Elyashiv the binary opposition between literality and figurativeness must be overcome in order so that a third path in which a metaphoric literality can be disclosed. In my reading of Elyashiv’s critique of a strictly figurative interpretation I attempt to show a latent metaphoricity that informs his literalist approach wherein Lurianic symbols may be viewed as literal only in so far as they are metaphorical depictions of that which cannot be depicted⁹. While true that Elyashiv viewed the strict figurative interpretations as transgressing the vital belief in the ontic reality of the *partzufim* described in Lurianic Kabbalah; the interdiction against the corporealization (*hagshama*) of God, and thus the

Lurianic symbols to reveal the *nimshal*, see the letter of R. Avraham Simha of Stislov, nephew of R. Hayyim of Volozhin regarding the Gra’s statement on R. Moshe Hayyim Luzzato, “that he understood the *nimshal* of the Lurianic writings (as the Gra stated that the Lurianic writings are entirely metaphor alone).”, printed in R. Moshe Hayyim Luzzato, *Daat Tevunot ve-Sefer ha-Klalim* (Freidlander, 1997), 235-236; Mordechai Pachter, “Kabbalat ha-Gra Through the Lens of Two Traditions”, in *Ha-Gra u-Beit Midrasho* (Ramat Gan, 2002), 119-136; Shaul Magid, “Deconstructing the Mystical: The Anti-Mystical Kabbalism in Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin’s *Nefesh-Ha-Hayyim*”, in *The Jewish Journal of Thought and Philosophy* (Vol. 9), 21-27. As this chapter will show, Elyashiv was aware of the attempt by certain students of the Gra to situate his Kabbalistic hermeneutics within the strictly figurative camp.

⁸ There have been numerous opinions with regards to which “kabbalist” Elyashiv was focusing his critique. While some (Sussman, Shocket, Naor) have claimed that the Leshem’s polemic was directly leveled against a Hassidic interpretation of Lurianic Kabbalah; others have claimed that it was towards Mithnagdim themselves, either R. Hayyim Voloziner (Pachter) or R. Yitzhak Issac Haver (Baumgarten, Shilo). Some have suggested, albeit mistakenly that Elyashiv’s critique was leveled towards the Lithuanian ethicist R. Yosef Leiv Bloch of Telz (Chriqui). It is this author’s opinion that the Leshem’s polemic and critique was directed towards R. Naftali Herz ha-Levi Weidenbaum of Jaffa as seen explicitly in the correspondence between the two, printed in Moshe Schatz, *Maayan Moshe* (Jerusalem, 2013), 254-273.

⁹ My thinking in this regard is influenced by Elliot R. Wolfson’s approach to the metaphoricity of Kabbalistic hermeneutics, see for example Elliot R. Wolfson, *A Dream Interpreted Within a Dream: Oneiropoiesis and the Prism of Imagination* (New York: Zone Books, 2011), 199-203; “Suffering Eros and Textual Incarnation: A Kristevian Reading of Kabbalistic Poetics”, in *Toward a Theology of Eros: Transfiguring Passion at the Limits of Discipline*, ed. V. Burrus and C. Keller (Fordham University Press, 2006), 341-365.

kataphatic impulse inherent within a purely literalist interpretation consistently informed his unique path of Kabbalistic hermeneutics¹⁰.

To properly express his literalist view, Elyashiv utilizes the thought of R. Moshe Hayyim Luzzato as his interlocutor¹¹. Typically, RaMHaL's Kabbalistic hermeneutics are perceived as espousing a strictly figurative/metaphorical approach in which Lurianic symbols were seen as products of prophetic vision (*hazon ha-nevuah*) conjured in the imagination of the prophet (*bi-yad ha-neviim edameh*)¹². For the *Leshem* this mode of interpretation points towards the purely metaphorical nature of Lurianic symbols. Similar to prophetic visions that were beheld in a state of imaginal unconsciousness only to be interpreted afterwards; Lurianic symbols serve as metaphorical tropes pointing beyond themselves towards a latent meaning that can only be disclosed through the process of demetaphorization. After praising Luzzato and distinguishing the written works of RaMHaL from their modern adaptations, Elyashiv continues with his critique of the figurative approach,

“Nevertheless I will state here: all the expansive interpretation that RaMHaL has applied to the words of the *Zohar* and *Arizal* through the [notion] of *hazon ha-nevuah* and the verse *bi-yad ha-neviim edameh*, and heaped upon them visions and imaginings, this does not sit well with me at all, for no one from the earlier generations (*rishonim*) nor the later generations (*ahronim*) has said this, and the words of the *Zohar* and *Arizal* cannot support his [RaMHaL] interpretation at all...to the point that they have taken

¹⁰ Elyashiv's Kabbalistic system is marked by a strict adherence to the Negative theological impulse as espoused by Maimonides, see for example *Leshem Shevo v-Achlama: Hakdamot u-Shearim*, 9, s.v *we-hinei*; 218, s.v *we-dah*; *Leshem Shevo v-Achlama: Drushei Olam HaTohu*, 1:163, s.v *u-bi'yoteir*. All references to *Sifrei Leshem Shevo we-Achlama* are based on the Barzani editions of the texts. Elyashiv saw in Maimonides's negative theology a precursor and prerequisite to the proper understanding of Lurianic Kabbalah wherein the apophatic negation remains in spite of the kataphatic depiction of God's investiture within finite existence, see Alan Brill, "Auxiliary to *Hokhmah*: The Writings of the Vilna Gaon and Philosophic Terminology" in *Ha-Gra u-Beit Midrasho* (Ramat Gan, 2002), 21 fn.37. Regarding the Maimonidean approach to the hermeneutics of secrecy and its influence of Kabbalistic hermeneutics, a transference that can be applied to Elyashiv's path as well, see Elliot R. Wolfson, "Beneath the Wings of the Great Eagle: Maimonides and Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah," in Görges K. Hasselhoff and Otfried Fraisse, eds., *Moses Maimonides (1138-1204): His Religious, Scientific, and Philosophical Wirkungsgeschichte in Different Cultural Contexts* (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2004), 209-237.

¹¹ *Leshem Shevo v-Achlama: Drushei Olam HaTohu*, 1:162, s.v *we-hinini*

¹² On Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto and his figurative approach to the Lurianic system, see Jonathan Garb, *Kabbalist in the Heart of the Storm: Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2014; Hebrew), 174-185; Mordechai Chiqui, *Rehev Yisrael: Kabbalat R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto* (Machon Ramchal, 1995), 285-330.

the lofty secrets, the holy of holies in their elevated heights, and drawn them (? Machnis or machnim) into the circularity and procession of this-worldly (*olam ha-zeh*) governance, as if to say nothing exists above, heaven forbid, other than the procession of governance that they have grasped according to their knowledge. Heaven forbid that anyone that carries the name of Israel (*shem yisrael*) should think these thoughts; these [thoughts] are the path of those philosophizing intellects removed from the light of Kabbalah.¹³”

In viewing the Lurianic symbols as a cluster of metaphor whose referential ground lay beyond the symbol, RaMHaL approaches the *partzufim* as figurative tropes that stand in for the true significance of these symbols, namely, the various forms of divine and historical governance (*hanhagot*)¹⁴. Like the Aristotelian conception of metaphorical speech where “metaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else”¹⁵, the names applied to the figurative *partzufim* signify the literal and perceptible modes of divine governance as they manifest in this-worldliness (*olam ha-zeh*). For RaMHaL the subjective experience of divine *hanhagot* is transferred into the Lurianic symbol which now serves as a stand in for the literal content and experience¹⁶. By minimizing the *partzufim* to overdetermined metaphors, Elyashiv finds the non-literalists guilty of denying the ontic reality of *atzilut*, a transgressive thought tantamount to denial, or in his language,

¹³ *Leshem Shevo v-Achlama: Drushei Olam HaTohu*, 1:162-163, s.v *we-hineini*

¹⁴ It is important to note that while Elyashiv denies the significance of a strictly figurative reading of the Lurianic system in which the demetaphorization of the symbols is the main goal of the Kabbalist; he does leave space for imaginative hermeneutics wherein the reader may enhance the historical meaning within the literal symbol. This becomes apparent as the reader encounters the second volume of *Drushei Olam HaTohu* in which Elyashiv’s project is conspicuously similar to the Kabbalistic interpretations of Luzzatto. This figurative reading, however, must be read in and through Elyashiv’s clarification of his own system of interpretation, what I have termed metaphoric-literality in the first volume of *Drushei Olam HaTohu*. See the correspondence between Elyashiv and Hertz printed in M. Schatz, *Maayan Moshe* (Jerusalem, 2013), 244-245.

¹⁵ For an overview of the Aristotelian theory of metaphor and its subsequent interpretations see Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor* (University of Toronto Press, 1974), 24-27; 259-272.

¹⁶ This reading wherein Luzzatto’s Kabbalistic hermeneutics remain strictly metaphorical to the point of denying any ontic literality is Elyashiv’s interpretation of “those interpreters who delve too deeply in the RaMHaL”. Luzzatto’s approach does allow for a literal interpretation of Lurianic symbols without denying the emphasis on a figurative understanding; see Moshe Schatz, *Maayan Moshe* (Jerusalem, 2013), 73-75; R. Yaakov Moshe Harlop, *Mei Marom: Al Shemoneh Perakim l’Rambam* (Beit Zevul, 1981), 176-177. Assuming that both Elyashiv and Luzzatto understand the Lurianic system as existing on a quasi-literal level, they split with regards to the function and ontology of metaphor. While Luzzatto adheres to the rhetorical theory of metaphor wherein meaning is transferred from the literal to the figurative, endowing the figure with the qualities and traits of the literal; Elyashiv, as we will show, advocates for a new model of metaphor wherein the literal and figurative coalesce in their difference.

“The great transgression involved in stating that the entirety of existence is not an absolute existence at all. This is tantamount to the denial of everything, heaven forbid, because according to their words, where (*ayeih*) is the truth of the entire *torah* that only exists from the *tzimtzum* and below, and where is the name *Y-H-V-H* whose disclosure is in *atzilut* alone.¹⁷”

Elsewhere Elyahsiv uses harsher language in describing the errancy of such an interpretive stance,

“Heaven forbid that one should entertain the thought and state that these are metaphors alone, for one who says this, in my eyes they are denying the entirety of Kabbalah, heaven forbid, and it is worthy to react towards them even more than the reaction of holy individuals towards the intellectuals (*hokrim*) who have removed various biblical stories from their plain meaning, for they have only touched the veracity of those particular stories, while those who claim that the words of the *Arizal* are simply metaphorical, they are denying the entirety of Kabbalah, as all the words of the *Arizal* that we have before us, they themselves are the words of the *Zohar* in the *Idrot* and *Sifra de-Tzniuta*, and so it is with the words of *Shir ha-Shirim* as she is the holy of holies, and so too numerous verses in the *Torah* that Moses received from the mouth of His strength (*mi-pi ha-gevurah*); all of these words are considered the concealed *Torah* and the disclosure of the name *Y-H-V-H* and all the names and appellations that grow from it, for they comprise the light and revelation of His blessed name that is disclosed from within his essential concealment, and from the infinite light (*ohr ein-sof*) to be revealed in all the emanations (*ne'etzalim*), that is, the world of *atzilut* in general, which is disclosed through the being and existence of the worlds of *by"ra* and their governance, as it is known.¹⁸”

In response to what he saw as a misunderstanding and misappropriation of Lurianic Kabbalah by those who “delved into these explanations beyond what RaMHaL himself intended” and whose metaphorical interpretations “do not amount to the wisdom of Kabbalah whatsoever”, Elyashiv reaffirms the literality of these symbols, “With regard to all of these aspects themselves, there is no metaphor at all, rather they exist truly with everything that is said and taught regarding them, without figurative speech or saying otherwise, and without any alternative intention.¹⁹” By confirming the ontic reality of the *partzufim* of *atzilut*, Elyashiv accomplishes two goals; rectifying what he sees as subversive heresy inherent within RaMHaL’s approach, and a return to Lurianic Kabbalah’s original project. As we will see, these two facets of Elyashiv’s hermeneutical endeavor split when discussing the inherent metaphoricity at play within his literalist interpretation.

Clarifying his approach towards the *partzufim* of *atzilut*, Elyashiv writes:

¹⁷ *Leshem Shevo v-Achlama: Drushei Olam HaTohu*, 1: 165, s.v *we-harei lanu*

¹⁸ *Leshem Shevo v-Achlama: Biurim*, 1: 10-11, s.v *we-halila*

¹⁹ *Leshem Shevo v-Achlama: Drushei Olam HaTohu*, 1: 165

“Now, all of these aspects are negated from the Creator in all manners of negation, however, in *atzilut* all of these aspects are there in actuality. Rather, they exist in their relative orientation accordant to *atzilut* that is loftier and removed from the existence of *briah*, *yetzira* and *asiyah* (*by”a*). There is no one within the entirety of *by”a* who can grasp the essence or form of *atzilut* as it is, as there is no equivalence between *atzilut* and *by”a* beyond the proper names alone...Nevertheless we see from all of this that the world of *atzilut* is a world comprised of all the particulars that are present in the worlds of *by”a*...However, their existence and essence is ungraspable to beings...Nevertheless, everything that exists within the lower (*takton*) is equivilant to the higher (*elyon*). For the higher is the root that contains the potential of each and every particular existent that exists in the lower, in all their quantity and quality, their shape, image and color. However, relative to the lower, all that exists within the higher is thought of as the potential root alone. But, in the existence of the higher itself there exists absolutely, in all its quality and quantity, its image and its shape, in all its particularity exactly like the lower. Except, each [level] according to its relative orientation. And so it is with *atzilut*, as she is the root of *by”a* in its entirety, and all that is manifest in the branch and fruit exists within the root as well. This is the aspect of the *shi’ur komah* and the *partzufim* that are mentioned in *atzilut*. For they are exactly as they are in *by”a*, except that in *atzilut* they are accordant with their relative orientation there, of which no being may understand or grasp.²⁰”

Affirming the literality of the configurations within *atzilut*, Elyashiv is showing the ontic reality of the Lurianic symbols. Within the same passage, however, the literal affirmation is revised regarding the Lurianic subject’s apperception of these symbols. Through a particularly distinct form of Kabbalistic perspectivism²¹, Elyashiv maintains the literal existence of the *partzufim* within *atzilut* while simultaneously denying any possibility of “understanding” or “grasping” those very *partzufim*. Paradoxically these configurations remain “unknowable and ungraspable, neither their demarcation nor their manifoldness; neither their time nor their space; neither their essential qualities nor their formal properties; neither their descriptive color nor shape²²” while forming the “true and actual reality” that comprises the world of *atzilut*. The foreclosure on grasping the nature of *atzilut* stems not from an epistemological limit in which the known exceeds the capacity of the knower to know, but rather an ontological demarcation barring the subject access to *atzilut*. As Elyashiv writes,

²⁰ *Leshem Shevo v-Achlama: Drushei Olam HaTohu*, 1:161-162

²¹ This mode of Kabbalistic perspectivism, or *klal ha-arhin* as it is expressed in the writings of R. Shalom Sharabi, is an example of Elyashiv’s vast utilization of Rashash’s school of Kabbalah. See chapter... “The Whole is in the Part: Ontological Individuation in the Leshem and Rashash.”

²² *Leshem Shevo v-Achlama: Biurim*, 1:13

“It is impossible for any being to grasp anything of *atzilut*, particularly the aspects discussed in the *Zohar* and *Ariza*’l, how they are or what they are at all, as it is written, “*ki lo yireini ha-adam w-hai*”. This is not the result of the individual’s unworthiness, for if it was [the result of this] the holy One blessed be He would not have withheld this from Moses. Rather, the intention here is that it is not possible (*sh-lo efshar*), and while for Him, may His name be blessed nothing is too wondrous; this [grasping of *atzilut*] is beyond the laws of creation. Meaning, it is impossible accordant with the laws of creation for the creature to grasp the creator.²³”

Meaning, the inability to comprehend the true nature of these configurations is not contingent on the subject’s capacity to comprehend, rather, it results from the irreducible distance separating beings from the source of being itself. Essentially barred from the subject, the realm of *atzilut* is at once unknowable, yet known in its unknowability²⁴. Attentive to the paradoxical logic at play wherein the *partzufim* of *atzilut* represent an ontic reality through which the divine infinitude (*ein sof*) discloses itself, while remaining inherently unknowable, and thus metaphorical and unreal, Elyashiv writes:

“However, the wisdom of Kabbalah given to Moses at Sinai teaches us that the truth of all of these aspects (*inyanim*) exist devoid of any image or pictorial depiction whatsoever, rather, it is concealed from us in all manners of concealment how they are, or what they are; all of this is enough to remove all the difficulties that befall the words of the *Arizal* and the *Zohar* regarding the nature of the descriptions and this-worldly happenings that are depicted in *atzilut* and above, even though (*af al-pi*) that from *atzilut* and beyond everything is absolute divinity removed from all these aspects entirely. However, the truth is that all the diminutions and lack that exist in these aspects, and everything that is forbidden to affix to divinity, they are not there at all, and He may His name be blessed is removed from them entirely, nevertheless (*v-im kol zeh*) all of these aspects exist there, precisely (*mamash*) in such a way that all the concepts and movements of the body are essentially negated, devoid of any description, shape or image whatsoever. Now, while at first glance these words are two oppositional postulates within a singular theme (*k-shnei haphahim bi-nosei ehad*), nevertheless, since the essence of *atzilut* is concealed in all manners of concealment (*ne’elam bi-tahlit ha-he’elam*), it is quite possible that there should exist there all of these things (*devarim*) in such a manner of concealment that negates all difficulties (*kushiyot*), and all of the investigations (*hakirot*) that arise in this, they have no place there, for there [*atzilut*] all of these things and descriptions are precisely themselves (*atzmam mamash*), so too with all the aspects that are spoken of in the *Zohar* and *Arizal*, they exist there in their entirety and truthfulness devoid of any picture, heaven forbid, without posing a contradiction (*stirah*) to the simple unity (*ahduto ha-peshuta*) of His blessed name; yet

²³ *Leshem Shevo v-Achlama: Drushei Olam HaTohu*, 1: 165-166

²⁴ See Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Schoken, 1978), 272-273; Scholem, *Kabbalah* (Dorset Press, 1974), 102-103.

(*elah*) it is concealed from us in all manners of concealment how they are and what they are...and all the words of *Arizal* [exist] in such an essential concealment (*mehut ne'elam*) as this, bereft of all description or image, without shape or color, absolutely devoid of any bodily conception entirely, this is what we mean when constantly say that He, may His name be blessed, He is concealed in all manners of concealment... no creature is capable of comprehending *atzilut* whatsoever, how all of these aspects of the *shi'ur komah* as described in the *Torah* and the words of the *Zohar* and *Arizal* exist there devoid of any depiction, image or shape whatsoever; and there is no metaphoricity nor exaggeration whatsoever regarding these aspects, nor are they the aspect of prophetic imagination (*maareh ha-nevuah*) alone, rather, they [*partzufim*] all exist precisely (*mamash*) as their intended meaning and literalness while [remaining] concealed in all manners of concealment how they are or what they are, as there is no true comprehension (*musag amitit*) of these aspects except to Him, may His name be blessed, alone...[after all of this] it is clear to us that the *Arizal* did not say that these are metaphors nor products of prophetic imagination whatsoever. ..Rather he [*Arizal*] said that they are subtle lights of utter spirituality (*orot dakim bi-tachlit ha-ruhaniyut*) in their incomprehensibility. Nevertheless, what we find is that they are precisely as their intended meaning and literalness (*k'mashmum w-pshutan mamash*), as it is described in *Eitz Hayyim* and the other writings of the *Arizal*.²⁵

From this text it is clear that Elyashiv is aware of the mutual exclusivity at play between these two postulates. On the one hand, Lurianic symbols are literal mechanisms of divinity and as such they exist absolutely as they are depicted and written. On the other hand, these symbols must remain ontologically incomprehensible, and thus metaphorical, as they represent the realm of *atzilut* wherein the finite descriptions and depictions of the divine are effaced through the divine infinity that negates the literality of the finite symbols. For Elyashiv, the configurations of *atzilut* represent an unavoidable paradox²⁶. If the reader sees them as metaphorical tropes standing in for a proper, albeit more refined vision, then the Lurianic system is degraded to an imaginal scene perceived within the particular psyche of one individual²⁷. The *partzufim*, devoid of any ontic reality, are relegated to the role of rhetorical tropes whose manifest form must be shed in order to reveal the latent meaning that lay beyond the symbols. If, however, the configurations are taken as literal descriptions of divinity devoid of any

²⁵ *Leshem Shevo v-Achlama: Biurim*, 1: 9-11

²⁶ This paradox is described by Elyashiv, borrowing from the *Zohar* (2: 162b), as *raza di'mihimnuta*, see *Leshem Shevo v-Achlama: Drushei Olam HaTohu*, 2: 136

²⁷ This critique of a purely metaphoric interpretation of Lurianic symbols is expressed in the writings of R. Zadok Rabinowitz of Lublin, *Kuntreis Sefer ha-Zikronot* (Jerusalem, 2001), 18-21.

metaphoricity or figure-of-speech, then the Lurianic system is guilty of depicting that which cannot be depicted²⁸.

In defining his approach wherein the Lurianic symbols are taken as literal and real configurations within the world of *atzilut*, Elyashiv counters the corporealization inherent in such a stance by renouncing that which has been affirmed within the same utterance²⁹. Each statement that seeks to affirm the literal existence of the various *partzufim* must be read simultaneously and against Elyashiv's apophatic "saying" in which the literalist "said"³⁰ is written under erasure³¹ to maintain the unbridgeable gap between the individual and the divine as manifest in *Atzilut*. As a result of his incessant apophatic unsaying of the kataphatic said within his literalist approach, Elyashiv carves a space where the Lurianic symbols must be seen as literal depictions of that which cannot be depicted and thus metaphorical in their attempt to visualize the invisible. Thus after his critique of the strictly metaphorical approach to Lurianic symbols, Elyashiv describes the quasi-metaphoricity essential to our understanding of these very symbols:

"Regarding what is written in various places, that all of these aspects in *atzilut* are metaphorical. The intention is with regards to our comprehension of these aspects, as there is certainly no relation or imagination whatsoever regarding their true existence (*metziutum ha-amiti*) nor our grasp or comprehension of them. As stated above regarding the relation of the soul (*neshamah*) in the body (*guf*), that even though the soul is surely within us, nevertheless we cannot grasp its essence at all. And according to our comprehension it is a simple light alone (*ohr pashut livad*) while in truth it contains the potential for all the particulars within the body...Therefore it is obvious that all the

²⁸ The concern of anthropomorphically depicting that which cannot be depicted and thus transgressing the interdiction against iconicity was at the fore of many Kabbalists who called for a non-literal reading of Lurianic Kabbalah....

²⁹ See Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago University Press, 1994), 1-14; Elliot R. Wolfson, *Language, Eros and Being* (Fordham University Press, 2005), 197-214.

³⁰ The distinction between the "saying" and the "said" is borrowed from Emmanuel Levinas's analysis of the two modalities of language which may be applied to the present discussion, see for example, Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* (Duquesne University Press, 1998), 5-9, 45-57, 153-162; Levinas, *Proper Names* (Stanford University Press, 1996), 5-14. Regarding the application of Levinas's theory of language and Jewish Mysticism, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Giving Beyond the Gift: Apophasis and Overcoming Theomania* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 90-154.

³¹ See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), Translator's Preface, xiv-xviii; Aubrey L. Glazer, *Mystical Vertigo: Contemporary Kabbalistic Poetry Dancing Over the Divide* (Academic Studies Press, 2013), 21-30.

aspects and *partzufim* that we speak of in *atzilut* are, according to our perception, purely metaphorical (*rak b-dereh mashal levad*) for the entirety of *atzilut*, accordant to our perception, is the aspect of nought (*efes*) and nothingness (*ayin*).³²

Acknowledging the inherent metaphoricity involved in describing something that is devoid of any identifying or distinguishing traits or qualities- a literal no/thing- Elyashiv employs a metaphoric perspectivism wherein the literal reality of *atzilut* is disclosed only through a figurative veil that conceals the unknowable “nought and nothingness” thus revealing it in its metaphorical representation. From within itself, the configurations of *atzilut* exist in their ontological absoluteness, devoid of any “image, shape or color” and thus literally incomprehensible. Paradoxically however, this incomprehensibility is disclosed in the comprehension that there can be no literal comprehension beyond the figurative. Thus, our “perception” of *atzilut* must be inherently metaphoric in that the literal “nothingness” of *atzilut* is only disclosed through its figurative “comprehension” as the figurative is the simultaneous concealment and revelation of the literal³³. Softening his antimetaphoric stance, Elyashiv bridges the gap separating literal truth and figurative untruth while maintaining the irreducible distance that must be maintained for either one to maintain its significance. For Elyashiv the paradoxical play wherein the literal enunciation of the *partzufim* is inherently tied up with the metaphoric renunciation of their very literalness is what maintains the ineffable nature of *atzilut* while simultaneously allowing it to be captured by speech. On a philosophical register, the apophatic negation of *atzilut* within the infinite is loosened through the kataphatic impulse wherein the infinity of *atzilut* is reified through a series of metaphoric tropes that represent nothing but their unrepresentable referent.

Elsewhere while reiterating his position regarding the metaphoric literality of the *partzufim* in *atzilut*, Elyashiv applies his stance towards the textual instances

³² *Leshem Shevo v-Achlama: Drushei Olam HaTohu*, 1:162

³³ This approach to the inherent metaphoricity within the literal and vice versa is drawn from Nietzsche’s description of metaphor as described in his essay “On Truth and Lies in the Non-Moral Sense”, in *Philosophy and Truth: Selections From Nietzsche’s Notebooks of the Early 1870’s* (Prometheus Books, 1979), 79-97; Elliot R. Wolfson, “Suffering Eros and Textual Incarnation: A Kristevian Reading of Kabbalistic Poetics”, in *Toward a Theology of Eros: Transfiguring Passion at the Limits of Discipline*, ed. V. Burrus and C. Keller (Fordham University Press, 2006), 341-365.

within the Lurianic corpus in which the R. Hayyim Vital gestures towards the figurative nature of *atzilut*:

“I will continue and say, regarding that which we find in the words of the *Arizal* himself that these aspects are by way of metaphor (*dereh mashal*), this is only by the lights (*orot*) that are above *atzilut*...and even when we find in certain places that he says this regarding *atzilut* as well, the true reader will understand that his [*Arizal*] intention is only regarding our grasp and comprehension, and it is certain that in this sense the truth of these aspects, as they are in their essence, are removed from our comprehension in the greatest possible distance, to the point that they are as absolute nothingness (*k-ayin mamesh*), and they are only by way of metaphor and enigma, but this is only accordant to our grasp of them...Therefore it is very reasonable to periodically find the words of the *Arizal* by way of metaphor, and the intention is with regards to our grasp and comprehension of these aspects from within this-worldliness (*bi-olam ha-zeh*), it is obvious (*pashut*) that they are above as absolute nothingness (*sh-hem li'maaleh ki-ayin mamesh*), and only by way metaphor (*dereh mashal bi-almah*)... but accordant to the relative orientation there [*atzilut*] they exist in their truthfulness precisely as their intended and plain meaning... However all of these revelations in *atzilut* are removed from all creatures, and relative to *by" a* they exist in *atzilut* in-the-aspect of absolute and fundamental negation (*bi-bechinat afisa muhletet w-tahlitit*) from all bodily concepts and processes altogether, without description or depiction, no image, shape or color at all, to that extent that accordant with our comprehension they have no essence whatsoever (*ad sh'al pi tfisoteinu ain la'hem mahut klal*)...for there [*atzilut*] it is the root of roots of the potentiality of potential (*shoresh ha-shorashim di-koah koah*) of the properties (*tehunot*) within *by" a*, essentially concealed as stated above, and all of these properties exist there in essence (*ezem*), except they exist in a manner of essential concealment, only in-the-aspect of the root of roots of the potentiality of potential alone, but nevertheless they exist there in essence...³⁴”

In this text, Elyashiv brings the demarcation separating the literal world of *atzilut* and its figurative description into sharper focus. However, this irreducible distance between the literal and the metaphoric reveals the inherent interdependency that is disclosed through their mutual exclusivity. Meaning, the literal existence of *atzilut* is essentially concealed and thus unknowable beyond the self-reflective knowing of itself. As such the figurative depiction of *atzilut* is infinitely removed from its literal referent and thus “by way of metaphor and enigma” alone.

This inherent metaphoricity at play within the description of *atzilut*, however, is a sharp departure from what Elyashiv saw as the heretical view

³⁴ *Leshem Shevo v-Achlama: Biurim*, 1:13-16

espoused by “certain followers of RaMHa”L” wherein *atzilut* as depicted through the Lurianic symbols was seen as strictly figurative in need of demetaphorization. For Elyashiv, inherent within this mode of Kabbalistic hermeneutics is the assumption that one is capable of disclosing the *nimshal*, or the essential kernel of truth that lay beyond the signifying figurative trope. If the *partzufim* of *atzilut* are purely metaphoric one must assume that they can, and must undergo a process of demetaphorization in order to reveal the literal meaning concealed by the inessential metaphor. RaMHa”L’s approach like classical substitution models of metaphor necessarily implies the possibility of translating the metaphorical onto the literal. If metaphor is defined as a deviation from the literal meaning, it is implied that a rhetorical analysis that would explore and expose the metaphorical action could restore the meaning from which it departed. In other words, if metaphor is engendered from and, consequently, reducible to an original meaning, it by necessity implies a translatability between the former and the latter³⁵. Like the Lurianic configurations apperceived by the subject in a personal state of imaginative beholding, *bi-yad ha-neviim edameh*, the metaphoric symbols present a bridge through which the distance separating the literal truth and the figurative untruth can, and must be collapsed. For Elyashiv, aside from relegating the Lurianic symbols to inessential tropes which must be discarded to reveal the essential and absolute nature of divinity, this interpretive approach implies the Lurianic subjects capacity of “grasping” and “comprehending” the true nature of *atzilut*. If the *partzufim* are truly figurative then the mystical adept must disrobe the metaphoric veil to disclose the secret referent that stands behind the concealing trope. Relegating the distance between the figurative untruth of the *partzufim* and the literal truth of their true meaning to an epistemological gap, the “kabbalists of our generation” miss, or worse, deny the ontological void separating *Ein-Sof* as disclosed in *atzilut* and the subject’s comprehension and grasp. For Elyashiv this ontological separation is of utmost importance in that it maintains the distance between creator and creation upholding the delicate balance between the apophatic negation of divine

³⁵ My formulation is influenced by Elina Staikou’s “*Metaphors of Travel and Writing: Deconstruction at Home*” (2002, Dissertation, University of Warwick).

Nothingness and kataphatic assertion of the divine something as disclosed in and through creation(s). According to Elyashiv this ontological divide constitutes the essential obscurity of Lurianic Kabbalah:

“With our words you may understand why the *mekubalim* always used the word secret (*sod*) in discussing their words, the intention is not specifically to point to some deeper aspect beyond what is written (*inyan amuk yoter mi-mah sh’katvu*), rather the intention is that the essence of their words and subject matter is concealed from the eyes of all living things- and as such this wisdom is referred to as the concealed wisdom, therefore they always use the word secret, meaning to say, that one must say it in whispers and concealment, for it is hidden and concealed regarding how it is or what it is (*nistar w’nealam aik sh’hu w-mah sh’hu*).³⁶”

The secrecy inherent within the Lurianic system- particularly the paradoxical nature of *atzilut* wherein Nothing (*ayin*) and Something (*yeish*) coincide in their nonidentity- is not contingent upon its being misunderstood; rather, it is an essential secrecy predicated on the impossible coincidence of the finite and the infinite existing simultaneously while maintaining their difference. The concealment of a clear and comprehensible synthesis between these two poles is essential and constitutive of the Lurianic system that represents both the concealed wisdom and the wisdom of concealment. As stated above Elyashiv does not view the incomprehensibility of *atzilut* as resulting from “unworthiness” or personal limitation of the subject, but “Rather, the intention here is that it is not possible (*sh-lo efshar*), and while for Him, may His name be blessed nothing is too wondrous; this [grasping of *atzilut*] is beyond the laws of creation. Meaning, it is impossible accordant with the laws of creation for the creature to grasp the creator.³⁷” For Elyashiv this irreducible distance between creator and created forecloses on any interpretive stance that implies the absolute comprehension of the true nature, or essence of *atzilut* through the demetaphorization of purely figurative and thus inessential metaphoric tropes. For Lurianic Kabbalah to maintain its unique mode of theosophical speculation in which the void separating creator and created is perpetually traversed in and through the upholding of their separation³⁸, *atzilut* and its configurations must occupy the liminal space wherein literal existence and figurative depiction act through

³⁶ *Leshem Shevo v-Achlama: Drushei Olam HaTohu*, 1:166-167

³⁷ *Leshem Shevo v-Achlama: Drushei Olam HaTohu*: 1:165

³⁸ See for example R. Nahman of Bratzlav, *Likkutei Moharan*, 1:64

one another disclosing a metaphoric literality in which the literal is metaphoric by virtue of its literality as the metaphoric is literal by virtue of its metaphoricity.

As stated above, by affirming the ontic reality of *atzilut*, Elyashiv accomplished two goals; rectifying what he saw as subversive heresy inherent within a strictly figurative approach, and a return to Lurianic Kabbalah's original project. These two facets of Elyashiv's hermeneutical endeavor split with regards to the inherent metaphoricity at play within his literalist interpretation. Regarding the former, it would be reductive to claim that Elyashiv's hermeneutical project calls for a strictly literal interpretation of the configurations of *atzilut*. In relegating his interpretive stance to rigorous literalism thus aligning it in binary opposition against a purely figurative view of the Lurianic system, the paradoxical and creative nature of Elyashiv's project is obscured. The literal affirmation of *atzilut* must be read simultaneously with, and against the figurative negation that negates the literal in the affirmation of the metaphoric. Meaning, by admitting to the necessity of metaphor and image in the comprehension of *atzilut*, Elyashiv concurrently denies the literal interpretation of the *partzufim*. However, this foreclosure on literal comprehension serves as the simultaneous upholding of that very literality, in that for *atzilut* as the disclosure of infinite unknowability to remain literal it must remain metaphorical. Iterating and reiterating his interpretive stance for fear of being misunderstood, Elyashiv blurs the boundary typically dividing the literal and the metaphoric:

“His investiture and contraction into the aspects of *atzilut*, is by way of the verse, “*bi-yad ha-neviim edameh*”...and we now see that the holiness blessed be His name contracted His truthful simplicity in order to reveal Himself to His creations, and this is what is written “*bi-yad ha-neviim edameh*”. However, my intention is not to imply that all of these aspects mentioned in the *Zohar* and the *Arizal* are only by way of prophetic visions (*maarot ha-nevuah*), like we find in the words of some of the later kabbalists, particularly in our generation where they have excessively entrenched themselves in this opinion, heaven forbid that my opinion be like this, heaven forbid, for all of the prophetic visions, the visions themselves (*maarot gufa*) were by way of imagination alone, and the essential vision had no authentic existence whatsoever, as is stated by *Rashi* (tb. Yevamot 49b) regarding the sages comment, “All of the prophets gazed through a speculum that does not shine”, “they presumed to see, but did not see”. However, all the words of the *Zohar* and the *Arizal* are authentic, existing as they are written (*bi-mitziutam k'kitvam*), for through this He may His name be blessed is disclosed in the disclosure of the name *Y-H-V-H* whose seal is truth, as well as His disclosure in the entirety of *torah* which is a *torah* of truth, and in the

totality of creation in her truthful existence. The words of the *Zohar* and the *Arizal* are not metaphoric or imaginative whatsoever, heaven forbid. However, they are not accordant with our grasp or comprehension...and accordant to our grasp of these things they are in truth only in the aspect of metaphor and imagination (*rak bi-bichinat mashal w-dimyon*), however, accordant to the relative orientation of *atzilut* itself as she is elevated and removed from all creation in all her aspects, as they are in that space they are authentic precisely as they are written (*hinei k'fi mah sh'heim sham heim b'emet kol ha-dewarim k'kitvan mamesh*), except, they are invisible and incomprehensible for every creature...we can now say regarding the entirety of *atzilut* “*ki lo yir'anee ha-adam w-hai*”, as all of the aspects that are stated there are concealed in all manners of concealment, and they cannot be grasped aside from Him may His name be blessed, alone, yet nevertheless, the words of the *Zohar* and the *Arizal* are true as they are written...I will review my words so that no mistake shall be made, as a mistake in this is a great danger. I will therefore review and restate, even though we have already written enough, that is, while we said that all of these things exist as they are written and in truth within *atzilut* itself, nevertheless, it is fundamental that accordant to the grasp and comprehension of all creation regarding these aspects that are described in the *Arizal* as existing in *atzilut*, they are only the aspect of absolute metaphor (*mashal mamash*) as they cannot be grasped by any being, and in *atzilut* there is no bodily form, no depiction or image whatsoever, for the entirety of *atzilut* is beyond creation...to the point that *atzilut* is absolute simplicity (*pashut l'gamrei*) relative to the entirety of creation...and we explicate and expound these aspects within *atzilut* as they serve as the concealed source (*shorasham bi-ne'elam*), however, how they are the source there, this is also concealed from all of creation, and it is only grasped by *atzilut* itself.³⁹”

Unlike the rhetorical interpretation of metaphor wherein the literal is transferred unto the figurative endowing the figurative trope with the qualities of the literal signified; the unbridgeable gap separating *atzilut* as-it-is and *atzilut* as-it-is-grasped denies the figurative depiction any semblance or unity with the literal thing-in-itself. In place of the substitution, and thus inessential model of metaphoric equivalency, Elyashiv offers an innovative model wherein the absolute metaphor⁴⁰ draws forth the concealed potentiality of the literal thus disclosing the literal in and through the metaphoric veil that is the veil of metaphoricity. Elyashiv’s approach to metaphor wherein the literal becomes literal through its metaphoric reification can be seen in Hans-Jost Frey’s depiction of metaphoric indeterminacy:

³⁹ *Leshem Shevo v-Achlama*:

⁴⁰ Another model of metaphor that is germane to the approach described in this chapter is Hans Blumenberg’s “absolute metaphor”, see his *Paradigms for a Metaphorology* (Cornell University Press, 2010), 1-15; 40-45; Pajari Rasanen, *Counter-figures: An Essay on Antimetaphoric Resistance: Paul Celan’s Poetry and Poetics at the Limit of Figuralty* (Dissertation, University of Helsinki 2007), 364-376.

“Does expressing something have to remain unexpressed? If it is expressed, then it is no longer expressing but something that has been expressed... To avoid this unavoidable demise of expressing, we would have to fulfill the seemingly contradictory requirement of expressing the expressing of something without letting it become something already expressed, or: expressing it without expressing it. If expressing something is not to become something expressed and thereby lost, then it must be replaced by another something that has been expressed that expresses the unmentioned expressing indirectly. This potential is fulfilled by metaphor. In metaphor, expressing is not expressed but meant. What is expressed is something else, fashioned in such a way that it makes what is meant but not expressed accessible. Expressing something can thereby be expressed without becoming something already expressed: when it is what is meant by what is expressed. This accessibility of expression via what is expressed is bound to the intransferability of the metaphor. Since expressing never becomes what is expressed without forfeiting the expression that it is, what is meant by what is expressed must not become something that is expressed. The nature of the metaphor, which does not say what is meant, must be kept viable. Waiving the hardly obligatory limitation of the metaphor, it can generally be said that discourse can make expression accessible when what is meant does not coincide with what is expressed, which is to say, whenever it does not name but speaks figuratively. How is expressing something made accessible in figurative discourse if it is never what is expressed but only what is meant? The step from expression to meaning must be made without reducing the metaphor. The metaphor must not be translated but must take place. Expressing something cannot be made accessible as something expressed, because it would no longer be what it was. But it is only what it is in the act of expression. If the metaphor is to make expressing something accessible as its unexpressed meaning, then it can only do so by provoking the act of expression as the occurrence of the metaphor. The unsolvable metaphor produces the expression that is its meaning.⁴¹”

Transferring Frey’s treatment of metaphoric indeterminacy unto Elyashiv’s path of kabbalistic hermeneutics, the infinite as disclosed through *atzilut* can be taken as the “expressing”, the inexpressible idea that seeks expression without losing its inexpressibility, or, the *nimshal*; while the *partzufim* of *atzilut* represent the “expressed”, the distinct manifestation of “expressing’s” potential, or, the *mashal*. As the essence of *atzilut* is neither nothing (*ayin*) nor something (*yeish*), its (non)existence remains expressible through its inexpressibility, or in Frey’s phrasing “the contradictory requirement of expressing the expressing of something without letting it become something already expressed, or: expressing it without expressing it.” The metaphor, or in this case the configurations of *atzilut*, discloses the “expressing” by showing itself as the “expressed” that means something other than what it is without being reduced to what

⁴¹ Hans –Jost Frey, “*Studies in Poetic Discourse: Mallarme, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Holderin*” (Stanford University Press, 1996), 27-30.

it means. The *partzufim* are at once literal in their expressivity and figurative in the invisible “meant” that they disclose in and through their nonequivalence. The literal nature of *atzilut* is thus metaphoric in that its literal “expressed” purpose is to make the inexpressible “expressing” visible without reducing its invisibility. Using the language of Frey, “In metaphor, expressing is not expressed but meant. What is expressed is something else, fashioned in such a way that it makes what is meant but not expressed accessible. Expressing something can thereby be expressed without becoming something already expressed: when it is what is meant by what is expressed.” For Elyashiv this stance allows for the nothingness of *atzilut* to be expressed in its metaphorical figuration without losing its indefinable nature, thus reconciling the apophatic nature of Lurianic kabbalah and the kataphatic impulse inherent in depicting the invisible⁴².

By maintaining the negative theological impulse in and through Lurianic Kabbalah, Elyashiv places the spiritual-hermeneutic fecundity of the system into question. After clarifying the metaphoric literality of *atzilut* in which the literal is literal by virtue of its metaphoricity, the Lurianic subject is still stuck in a double bind wherein speaking of *atzilut* betrays the silence it demands as silence betrays the demand of speech. Foreclosing on the process of imaginative demetaphorization (*li-hasig et ha-nimshal*) advocated by some kabbalists, while simultaneously warning against a purely literalist comprehension and grasp that would imply a total beholding, and thus appropriation of divine infinity, Elyashiv places the Lurianic subject in a space of indeterminate ambiguity. To move beyond this indeterminacy Elyashiv continues to forge a path traversing the contradictory either/or binary of literal/figurative towards the clearing of a paradoxical both/and wherein the boundaries separating the literal and the figurative are collapsed without losing their functionality. To disclose the truly fecund potency of kabbalah and its study, Elyashiv reiterates his distinction between ontic literality and metaphoric comprehension, this time emphasizing the linguistic nature of the Lurianic Kabbalah, aligning it with the grand history of Jewish anthropomorphism, from The Song of Songs (*Shir Ha-Shirim*)⁴³ to the *Torah* itself:

⁴² For Elyashiv, understanding is depicted through an occularcentric mode of knowledge...As Jonathan Garb has correctly noted....

⁴³ While clarifying his paradoxical approach to metaphor Elyashiv consistently refers back to *Shir Ha-Shirim* as a paradigm for anthropomorphic figurativeness. Regarding the metaphoricity of *Shir Ha-*

“From these words of the Gr”a various kabbalists of our generation have founded their words, that everything is by way of metaphor alone, however, it is my opinion that these words of the Gr”a do not support their approach whatsoever, and ostensibly these words [of the Gr”a] are unintelligible when they state that everything we speak of is by way of metaphor etc., is it not true that all of our language is itself only the language of *ha-Rashbi* in the *Zohar*, particularly the *Idrot* and *Sifra di-Tzniuta*... This is also the language used by King Solomon throughout the entirety of *Shir ha-Shirim*, for in his days the moon stood in her fullness (*sihara bi-ashlimuta*) in the greatest rectification (*tikkun*) as it is known, furthermore, this is the language of the descriptive *shi’ur komah* in the *Torah* of Moses our master, and we have no other language in the works of Kabbalah aside from their exact language, and with this we are constantly engaged, perpetually speaking in this language that was spoken by all the elevated holy ones (*kidoshei elyon*) the first of the first back towards Moses from the mouth of Strength (*m’pi ha-gevurah*)...upon them we rely and establish all of our words as well accordant with the intention they intended , and we speak perpetually in that language itself. Therefore, regarding what the Gr”a said, that everything we speak etc. is only by way of metaphor, are we not engaged in the very same language aligned with their truthful intent that comes from the mouth of the Holiness blessed be He? The matter, however, is simple, the intention of the Gr”a is not meant regarding the language and speech (*ha-dibbur w’ha-lashon*), rather only on comprehension itself (*ha-haa’saga bilvad*), and all of his words come only to concretize in our hearts that we do not comprehend anything, and in order to distance and remove any thought of likeness, image or shape heaven forbid, regarding this he [Gr”a] said that anything we grasp in these aspects is only the back of the back (*ahorayim d’ahorayim*) and unrefined, and our comprehension in all of these things and languages are distant from their truth, for we do not understand at all to the extent that accordant with out comprehension all of their words are only the aspect of metaphor...But in truth all of these things themselves exist in their space in absolute truthfulness (*bi-mikoran al amitatam li-gamrei*), while remaining removed and negated from any image, likeness or depiction heaven forbid, without any bodily limitations, concealed in all manners of concealment how it is or what it is, and they cannot be grasped except by Him to Himself, my His name be blessed⁴⁴.”

Questioning the evocation of a statement attributed to the Gaon of Vilna⁴⁵ by those calling for a purely figurative interpretation, Elyashiv points towards the constitutive mistake in their approach. In viewing the language of Lurianic Kabbalah

Shirim as it relates to our presentation of metaphoric literality, see Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love* (Columbia University Press, 1987), 265-279.

⁴⁴ *Leshem Shevo v-Achlama: Biurim*, 1:17-18

⁴⁵ R. Elijah Kramer of Vilna, *Biur ha-Gra le-Sifra di-Tzeniuta* (Jerusalem, 2012), *Liqqutim*,

as strictly metaphoric, the figurative kabbalists are assuming a non-linguistic referent that lay beyond the *partzufim* of *atzilut*. Starting with the unnamed (no)thing that lay behind the nameable configurations, this interpretive approach claims, implicitly, to grasp and comprehend the absolute truth (*nimshal*) that grounds the Lurianic system, thus relegating the Lurianic symbols to rhetorical tropes that conceal the unnamed yet nameable essence. For Elyashiv the assumption that the unnamable essence can be named and grasped as anything other than the name that erases itself at the moment of its naming, uttered in its inutterability is tantamount to the idolatrous conception inherent within the kataphatic impulse. As a system of linguistic mysticism⁴⁶ all we have is the “exact language” containing the “intention that was intended” in and by the language itself. As a theistic kabbalist Elyashiv saw in the language of the *Arizal* a linguistic thread strung through the various attempts within Jewish mysticism to say the unsayable culminating and beginning within the recesses of the infinite (*ein-sof*). Disclosing the infinite-text that is the text-of-the-infinite in and through the text-of-*atzilut*, Divine Nothingness conceals itself thus enabling its investiture within the linguistic register. Lurianic language, a new echo of “the *Zohar* and *Shir Ha-Shirim*”, is literal in its saying of the infinite in and as language, signifying nothing but its inherent signification; and figurative in its perpetual folding and unfolding onto and away from its ungraspable (non)ground, metaphoric when spoken as literal and literal when understood as metaphoric. With this conception of the linguistic nature of Lurianic Kabbalah that is both metaphorically real and literally unreal, Elyashiv describes the “essence and elevated status of studying Kabbalah” as:

“Speaking in *atzilut* alone, to use only the words and languages that were spoken and said in the *Zohar* and the words of the *Arizal*, [and] through this to stimulate those aspects above so that they may egress, be disclosed, and proceed from concealment to revelation, so as to increase in them light (*ohr*) through the unification of the infinite light in them (*al yidei ha-yichud d'ohr ein-sof sh-ba'hem*)...⁴⁷” (Biurim, 10)

⁴⁶ On the linguistic nature of Kabbalah see....

⁴⁷ *Leshem Shevo v-Achloma: Biurim...*

As a system of linguistic mysticism, the reader reading the text discloses the word from within its unspoken concealment through the speech-act. Ungraspable beyond language, the essential silence that marks the unspoken word of *atzilut* upholds the literalness that exists prior to revelation. With the saying of the word, the infinite potential of *atzilut* is disclosed through a procession of egression culminating in the said of *atzilut*. Disclosed through speech, the word of *atzilut* is now grasped in the saying of the said which is at once metaphoric and literal. Metaphoric in its comprehensibility and literal in its linguistic form, the speaking of *atzilut* draws the infinite and undefined potential into manifestation. The enunciation of the infinite as disclosed in *atzilut* is at once the renunciation of the silence that upheld the literality of the infinite. For Elyashiv, however, there is a dual movement at play in the speech act. Cutting the silent boundary separating Nothingness (*ayin*) and Something (*yeish*) speech simultaneously discloses the words limitedness while maintaining its unlimited and thus infinite nature, or in Elyashiv's words, speaking in *atzilut* causes the "procession from concealment to revelation" while causing "the unification of infinite light in them". In other words, the literality of *atzilut* that is upheld in the silence of its own unsayability folds into the metaphoric transport of language without losing its literal nothingness. Moving from "concealment to revelation" the textual potential merges, manifesting in the finite said of *atzilut*, yet, the speaking is marked by its own unspeakability murmuring beneath and within the utterance, resulting in the "unification of the infinite light" within the language of finitude. This paradoxical mode of Lurianic language that is both literal in its "saying" and metaphoric in its "said" pushes the speaking subject to the limit wherein what is said is unsaid in and through the word itself. Marked by the need to speak of that which is unspeakable, to visualize the invisible, Elyashiv understands the language of *atzilut* as a space one must say "in whispers and concealment"⁴⁸.

⁴⁸ Regarding the whisper as a mode of communicating the incommunicable in Jewish Mysticism see Elliot R. Wolfson, "Murmuring Secrets: Eroticism and Esotericism in Mediaeval Kabbalah", in *Hidden Intercourse: Eros and Sexuality in the History of Western Esotericism* Ed. W. Hanegraaff and J. Kripal (Brill, 2008), 85-110.

