

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Radical Rupture: Chabad’s Theological Continuity When Divine Withdrawal Precedes Sin

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Received: 20 June 2025 Accepted: 04 July 2025 Published: 10 July 2025

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## Abstract

Lubavitcher Rebbe’s understanding of *tzimtzum* represents perhaps the most radical theological departure in modern Chabad scholarship. This article examines Eli Rubin’s claim that the seventh Rebbe fundamentally inverted traditional Chabad theodicy, positioning divine contraction as the precursor rather than consequence of sin. Through comparative analysis with earlier Chabad rebbes and engagement with contemporary scholars including Moshe Idel, Elliot Wolfson, Shaul Magid, Michael Fishbane, and Daniel Matt, we explore whether Rubin’s reading reveals genuine innovation or hermeneutical overreach. The analysis culminates in examining potential connections to Jonathan Eybeschütz’s mystical formulation “*ve-avo hayom el ha-ayin*” (and I shall come today to the Nothing), investigating whether the Rebbe’s alleged radicalism represents a return to earlier kabbalistic trajectories or an unprecedented theological rupture.

## 1. Introduction

In his groundbreaking analysis of the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s 11 Shevat 5731 Maamar, Eli Rubin advances a thesis that fundamentally challenges our understanding of Chabad theology

The existence of *simsum* itself has within it an aspect that is counter to the will [of God], for it is the opposite of the primordial will that luminosity shall radiate. . . . From this emerges . . . the general possibility of sin, and ultimately the sin of the tree of knowledge, and the sins that follow it throughout the ages.<sup>27</sup>

“Rather than sin precipitating the ascent of the Shechina from the cosmos, it is the primordial ascent of the Shechina—the *Tzimtzum*—that precipitates sin.” (1) This inversion of traditional theodicy, if accurate, positions the seventh Rebbe not merely as an innovative interpreter but as a revolutionary who overturned two centuries of Chabad theological development.

The implications extend far beyond academic discourse. If Rubin’s reading holds, it suggests that the most influential Hasidic leader of the modern era fundamentally reconceptualized the relationship between divine action and human moral failure,

placing the origin of evil within the very structure of creation rather than in human transgression. This article examines whether such radicalism can be sustained through textual analysis and scholarly critique.

## 2. The Traditional Chabad Framework

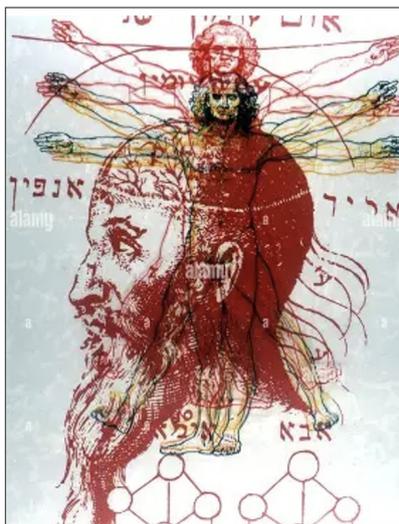
### 2.1 Rabbi Schneur Zalman’s Foundation

To assess the Rebbe’s alleged radicalism, we must first establish the theological baseline established by Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1812), the Alter Rebbe and founder of Chabad. In his *Tanya*, particularly in *Shaar HaYichud VeHaEmunah*, the Alter Rebbe presents *tzimtzum* within a classical framework where divine concealment serves specific cosmological purposes but remains fundamentally revelatory in intent. (2)

For the Alter Rebbe, *tzimtzum* operates as divine pedagogy—a self-limitation that enables finite creatures to receive infinite light gradually. This conception follows the traditional kabbalistic model where divine withdrawal creates space for creation without implying any fundamental rupture in divine

**Citation:** Julian Ungar-Sargon. Radical Rupture: Chabad’s Theological Continuity When Divine Withdrawal Precedes Sin. *Journal of Religion and Theology* 2025;7(3):35-48.

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unity. Sin, in this framework, represents human failure to recognize the underlying divine reality that remains present despite apparent concealment.

The Alter Rebbe's position on the literal versus metaphorical nature of tzimtzum became legendary in the debate with the Vilna Gaon. His insistence that "God did not withdraw from the space" (lo itzatzel hamakom) established Chabad's commitment to divine immanence even within apparent concealment. (3) This theological stance would influence all subsequent Chabad interpretation.

## 2.2 The Middle Rebbes: Continuity and Development

The second through sixth Rebbes of Chabad—the Mittlerer Rebbe, the Tzemach Tzedek, the Maharash, the Rashab, and the Rayatz—developed and refined the Alter Rebbe's framework without fundamentally challenging its basic structure. Each contributed distinctive emphases while maintaining theological continuity.

The Mittlerer Rebbe (Rabbi Dovber, 1773-1827) elaborated the psychological dimensions of tzimtzum, developing sophisticated parallels between divine self-contraction and human consciousness. His work demonstrated how tzimtzum operates not merely cosmologically but as the fundamental structure of awareness itself. Yet this psychological turn maintained the traditional causal relationship between human sin and divine response. (4)

The Tzemach Tzedek (Rabbi Menachem Mendel, 1789-1866) engaged extensively with the Lurianic concepts of shevirat hakelim (shattering of vessels) and tikkun (repair), but consistently within the framework where cosmic catastrophe results from created limitation, not divine choice. His extensive writings on tzimtzum in works like Derech Mitzvosecha reveal a sophisticated

thinker who nonetheless operated within traditional parameters. (5)

The Maharash (Rabbi Shmuel, 1834-1882) introduced the famous principle of "lechatechila ariber" (from the outset, transcend), which some might interpret as proto-revolutionary. However, his understanding remained grounded in the conviction that divine light ultimately transcends all limitation through human spiritual work, not through reconceptualizing the nature of limitation itself. (6)

The Rashab (Rabbi Sholom DovBer, 1860-1920) and the Rayatz (Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak, 1880-1950) continued this development, with the Rashab's profound metaphysical investigations and the Rayatz's emphasis on practical implementation both maintaining the essential framework inherited from their predecessors. (7)

## 3. The Consistent Pattern: Sin as Response, Not Cause

Across these six generations of Chabad leadership, a consistent theological pattern emerges: divine concealment, including tzimtzum, represents God's response to cosmic or human limitation, not its cause. Sin creates the need for divine withdrawal; withdrawal does not create the possibility for sin. This maintains traditional Jewish theodicy while developing sophisticated understandings of divine immanence.

Even in the most complex metaphysical formulations of the middle rebbes, the basic causal structure remains intact. Divine light encounters limitation through created finitude, not through divine choice to limit. The cosmos requires divine pedagogy because of its inherent limitations, not because God chooses to create limitation.

## 4. The Seventh Rebbe's Innovation

According to Rubin's analysis, the seventh Rebbe (Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, 1902-1994) fundamentally inverted this traditional framework. Rather than presenting *tzimtzum* as divine response to cosmic limitation, the Rebbe allegedly positioned divine contraction as the primary creative act that generates the very possibility of limitation, moral choice, and therefore sin.

This interpretation centers particularly on the Rebbe's 11 Shevat 5731 Maamar, which Rubin reads as presenting a radical theological inversion. A careful analysis of this discourse reveals several key themes that support Rubin's interpretation:

**4.1 Divine Revelation vs. Human Response:** The Rebbe emphasizes the dynamic interplay between God's initial revelation and human moral agency. Spiritual elevation (e.g., descent of the *Shechinah*) doesn't eliminate the need for growth—moral struggle with temptation remains essential. This suggests that divine action precedes rather than responds to human moral development. (8)

**4.2 Paradox of Divine Descent:** The very act of divine "contraction" (*tzimtzum*) or descent creates a space where imperfection and moral choice emerge. Thus, God's concealment is what makes room for human responsibility and potential for ethical failure—and growth. This positioning of *tzimtzum* as the precondition for moral possibility rather than response to moral failure represents the heart of Rubin's argument. (8)

**4.3 Purposeful "Withdrawal" of the Shechinah:** The Rebbe explains that the *Shechinah's* descent is not abandonment, but a precondition for creation. From this "withdrawn" state arises the dual opportunity for **sin** and the opportunity for **repair**. It also establishes an arena where human free will and spiritual ascent remain meaningful. This framework positions divine withdrawal as structurally prior to rather than reactive to human moral choice. (8)

**4.4 Moral and Spiritual Tension:** Because God steps back, humans are left facing the consequences of their actions. But this tension is purposeful: every failure and recovery are part of a grand divine plan. Without the possibility of error, spiritual ascent is hollow. This suggests that moral failure emerges from divine creative design rather than opposing it. (8)

**4.5 Etzem vs. Kehillah Dichotomy:** The Rebbe contrasts the *etzem* (absolute essence of Divinity) with *kehillah* (its communal presence). Even the hidden

aspect of God's essence serves as active presence; the need for moral striving becomes an essential form of divine-human interaction. This framework suggests that divine concealment functions as revelation rather than absence. (8)

[https://www.chabad.org/therebbe/article\\_cdo/aid/551625/jewish/11-Shevat-5731-Sicha-10.htm](https://www.chabad.org/therebbe/article_cdo/aid/551625/jewish/11-Shevat-5731-Sicha-10.htm)

11 Shevat 5731 - Sicha 10

These elements from the 11 Shevat 5731 Maamar provide crucial support for Rubin's controversial thesis. Two key connections emerge

**4.5.1 Sin & Tzimtzum:** The Rebbe's insight echoes Rubin's view ("it is the primordial ascent...the *tzimtzum* that precipitates sin"). Divine concealment itself enables sin, making human moral challenge an intentional feature of creation. Rather than sin causing divine withdrawal, the discourse suggests that divine withdrawal creates the structural conditions within which sin becomes possible. This represents a fundamental inversion of traditional causal relationships in Jewish theodicy. (1,8)

**4.5.2 God's Responsibility:** Contrary to seeing sin as solely human failure, the Rebbe—and Rubin—present it as a consequence of God's own creative act. *Tzimtzum* opened the space where both failure and repair unfold. This positioning moves beyond traditional frameworks where divine action responds to human limitation, toward a more radical understanding where divine creativity bears structural responsibility for the possibility of moral failure. (1,8)

This interpretation suggests that the Rebbe moved beyond traditional theodicy toward a more radical understanding where divine action bears direct responsibility for the existence of evil. Rather than evil emerging from created limitation or human choice, it emerges from the fundamental structure of divine creativity itself.

## 5. Textual Evidence and Hermeneutical Questions

The challenge in evaluating Rubin's claim lies in the inherent complexity of the Rebbe's discourses. The Rebbe's talks and writings span over forty years and thousands of pages, with sophisticated development of themes across multiple contexts. Isolating specific innovations requires careful attention to hermeneutical method and theological context. (9)

Rubin's focus on the 11 Shevat 5731 Maamar raises important questions about selective emphasis.

Does this single discourse represent a fundamental theological shift, or does it reflect one facet of a more complex and ultimately traditional position? The Rebbe's other writings on *tzimtzum*, particularly in earlier years, often maintain more conventional frameworks.

Furthermore, the question of literal versus metaphorical interpretation complicates any assessment. The Rebbe consistently maintained that kabbalistic concepts require translation into contemporary intellectual frameworks. His apparent innovations might represent hermeneutical sophistication rather than theological departure. (10)

If Rubin's reading accurately captures the Rebbe's position, the implications extend far beyond *tzimtzum* interpretation. This would represent a fundamental shift in Jewish theodicy, moving from a framework where divine goodness encounters created limitation toward one where divine creativity inherently generates moral complexity.

Such a position would align the Rebbe with certain strands of German Idealism and contemporary process theology, where divine becoming rather than divine being provides the foundation for cosmic development. This would represent not merely innovation within Jewish mysticism but engagement with broader theological currents in ways unprecedented in Hasidic thought. (11)

### 5.1 Scholarly Critiques

Moshe Idel, the preeminent scholar of Jewish mysticism, has consistently emphasized the conservative nature of Hasidic theology despite its apparent innovations. In his extensive studies of Hasidic thought, Idel argues that even the most revolutionary-seeming Hasidic teachings typically represent creative reapplication of earlier kabbalistic concepts rather than fundamental theological departures. (12)

Idel's methodology would likely approach Rubin's claims with skepticism. His work on the transmission of kabbalistic concepts demonstrates how apparent innovations often reflect deeper continuities with medieval and early modern mystical traditions. (13) The question becomes whether the Rebbe's alleged inversion of *tzimtzum* represents genuine innovation or sophisticated reapplication of existing kabbalistic trajectories.

Idel's emphasis on the phenomenological approach to mystical texts would also raise questions about Rubin's hermeneutical method. Does Rubin's reading reflect the Rebbe's intended meaning, or does it impose

contemporary theological concerns onto traditional mystical discourse? Idel's insistence on contextual interpretation would demand careful attention to the Rebbe's broader corpus and its relationship to earlier Chabad sources. (14)

Elliot Wolfson's approach to kabbalistic texts through postmodern and deconstructive lenses offers a particularly illuminating counterpoint to Rubin's claims. In his seminal work *Open Secret*, Wolfson develops a sophisticated analysis of Hasidic mysticism that directly engages questions about concealment and revelation in ways that both complement and challenge Rubin's interpretation. (15)

### 5.2 "Open Secret"

Wolfson explores what he terms the "open secret"—a revelation that paradoxically operates through its own concealment. This concept provides a crucial framework for understanding the Rebbe's messianism and its relationship to *tzimtzum* that differs markedly from Rubin's linear causality model. (15)

For Wolfson, the Messianic Presence operates as both present and concealed simultaneously, representing a nondifferentiated reality that fundamentally subverts traditional dualities—including the distinction between revelation and concealment itself. This represents not theological innovation but recovery of the deepest mystical insight: that true revelation emerges precisely through the erasure of all conceptual limitations. (15)

Wolfson's emphasis on apophatic theology suggests that concealment functions not as divine withdrawal creating space for sin, but as the very mode through which infinite reality continuously manifests while remaining beyond conceptual grasp. The "secret" becomes functional rather than deceptive—it serves as the channel through which non-dual redemption is continuously delivered, yet always paradoxically hidden. (15)

The contrast between Rubin's and Wolfson's interpretations reveals fundamentally different approaches to understanding divine concealment and its theological implications

#### *Role of Withdrawal*

- *Rubin: The tzimtzum initiates a metaphysical condition where sin becomes possible—withdrawal precedes and enables moral failure*
- *Wolfson: Concealment (tzimtzum) functions as revelation in its own right—a hidden manifestation that transcends traditional categories (15)*

Aspect	Rubin	Wolfson
Role of Tzimtzum	Initiates metaphysical condition enabling sin; withdrawal allows for moral failure	Concealment itself is a form of revelation; transcends traditional categories
Function of Concealment	Enables human fallibility and moral agency	Messianic strategy: infinite revelation through apparent absence
Understanding of Sin	Sin is a secondary consequence of divine contraction, not the primary focus	Sin is less focal; revelation through concealment transcends ethical causality
Theological Dynamics	Linear: Tzimtzum → Sin → Redemption	Cyclic/paradoxical: Hidden revelation dissolves categories of presence/absence, good/evil

*Function of Concealment*

- *Rubin: Creates metaphysical background that enables human fallibility and moral agency*
- *Wolfson: Operates as messianic strategy—yielding infinite revelation precisely through its apparent absence (15)*

*Understanding of Sin*

- *Rubin: Sin emerges as secondary consequence of divine contraction—a result rather than cause*
- *Wolfson: Sin becomes less focal; revelation through concealment operates beyond ethical causality, prioritizing transcendence over moral categories (15)*

*Theological Dynamics*

- *Rubin: Linear progression: Tzimtzum → Sin → Redemption*
- *Wolfson: Cyclic/Paradoxical: Infinite hidden revelation continuously dissolves the categories of presence and absence, good and evil (15)*

Wolfson’s analysis suggests several critical challenges to Rubin’s interpretation:

First, Wolfson’s emphasis on the paradoxical nature of mystical discourse questions whether Rubin’s systematic theological analysis adequately captures the complexity of the Rebbe’s teaching. The “open secret” paradigm suggests that apparent innovations might reflect deeper engagement with mystical paradox rather than theological departure. (15)

Second, Wolfson’s focus on the apophatic dimension of mystical thought raises questions about whether any positive theological claims—including Rubin’s attribution of revolutionary intent to the Rebbe—can adequately represent the complexity of mystical

teaching. The question becomes whether Rubin’s systematization artificially resolves tensions that the Rebbe intentionally maintained. (15)

Third, Wolfson’s work on gender symbolism in kabbalah illuminates aspects of Rubin’s emphasis on Shechinah’s “primordial ascent.” Rather than representing theological innovation, this emphasis might reflect sophisticated engagement with traditional feminine divine symbolism that Wolfson has explored extensively. (16)

**6. The Amalek Paradigm**

The divergence between Rubin’s and Wolfson’s approaches becomes even sharper when examining their respective treatments of evil’s origination. While Rubin focuses on sin as consequence of divine contraction, Wolfson’s analysis of Amalek in *Open Secret* provides a fundamentally different framework for understanding evil’s relationship to divine structure. (15)

In Wolfson’s treatment, evil—exemplified by the archetypal enemy Amalek—emerges not as external force entering creation from without, but as something “contained” within the divine right side itself. This reflects the sophisticated kabbalistic notion of “left-contained-in-right”: evil operates as an intrinsic element within the divine schema rather than external opposition to it. (15)

Wolfson’s interpretation presents Amalek as the “ultimate evil”—not merely external enemy but metaphor for the unmixed rigors of divine judgment (the ‘left hand’). Amalek represents the full, unchecked power of divine severity that must be subordinated or “contained” within divine mercy for cosmic harmony to be maintained. (15)

### Comparative Framework: Two Approaches to Evil’s Origin

Author	Concept of Evil	Mode of Expression
Rubin	Primordial tzimtzum precedes sin	Metaphysical framing of sin’s origin—beyond ethics
Wolfson	Amalek = ultimate evil	Historical-symbolic; evil as undefinable hostility

The contrast between Rubin’s reading of the Rebbe’s ma’amar and Wolfson’s treatment of Amalek reveals fundamentally different theological orientations:

#### Origination of Sin/Evil

- *Rubin: Evil originates “from above”—the Shechinah’s tzimtzum creates conditions enabling sin*
- *Wolfson: Evil emerges as “embedded within”—left-hand severity operates as intrinsic divine force (15)*

#### Nature of Evil

- *Rubin: Evil functions as consequence of divine contraction—secondary phenomenon*
- *Wolfson: Evil represents intrinsic and primal force (exemplified by Amalek) requiring integration (15)*

#### Theodicy Framework

- *Rubin: Sin operates as byproduct of Divine self-limitation—unintended consequence*
- *Wolfson: Evil functions as “divine-lawful” (left-hand authority) requiring proper restraint and containment (15)*

#### Resolution Strategy

- *Rubin: Linear progression: Divine contraction → creation → sin → redemption*
- *Wolfson: Structural integration: Left must be “contained” in right for ultimate harmony (15)*

Both approaches recognize sin/evil as not purely external to divine reality, nor purely human-made phenomena. They emerge as structural consequences of how God’s presence manifests within creation. However, their emphasis differs significantly:

**Rubin’s Vertical, Cosmic Dynamic:** Emphasizes the ontological sequence of divine contraction creating space that enables sin. This represents a temporal-causal understanding where divine action precedes and enables moral failure.

**Wolfson’s Horizontal, Theosophic Dynamic:** Highlights the structural tension and necessary integration between mercy (right hand) and judgment

(left hand) within divine reality itself. This represents a synchronic-harmonic understanding where evil requires proper containment rather than elimination. (15)

Despite their different emphases, these approaches complement rather than contradict each other. Both Rubin and Wolfson recognize sin and evil as internal to the divine-human continuum rather than external opposition to divine reality.

Rubin’s ontological lens focuses on origin—how the very structure of divine creativity enables moral failure. His reading of the Rebbe’s ma’amar suggests that sin emerges as the inevitable outcome of Divine creative contraction, representing cosmic rather than merely human responsibility for evil’s possibility.

Wolfson’s symbolic/theurgical lens focuses on moral treatment—how evil functions within divine structure and requires proper integration rather than elimination. Evil operates as part of the divine “spectrum” that must be contained and harmonized within divine structure itself. (15)

### 7. Historical-Critical Analysis

Shaul Magid’s work on Hasidic thought emphasizes the importance of historical context in understanding theological development. His studies of innovation and tradition in Hasidic literature would likely approach Rubin’s claims through careful attention to the social and intellectual context of the Rebbe’s teaching. (17)

Magid’s analysis might focus on the Rebbe’s engagement with modernity and its challenges to traditional Jewish thought. The alleged theological inversion could reflect the Rebbe’s response to contemporary philosophical and theological developments, the Holocaust in addition to purely internal mystical reasoning. (18)

Magid’s work on American Hasidism would also provide important context for evaluating the Rebbe’s innovations. The transplantation of Hasidic thought to American soil involved significant adaptations to new intellectual and cultural environments. The question becomes whether the Rebbe’s apparent radicalism reflects response to these environmental pressures in addition to an internal theological development. (19)

Furthermore, Magid's attention to the political dimensions of Hasidic thought might illuminate aspects of Rubin's interpretation that relate to questions of divine and human agency in historical process. The alleged shift in understanding *tzimtzum* could reflect broader questions about human responsibility in the face of historical catastrophe. (20)

Daniel Matt's work on Jewish mysticism, particularly his translation and interpretation of the *Zohar*, provides additional perspective on Rubin's claims. Matt's careful attention to the development of mystical concepts across historical periods offers important context for evaluating alleged innovations in Hasidic thought. (24)

Matt's scholarship might illuminate earlier precedents for the Rebbe's alleged position, demonstrating continuities with earlier mystical traditions that Rubin's reading might overlook. His work on the relationship between divine transcendence and immanence in Jewish mysticism provides frameworks for understanding the complexity of *tzimtzum* interpretation. (25)

Matt's emphasis on the experiential dimensions of mystical teaching would also raise questions about the practical significance of Rubin's theological analysis. Does the alleged inversion of traditional causality affect mystical experience and spiritual practice, or does it remain primarily conceptual? Matt's attention to the lived dimensions of mystical teaching would demand engagement with these questions. (26)

## 8. Methodological Challenges

Evaluating Rubin's claims requires careful attention to methodological questions that affect any assessment of theological innovation. The challenge lies in distinguishing between genuine theological departure and sophisticated reinterpretation of existing concepts within new contexts.

The Rebbe's extensive corpus includes thousands of discourses delivered across multiple decades to diverse audiences. Isolating specific innovations requires attention to the development of themes across time and context. Single discourses, however significant, must be understood within this broader framework. (9)

Furthermore, the Rebbe's consistent emphasis on the practical implications of mystical teaching raises questions about purely theoretical innovation. Even if specific formulations appear revolutionary, their integration into broader patterns of religious practice

and spiritual development might reveal deeper continuities with tradition. (10)

Despite Rubin's claims for revolutionary departure, extensive evidence suggests basic continuity between the Rebbe's position and earlier Chabad teaching. The Rebbe's frequent citations of his predecessors, his emphasis on maintaining established patterns of religious practice, and his consistent affirmation of traditional Jewish theological principles all suggest evolution rather than revolution. (27)

The Rebbe's extensive writings on *tzimtzum*, examined comprehensively rather than selectively, reveal consistent themes that align with traditional Chabad interpretation. While specific formulations might appear innovative, the underlying theological framework remains recognizably continuous with earlier teaching. (28)

Furthermore, the Rebbe's emphasis on the unity between revealed and concealed aspects of divine reality maintains traditional kabbalistic frameworks even while developing them in new directions. The alleged inversion of causality might reflect sophisticated understanding of traditional paradoxes rather than departure from traditional teaching. (29)

However, Rubin's claims cannot be dismissed without serious consideration. The Rebbe's engagement with contemporary intellectual developments, his sophisticated philosophical training, and his innovative approaches to traditional concepts all suggest capacity for genuine theological innovation. (30)

The specific emphasis on *tzimtzum* as the structural foundation for moral possibility rather than response to moral failure does represent a significant shift in emphasis if not fundamental theological orientation. This shift might reflect the Rebbe's response to modern challenges to traditional theodicy following the Holocaust and other historical catastrophes. (31)

Furthermore, the Rebbe's unique position as a Hasidic leader with extensive secular education positioned him to engage traditional concepts through contemporary intellectual frameworks in ways unprecedented in earlier Hasidic leadership. This background might have enabled genuine theological innovation that transcends traditional boundaries. (32)

## 9. Ethical Implications and Historical Application

The theological debate becomes even more complex and ethically fraught when we consider the scholarly analysis of the Rebbe's controversial theological

positions by researchers like Zbynek Tarrant. This article analyzes the intellectual controversy sparked in the 1970s by the remarks of the last Rebbe of the Lubavitcher dynasty, Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994), concerning the alleged Divine role in the horrors of the Shoah. This work, documented in academic publications such as “Blessed Be the Surgeon?” examines how the Rebbe’s theological framework—which may align with Rubin’s interpretation—generates profound ethical dilemmas when applied to historical catastrophe. (33)

The controversy centers on the Rebbe’s comparison of divine action during the Holocaust to medical intervention. On the subject of the Holocaust, the Rebbe wrote as follows: “It is clear that ‘no evil descends from Above,’ and buried within torment and suffering is a core of exalted spiritual good. Not all human beings are able to perceive it, but it is very much there. So it is not impossible for the physical destruction of the Holocaust to be spiritually beneficial. On the contrary, it is quite possible that physical affliction is good for the spirit” (“*Mada Ve’emuna*,” *Machon Lubavitch*, 1980, *Kfar Chabad*). (34)

The Rebbe goes on to compare God to a surgeon who amputates a patient’s limb in order to save his life. The limb “is incurably diseased ... The Holy One Blessed Be He, like the professor-surgeon...seeks the good of Israel, and indeed, all He does is done for the good...” (34) This metaphor generated intense controversy because it appeared to position even the Holocaust as divinely ordained therapeutic intervention rather than unmitigated evil requiring theological response.

There is a controversial analogy attributed to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, in which the Shoah is looked upon as a surgical procedure, with God being likened to a surgeon who removes a limb in the best interests of his patient. The specific controversy unfolded through multiple stages: (35)

The initial publication, either by the Rebbe or quoting the Rebbe, was in an issue of *Mada’ ve-Emunah (Kfar Chabad: Makhon Lubavitch, 1980)*. MK Haika Grossman (who took part in the Bialystok Ghetto Uprising of 1943) was offended by the Rebbe’s analogy and published a response on August 22nd the same year in a left-wing paper called *Al haMishmar*. The Rebbe saw Mrs Grossman’s response to him and replied, both defending his analogy and attempting to explain it, on August 28th (16th Elul). (35)

The genealogy of the controversial language reveals important complexities. It is worth noting that the original talks by the Rebbe do not have the language about a surgeon removing limbs. The exact language appears in a private letter from the winter of 1954 (5714) that the Rebbe wrote to Rabbi Bentzion Shemtov, the father of Rabbi Avraham Shemtov. (35)

Academic investigation of this controversy reveals its deeper implications for understanding the relationship between traditional Jewish theodicy and contemporary ethical sensibilities. The ensuing dispute took place in the form of essays, newspaper articles and op-eds, as well as private and open letters, and its echoes have occasionally resonated well into the 2000s. Closer inspection of the controversy reveals not only the conflicting paradigms between traditional Jewish theodicy on the one hand and secular ethics on the other, but also the differences between Hasidic hagiographic narration and scientific positivism. (33)

The controversy exposes fundamental tensions in post-Holocaust Jewish theology. This analysis uses original Hebrew sources, some of which have never been published in English. The Rebbe’s controversial words are analyzed in their full, original context, and the ensuing controversy is explored with a focus on the incompatible patterns of reasoning that may have hindered the dialogue. By further exploring the legacy of this controversy, the article also serves as a case study on how apocrypha are construed in contemporary religious movements. (33)

Theme	Rubin	Wolfson	Academic Analysis of the Rebbe
Origin of Sin	Emerging from primordial divine contraction (tzimtzum)	Emerging from divine concealment and unfathomed intimacy—"open secret"	Often attributed to divine action, portrayed as remedial "surgery"
Divine Role in Sin	Sin is neither willed by God nor absent—it's a byproduct	Sin is enabled by hidden divine presence	Paradoxically justified as divine "discipline" or tikkun—but raised ethical red flags
Concept of Evil	Sin is inherent to the cosmos following tzimtzum	Evil arises from the tension of divine immanence/transcendence	Evil is treated as that which must be excised for the health of the whole
Historical Application	Remains largely theoretical and cosmic	Functions through mystical paradox beyond ethical categories	Applied directly to Holocaust with controversial implications
Ethical Implications	Places sin outside immediate moral blame—more metaphysical	Highlights sin's relational complexity with divine presence	Sparks controversy by situating historical suffering as "divinely required"

The inclusion of the documented controversy provides a crucial third perspective that illuminates the practical implications of both Rubin's and Wolfson's theoretical approaches

This three-way comparison reveals crucial tensions in contemporary Jewish theological discourse that extend far beyond academic considerations

*Rubin's Cosmological Framework situates sin as necessary consequence of the divine act of tzimtzum. This provides a metaphysical structure that removes immediate moral blame while potentially raising questions about ultimate divine responsibility. However, when translated into practical theological application, such frameworks risk the kind of ethical difficulties documented in the surgeon parable controversy.*

*Wolfson's Mystical-Relational Framework delves into the sophisticated tension where sin originates because the divine is simultaneously too present and too concealed to be adequately apprehended. The "open secret" paradigm preserves divine transcendence while acknowledging evil's reality but operates primarily within mystical discourse that resists direct application to historical events. (15)*

*The Documented Rebbe's Applied Framework exposes the profound ethical difficulties that emerge when sophisticated theological abstractions encounter concrete historical suffering. The surgeon parable demonstrates how even the most sophisticated theological frameworks can generate controversy when applied to historical catastrophe. (34)*

The documented controversy provides essential context for assessing whether Rubin's interpretation represents theological innovation or recovery of established mystical insight. Several critical questions emerge

**9.1 Theological Consistency:** If Rubin's reading accurately captures the Rebbe's position that tzimtzum precedes and enables rather than responds to sin, how does this relate to the practical theological applications documented in the surgeon parable? The controversy suggests that positioning divine action as structurally preceding moral evil generates significant ethical difficulties when applied to historical events.

**9.2 Hermeneutical Boundaries:** The documented controversy reveals that even within traditional Jewish theological discourse, there are limits to how theological abstractions can be applied to historical suffering. In his writings and discussions on the subject,

the Rebbe rejected all theological explanations for the Holocaust. This raises questions about the relationship between Rubin's systematic theological interpretation and the Rebbe's more cautious approach to explaining historical catastrophe. (36)

**9.3 Community Reception and Practical Implications:** The documented controversy within the Chabad movement itself suggests that even sympathetic interpreters found certain theological implications problematic. This provides important context for evaluating whether Rubin's interpretation, however textually grounded, adequately captures the complexity of the Rebbe's position. (37)

**9.4 Historical Development:** The documented evolution of the Rebbe's position—from the private 1954 letter to Rabbi Shemtov through the 1980 published formulation and subsequent clarifications—suggests a more complex theological development than Rubin's reading of the 11 Shevat 5731 Maamar might indicate. Can we presume to assume that an explanation small enough to fit inside the finite bounds of human reason can explain a horror of such magnitude? We can only concede that there are things that lie beyond the finite ken of the human mind. (36)

The documented controversy illuminates broader methodological questions about the relationship between mystical theology and practical ethics in contemporary religious discourse. While Rubin and Wolfson offer sophisticated metaphysical and mystical explanations for evil's origin—emphasizing divine structure and concealment—the surgeon parable controversy reveals the profound challenges that arise when such theological frameworks encounter concrete historical suffering and communal memory.

This suggests that evaluating the Rebbe's alleged theological radicalism requires attention not merely to abstract theological innovation but to the practical, ethical, and communal implications of such innovation for religious life and historical interpretation. The controversy demonstrates that even sophisticated theological frameworks cannot be divorced from their potential applications and ethical implications.

The fundamental question becomes whether theological claims about the structural relationship between divine action and human evil can maintain their validity when subjected to the test of historical application and communal reception. The documented resistance to the surgeon parable—even from within the Chabad community—suggests important limitations to how theological abstraction can be applied to historical

suffering without generating ethical problems that may undermine the very theological insights being advanced.

## 10. Historical Context and Mystical Precedent

The potential connection to Rabbi Jonathan Eybeschütz (1690-1764) and his mystical formulation “ve-avo hayom el ha-ayin” (*and I shall come today to the Nothing*) provides crucial context for evaluating the novelty of the Rebbe's alleged position. However, recent scholarship suggests that Eybeschütz's engagement with ayin represents far more than historical precedent—it constitutes a radical theological trajectory that fundamentally challenges normative Jewish mysticism. (38)

## 11. Mystical Paradox and the Rehabilitation of Ayin

The phrase “ve-avo hayom el ha-ayin”—drawn from Eybeschütz's controversial writings and framed within his disputed but compelling mystical corpus—serves as a radical counterpoint to normative theologies that prioritize positive divine attributes. Eybeschütz's deliberate gravitation toward **ayin** (nothingness) does not merely echo earlier Kabbalistic motifs, such as the Lurianic *tzimtzum*, but reconfigures them into a spiritual praxis grounded in negation, uncertainty, and surrender to the unknowable. (39)

For kabbalists generally, Ayin became the word to describe the most ancient stage of creation and was therefore somewhat paradoxical, as it was not completely compatible with “creation from nothing”. Ayin became for kabbalists a symbol of “supreme existence” and “the mystical secret of being and non-being became united in the profound and powerful symbol of the Ayin”. (40) However, Eybeschütz's approach bears crucial affinity with the Rebbe's reinterpretation (as Rubin reads it) of *tzimtzum* not as concealment following sin, but as the original divine contraction that makes sin possible—a theological inversion that privileges withdrawal over revelation as the enabling condition for moral and spiritual agency.

In this light, Eybeschütz can be re-read not only as a mystical forerunner of Hasidism, but as a precursor to a postmodern theological trajectory that regards paradox, absence, and even moral rupture as theologically constitutive rather than problematic. The structural similarity to the Rebbe's alleged view—wherein *tzimtzum* is the precondition for moral

failure, and therefore for the possibility of teshuvah and redemption—suggests that Rubin's claim may not be a radical innovation so much as a retrieval of an underground tradition of mystical theodicy. (41)

Eybeschütz's controversial text “Va-avo ha-Yom el ha-'Ayin” demonstrates this radical approach through its apparent endorsement of theological paradox and its willingness to embrace what David Halperin identifies as fundamental challenges to conventional religious categories. The text presents what Halperin analyzes as “a vision for a universal future religion rooted in Kabbalistic Judaism” that transcends traditional theological boundaries. (42)

## 12. Personal Mysticism versus Historical Theodicy

While Eybeschütz's ayin operates primarily within a framework of individual mystical ascent—perhaps in line with the *devekut* model found in early proto-Hasidic texts—the Rebbe's theology, as interpreted by Rubin, appears more invested in cosmic and ethical structures, particularly in responding to the Holocaust and theodicy. (43)

The mystical approach advocated in Eybeschütz's writings suggests that “one should think of oneself as Ayin, and that ‘absolute all’ and ‘absolute nothingness’ are the same, and that the person who learns to think about himself as Ayin will ascend to a spiritual world, where everything is the same and everything is equal: ‘life and death, ocean and dry land.’” (44) This reflects an intensely individual contemplative practice focused on ego-annihilation and mystical union.

Thus, while both thinkers operate from within a shared symbolic vocabulary of divine absence and paradox, their existential orientations diverge: Eybeschütz moves inward, toward contemplative negation; the Rebbe moves outward, toward practical redemptive engagement. This difference mirrors Levinas's shift from ontology to ethics and may be framed through that philosophical lens to further distinguish their theological aims. (45)

The Rebbe's alleged theology (according to Rubin's interpretation) maintains practical religious engagement while acknowledging the primordial role of divine withdrawal in enabling moral possibility. Eybeschütz's mystical approach, by contrast, seeks transcendence of ordinary moral categories through absorption into divine nothingness. This represents a fundamental difference in practical implication despite shared theoretical foundations.

Eybeschütz’s legacy raises critical questions about normative versus transgressive mysticism. His scholarship illuminates the potentially antinomian implications of radical mystical theology. (46)

Rabbi Jacob Emden accused him of heresy, finding “serious connections between the Kabbalistic and homiletic writings of Eybeschütz with those of the known Sabbatean Judah Leib Prossnitz.” The controversy involving both Yechezkel Landau and the Vilna Gaon “may be credited with having crushed the lingering belief in Sabbatai current even in some Orthodox circles.” (47) This historical context suggests that Eybeschütz’s mystical trajectory carried inherent risks of such antinomian development.

*However, Rubin’s reading of the Rebbe sidesteps any antinomian tendencies and instead radicalizes the normative, suggesting that paradox and divine absence do not license transgression but rather demand moral intensification. In this way, the Rebbe’s theology could be read as a kabbalistic counter-Sabbateanism: not rejecting the mystical core of Eybeschütz and others but refusing its antinomian application. (48)*

The Rebbe’s consistent emphasis on traditional halakhic observance and practical religious engagement demonstrates how radical mystical theology can be channeled toward normative rather than transgressive conclusions. Where Eybeschütz’s approach potentially led toward antinomian implications through the dissolution of conventional categories, the Rebbe’s approach (as Rubin reads it) intensifies moral responsibility by grounding it in divine creative structure. The potential connection to Eybeschütz illuminates broader questions about the nature of innovation in Jewish mystical thought. Rather than representing unprecedented departure, the Rebbe’s alleged radicalism might reflect recovery and development of earlier mystical trajectories that had been suppressed or forgotten due to their association with dangerous antinomian implications. (49)

This perspective would position the Rebbe not as revolutionary innovator but as sophisticated retriever of authentic mystical possibilities that earlier historical circumstances had rendered inaccessible. The Sabbatean controversy and its aftermath created conditions where radical mystical approaches like Eybeschütz’s became theologically suspect, potentially driving underground legitimate mystical insights that could be recovered and developed in safer historical contexts. (50)

Such an interpretation would maintain traditional claims about the eternal validity of mystical teaching while acknowledging the appearance of innovation. The Rebbe’s sophisticated philosophical training and engagement with contemporary intellectual frameworks might have enabled him to recover and develop mystical insights that earlier generations could not safely explore. (51)

However, this interpretation raises its own questions about the relationship between historical development and timeless truth in mystical teaching. If the Rebbe’s position represents recovery of earlier possibilities, why did these possibilities require recovery? What historical circumstances led to their suppression, and what circumstances enabled their retrieval? The answer may lie in the maturation of modern Jewish thought and its capacity to distinguish between radical mystical insight and potentially dangerous antinomian application. (52)

The Eybeschütz connection ultimately suggests that the question of the Rebbe’s theological radicalism cannot be resolved through simple appeals to innovation versus tradition. Instead, it illuminates how mystical traditions develop through complex processes of concealment, recovery, and creative reapplication across historical contexts.

The phrase “ve-avo hayom el ha-ayin” represents more than historical curiosity—it points toward a persistent strand within Jewish mystical thought that

Dimension	Eybeschütz	The Rebbe (per Rubin)
Core Concept	Encounter with Ayin	Tzimtzum as moral and cosmic precondition
Orientation	Personal, mystical, contemplative	Communal, ethical, historical
Theological Gesture	Surrender to divine nothingness	Reinterpretation of concealment as potentiality
Practical Consequence	Potential withdrawal from halakhic norms	Intensification of halakhic and social action
Risk Profile	Accused of Sabbatean leanings	Remains firmly within Chabad orthodoxy

embraces paradox, negativity, and divine absence as theologically constitutive. Whether this strand represents authentic mystical insight or dangerous theological deviation depends largely on its practical implications and ethical outcomes. (53)

The Rebbe's alleged theology (as Rubin interprets it) might represent the successful retrieval and normative application of mystical insights that earlier thinkers like Eybeschütz could only explore at great risk to their religious authority and community standing. This would position the Rebbe not as theological revolutionary but as sophisticated synthesizer capable of integrating radical mystical insight with normative religious practice. (54)

### 13. The Limits of Revolutionary Claims

Careful analysis of Rubin's claims reveals both insights and limitations. While the Rebbe's sophisticated engagement with *tzimtzum* concepts demonstrates remarkable intellectual creativity, the evidence for fundamental theological revolution remains ambiguous. The apparent inversion of traditional causality might reflect hermeneutical sophistication rather than theological departure. (47)

The Rebbe's consistent emphasis on maintaining traditional religious practice while developing innovative theological formulations suggests evolution rather than revolution. Even the most radical-seeming theological innovations occur within frameworks that preserve essential continuities with earlier teaching. (48)

Furthermore, the complexity of mystical discourse resists systematic theological analysis. The Rebbe's teachings, like earlier mystical traditions, intentionally maintain paradoxes and tensions that systematic interpretation might artificially resolve. Rubin's analysis, however insightful, might impose coherence that the original teachings intentionally avoid. (49)

However, dismissing Rubin's claims entirely would ignore genuine aspects of innovation in the Rebbe's teaching. The sophisticated development of traditional concepts through engagement with contemporary intellectual frameworks does represent significant contribution to Jewish theological development. (50)

The Rebbe's willingness to explore the implications of traditional mystical concepts for understanding contemporary challenges demonstrates intellectual courage that extends beyond mere preservation of inherited tradition. Even if fundamental theological framework remains continuous with earlier teaching, specific developments might provide genuine insight into perennial theological questions. (51)

Furthermore, the practical impact of the Rebbe's teaching suggests effectiveness that transcends purely academic questions about theological innovation. The global influence of Chabad ideology and practice reflects practical wisdom that might not require revolutionary theological foundations but nevertheless represents significant religious achievement. (52)

The debate over Rubin's interpretation illuminates broader methodological questions about the study of contemporary religious thought. The challenge lies in maintaining scholarly objectivity while acknowledging the living character of religious tradition and its continuing development. (53)

The question of whether the Rebbe represents revolutionary innovator or sophisticated traditionalist might reflect broader questions about the nature of religious tradition itself. Rather than requiring resolution, this tension might represent productive ambiguity that enables continuing theological development within traditional frameworks. (54)

### 14. Conclusion

The question of whether Eli Rubin's reading reveals genuine revolution in the seventh Rebbe's theological approach resists simple resolution. While Rubin identifies important innovations in the Rebbe's treatment of *tzimtzum*, the evidence for fundamental departure from traditional Chabad theology remains ambiguous.

The scholarly critiques from Idel, Wolfson, Magid, Fishbane, and Matt provide important perspectives that illuminate both the insights and limitations of Rubin's interpretation. These scholars' methodological approaches suggest caution about claims of revolutionary theological departure while acknowledging genuine aspects of innovation and development.

The potential connection to Jonathan Eybeschütz's mystical formulation "ve-avo hayom el ha-ayin" provides intriguing historical context that might position the Rebbe's alleged radicalism within longer trajectories of Jewish mystical development. Rather than unprecedented innovation, the Rebbe's sophisticated theological formulations might represent recovery and development of earlier mystical possibilities.

Ultimately, the question might require reframing. Rather than asking whether the Rebbe represents revolutionary innovator or traditional interpreter, we might ask how his teaching demonstrates the

continuing vitality of Jewish mystical tradition and its capacity for creative development within established frameworks.

The Rebbe's legacy suggests that the most significant religious innovations often occur through sophisticated reinterpretation of traditional concepts rather than departure from traditional foundations. Whether or not Rubin's specific claims about theological revolution can be sustained, his analysis illuminates the continuing creativity and relevance of Jewish mystical thought in contemporary contexts.

This tension between tradition and innovation, between continuity and creativity, might itself represent the most significant aspect of the Rebbe's theological contribution. Rather than resolving this tension through systematic analysis, we might acknowledge it as productive ambiguity that enables continuing religious development within traditional frameworks.

The debate over Rubin's interpretation thus serves broader purposes beyond settling questions about the Rebbe's theological originality. It demonstrates the continuing vitality of Jewish theological discourse and its capacity to engage contemporary questions while maintaining connection to traditional sources and concerns.

Whether the Rebbe ultimately represents revolutionary departure or sophisticated development within tradition, his teaching continues to generate productive theological reflection that extends far beyond the boundaries of Chabad community or Jewish mystical scholarship. This might represent the most significant measure of theological achievement—not systematic innovation but continuing capacity to inspire serious reflection on fundamental religious questions.

In this light, Rubin's analysis, regardless of its accuracy regarding the Rebbe's revolutionary character, provides valuable contribution to contemporary Jewish theological discourse. His willingness to engage traditional mystical concepts through sophisticated hermeneutical analysis demonstrates the continuing relevance of Jewish mystical thought for addressing perennial theological questions in contemporary contexts.

The ultimate value of this inquiry might lie not in resolving questions about theological innovation but in demonstrating the continuing vitality and relevance of Jewish mystical tradition and its capacity for creative engagement with contemporary intellectual and spiritual challenges. Whether revolutionary or evolutionary, the Rebbe's theological contribution

continues to generate productive reflection that extends far beyond its original historical context.

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- This analysis represents academic exploration of theological questions and should not be understood as authoritative interpretation of religious teaching or practice. The complexity of mystical discourse requires continued careful study and reflection by qualified scholars and religious authorities.*