The Disclosure of Concealment: *Simsum* in the Thought of Rabbi Shlomo Elyashiv

Simsum in Lurianic Kabbalah

Of the ideas that Lurianic Kabbalah has (re)introduced[1], *simsum*- commonly defined as the withdrawal or the concealment of God for the sake of creation- has enjoyed the most extensive explication and interpretation. Due in large part to Scholem's vision of *simsum* as both a cosmological myth that explains the possibility of "the world existing at all if there is nothing besides *Ein Sof*, the infinite Deity that is all and fills all"[2] as well as a highly innovative historiographical trope that sees the initial movement within the depths of the Divine as "a voluntary restraint and limitation …a ruthlessness towards Himself, for He exiled Himself from boundless infinity to a more concentrated infinity. There is a profound inward Galut, not the Galut of one of the creatures but of God Himself"[3], *simsum* may be viewed as the paradigm of Lurianic Kabbalah's interpretational fecundity with analyses expressed in fields from comparative theology to literary criticism.

According to the general interpretations of *simsum*, Lurianic Kabbalah describes the initial movement within the undifferentiated and infinite light of the Divine as an act of withdrawal[4]. Prior to the initial opening in which the other-than-God could exist, the fullness of the Divine Plenum (*Ein-Sof*) 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, or void (*halal ha-panui*) could form. This place, devoid of presence can 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. *Simsum*, however, is more than an absolute withdrawal or concealment; it is paradoxically the

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[1] On the concept of *simsum* in pre-Lurianic Kabbalah, see Moshe Idel, "On the Concept of Zimzum in Kabbalah and Its Research", in *Lurianic Kabbalah,* eds. Rachel Elior, Yehuda Liebes (Magnes Press, 1992), pp. 59-112.

[2] G. Scholem, *Kabbalah* (Dorset Press, 1987), pp. 129.

[3] G. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (Schocken Books, 1971), pp. 44.

[4] See R. Hayim Vital, *Eitz Hayim,* 1:1; *Mevo Shearim* 1:1:1. For an overview of *tzimtzum* and its various interpretations, both literal and nonliteral see T. Ross, "Two Interpretations of *Tzimtzum:* R. Hayim of Volozhin and R. Shneur Zalman of Liady", *Mehakrei Yerushalayim* 2 (1982), pp.152-169; S. 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,* (New York: Seven Bridges, 2002), pp. 163-214

mode in which God allows his presence to be revealed. This dialectical sway between concealment (*he'elam*) and disclosure (*gillui*); or egression (*hitpathtut*) and regression (*histalqut*) takes place within and as the initial caesura of being and as such represents the constitutive process through which the eventual concatenation of existence will unfold. As a primary process through which all eventual stages of creation must be viewed, the *simsum* becomes both an isolated event within the cosmological drama as well as the formative opening that must be taken into account with each successive event. As such the proper interpretation of the *simsum* process amongst Lurianic and post-Lurianic Kabbalists became an essential question whose answer preceded and founded the whole of the Lurianic system.

While there are significant differences amongst R. Issac Luria's students as to what the *simsum* process actually was; the main mode of discussion in post-Lurianic Kabbalah has not been the proper description of *simsum*, but rather the proper interpretation of a preexisting concept. In other words, the discourse surrounding *simsum* is not the description of an ambiguous concept, but rather the clarification of a concepts proper meaning. As the initial act of withdrawal/concealment for the sake of enabling/allowing the creation of the worlds, *simsum* represents the giving of space for the other-than-God. By removing or concealing His infinite light, God gave space for the eventual unfolding of the world- from the most spiritual to the most physical qualities- as well as temporal process of past-present-future that constitutes pre-human, human and post-human history. As the "entry of God into Himself…that leaves room, so to speak, for the creative processes to come into play" the *simsum* enables, as well as constitutes everything that takes place afterwards. Therefor the proper interpretation of *simsum* amongst post Lurianic-Kabbalists was much more than just the clarification of one particular idea within a system, it became the Archimedean point that defined everything that would come after[5].

<div align="center">Literal (ki-pshuto) and Allegorical (lav ki-pshuto)</div>

The main point of contention amongst post-Lurianic Kabbalists was whether the *simsum* was to be interpreted literally, as the withdrawal of Gods infinite essence; or figuratively, as the occlusion and concealment of God's infinite presence. According to the general interpretation, those Kabbalists that proposed a literal reading (*ki-peshuto*) of the *simsum* act saw the withdrawal of the Divine as an actual event constituting the ontological nature of a reality separate and void of the infinite essence who's original presence prevented its very disclosure. The Kabbalists proposing a figurative reading (*lav ki-peshuto*) of *simsum*, on the other hand, saw in it a necessary act of occlusion wherein the all consuming light of the infinite was concealed so as to allow the epistemological (mis)recognition of existence as separate and other than God. While these two paths of

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5 See Yosef Avivi, *Kabbalat HaAri* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2008) Vol. 3, pp. 1051; 1071

interpretation eventually extended into differing views regarding the nature of existence, the literal versus figurative approach to *simsum* underwent its first significant stage in the texts of two post-Lurianic Kabbalists, R. Yosef Ergas (1685-1730) and R. Immanuel Hai Ricchi (1688-1743). Responding to Ricchi's comments in his work *Yosher Leivav* which calls for a literal reading of the *simsum* act, Ergas in his *Shomer Emunim* vehemently rejects the *simsum ki-peshuto* doctrine on account of its heretical underpinnings, namely the implied corporality of a God who can be delimited within, or outside of Euclidean space. Continuing the thread of discourse, the highly polemical dissent between the Hassidic interpretation of the Lurianic corpus, championed by R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1812) and Mitnagdic, or Lithuanian Kabbalah advocated by R. Elijah ben Solomon of Vilna (1720-1797) has been said to center around the proper interpretation of *simsum*. While R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi called for a non-literal interpretation, wherein *simsum* represents a dialectical play of disclosure and concealment resulting in the occlusion of the light of the Divine within the psyche of the created subject[6]; the stance projected[7] onto the Vilna Gaon was a literal view of *simsum* where God Himself is actually removed from existence maintaining a willful connection through the particulars of Divine providence.

These differing accounts of the *simsum* act- namely, the literal removal of Divine essence from the plane of immanent reality or the figurative occlusion of Divine presence (*ohr*) resulting in the epistemological limitation of created subjects- constitute vastly differing conceptions regarding the nature of perceivable reality as well as Gods interaction with the other-than-God. The figurative interpretation of *simsum* promotes a certain acosmic, or panentheistic view of reality wherein the apparent separation between Creator and created is the result of a temporary concealment of the Divine light that fills (*mimaleh*) and surrounds existence (*soveiv*). The *simsum* act enables the occlusion necessary for created subjects to function under the epistemological fallacy of a world separate and apart from the infinite and annihilating presence of the Creator. As such, any demarcations that serve to separate and distinguish between God and not-God, holy and profane, are provisional in nature bearing no impact on the ontological reality of Gods infinity. The literal interpretation of *simsum*, however, risks "contradicting the principles of faith" for the sake of maintaining reality as a separate, yet highly influenced existence. Emphasizing the transcendent essence of God that remains after the contraction and

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[6] Regarding R. Shneur Zalman and the Habad interpretation of *simsum* as a paradoxical play of concealment and disclosure, see Elliot Wolfson, *Open Secret* (Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. ; Rachel Elior, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God: The Kabbalistic Theosophy of Habad Hasidism* (State University of New York, 1992), pp. 79-93.

[7] The ambiguity surrounding the actual stance of the Vilna Gaon regarding *simsum* will be discussed below. Scholem, commenting on the various interpretations of *simsum* was aware of the questionable veracity of the interpretation projected- in the psychoanalytic sense- unto the Gaon, "In the *Tanya* Shneur Zalman maintained that the Gaon of Vilna mistakenly took *simsum* literally, but it is an open question if he was justified in interpreting the Gaon's teachings in this way" (G. Scholem, *Kabbalah* (Dorset Press, 1987), pp. 135).

removal of divine immanence, the literalists view *simsum* as the absolute withdrawal of divinity that results in a voided space in which the divine essence is ontologically absent.

<u>The Gaon of Vilna, R. Elyashiv and the Literal Reading of *simsum*</u>

In the echo of R. Elijah ben Solomon of Vilna's excommunication of Hassidism- an event whose historical significance outweighs the textual evidence of its own inception- various accounts of reasoning have been projected unto the lacuna left by the Gaon of Vilna[8]. Of the more accepted arguments[9], R. Elijah was seen as espousing a literal interpretation of *simsum* resulting in an immanent reality devoid of the Divine essence (*atzmut*); in contradistinction to the Hassidic interpretation of Lurianic Kabbalah wherein *simsum* was read in a strictly figurative manner[10]. Following the line of argument proposed by R. Immanuel Hai Ricchi, R. Elijah is said to have seen the figurative interpretation of *simsum* akin to a form of acosmic pantheism and as such a transgression of certain fundamentals of Jewish doctrine hinted to in the verse "and the earth is filled with His glory"[11]. While this assumption has been challenged by the subsequent interpretations of Lithuanian Kabbalah- namely R. Hayyim of Voloszhin, R. Menahem Mendel of Shklov and R. Issac Haver- it has nevertheless remained a significant point of debate within the discourse of *simsum*.

For those who wished to uphold the strict theological boundary separating R. Elijah from Hassidism, it was R. Shlomo Elyashiv's interpretation of *simsum* that proved most fecund. As a link within the chain of Lithuanian Kabbalah, the *Leshem* was seen as an authoritative interpreter of R. Elijah's Kabbalistic project and as such his comments on *simsum* were seen as reifying the true opinion of the Vilna Gaon. Commenting on *simsum* as it appears in *Eitz-Hayyim*, R. Elyashiv writes:

> "With regards to the *simsum*, there is a lengthy discussion in *Shomer Emunim* to prove that is figurative (*lo k'pshuto*), however, we have nothing but the words of the Arizal that we have shown to prove that the *simsum* was literal".

In the same text, commenting on R. Immanuel Hai Ricchi's stance vis-à-vis R. Yosef Ergas, R. Elyashiv maintains his position of interpreting *simsum* literally, "So too with regards to the *simsum*, for it is as its intended meaning and literal depiction (*k'mashma we-k'pshuto*)". By interpreting *simsum* literally, the *Leshem* has been read as supporting the thesis that the Vilna Gaon saw the *simsum* act as a literal withdrawal resulting in a

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[8] See E. Stern, *The Genius: Elijah of Vilna and the Making of Modern Judaism* (Yale University Press, 2013), pp. 85-104

[9] See A. Nadler, *The Faith of the Mithnagdim: Rabbinic Responses to Hasidic Rapture* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 29-50

[10] See R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Likkutei Amarim, Tanya* (Kehot, 2004), pp. 165-166

[11] See T. Einfeld, *Torat Ha-Gra we-Mishnat Ha-Hassidut: Elu we-Elu Divrei Elokim Hayyim* (Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 2010), pp. 183-192

reality ontologically separate from God's infinite essence[12]. As such, the true mitnagdic view of *simsum* and the consequent unfolding of existence was viewed in sharp contradistinction to the Hassidic, and figurative reading of *simsum* that resulted in a sort of acosmic pantheism. What remains to be shown, however, is that while R. Elyashiv explicitly interprets *simsum* literally, his reading of the Divine withdrawal is significantly more complex than previously noted. Far from depicting the literal withdrawal of Divine essence from the plane of reality as attributed to the Vilna Gaon; R. Elyashiv presents a paradoxical view of *simsum* wherein concealment and disclosure act in unison resulting in space that is both space and not-space, present and absent. As described in the previous chapter, R. Elyashiv's treatment of *simsum* adheres to his reading of Lurianic Kabbalah, wherein the literal nature of the Arizal's metaphors are literal in their existence (*metziut*) as well as irreducibly metaphoric in the essence (*mahut*). With his unique mode of Kabbalistic hermeneutics, the *Leshem* depicts *simsum* as an act of disclosure that paradoxically limits the unlimited, carving a space for creation that is both separate and unified with the infinite. When read in full, R. Elyashiv's treatment of *simsum* results in a view of existence that is vastly different than the purported view of R. Elijah that it has been claimed to support[13]. Furthermore, R. Elyashiv's reading calls into question the general binary of literal/figurative that has marked previous discussions surrounding *simsum*. While he does ascribe to it a literal sense (*k'pshuto*) aligned with his general hermeneutic; R. Elyashiv reads the *simsum* as the preoriginal opening of discourse and as such it remains beyond the economy of literal sense and figurative meaning. Vastly different than a materialistic interpretation of a literal event, the *simsum* represents the unpresentable origin that constitutes the beginning. Irreducibly metaphoric the primordial *mashal* of *simsum* becomes literal in its absolute remainder.

The Coordinates of *simsum*

For R. Elyashiv the significance of *simsum* can be understood as operating at three separate, yet corresponding points within the Lurianic system. Firstly, the initial act of *simsum* represents the limit from which the disclosure of God begins and at which the contemplation of God ends[14]. Everything that can be said about the relationship between Creator and created is posterior to the initial opening through which God discloses

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[12] See T. Ross, "Two Interpretations of Tzimtzum: R. Hayim of Volozhin and R. Shneur Zalman of Liady", *Mehakrei Yerushalayim* 2 (1982), p. 153; B. Naor, *Kana'uteh de-Pinhas* (Monsey: Orot, 2013) p. 8; 20; Mordechai Pachter, "Circles and Straightness: A History of an Idea (From Lurianic Kabbalah to the Teachings of Rav Kook)," in Mordechai Pachter, *Roots of Faith and Devequt: Studies in the History of Kabbalistic Ideas* (Cherub Press, 2004), 131-185.

[13] See R. Shuchat, "Peirush ha-Gra mi-Vilna le-Mishnat Hasidim: Mashal ve-Nimshal be-Kitvei ha-Ari" in *Kabbalah* 3 (1998), pp. 270-276; E. Peleg, "More on R. Shlomo Elyashiv's Polemic against "Kabbalists in our Generation" in *Daat* 79-80 (2015), pp. 183-201. Regarding the inattentive reading of R. Elyashiv's treatment of *simsum*, see R. Shucat, "Thoughts on Lithuanian Kabbalah: A Study in the Lurianic Concept of Igulim and Yosher" in *Daat* 79-80 (2015), p. 27 fn. 90 where he references his hitherto unpublished essay titled "Simsum k'Peshuto: Bein R. Immanuel Hai li-R. Shlomo Elyashiv".

[14] LS"V, *Hakdamot u-Shearim, Shaar Alef, Pereq Beit,* p.

Himself as a thematizable idea. Representing the originary "will that has arisen to create the world", *simsum* marks the boundary between what cannot be thought and the thinkable order of concatenation (*seder ha-hishtalsh'lut*) that manifests in created reality. Each stage of disclosure is thus bound to operate within the space of revelation, always already after the essential concealment of the Divine essence. In this sense, R. Elyashiv maintains and protects the apophatic nature of Kabbalistic thought where everything that can be thought is ontologically removed from that which remains unthinkable. Thus even the highest aspect of Divinity, the light of the infinite (*ohr ein sof*) is considered a stage of disclosure infinitely removed from the unthinkable "essence of God" (*atzmuto yitbarach*)[15]. It is both impossible and prohibited[16] to think the unthinkable, to name that which can never be named, and as such all discourse is contained within the finite space that is disclosed in and through the originary *simsum*. It is important to note that for R. Elyashiv this originary *simsum* is not affixed to any particular point within the order of concatenation; rather, it is the Archimedean point that moves along the borders of discourse always maintaining its role as the originary act of disclosure and thus the boundary of contemplation. Whether the apex of the Kabbalistic system is the *simsum* that results in the primordial Anthropos (*adam kadmon*) in the writings of R. Hayyim Vital, or the *simsum* that results in the primordial torah (*torah kedumah*) within the world of the garment (*olam ha-malbush*) in the writings of R. Yisrael Sarug, the originary *simsum* remains the limit at which thought dissolves into the unthinkable.

The second manifestation is the *simsum* that is discussed by R. Hayyim Vital at the beginning of *Eitz-Hayyim*[17] referred to by R. Elyashiv as the "world-of-*simsum*"[18]. This act of Divine contraction represents the transition from the worlds of the infinite (*olamot ein-sof*) to the worlds of limitation (*gevul*), specifically *Adam Kadmon* and its primary purpose, the world of emanation (*atzilut*). This *simsum* act is the primary source of discourse regarding the first movement of God from infinite (*ein-sof*) into finite, and thus graspable reality. In contradistinction to the originary *simsum* that points towards "the originary disclosure of the infinite from within its truthful and concealed simplicity"

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[15] Regarding the revelatory status of *ein-sof* as a secondary infinitude, see *Hakdamot u-Shearim….*

[16] Regarding the prohibition on contemplating that which cannot be contemplated, see R. Shlomo Elyashiv, *Sefer ha-Biurim* (Barzani, 2012), pp. 13; *Iggerot Baal ha-Leshem*, no.1, in M. Shatz, *Maayan Moshe* (2010), pp. 240, "For someone who stands outside of existence in the space of its negation, they are capable of grasping existence, and this is the reason for the disallowance of contemplating *Ein Sof*, as *Ein Sof* represents the unlimited and the unending, and there is nothing outside of it, therefore it is impossible to contemplate, for contemplation itself posits that he who contemplates is removed from it (*Ein Sof*) heaven-forbid, and with regards to *Ein Sof* there is nothing outside of it".

[17] R. Hayyim Vital, *Eit- Hayyim, Shaar 1, Anaf 2,* p.11. (footnote here regarding olam ha-malbush, essay about leshem simsum in shaar haponeh kadim)

[18] The term "*olam ha-simsum*" is used to describe the second stage of disclosure within the fivefold chain-of-being comprised of "the world of the infinite" (*Ein-sof*), "the world of *simsum*", "the world of *adam kadmon*", "the world of emanation" (*atzilut*) and "the world(s) of separation" comprised of the triadic constellation of "creation, formation and actualization" (*beriyah, yetzirah, asiyah*) see LS"V, *Hakdamot u-Shearim, Shaar Zayin, Pereq Beit,* p.

and of which "we have no permission to speak about or contemplate whatsoever"[19]; the "world-of-*simsum*" describes the contraction of a secondary infinitude that is simultaneously a finite revelation (*gilui d'gevul*) relative to the absolute infinity of the Divine essence and an infinite concealment (*he'elem d'ein-sof*) relative to the order of concatenation. The *simsum* described at this level is the contraction of the infinite light (*ohr ein-sof*) that reveals the vacant space (*halal ha-panui*) in which the worlds of unity (*adam kadmon, atzilut*) and the secondary worlds of separation (*briyah, yetzira, asiya*) will eventually unfold. As the revealed source of thinkable existence described in Lurianic Kabbalah, the correct interpretation of the first *simsum* is a fundamental key in properly understanding the Lurianic system.

The third utilization of *simsum* differs from the first two in that it reveals a process as opposed to an event[20]. Describing the order of concatenation and the dynamics of its unfolding, R. Elyashiv echoes the Lurianic idea positing that each anterior level in the chain-of-being is the aspect of infinity vis-à-vis the subsequent and posterior level. As such, with each and every stage of Divine revelation, the space rooted in the *halal ha-panui* that stood ready to receive existence becomes saturated, no longer capable of receiving anything other than that which fills it. The act of revelation, the outward movement wherein the latent stage of potency is disclosed overtly is termed *hitpathtut*, or egression. Each egression of Divine light subsumes the space that serves as its receptacle (*kli*) thus leaving no space for the subsequent stages of revelation necessary for the full manifestation of existence. To enable the disclosure of the ensuing stage of revelation, the current egression of the Divine light must be removed from the potential space it currently fills through an act of *histalqut*, or regression. These "two tendencies of perpetual ebb and flow[21]" form the dialectical process that operates at each and every stage of Divine disclosure, at both the general as well as particular level ad infinitum[22]. While the regressive stage (*histalqut*) of this dialectic represents the actual movement of withdrawal synonymous with *simsum*, it is the concomitant interplay of egression and regression that form the paradoxical process of *simsum* that is at once an act of

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[19] *Hakdamot u-Shearim, Shaar Wav, Pereq Alef,* p. 91

[20] For an in-depth treatment regarding this manifestation of *simsum*, see A. Fraenkel, *Nefesh HaTzimtzum: Volume 2* (Urim Publications, 2015), pp. 39-56

[21] G. Scholem, Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism (Schocken, 1978), p. 136

[22] Ibid. Scholem states that "Throughout this process the two tendencies of perpetual ebb and flow- the Kabbalists speak of *hithpasthtuth*, egression and *histalthkut*, regression- continue to act and react upon each other." In a note on this text Scholem directs the reader to R. Chaim Vital's *Eitz Chaim* and adds that "This fundamental idea has been made the basis of the great Kabbalistic system propounded in Solomon Eliassov's *magnum opus Sefer Leshem Shevo v-Achloma*. The third volume (Jerusalem 1924) called *Klalei Hithpasthuth v-Histalthkut.*" (p. 404n56).

concealment as well as disclosure. It is this third description that constitutes and informs R. Elyashiv's unique understanding of *simsum*. While the first two depictions of *simsum* present an event that takes place at a particular point in the order of concatenation; the third represents the process and mechanism that constitute the event(s) of *simsum*. The perpetual *hitpathtut* and *histalqut* of *simsum* forms a system of dynamic repetition masking its own internal difference that results in the full disclosure of creation from within the infinite depths of Divine concealment.

<u>The Disclosure of Concealment</u>

To grasp the novelty in R. Elyashiv's theory of *simsum*, it must be read against the common interpretation attributed to the literalist view (*k'pshuto*). As an act of withdrawal, the *simsum* process enables creation by removing the infinite light (*ohr ein sof*) from the potential space of existence thus disclosing a voided space (*halal ha-panui*) of absence. The emptiness that remains after the withdrawal serves as the void that stands ready to receive the influx of the infinite ray of light (*kav ein-sof*) that refills the void in a newly limited and measured way. Stated in a linear way, the primordial fullness of the Divine Plenum is emptied, giving way to the empty void which is then filled with a potent yet limited expression of Divine fullness. Having gained an independent identity in and through the absence of the annihilating presence of the infinite[23], the void (*halal*)

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[23] See R. Hayyim Vital, *Eitz- Hayyim, Shaar* 1, *Anaf* 3, p.14 where R. Vital questions the necessity of a full removal of *ohr ein-sof* prior to the disclosure of the infinite ray (*kav)* that refills the void in a potent yet measured way. According to R. Vital, the measure of light that comprises the *kav* should have been left over during the removal of the excess light, negating the process of initial removal and subsequent disclosure from the outset. However, in order so that the vessels (*keilim*) associated with the *kav ha-middah* that are produced in the absence of the infinite light maintain an independent existence, their evolution must proceed from a prior emptiness, free from the annihilating light of the infinite. Translated onto a psychological register, the triadic process of dependency, separation and independency is akin to the Winnicotian process describing the subjective development of the child marked by the transition from a state of illusion to a state of disillusion through the potential space formed by the mothers withdrawal, see D. Winnicot, *Playing and Reality* (Routledge, 2005), pp…..For R. Elyashiv, this formulation by R. Hayyim Vital hints towards the paradoxical nature of *simsum* wherein the infinite conceals itself through itself resulting in a diminution of its essence in and through its own assertion, symbolized by the Rabbinic phrase often applied to the *simsum* by earlier Kabbalists (see R. Menahem Azarya of Pano, *Yonat Eilam* (?), no. 1), "*k'hadein kamtza d'lewushei minei u-bei*" (Genesis Rabbah, 21:5), roughly translated as "the locust whose garment comes from within itself", see *Drushei Olam ha-Tohu*….According to R. Elyashiv the paradoxical process in which the garment that serves to conceal is part and parcel of that which is being concealed and thus an aspect of disclosure displays the method wherein the vessels (*keilim*) are formed, an act of limitation and as such an internal repetition of the original act of *simsum*. Echoing the Kabbalistic axiom positing that any light (*ohr*) removed from its original space leaves a residual trace (*roshem*) in its vacancy, R. Elyashiv views the vessels- the constricting limit- not as an independent entity formed in a vacuum, but rather, the irreducible remainder that remains in the absence of its source. In other words, the limit that is disclosed through the concealment of the unlimited is nothing but the unlimited disclosing itself as limit. Deconstructing the binary between light (*ohr*) and vessel (*kli*), the vessel is nothing but residual light, condensed into a compact cluster of "thickened" light that appears, and serves as a limiting vessel. This process, explicitly described by R. Hayyim Vital in *Eitz-Hayyim, Shaar ha-Akudim* (?) as the formation of the first vessel in the(non)material "bounded

and the order of concatenation that fills it now exist ontologically separated from the infinite light. Predicated on its emptying power, *simsum* removes that which was present resulting in the absence of Divine light within the demarcated space of the void. Thus *simsum* has been seen as an act of negation that makes room for a subsequent affirmation of presence; a withdrawing for the sake expression. The notion of the Divine withholding itself by contracting into itself has influenced the general theories of *simsum* which generally describe an act of negative removal for the sake of positive disclosure.

For R. Elyashiv the assumption that *simsum* results in a vacant space of emptiness is theologically as well as philosophically untenable. As we will see, the reasoning that R. Elyashiv employs to defend his literal interpretation of *simsum* is the same reasoning used to question the simplistic reading in which an act of withdrawal results in a space of absence devoid of Divinity. Regarding the description of the void as "primordial air" (*avir kadmon*), R. Elyashiv writes[24]:

> "The *simsum* is like air (*avir*) and empty space within which the totality of the worlds are made and found, and it is therefore referred to as *avir ha-kadmon*, for it is like a void and removed air (*halal we-avir panui*) that precedes all existence…However, this space is not actually (*mamesh*) removed in the aspect of emptiness (*reikani*) and absence (*he'edar*) heaven forbid, for there is no emptiness whatsoever as the holy R. Yosef Giktalia writes in his *Ginat Egoz,* that there is no emptiness or absence…"

Here we have the first paradoxical statement regarding the *simsum*. On the one hand it results in an empty space, absent of the annihilating light of the infinite whose presence would prevent the existence of anything other-than-God; on the other, this space is only the "aspect of emptiness" where presence, as opposed to absence still reigns. This reading of the "empty space" that is not empty is rooted in both the ontological as well as textual world of R. Elyashiv. As a faithful interpreter of Lurianic Kabbalah, R. Elyashiv was keenly aware as to the transgressive nature of applying metaphysical speculation unto the Lurianic system. In attempting to clarify the often contradictory texts of the system, R. Elyashiv always tethers his speculative hermeneutics to the text itself, stating that "the words of the Arizal are like all words of Torah that are not written as they should be read" (*asher lo kemo sh'niktavu nikrauh*). Commenting on R. Hayyim Vital's explication of *simsum* in the name of the Arizal, R. Elyashiv writes[25]:

> "However, we need to understand the Arizal's promise to clarify the necessity of the *simsum*, have we not already described in full that the entire aspect of the *simsum* was to make space for the entirety of the worlds; furthermore, regarding the Arizal's claim that the *simsum* is the root of all thickness and vessels, this also seems difficult to understand, for he has already stated that the *simsum* is an empty and vacant void (*halal panui we-reikani*), and if that is the case it [*simsum*] is absolute absence devoid of any thickness whatsoever."

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world", is read by R. Elyashiv as a subtle hint towards the logic inherent in every *simsum* wherein the vessel (limit, *simsum* etc.) is nothing but the light (unlimited, infinite etc.) that it appears to remove.

[24] LS"V, *Hakdamot u-Shearim, Shaar Hei, Pereq 1,* p. 82; *Sefer Ha-Klalim, Klal Yud, Pereq 1,* p. 113

[25] LS"V,

If the *simsum* results in an "empty and vacant void", the promise to further clarify appears unnecessary. Furthermore, the notion that the vessels (*keilim*) are somehow rooted in a "thickness" that comes into being through the *simsum* implies a presence in the place of absence. These textual discrepancies lead R. Elyashiv to read the void as something other than simply empty.

<div align="center">Plenitude of Absence</div>

Faced with the contradictory need for a space that is at once both filled and empty, R. Elyashiv describes a third category, the excluded middle that allows for the simultaneous existence of a void that is both empty and full; empty in its disclosure and full in its concealment. Reiterating the general misinterpretation of the *halal ha-panui* as a vacant and empty space R. Elyashiv writes[26]:

> "The intention is not that the space below is left empty and removed entirely, for there is never absolute absence (*he'edar hehlati*) in any space, just as there has never, nor will there be absolute absence at any time…Rather the aspect of *simsum* is, in and of itself, an existence as well, meaning, it is in the aspect of a particular power (*koah prati*) that darkens and conceals the light as it limits it, like the partition (*mesah*) that stands in front of the light… And when the light which is the aspect of *ein-sof* and thus removed from any distinction of limit is removed and returned upwards…there is a disclosure and emanation of a singular particular power that darkens and conceals the light that stands before it, and it places distance upon it (*we-notein harhaka elav*) as this power is drawn and spreads throughout the potential space for all of existence, darkening and separating the light that rose upwards. Regarding this is it said (Psalms 18:12), "He made darkness his hiding place, His canopy around Him", for it is placed in front of the light as a partition and curtain before him…This power's (*koah*) measurement and expansion is called void (*halal*) and empty space (*makom panui*), as it is the space for the eventual existence that will be created afterwards, and it is the void of the *simsum* in which all existence is created."

In contradistinction to the general theory of *simsum* in which the infinite light undergoes a negative withdrawal in order to disclose a vacant space, R. Elyashiv describes an affirmative act of disclosure in which a concealing "power" is revealed in order to "darken" and "distance" the annihilating presence of the infinite. The light "which is the aspect of *ein-sof*" is not removed but rather veiled in and through a "particular power" emanating from the very same light it comes to conceal. Expressed on a philosophical register, the limitation of the infinite takes place through the affirmation of limit as opposed to the negation of the limitless. No longer seen as an empty space devoid of any existence, the "void and empty space" is filled with a presence that appears as absence. As an "existence" that lacks any qualitative measure, the *simsum* serves as an affirmative negating power that "spreads throughout" the potential space of all subsequent existence.

<div align="center">The Dialectical Standstill of Disclosure and Concealment</div>

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[26] LS"V, *Hakdamot u-Shearim, Shaar Vav, Pereq Beit,* pp. 94-95

Describing the *simsum* as an act of disclosure and emanation, R. Elyashiv appears to situate himself within the tradition that equates the concealment (*he'elam*) of the infinite with its disclosure (*gillui*); however, there is an important distinction between previous traditions and what he describes as "the deep and frightening secret" of *simsum*. For R. Elyashiv the revelatory nature of *simsum* is not due to the limitation of the infinite inherent in every transition from concealment into disclosure; rather the "concealing power" acts as a veil upon the infinite light that remains in its original place. Meaning, the *simsum* is not predicated on the diminution of the infinite but rather the impossible covering of the infinite by a particular power that is disclosed from within the infinite itself. The infinite is not lessened or negated, it exists within and underneath the finite and "particular power" whose purpose is to make the infinite appear as absent. This concealing power that is disclosed from within the infinite Godhead achieves the necessary *simsum* through a series of similar yet distinct processes, what R. Elyashiv terms "darkening", "concealing" and "distancing". Operating at the transitionary stage between the worlds-of-the-infinite (*olamot d'ein-sof*) and the world of emanation (*atzilut*), the *simsum* takes place anterior to any thematizable or positivistic assertions regarding the existence (*metziut*) or essence (*mahut*) of God. The annihilating light-of-the-infinite prevents any description or name from being applied to God, as the act of naming indicates a certain graspability of that which is named. To initiate the gradual procession from the unnamable through the nameless to the name, a darkening power was disclosed to cover the unbearable lightness that permeated all potential space. In line with the philosophical and mystical tradition that views darkness as a creative power as opposed to the privation of light, R. Elyashiv describes a darkness whose essence is affirmative, a darkness that actively conceals as opposed to a darkness that negates. The same inverted logic applies to the concealing capacity of *simsum* as well. As an affirmative act of revelation, the limit that is disclosed paradoxically conceals the prior effulgence that prevented the disclosure of anything other than itself. Meaning, that while the general theory of *simsum* is predicated on the impossibility of any revelation within the fullness of the infinite light (*ohr ein-sof*) and the subsequent necessity of the withdrawal or removal of that light, R. Elyashiv describes the disclosure of an additional power within the impossible space that is already saturated. Regarding the "distancing" power inherent in the *simsum*, we find the assertion of measurement that opens unto differentiation through the "distancing" of one thing from the other, a process associated with the Divine quality of potent strength (*gevurot*). Being that the infinite light is necessarily devoid of any limitation and thus undifferentiated in its appearance, the *simsum* imposes "the power of limitation (*koah gevuli*) that serves as the limit, end, measure and boundary (*ha-gevul weha-kitzvah weha-midah weha-tehum*) [27] " that demarcates the expression of the infinite light, thus paradoxically limiting the unlimited. Distinct from the general workings of difference wherein one thing is separated from the

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[27] LS"V, *Helek ha-Biurim, Iggulim v-Yosher,* 2:13, pp. 24-25

other through the imposition of spacing, or the negation of a prior unity where everything is every-other-thing; the difference caused by *simsum* is an affirmative assertion of boundary that in no way erases the previous unboundedness. In the undifferentiated light of the infinite there is no space for limit and thus any conceptual thought regarding the infinite. To make space for the eventual worlds that represent the other-than-God, a differentiating power must be introduced so that the edges separating one thing from the other may now speak the language of difference. Translated onto the philosophical register, difference as a positive assertion onto the undifferentiated is "no longer between two things[28]" rather "difference of nature is itself a thing" that "is no longer simply a concept, but rather the possibility of conceptuality, of a conceptual process and system in general[29]".

The Paradox of *simsum*

It is clear that for R. Elyashiv each stage of the *simsum* process is marked by a certain contradictory logic. On the one hand the limit that is imposed on the unlimited must perform the necessary concealment so as to enable the disclosure of the other-than-God; but in denying any actual absence or emptiness within the Divine Pleroma, the measure enacted through the *simsum* must ultimately fail in its intended purpose. In other words, the *simsum* is tasked with introducing difference into the undifferentiated light-of-the-infinite without negating the unity that negates all difference. This logic wherein the *simsum* conceals without removing the infinite light, thus providing an imaginal space devoid of any ontological existence may adhere to the vision of reality as an epistemological fallacy advocated by the non-literal interpretation of *simsum*; but for R. Elyashiv- the defender of *simsum ki-peshuto*- this thinking appears irreconcilable with his stated interpretation. Furthermore, if the *simsum* is to allow the coming into being of a "space (*makom*) for the eventual existence that will be created afterwards", a space that must, theoretically, be emptied of any prior effulgence, then the assertion of an affirmative power presents a contradiction to the concept of space. The disclosure of this concealing power remains an affirmative revelation from within the recesses of the infinite and thus prevents the manifestation of space that must be predicated on absence of the infinite. Aware of the contradictory logic inherent in his presentation of *simsum* as literal, thus maintaining the ontological reality of existence predicated on the actual diminution of the infinite, and the affirmative nature of *simsum* as a "particular power" that is disclosed from within the infinite itself, R. Elyashiv attempts to textually present the impossible paradox that results in a space that is at once real and unreal, both because neither and neither because both.

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[28] G. Deleuze, "Review of Jean Hyppolite, *Logic and Existence*", in J. Hyppolite, *Logic and Existence* (Albany State University Press, 1997), p.195

[29] J. Derrida, "Difference", in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago University Press, 1982), p. 11

The Potential Limit

In defining the void of *simsum* as a place that is both space and not-space, absent and present, R. Elyashiv draws from earlier Kabbalistic sources, namely the philosophical mysticism of R. Azriel of Gerona as refracted in the works of R. Meir ibn Gabbai. Posing as an interlocutor questioning the doctrine of the ten *sefirot* as opposed to a direct relationship with the infinite cause, R. Azriel posits that for the infinite to be wholly infinite it must contain within itself the potentiality of finitude. Cautiously aware of the theological ramifications of situating the infinite as finite, a conceptual transgression tantamount to denial (*kefira*), R. Azriel describes the finite capacity within the infinite as the "potential of limit within the unlimited" (*koah bi-gevul mi-bli gevul*) that is actualized in and as the *sefirot* which serve as "the potential to make present limited existence". For R. Elyashiv the necessary fullness of the infinite produces finitude through a concealing power that manifests as the "limit and measure, that after the *simsum* within His essential light becomes the root of potential for all subsequent limitations that are also, only the affirmation of Him Himself (*hinei hu gam kein rak hu atzmo*)", a description that he attributes to the teaching of R. Azriel[30]. What R. Azriel calls the potential of limit (*koah ha-gevul*) is for R. Elyashiv the disclosure of concealment that is at once both an aspect of the infinite as well as the inception of finitude. Stressing the inseparable unity that exists between the limited and the unlimited, R. Elyashiv describes the dialectical sway of disclosure and concealment within the infinite wherein "that which vis-a-vis our perspective is disclosure, is for Him (*etzlo*) the aspect of concealment[31]". However, for this concealing power to enact the necessary limitation required by *simsum*, this concealment must become manifest in and of itself, separate and "newly created" (*mehudash*) from within the infinite light. Here we come upon the greatest difficulty in clarifying R. Elyashiv's approach to *simsum*, what he refers to as the "wondrous power[32]" (*koah nifla*) of *simsum*. On the one hand this concealing power is an affirmative disclosure of "the essential power of darkness that darkens and conceals each light as it limits it, as well as the power of thickness (*koah ha-aviyut*)" that serves as "the root for each aspect of body and vessel and the root of all matter (*homer*) and physicality (*geshem*)[33]", and thus a determinate form of difference that breaks up the totality of the undifferentiated light of the infinite through a series of specific actions such as "distancing", "darkening" and "concealing". On the other hand, this concealing power is nothing but a reassertion of the infinite itself thus erasing any potential demarcations that would be enacted through an actual manifestation of finite limitation. As an aspect of the

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30 LS"V, *Sefer ha-Klalim,*
31 R. Shlomo Elyashiv, "Iggerot R. Shlomo Elyahiv", 3, in R. M. Shatz, *Maayan Moshe*
32 LS"V, *Sefer ha-Klalim, Klal Esser, Anaf Alef*, p. 113
33 LS"V, *Helek Biurim Igullim v-Yosher*. 2:13, pp. 24-25

infinite this power "in and of itself has no revelation whatsoever, and it is quite literally (*mamash*) the aspect of absence… for it itself is the opposite of existence and through the darkening and concealing power within it, it negates all existence from itself, as well as negating any distinction of any power from within its concealed quality (*we-hu sholel gam kein m'li-havhin bo shum koah m'tehunotav ha-ne'elamim bo*)". Thus we are faced with contradictory postulations regarding *simsum*; it is at once something and nothing, real and unreal. It is disclosed and thus distinct from the infinite, as well as the impossible folding of the infinite upon itself, concealing itself through nothing other than itself.

<u>Space and Non-space</u>

Describing the contradictory nature of *simsum*, R. Elyashiv writes[34]:

"However, regarding the essential power of the *simsum* in and of itself, devoid of anything upon which to utilize its power, it is impossible to demarcate anything within it, as it is impossible to stand upon what it is, for in its essence it negates and defers all things. Its existence and qualities are like two opposites in a singular entity (*k'shnei haphakim bi-noseh ehad*), this is what the Arizal meant when he stated that it [*simsum*] is void, empty and removed air, for in truth no existence can be applied to its essence. However, it is a power that intensifies and connects to all existence, causing the production of the forms of existence and their limit. Since in truth it [*simsum*] is a power of potency and strength, albeit concealed as described above, the Arizal referred to it as air (*avir*), for air is not absence as it is known, rather the opposite is true- it is the vitality of all life."

Here we find an explicit description of the *simsum* paradox. On the one hand the power disclosed from within the infinite is a "potency and strength" that "intensifies and connects all existence"; while on the other "no existence can be applied to its essence". As a literal process the *simsum* must exist as an affirmative expression of Divine power that "defers" the prior plenitude thus "causing the production of forms" through which the order of concatenation may unfold. As the fundamental process through which the production of space is initiated, however, the *simsum* must "negate" all presence through its concealing power that results in the "void and empty" space. Faced with the paradox of an event whose active form of affirmation must yield the intended effect of negation, R. Elyashiv utilizes the traditional mystical trope of "*shnei haphakim bi-noseh ehad*"[35], the coincidence of opposites. The impossible balance being struck is the simultaneity of a disclosure of the infinite that paradoxically forms finite space without negating either the unlimited nature of infinite light, or the limitedness of the void. The dialectical sway of disclosure and concealment is held at a standstill, without the "presence" of the infinite, or the "absence" of the void annulling the other, thus disclosing a middle path that is neither space nor non-space, but rather "air". Utilizing a theme culled from the

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[34] LS"V *Helek ha-Biurim, Igullim v-Yosher* 2:13, pp. 24-25
[35] See LS"V, *Sefer ha-Klalim, Klal Beit, Anaf Gimmel, Ot Hei,* pp. 36; *Sefer ha-Klalim, Klal Yud-Heit, Anaf Zayin,* p. 218

Kabbalistic system of R. Israel Sarug, R. Elyashiv refers to the *simsum* and its subsequent void as primordial air (*avir kadmon*)[36]. As a presence that discloses itself as absence, devoid of any qualitative traits aside from its own essential quality, air serves as a worthy metaphor for the a power that is at once present and absent. Unbounded in its fullness, air fills without filling, invisible in its appearing[37]. Always without identifiable traits, air is the "vitality of all life" whose presence is felt only in its active participation within being. Air exists as an affirmative presence yet appears as nothing, passively awaiting the active existent to enroot itself within her emptiness.

Simsum and *Khora*

As a receptacle that stands to receive all subsequent existence the "air" of *simsum* brings to mind the Platonic concept of the *khora*. For Plato the *khora* represents the undefinable "place" or "site" in which the origins of spatiality begin. Serving as an invisible bridge between the infinite realm of the intelligible and the finite space of the sensible, *khora* is a kind of "pure permeability, infinitely transformable, inherently open to the specificities of whatever concrete it brings into existence…with no features of its own. Seeped in paradox, its quality is to be quality-less, its defining characteristic that it lacks any defining feature[38]". Like the *khora*, the void of *simsum* "somehow in a puzzling way participates in intelligibility yet is distinct from the intelligible; it is also distinct from the material world insofar as it is invisible and formless…It dazzles the logic of non-contradiction, it insinuates itself between the oppositional terms, in the impossible no-man's land of the excluded middle". A theoretical space "which is eternal and indestructible, which provides a position for everything that comes to be, and which is apprehended without the senses by a sort of spurious reasoning that is hard to believe in[39]", *khora*, like the *simsum* is both present and absent, affirming subsequent spatiality through its negative presence. For R. Elyashiv the *simsum* acts without acting, creating nothing but the space in which activity may unfold. However, once the activity of existence unfolds within the emptiness of the void, the void is revealed retroactively as having been the matrix that enabled the active movement of existence. As long as *simsum* stands alone it is nothing; however, once the order of concatenation unfolds the nothing of the *simsum* is revealed to be the nonground upon which the ground of being is situated. Explicitly aware of this paradoxical sway between the inaction of nothing and the action of something inherent in *simsum*, R. Elyashiv writes[40]:

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[36] LS"V, *Hakdamot u-Shearim, Shaar Hei, Pereq Alef,* pp. 82
[37] See Forgetting of Air….
[38] Elizabeth Grosz, "Women, Chora, dwelling" in *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (Routledge, 1995), pp. 112
[39] Plato, 1977: 71-72 ?
[40] LS"V, *Hakdamot u-Shearim, Shaar Vav, Pereq Beit,* pp. 94-95

"The *simsum* itself, however, that is the power that conceals and limits the light in and of itself, in truth, has done nothing whatsoever as-of-yet, for in and of itself it is the aspect of hylic potential (*koah hiuli*) that stands prepared to receive any form (*tzurah*), but in and of itself it shows no form whatsoever, and it cannot be classified as existing (*we-aino nofel alav sheim metziut klal*). In fact it seems to be the reverse, for it appears that it is the opposite of existence (*hipuch ha-metziut*), as the initial existence rose up and was removed and this [*simsum*] now stands in front darkening and concealing it, and no other existence has yet to take its place."

The affirmative concealment is devoid of "form" and measure, a literal nothing that "appears as the opposite of existence" deferring any presence through its non-present presence devoid of any qualitative classification. As the in-between that bifurcates the unlimited infiniteness of the Divine and the measurable limit of creation the void of *simsum* is "the abstract spacing, place itself, the place of absolute exteriority[41]" that is both empty and full, full in its emptiness. Literally speaking the *simsum* "cannot be classified as existing" until the active power of revelation is disclosed within it, retroactively activating the concealed power that enabled the very existence of all subsequent revelation. Describing the delayed effects of the *simsum* and the transition from potential limitation into actual limit, R. Elyashiv writes[42]:

"The quality of the thickening power that works through condensation and contraction, it only exists when there is something to rule over. This applies to all the powers concealed within it , none of them are revealed without some aspect over which it rules and through which it can disclose its power (*hinei ein gilui lahem eleh rak al eizeh noseh sh'sholeit alav u-megaleh et kohotav bo*)."

The *simsum*- which can properly be described as a "something which is not a thing[43]" that appears as "an apparently empty space – even though it is no doubt not emptiness"- serves as the preoriginal opening that stands to "receive so as to give place to all the determinations" that unfold in her, within the empty presence of her air. Like *khora*, the *simsum* presents herself as emptiness becoming "nothing other than the sum or the process of what has been inscribed on her". Not unlike the mythic images of the "mother" or the "nurse" ascribed to the *khora*, *simsum* operates like a womb which prior to its impregnation stands silently in her potentiality, only to disclosed retroactively as the ground of being. As R. Elyashiv writes, *simsum* is like "the aspect of the womb of the mother needed for the fetus that stands to be born from her[44]", the feminine principle that while "appearing as an emptied and vacant void" contains within herself "a wondrous power (*koah niflah*)" that "joins that which has egressed into it, influencing it, creating from both of them a single and complete action resulting in a new existence (*metziut hadash*)".

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[41] Derrida, Faith and Knowledge….
[42] Biurim (24-25) igv"y 2:13
[43] Derrida, Khora 103
[44] Klalim 10:1 (113)

Beyond Literal or Figurative

Returning back to the beginning, we stated that while R. Elyashiv- following R. Immanuel Hai Ricchi- reads the *simsum* in a literal way (*k'peshuto*), his approach differs from the commonly held interpretation attributed to the Vilna Gaon in which the infinite (*ein-sof*) removes (*ne'etak*) itself leaving an ontological space devoid of Divine presence. As the preoriginal beginning that both forms and constitutes the subsequent order of concatenation, the proper interpretation of *simsum* and the literal/figurative debate that ensued can be read- in the spirit of Rabbinic hermeneutics, namely the detail (*prat*) that informs the general (*klal*)- as a particular that informs the entirety of the Lurianic system. Therefore, R. Elyashiv's specific treatment of *simsum* may be viewed as a prooftext for his particular mode of Kabbalistic hermeneutics. For R. Elyashiv the *simsum* is literal in that it represents an unpresentable origin and as such it can only be grasped in the materiality of its symbolic depiction. Like all processes and events within the world-of-emanation (*atzilut*) and above, the simple (*pashut*) symbolic depiction is the closest we come as well as the farthest we go with regards to apprehending the essence (*ha'sagat ha-mahut*) of that which transpires beyond being[45]. The actual movements of *simsum*, the mechanisms through which the transition between infinity and finitude take place, these remain inaccessible beyond the simple fact of their ontological existence; the "how", "why" and "what", however remain concealed in their essence that transcends the binary of literal and figurative. Like the *khora*, *simsum* "goes beyond or falls short of the polarity of metaphorical sense versus proper sense…it exceeds the polarity"[46]. Taken at its irreducible intended meaning, the *simsum* exists hyper-literally as the inception of being; but as the index for R. Elyashiv's hermeneutics, its literal existence posits nothing as to the actual manifestations of the *simsum* event.

For R. Elyashiv, the literal nature (*k'peshuto*) of *simsum* does not result in a voided space ontologically removed from the infinite presence of the Divine, a theosophical worldview attributed to the literalists; nor does it imply a merely apparent space stemming from the temporary occlusion of the Divine light often attributed to a figurative (*lav k'peshuto*) reading. Like the *simsum* that opens unto being, existence is marked by the same (non)logic in which opposites simultaneously unite in their difference, resulting in the third path of the excluded middle wherein existence (*metziut*)

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[45] See E. Wolfson, "Beautiful Maiden without Eyes: *Peshat* and *Sod* in Zoharic Hermenutics", in *Luminal Darkness: Imaginal Gleanings from Zoharic Literature* (One World, 2007), pp. 75-82; E. Wolfson, *Language, Eros and Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 232
[46] J. Derrida, "Khora", in *On the Name* (Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 92

is both separate from and unified with the infinite presence of *Ein-sof*. At times, stressing the ontological nature of a reality separated from its Infinite source, R. Elyashiv positively asserts the process through which the limit (*gevul*) manifests as an independent existence beyond its undefined potentiality within the unlimited (*bli gevul*). At other times however, he defines the limit- a general term representative of the entire order of concatenation- as "the thickness (*awiyut*) which is from the infinite light itself and which remains united with the remainder (*tamzit*) and residue (*roshem*) of the light forever[47]"; a revelation that is impossibly both separate and a part of the originary light of the Infinite. The Infinite presence as infinite remains indivisible and as such any "remainder" or "residue" must be comprised of the same qualities as its source, thus negating any limit or boundary that serves to contain it. The order of concatenation (*seder ha-hishtalshlut*) that serves to measure and rectify (*m'takein*) the Infinite light through a complex system of vessels (*keilim*), partitions (*mesach*) and configurations (*partzufim*) is a literal system that undoes itself from within itself, an absolute system whose essential framework is nothing but the unlimited that it comes to limit. Throughout R. Elyashiv writings one finds the impulse towards positivistic descriptions of the chain-of-being as a complex system of fractal iterations that exist ontologically and independently from the unlimited, yet transcendent presence of the Infinite. This impulse, however, is repeatedly assaulted by the hyper-immanency of the Infinite (*Ein-sof*) that maintains, controls and theoretically erases the absolute existence of anything other than Itself. Unwilling to posit the absolute existence of a world wholly separate from the infinite presence of the Divine, R. Elyashiv presents a vision of reality that is both something and nothing, finite and infinite at once. Describing the contingent nature of existence without negating its independent nature, R. Elyashiv- commenting on R. Hayyim Vital's emphasis on the *simsum* and the middle-point of the Infinite- writes[48]:

> "This is stressed in order to teach and secure in our hearts, that even though we find the entirety of existence embodied within vessels, limits and measurements, comprising the existence of the natural world and order (*metziut v-han'hagat ha-tevah*), nevertheless, the light of the Infinite surrounds them from all sides. They are founded and contingent only on the light of the Infinite. As a result, the limit, measure and entirety of nature (*tevah*) lack any absolute foundation whatsoever (*yesod heh'lati*), devoid of any individual control (*shli'ta atzmutit*). Rather, they are entirely contingent His will (*retzono*)…For the entirety of existence is contingent only within the light of the Infinite."

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[47] LS"V, *Hakdamot u-Shearim, Shaar Beit, Pereq Alef,* p. 33
[48] LS"V, *Helek ha-Biurim, Iggulim v-Yosher,* 2:18, p. 28; LS"V, *Hakdamot u-Shearim, Shaar Daled, Pereq Hei,* p. 73; LS"V, *Sefer ha-Klalim, Klal Beit, Anaf Gimmel,* p.