The Question of the Void and the Void of Questioning:

R. Nahman of Bratslav and Edmond Jabès

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To identify, clarify and represent the truth, both epistemologically and ontologically has been the telos of inquiry. The origins of philosophical as well as theological thought can be said to lay in the human subject’s effort to know, with absolute clarity, the nature and identity of that which is perceived. Knowledge, thus defined, provides thinking subjects the necessary grounds to engage reality with certainty and self-assuredness. Rational categorizations demarcating the boundaries between one thing and the other create the semblance of an ordered world in which the laws of logic dictate the true and the possible. As such, the primary mode in which thinking manifested itself was the authoritative answer. To end the interrogative thought journey with the absolute, totalized statement of fact was seen as the apex of knowledge and wisdom. The positive declaration that enclosed the circle of thought served as the culmination of the thought process. As a result of this logocentric nature of thinking, the answers to queries and philosophical explorations were elevated to a primary status while the questioning act itself was relegated to a secondary, if not negative category. Viewed as such, the question serves a utilitarian purpose in that it creates the opening necessary for knowledge to unfold. The interval between the unexamined presence of being and the enlightened knowledge of being is the question. Inessential on its own, the question creates the space in which thinking, and ultimately knowledge can take root. The question then becomes an impediment which must be traversed in order for the answer to be disclosed. From Socratic questioning through Hegelian dialectics, the difficulties set forth by the question serve a secondary role in a process through which the question is eventually absorbed within the clarified answer.

Within our historical moment, however, the binary oppositions that have dictated the hierarchy of values have been overturned. The quest for knowledge can longer be said to close with the absolute answer. With Nietzsche’s “great problems and question marks”[[1]](#footnote-1) of reality, the passage has been opened through which the essentialist nature of the ontotheological project can be called into question. The turn from the totalized project of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit and the self-conscious Cartesian subject resulted in a paradigmatic shift in which the ideas and concepts once relegated to the margins-of-thought have reasserted themselves into the body-of-thought. Martin Heidegger, in his attempt to move beyond the beginning of western metaphysics claims that ontology, or being, has been taken for granted. The question that lay beneath the edifice of Greek philosophical thought, namely, the question of “what is being?” presupposes that being-is. According to Heidegger, the question that the metaphysical project opens with is the wrong question. In an act of *destruktion*, Heidegger attempts to move beyond the beginning towards the origin of thought. This radical questioning of the metaphysical question leads Heidegger to the clearing in which the question-of-being is posed. In contradistinction to the metaphysical question “what is being?” Heidegger discloses the question-of-being itself. This radical questioning-of-being which enables Heidegger to engage in his analytic of *Dasein,* is a marked departure from the metaphysical question of beings, which operates off of the presupposition of being[[2]](#footnote-2). Jacques Derrida, in his critique of Heidegger’s philosophical project[[3]](#footnote-3), claims that while Heidegger’s move beyond the beginning towards the original question-of-being is a radical gesture, it does not go far enough. For Derrida, the question-of-being is predicated on the presence of a reflective subject. The primacy of the thinking individual that is capable of questioning the foundation is still a symptom of the metaphysical project in which presence- namely the presence of a questioning subject- is given primacy over absence. In a provocative and somewhat paradoxical stance, Derrida asks “what comes before the question”[[4]](#footnote-4)? For Derrida, the questioning-act, however radical, assumes a starting point from which the questioning-subject questions. The assumption of an identifiable starting point, or beginning, from which all else is born- including the question itself- operates within a linear perception of beginning-middle and end. For Derrida, the beginning is impossibility. It is the opening that has always been opened by something more primordial, more ancient. The (non)original *differance* that represents “the mark of the absence of presence, an always already absent present, the lack at the origin that is the condition of thought and experience”[[5]](#footnote-5), leads Derrida to suggest that “what opens the possibility of thought is not merely the question-of-being, but also the never-annulled difference from “the completely other”[[6]](#footnote-6). For Derrida however, that which conceals the origin is concurrently that which discloses a relationship to it. In describing the notion of the trace, Derrida claims that, “the trace is not only the disappearance of origin” rather it means “that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a non-origin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin”[[7]](#footnote-7). The impossibility of the absolute beginning or the absence-of-presence is disclosed to us through the trace of that beginnings absence, thus bringing us in contact with the presence-of-absence. Derrida’s question of “what comes before the question?” brings us face-to-face with the un-questionable and thus reveals the relationship between thinking subjects and the absent origin to be that of questioning. This becomes more apparent when one takes note of Derrida’s usage of the question itself to question the primacy of questioning, “what comes before…?”. Derrida’s deconstructive project can be described as an unending “question of origins”. Nevertheless, both Heidegger and Derrida, in deconstructing the metaphysical system in which absolute knowledge and presence are viewed as the closure of thought, have opened up the opening through which the questioning-act may be reevaluated in relationship to both itself and the answer. It is in this sense that Derrida sees the possibility of philosophy only in the “community of the question, therefore, within that fragile moment when the question is not yet determined enough for the hypocrisy of an answer to have already initiated itself beneath the mask of the question, and not yet determined enough for its voice to have been already and fraudulently articulated within the very syntax of the question…A community of the question about the possibility of the question”[[8]](#footnote-8).

With this reorientation towards the nature of the question, the pursuit of knowledge has been overturned. The progressive movement towards the totalized closure of knowledge is interrupted by desire in which absence shakes presence from its self-assured slumber. In the space of the answer which promised proximity and coherence, the question murmurs as it reveals the inherent distance between thought and its desired effect. Maurice Blanchot describes the questioning act as that which “rests upon incompleteness. It is not incomplete as a question: on the contrary, it is speech that is accomplished by having declared itself incomplete. The question places the full affirmation back into the void, and enriches it with this initial void. Through the question we give ourselves the thing and we give ourselves the void that permits us not to have it yet, or to have it as desire. The question is the desire of thought”[[9]](#footnote-9). The question opens up the potential space in which the project-of-thought becomes the play-of-thought. To begin with the question is to question the prior grounds of knowledge, to open the void through which being “veers and appears as the suspension of being in its turning”[[10]](#footnote-10). The question, in its epistemological sense, discloses the questioning nature of the subject. The primacy of the question takes root within the subject’s being on the existential level. Noting the paradoxical nature of questioning the question, Blanchot notes how, “Every question refers back to someone who questions, that is to say, to the being we are and for whom alone exists the possibility of questioning, or of coming into question. A being like God could not put himself in question- he would not question; the word of God needs man to become the question of man. When after the fall God asks Adam “Where are you?” this question signifies that henceforth man can no longer be found or situated except in the place of the question[[11]](#footnote-11).” No longer viewed as a necessary disruption along the path towards absolute knowledge, the question introduces a new form of knowing, a knowing that “becomes knowing only if it is at the same time critical, if it puts itself into question, goes back beyond its origin – in an unnatural movement to seek higher than one’s own origin, a movement which evinces or describes a created freedom”[[12]](#footnote-12).

While the shift from knowing to questioning represents a radical change for western thought, the Jewish tradition has continually shown a deep affinity towards the questioning-act. From biblical exegesis to Talmudic hermeneutics, the quest for wisdom is perpetually interrupted by the question. The void separating Athens and Jerusalem is the space of the question. It has been argued that the distinguishing factor separating Rabbinic thought from Greek thought is the auditory as opposed to ocular nature of investigation[[13]](#footnote-13). To see is to behold through the mind’s eye, with in*sight*, the totality of that which is being considered. Hearing, however, implies distance, to hear the other is to be removed from the other. While this critique of the totalized nature of Greek thought is engaged in the same totalized generalizations that it hoped to overcome, the distinction remains an important one[[14]](#footnote-14). Rabbinic thought is marked with a sense of epistemological distance in which the quest for absolute knowledge is interrupted by the limits of subjective interpretation. As a result of this distance between the thinking subject and the desired known, questioning becomes the primary mode in which human beings undertake the quest for understanding. It is important to note however that this questioning is predicated on the limits of human cognition. In other words, the questioning that marks Rabbinic hermeneutics and interpretation is provisional in nature. As such, an aspect of Jewish eschatology is the hope for a clarification of the questions and doubts that mark current epistemology associated with the Tree of Knowledge, and the restoration of perfect knowledge associated with the Tree of Life[[15]](#footnote-15).

Viewed in this sense, questions and questioning take on an exilic, even demonic nature in various streams of Jewish thought, namely Jewish Mysticism. For example, R. Haim Vital records that his teacher, R. Issac Luria would exhaust his efforts while engaged in Halachik texts. In recalling his teacher’s response, R. Haim Vital writes that “learning *halacha* is for the purpose of shattering the *klippot*, and this is the secret of the confusion and difficulties. Therefor one must utilize all of their effort to the point of weakening.[[16]](#footnote-16)” The questions that arise within Halachik discourse grow from within the *klippot,* or “obstructions to the stream of life, which solidify it in the externals and in “shells”[[17]](#footnote-17).” This perception of questioning as a symptom of exile can be found in Zoharic literature as well as later strains of Jewish Mysticism, especially the thought of R. Moshe Hayim Luzato[[18]](#footnote-18). Questioning is thus a result of the obfuscation of truth, and as such, it is limited to the history of exile. With the Messianic advent, when impurities are removed and wisdom revealed, questions will seize to interrupt the stream of thought. Therefore, the primacy of the questioning-act within Rabbinic thought can be said to be predicated on a temporary “life lived in deferment”[[19]](#footnote-19) in which the epistemological capacity is limited.

What follows will attempt to describe a second, more primordial form of Jewish questioning that may be termed ontological-questioning. In contradistinction to the epistemological-questioning described above, ontological-questioning is not limited to the exilic reality in which absolute knowledge is temporarily occluded. The ontological-question is that which sits at the center of experience murmuring beneath any and all attempts at the answer. In beholding the ontological-question, the subject itself is put into question. The inability to provide an answer to these “profound questions”[[20]](#footnote-20) is not contingent on historical or epistemological imperfection. The ontology of the question creates the opening, or void, through which being maintains its infinite concealment. Any attempt to disclose an answer is to confuse the ontological-question for the epistemological-question. The ontological-question is predicated on nothing expect its own unanswerability, the impossibility of an answer that stems from the impossibility of the question.

Two thinkers vastly separated both historically and contextually, will serve as the lens through which we may approach the question of the question. Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, the 18th century Ukrainian Hassidic master, and Edmond Jabès, a Jewish Egyptian poet and writer of the 20th century utilize the trope of the question to reveal certain ontological antinomies that establish the relationship with what both refer to as “the void”. While both thinkers approach the issue from separate spaces, the difference in approach to the ontological-question is reduced by the conclusions they eventually arrive at.

R. Nahman of Bratslav (1772-1810) was the founder and master of the Bratslav Hassidic sect. Born in Ukraine, R. Nahman followed in the mystical footsteps of his maternal great-grand father R. Israel ben Elezar, known as the Baal Shem Tov and the founder of the Hassidic movement[[21]](#footnote-21). Although his presence served as a continuation upon the path of Hassidut, R. Nahman breached a path that was paradoxically ‘ancient and wholly new’[[22]](#footnote-22) at the same time. Acutely aware of the difficulties and disruptions (*meniot*) that bombard the spiritual seeker[[23]](#footnote-23), R. Nahman sought ‘a path from the side’[[24]](#footnote-24) through which the subject could balance existential suffering along with authentic faith. In a faithless world, he demanded of his followers- and more importantly himself- a holy defiance (*azut di-kedusha*)[[25]](#footnote-25) in which the leap of faith paradoxically moves through and beyond the abyss of denial[[26]](#footnote-26). The world of R. Nahman is a world in which the presence of God is occluded. Engendering the biblical verse in which God proclaims that his presence will be doubly concealed, interpreted traditionally as concealment upon concealment, R. Nahman interprets the verse as describing a concealment of the concealment[[27]](#footnote-27). The world of R. Nahman is a world of darkness in which the concealment of Godliness is concealed from those who seek out God. This concealment, however, stems less from the dereliction of Divine service than from the ontological reality of an existence that appears separate from God. As such, R. Nahman viewed the intellectual pursuit of God, predicated on the laws of logic and rational thought, to be a movement founded upon a fundamental flaw. Rationality implies proximity, in order to understand one must be aware of that which is to be understood. Proximity or immanency presupposes the disclosure of that which is sought[[28]](#footnote-28). For R. Nahman, to assume the disclosure of Godly presence within the world is to ignore or deny the concealment of God upon which the world exists. The fallacy of reason, according to R. Nahman applies to both the epistemological as well as ontological register. Regarding the former, the rationalism invoked by philosophy, both Jewish and otherwise, operates within the realm of reason and can thus be grasped by those who master it. For R. Nahman this self-proclaimed mastery directly implies the foreclosure of all that exceeds or contradicts the strict contours of reason, namely paradox and the imaginative faculty[[29]](#footnote-29). It is with regards to the latter that we find R. Nahman’s radical treatment of faith, and primary to this essay his approach to the ontological-question[[30]](#footnote-30).

Edmond Jabes (1912-1991) was a Jewish writer and poet born and raised in Egypt[[31]](#footnote-31). Born into a wealthy and secular family, Jewish identity was a cultural reality for Jabes. Influenced by the Surrealist movement and by his close friend and mentor Max Jacob, Jabes’s early writing and poetry earned him the reputation as a significant literary figure. However, as a result of living in Cairo his reputation did not travel very far. In 1956 Jabes along with the Jewish community, was exiled from Egypt and forced to resettle in France. As Paul Auster notes, “the Suez Crisis of 1956 changed everything for Jabes, both in his life and in his work”[[32]](#footnote-32). With exile and the subsequent feelings of homesickness which would stay with him until the end, Jabes entered into his second stage of writing, unique in its indefinability[[33]](#footnote-33). The main body of Jabes work consists of the seven-volume Book of Questions (1976-1984) and the three-volume Book of Resemblances (1990-1992). In these texts- if one may refer to them as texts- Jabes utilizes an inimitable mode of fragmentary writing, displaced imaginary quotations and a cacophony of rabbinic specters[[34]](#footnote-34). These works are comprised of haunting narratives of loss incessantly interrupted by ghostly rabbinic interpretations. The rabbinic voices invoked by Jabes create a liminal dialogue in which one statement disappears into the next. To trace a coherent discussion within these silent voices proves to be an uncanny experience. The moment the reader assumes an understanding of the text; an interruption appears- as if silently wandering out of the margin- thus rupturing the imagined lucidity[[35]](#footnote-35). Although the attempts at classifying his texts as postmodern or deconstructive have been made[[36]](#footnote-36), Jabes consistently evaded the demarcations of genre or type. Rather than categorizing his textual edifices within the normative literary subsets, Jabes viewed his textual wanderings as a symptom of his own lived experience. Removed from his homeland, Jabes found familiarity within the unfamiliar experience of exile. Wandering through the desert, he reentered the Jewish tradition into which he was born[[37]](#footnote-37). The Jew, for Jabes, is the embodiment of exile, the wound that erupts when one is torn away from the other[[38]](#footnote-38). Exiting the groundedness of a homeland, Jabes entered into the abyss of the desert. Erring towards his future destination in France, Jabes never forgot the sense of Jewish wandering and alienation from the familiar. As the exiled people of the book, Jabes saw his writing as a manifestation of his Jewishness, often finding it difficult to separate the two[[39]](#footnote-39). Commenting on his literary experience Jabes writes how “I have always answered the question, “Do you consider yourself a Jewish writer?” with, “I am a writer and a Jew”, an answer at first disconcerting, but which springs from a great care not to reduce either term to what I might be able to say in joining them[[40]](#footnote-40).” Later on, however, Jabes writes that, “At first I thought I was a writer. Then I realized that I was a Jew. Then I no longer distinguished that writer in me from the Jew because one and the other are only torments of an ancient word[[41]](#footnote-41)”. For Jabes “the difficulty of being Jewish is the same as the difficulty of writing. For Judaism and writing are but the same writing, the same hope, the same wearing out[[42]](#footnote-42).” The reoccurring themes of exile, the desert, the void, the book, the act of writing, and questioning appear on nearly every page of Jabes vast oeuvre. Questioning, for Jabes rests at the (non)center of his writing[[43]](#footnote-43). Each fragment of writing is a questioning of both that which was written before and that which will be written afterwards. The question simultaneously erases the written past as it engraves the white space necessary for the written future. For Jabes, the question is not an attempt at definition or clarification but rather a revelation of the ontological-question that opens a rupture into which the letters of his words fall into the void.

Edmond Jabes’s writing is deeply influenced by certain tropes within Jewish Mysticism, or Kabbalah[[44]](#footnote-44)*.* Experienced in secondary texts describing the basic foundations of Kabbalistic thought[[45]](#footnote-45), Jabes drew unique inspiration from the theory of *tzimtzum* as it is described in the theosophical system of Lurianic Kabbalah. Taylor[[46]](#footnote-46) correctly notes, that “though Jabes rarely comments on the sources of his reflections, his writing is, in effect, a scriptural repetition of the Kabbalistic interpretation of creation. Like the ever elusive *tzimtzum*, silence is the white space whose withdrawal marks the emergence of the black space of the created world.” In brief, R. Issac Luria describes the initial movement within the undifferentiated and infinite light of the Divine as an act of withdrawal[[47]](#footnote-47). 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, or void could form. This space, 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. For Jabes, *tzimtzum* represents the abyss that is born in the withdrawal of God, and the abyss that will forever be associated with this departed God[[48]](#footnote-48). In explaining the vast presence of God throughout his writing Jabes states that “what I mean by God in my work is something we come up against, an abyss, a void, something against which we are powerless. It is a distance…the distance that is always between things”[[49]](#footnote-49). *Tzimtzum*, however, is more than an absolute withdrawal or concealment; it is paradoxically the mode in which God allows his presence to be revealed. “In the Kabbalah”, Jabes points out “God reveals himself in a dot, and by making this reference; the whole work of deconstruction seems to uncover a totality. But this totality can never be shown”[[50]](#footnote-50). The white space that marks the writing of Jabes, incessantly interrupting and thus revealing “the distance between things” is a form of textual *tzimtzum[[51]](#footnote-51).* The 19th century Kabbalist, R. Menahem Mendel of Shklov describes *tzimtzum* as “the secret of spacing between the chapters for the sake of understanding, and between statement to statement, and between word and word, and between letter and letter…” To enable the fragmented word to be revealed, the author must withdraw from the text thus allowing the text to err in its own direction. For Jabes these white spaces separating letters and words represent the void that is born in the absence of God. It is this void, or desert that opens upon the ontological-question. As a continuation of Kabbalistic and Hasidic thinking, R. Nahman’s thought is a combination of Lurianic doctrine and midrashic hermeneutics. Thus, R. Nahman was fully versed in the doctrine of *tzimtzum* and the various interpretations thereof and it serves as a fundamental theme within his thought. Utilizing the void or “vacated space” (*chalal ha-panui*) as a point of departure we shall see how these two thinkers approached the idea of the question that erupts from within God’s absence in separate yet similar ways. For both R. Nahman and Jabes the act-of-questioning is not synonymous with the questioning-act. While the act-of-questioning in which the subject seeks information or knowledge hitherto unattained represents the quest for an epistemological unknown, the questioning-act points towards an ontological situatedness in which the subject faces that which is unknowable.

Although, as noted, Jabes was familiar with various streams of Rabbinic thought, including Jewish mysticism, there is little room to assume that Jabes was familiar with the thought of R. Nahman. Thus far the only scholarship that has touched upon the relationship between these two thinkers has been Marc-Alain Ouaknin’s “Burnt Book” and Handelman’s essay on Jabes, “Torments of the Ancient Word: Edmond Jabes and the Rabbinic Tradition”. While significant in developing this constellation, neither touch upon the thematic of questioning as expressed in the thought of R. Nahman and Jabes.

The primary treatment of questioning in the thought of R. Nahman is a discourse (*Torah)* recorded by his main disciple R. Natan of Nemirov and printed in the collected discourses of R. Nahman in *Likkutei MoHaRan.* Discourse sixty-four, titled “Come forth to Pharaoh” (*bo el paroh)* discusses the necessary act of Divine withdrawal (*tzimtzum*), the subsequent disclosure of the vacant space (*chalal ha-panui*), the cataclysmic shattering of the vessels within the void (*shvirat ha-keilim*) and the two modes of heresy (*apikorsut*) that arise as a result of the primordial act of Divine concealment. R. Nahman (64:1) begins the discourse by explicating the Lurianic doctrine of *Tzimtzum*:

…And when the blessed Name wanted to create the world, there was no place to create it, because everything was infinite; therefor he contracted (*tzimtzem*) the light to the sides, and by that contraction (*tzimtzum*) the vacated space was created, and within this vacated space all the days and measurements came to be, for they are the creation of the world. This vacated space was necessary for the creation of the world, because without the vacated space there would have been no place for the creation of the world. This *tzimtzum* of the vacated space cannot be understood or grasped until future times, because two opposite things must be said about it: existence and nothingness, because the vacated space is created through *tzimtzum*, which is ostensibly the *tzimtzum* of the divinity, because there is, as it were, no divinity there. For otherwise it would not be vacant, and (since) everything is infinite there would be no place for the creation of the world at all. But in absolute truth, there is divinity there nevertheless, because certainly there is nothing without it, and therefore it is impossible to grasp the existence of the vacated space until the future.

The paradoxical nature of the *tzimtzum*, namely the necessary absence of divinity for the sake of the other-than-God and the equally impossible theological notion of the absence of God prevents the full understanding of the vacant space (*chalal ha-panui*). As a result of the contradictory grounds upon which the edifice of the perceptual world is founded, R. Nahman describes the questioning and heretical thinking that is born within this paradox:

And know that there are two kinds of heresy (*apikorsut*); there is *apikorsut* that comes from external wisdom, on which it is stated “know what to respond to the *apikoret*”; because for this *apikorsut* there is an answer (*teshuvah*); because this *apikorsut* comes from external wisdom which come from permissible things, from the aspect of the breaking of the vessels (*shvirat ha-keilim*). For due to the abundance of light, the vessels were broken, and from there the *kelipot* came into existence, as it is known…And therefor whoever falls into that *apikorsut,* he is able to find rescue and leave that place. For since they come from the breaking of the vessels there are some sparks of holiness there and some letters were broken and fell into there, as it is known- the person can therefor find divinity there and the wisdom to resolve the difficulties (*kushyot*) of that *apikorsut*…However, there is another kind of *apikorsut*, and these are the wisdoms that are not wisdom. But because they are deep and people do not grasp them, they seem to be wisdom…And in truth it is impossible to resolve those difficulties, because the difficulties of that *apikorsut* come from the vacant space- and there in the vacant space there is no divinity, as it were. Therefor those difficulties that come from there, since they possess the aspect called “vacant space”, it is impossible in any way to find an answer for them- that is to say, to find the blessed Name there- because if the blessed Name were found there as well, then it would not be vacant, and everything would be Infinity, as mentioned above. Therefore regarding this *apikorsut* it is stated “all who enter her shall not return (*yeshuvun*)”; for there are no answers for this *apikorsut*, because it stems from the vacant space, from which divinity has been contracted (*tzimtzem elokuto*), as it were.

R. Nahman describes two forms of questioning that arise in the guise of heretical thinking. The first mode of questioning is rooted in the *apikorsut* that stems from the cataclysmic shattering of the vessels. In Lurianic Kabbalah *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 (*he-elam l-shem gilui*). 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 physical world would eventually unfold. However, due to the divine properties of *orot* the initial investiture within the *keilim* left traces of light, present through their absence, within the broken remnants of the vessels. According to R. Nahman, the questions or antinomies that stem from the *apikorsut* of the shattering of the vessels can be responded to and answered. The *kushyot* of this order can be defined as epistemological questioning. As a result of the shattering of the vessels the presence of absolute knowledge has been disrupted. The remnants of a fractured plenitude are scattered and thus retrievable through rigorous investigation, however, the occlusion of clarified knowledge serves as an obstruction facing the subject who is seeking the kernel of truth. As R. Nahman writes regarding the first type of questioning, “The vessels were broken, and from there the *kelipot* came into existence”. *Kelipot* or shells symbolize the unrefined potencies that surround and conceal the kernel of truth. On an epistemological register, *kelipot* represent the initial assumptions that lead to confusion and which must be discarded before coming upon the authentic known. These questions of the *apikorsut* of the shattered vessels are inessential and thus the spiritual seeker may find an answer which nullifies the question retroactively.

The second category of questions, those that stem from the *apikorsut* of the *chalal ha-panui* represent the ontological question. Here, the inability to supply an answer stems less from an epistemological limitation than from the ontological nature of the question itself. As explained above, for R. Nahman the vacant space represents the ontological paradox in which the absence of God is dialectically related to the presence of God. From within the void of reason questions arise in which the human capacity of thought is unable to resolve the paradoxical and impossible nature of being. These “ontological antinomies” symbolized by the paradoxical play of something and nothing (*yesh ve-ayin*) that was necessary for the creation of the other-than-God is described by R. Nahman as “wisdoms that are not wisdom” (*chochmot sh-einam chochmot*). In contradistinction to the *kushyot* of *shevirat ha-keilim* in which an answer may clarify the dissonance between unknown and known, the *kushiyot* of the *chalal ha-panui* are “not a philosophy of the option that chooses either *one or the other* (disjunction); nor is it a thought of *neither one nor the other* (negative conjunction) such as one encounters in the dialectics of antinomies…Nor is it a question of the Hegelian synthesis, which offers us a *both one and the other* (positive conjunction)” rather it is “the scandal of the antithesis without the synthesis that R. Nahman calls *kushiah”.* As a result of the ontological question’s rootedness in the vacant space, they will not, and cannot be answered until “future times”, as R. Nahman stated, “And therefore it is impossible to grasp the aspect of the vacant space until future times”.

In order to understand the significance of R. Nahman’s claim, namely that the ontological questions that are rooted in the *chalal ha-panui* cannot be answered within the temporal constancy of this-worldliness, we must examine another discourse in which R. Nahman treats the issue of *kushiyot*. Discourse seven titled “For the merciful shall guide them” (*Ki me-rachmam yi-nahageim*), printed in the second volume of *Likkutei MoHaRaN,* discusses the Lurianic concepts of surrounding lights (*orot makkifin*) and inner lights (*orot pnimim*). In short, the Lurianic system describes uniformity between lights (*orot*) and vessels (*keilim*). To enable the lights the capacity to invest themselves within the vessels, the vessels underwent a process of compartmentalization in which each *kli* or world (*olam*) was arraigned in hierarchal order. As a result, the more potent light inhabits the loftier vessel, while the weaker light inhabits the coarser vessel. Each vessel is comprised of three compartments which descend from the least corporal to the most corporal. The relationship between the *orot* and *keilim* is analogous to the interaction of body and soul, and thus the various *keilim* are symbolized by aspects of human anatomy. The highest part of the *kli* is termed “brain” (*moach*) and on the spatial register it represents “the inner” (*pnim*). The intermediate part of the *kli* is termed “heart” (*lev*) and the spatial level of “middle” (*emtza*). The lowest part of the *kli* is termed “liver” (*kaved*) and it serves as the spatial coordinate of “outer” (*chitzon*). While the *orot* maintain their undifferentiated status, the compartmentalization of the *keilim* allows for the individuated manifestation of the lights into their correspondent vessel. As stated, the interplay between *orot* and *keilim* is analogous to the relationship between body and soul and thus the varied manifestations of lights are symbolized by aspects of the spirit (*nefesh*). Within Rabbinic thought, however, the human soul is comprised of five highly integrated aspects termed soul (*nefesh*), spirit (*ruah*), breath (*neshamah*), life (*chaya*) and singularity (*yehida*). The incongruity between the varied aspects of lights and vessel is alleviated through the Lurianic notion of *pnimim* and *makkifim*. The three lower aspects of the soul, *nefesh, ruah* and *neshmah* invest themselves within the three compartments of the vessel- *nefesh* within the “outer/liver”, *ruah* within the “middle/heart” and *neshamah* within the “inner/brain”. These *orot* are referred to as internal lights (*orot pnimim*) as a result of their investiture within the vessels. The remaining two aspects of the soul, *haya* and *yehida* are left unclothed, hovering and surrounding the vessel in which the lower aspects of the soul are clothed. These two aspects, *haya* and *yehida* are referred to as surrounding lights (*orot makkifim*).

Through an act of psychological hermeneutics R. Nahman interprets the notion of *makkifim* and *pnimim* as states of cognition. The *pnimi* represents an intellectual idea that is fully grasped by the thinker, as R. Nahman writes, “for that which an individual understands and grasps in their intellect, this is the aspect of *pnimi*, as this idea fully enters the intellect”. The *makif*, however, represents those ideas that transcend the vessels of human cognition and as such cannot be fully understood by the thinking individual. Regarding the cognitive aspect of the *makif*, R. Nahman writes, “however, that which he cannot bring into the intellect, meaning, that which he cannot understand, this is the aspect of *makkifim*, as this idea surrounds the limits of the psyche, and it is impossible to bring it internally (*pnimi*) within the intellect, for it is impossible to understand it, as it is the aspect of *makif* for him”. For R. Nahman the *makkifim* symbolize the ever-evasive aspects of knowledge that the human mind cannot comprehend. This incomprehension that is associated with the aspect of *makkifim* however, stems less from an epistemological limitation than from the composition of the human psyche as described above based on the Lurianic doctrine of *makkifim* and *pnimim.*

1. F. Nietzsche, *Gay Science* pp. 373; *Beyond Good and Evil* pp. 204 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. M. Heidegger, *Being and Time,* pp. 21-33 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Regarding Derrida’s critique on the Heideggerian notion of questioning, see V. Blok, “Heidegger and Derrida on the Nature of Questioning: Towards the Rehabilitation of Questioning in Contemporary Philosophy”, in *The Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology,* 2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. J. Derrida, in an interview titled “What Comes Before the Question”. See S. Gaston, *Derrida and Disinterest* (Continuum, 2005), pp. 82-84. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. G.C Spivak, *Of Grammatology* (John Hopkins, 1997), pp. xvii [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (John Hopkins, 1997), pp. 61 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid, pp. 91 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago, 1978), pp. 80 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. M. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation* (Minnesota, 1993), pp. 12 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid, pp. 13 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid, pp. 14 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. E. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being,* pp. 26 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See S. Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (SUNY, 1982), pp. 3-27. See as well, M. Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (California, 1994), pp. 23-24; 33-36 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See David Stern, “Moses-cide : Midrash and Contemporary Literary Criticism”, *Prooftexts* 4 (1984), pp. 193-213; E. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton, 1994), pp. 13-16 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See G. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (Schocken Books, 1971), pp. 37-49 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. H. Vital, *Pri Eitz Hayim, shaar han-hagat ha-limmud,* pp. 353; *Shaar ha-Mitzvot* (*Alei Ayin* 2002*),* pp. 188 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. G. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (Schocken Books, 1971), pp. 23 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See M.H Luzato, *Adir Ba-Marom* (Y. Spinner), pp. 39-50 ; *Takt”u Tfilot* (*Machon Ramchal*), pp. 32-34 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. G. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (Schocken Books, 1971), pp. 35 ; see as well H. Bloom, *Kabbalah and Criticism* (Continuum, 2005), pp.  [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See M. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation* (Minnesota, 1993), pp. 16 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. For a biographical overview of R. Nahman’s life and thought, see A. Green, *Tormented Master: The Life and Spiritual Quest of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav* (Jewish Lights, 1992); Z. Mark, *Mysticism and Madness: The Religious Thought of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav* (Continuum, 2009) [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *Hayei MoHaRan,* 392 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See R. Nahman, *Likkutei MoHaRan,* I, 14:5, 66:4, 185; II, 44, 45 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. A. Kaplan, *Rabbi Nachman’s Stories* (Breslev Research Institute, 1983), pp. 40. Regarding the tales of R. Nahman, see R. Nahman, *Likkutei MoHaRan,*I,60; A. Green, *Tormented Master* (Jewish Lights, 1992), pp. 337-373; M. Schleicher, *Intertexuality in the Tales of R. Nahman of Bratslav* (Brill, 2007); Y. Dreyfus, *The Marriage of the Lost: A New Reading of R. Nahman’s Tale of the Seven Beggars* (Siach, 2009), pp. 12-24; O. Wiskind-Elper, *Tradition and Fantasy in the Tales of Reb Nahman of Bratslav* (SUNY, 1998), pp. 41-56 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See R. Nahman, *Likkutei MoHaRan,* I, 22:4, 271 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See A. Green, *Tormented Master* (Jewish Lights, 1992), pp. 285-330; Z. Mark, *Mysticism and Madness* (Continuum, 2009), pp. 155-173; S. Magid, “Through the Void: The Absence of God in R. Nahman of Bratzlav’s *Likkutei MoHaRan”,* in *Harvard Theological Review* 88:4 (1995), pp. 495-519; Y. Leibes, “*Ha-tikkun ha-klali* of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav and its Sabbetean Links”, in *Studies in Jewish Myth and Jewish Messianism* (Albany, 1993), pp. 115-130 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. *Likkutei MoHaRan,* I, 56:3 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See R. Shlomo Elyashiv, *Leshem she-vo v’Achaloma 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”. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See Z. Mark, *Mysticism and Madness* (Continuum, 2009), pp. 1-28 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. The thematic of questioning in the thought of R. Nahman has already been treated extensively, see J. Weiss, “The Question in the Teachings of R. Nahman” in M. Piekarz, *Studies in Bratzlav Hasidism* (Jerusalem, 1972), pp. 109-149 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. The biographical information of Jabes is limited, see however, P. Auster, “Book of the Dead: An Interview with Edmond Jabes” in *The Sin of the Book* (Nebraska, 1985), pp. 3-9; R. Waldrop, *Lavish Absence: Recalling and Rereading Edmond Jabes* (Wesleyan, 2002), pp. 3-11. For brief autobiographical remarks, see E. Jabes, “My Itinerary”, in *Studies in 20th Century Literature,* Volume 12 Issue 1, pp. 4-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. P. Auster, “Book of the Dead: An Interview with Edmond Jabes” in E. Gould’s *The Sin of the Book* (Nebraska, 1985), pp. 4 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. On the indefinability of Jabes’s writing, see J. Derrida, “Ellipsis”, in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago, 1978), pp. 294-300 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Regarding Jabes usage of “imagined Rabbis” in his writing see, S. Handelman, “Torment of the Ancient Word”, in E. Gould, *The Sin of the Book* (Nebraska, 1985), pp. 67-68; T. Veiling, “Edmond Jabes: Rabbi-Poet of the Book”, *Pacifica* 7 (1994), pp. 19-21 [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Maurice Blanchot describes the fundamental aspect of Jabes’s writing as “the interruption which allows exchange”. See, M. Blanchot, “Interruptions”, in E. Gould’s *The Sin of the Book* (Nebraska, 1985), pp. 43-55 [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. See E. Gould, “Jabes and Postmoderism”, in *Studies in 20th Century Literature,* Volume 12, Issue 1, pp. 115-121; B. Hawkins, *Reluctant Theologians: Kafka,Celan, Jabes* (Fordham, 2003), pp. 161-164 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. On the exilic nature of Jabes’s writing, see R. Stamelaman, “Nomadic Writing: The Poetics of Exile”, in E. Gould *The Sin of the Book* (Nebraska, 1985), pp. 92-115; B. Hawkins, *Reluctant Theologians* (Fordham, 2003), pp. 170-178 [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Regarding the trope of “the wound” in Jabes’s writing, see A. Ploeg, “I Will Remain Silent and Scream: Edmond Jabes and the Wound and Witness of Language”, *Shofar* Vol. 30, No. 2, pp. 91-101 [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. On the “Jewishness” of writing, see E. Jabes, “There is Such a Thing as Jewish Writing”, in E. Gould, *The Sin of the Book* (Nebraska, 1985), pp. 26-32; E. Jabes, “My Itinerary”, in Studies in 20th Century Literature, Volume 12 Issue 1, pp. 4-12; B. Hutchens, “Religious Silence and the Subversion of Dialogue: The Religious Writings of Edmond Jabes”, *Literature and Theology,* Vol. 9, No. 4 (1995), pp. 424-428; J. Derrida, “Edmond Jabes and the Question of the Book”, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago, 1978), pp. 66-72 [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. E. Jabes, “There is Such a Thing as Jewish Writing”, in E. Gould, *The Sin of the Book* (Nebraska, 1985), pp. 27 [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. E. Jabes, *The Book of Questions* I, pp. 361 [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. E. Jabes, *The Book of Questions* I, pp. 122 [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. On the thematic of questioning in the writing of Jabes, see M.A Caws, “Questioning the Question”, in E. Gould *The Sin of the Book* (Nebraska, 1985), pp. 171-178; B. Hawkins, *Reluctant Theologians* (Fordham, 2003), pp. 163-170 [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Regarding the influence of Kabbalah on the writings of Jabes, see S. Handelman, “Torments of the Ancient Word”, in E. Gould *The Sin of the Book* (Nebraska, 1985), pp. 68-75; N.D Miller, “Tree of Consciousness: The Shekhina in Edmond Jabes’ *Yael”, Literature and Theology* Vol. 17, No. 4 (2003), pp. 390-394; M. Del Nevo, “Kabbalism After God”, *Journal of American Academy of Religion* Vol. 65, No. 2, pp. 403-414; S. Moses, “Edmond Jabes: From One Path to Another”, *Studies in 20th Century Literature* Vol. 12, Issue 1, pp. 81-84; G. Bounoure, *Edmond Jabes, la demeure le livre* (Montpellier: 1984), pp. 19; W. Franke, “Edmond Jabes, or the Endless Self-Emptying of Language in the Name of God”, *Literature and Theology* Vol. 22, No. 1 (2008), pp. 102-107; B. Hawkins, *Reluctant Theologians* (Fordham, 2003), pp. 208-215 [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Nathalie Debrauwere-Miller writes (“Tree of Consciousness: The Shekhina in Edmond Jabes’ Yael”, Literature and Theology Vol. 17, No. 4 (2003), pp. 403 fn.9), “In the summer 1998, I had the opportunity to meet one of Jabes’ two daughters, Viviane Jabes-Crasson, in Paris. During our meeting I was able to verify my assertion regarding Jabes relationship to the Jewish Kabbalah and the Talmud checking his private library. Though Jabes lost part of his books when he fled Egypt, and some of his remaining books were held by the other daughter, a few books were left with Viviane Jabes- Crasson such as: *Le Zohar,* 3 vols. (Paris: Verdier, 1981); Gershom Scholem’s books such as *La kabbale et sa Symbolique* (Paris: Payot, 1966); *Le Talmud de Jerusalem* (traduction Moise Schwab); *Ouvrage collectif sur Rachi* (Manes Spenber); Henri Serouya, *La Kabbale* (Paris: Grasset, 1947); David Malki, *Le Talmud et ses Maitres,* 3 vols. (Paris: Albin Michel, 1980”. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. M.C Taylor, forward to E. Jabes, *The Book of Margins* (Chicago, 1993), pp. xiv [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. See P. Auster, “Book of the Dead: An Interview with Edmond Jabes” in E. Gould, *The Sin of the Book* (Nebraska, 1985), pp. 19. On the absence of God and God as absence in the writing of Jabes, see B. Hawkins, “Perpetuating the Death of God: Edmond Jabes’s Post-Nietzchean Midrash”, *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy,* Vol. 10, pp. 341-372; R. Stamelman, “The Dialogue of Absence”, *Studies in 20th Century Literature,* pp. 100-106; S. Levy, “The Question of Absence”, in E. Gould, *The Sin of the Book* (Nebraska, 1985), pp. 147-152 [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Ibid, pp. 19 [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. P. Auster, “Book of the Dead: An Interview with Edmond Jabes” in E. Gould, *The Sin of the Book* (Nebraska, 1985), pp. 20 [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. The unique spacing in the writings of Jabes brings to mind the white space of the biblical text. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)