

Do we really exist?

Rabbi David Sedley

"To be, or not to be: that is the question"

William Shakespeare - Hamlet 3: 1

Early Philosophy

1. Moreh Nevuchim 1: 71

When the Muslims caused Arabic translations of the writings of the Philosophers to be made, those criticisms were likewise translated. When the opinions of John the Grammarian, of Ibn Adi, and of kindred authors on those subjects were made accessible to them, they adopted them, and imagined that they had arrived at the solution of important problems. Moreover, they selected from the opinions of the ancient philosophers whatever seemed serviceable to their purposes; although later critics had proved that those theories were false; as, e.g., the theories of atoms and of a vacuum.

2. Moreh Nevuchim 1: 71

Having studied the works of these Mutakallemim, as far as I had an opportunity, just as I had studied the writings of the philosophers according to the best of my ability, I found that the method of all Mutakallemim was the same in its general characteristics, namely, they assume that the really existing form of things proves nothing at all, because it is merely one of the various phases of the things, the opposite of which is equally admissible to our minds. In many instances these Theologians were guided by their imagination, and thought that they were following the dictates of the intellect. They set forth the propositions which I shall describe to you, and demonstrated by their peculiar mode of arguing that the Universe had a beginning. The theory of the creatio ex nihilo being thus established, they asserted, as a logical consequence, that undoubtedly there must be a Maker who created the Universe. Next they showed that this Maker is One, and from the Unity of the Creator they deduced His Incorporeality. This method was adopted by every Islamic Mutakallem in the discussion of this subject, and by those of our co-religionists who imitated them and walked in their footsteps. Although the Mutakallemim disagree in the methods of their proofs, and employ different propositions in demonstrating the act of creation or in rejecting the eternity of the Universe, they invariably begin with proving the creatio ex nihilo, and establish on that proof the existence of G-d. I have examined this method, and find it most objectionable.

3. Moreh Nevuchim 1: 71

In addition you will find that in the few works composed by the Geonim and the Karaites on the unity of G-d and on such matter as is connected with this doctrine, they followed the lead of the Islamic Mutakallemim, and what they wrote is insignificant in comparison with the kindred works of the Muslims.

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"Cogito, ergo sum" "*Je pense, donc je suis*" ("I think, therefore I am")

René Descartes

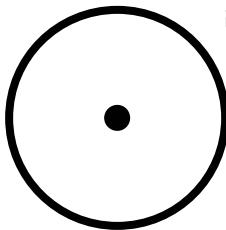
4. Meditations on First Philosophy beginning of Second Meditation.

But I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it now follow that I too do not exist? No: if I convinced myself of something [or thought anything at all] then I certainly existed. But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me. In that case I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. So, after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that the proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.

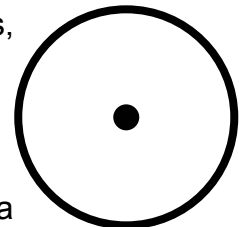
Tzimtzum

5. Etz Chaim Heichal 1: Shaar 1: Anaf 2

דע כי טרם שנאצלו הנאצלים ונבראו הנבראים היה אור עליון פשוט ממלא כל המציאות ולא היה שום מקום פנוי בבחי' אויר ריקני וחלל אלא הכל היה ממולא מן אור א"ס פשוט ההוא ולא היה לו בחי' ראש ולא בחי' סוף אלא הכל היה אור א' פשוט שוה בהשוואה א' והוא הנק' אור א"ס. וכאשר עלה ברצונו הפשוט לברוא העולמות ולהאציל הנאצלים להוציא לאור שלימות פעולותיו ושמותיו וכנוייו אשר זאת היה סיבה בריאת העולמות כמבואר אצלינו... והנה אז צמצם את עצמו א"ס בנקודה האמצעית אשר בו באמצע אורו ממש וצמצם האור ההוא ונתרחק אל צדדי סביבות הנקודה האמצעית ואז נשאר מקום פנוי ואויר וחלל ריקני מנקודה האמצעית ממש כזה.



You should know that before His exaltedness rested and before the creatures were created, there was simple supernal light filling all of existence. There was no empty place or void vacuum because everything was filled with the simple infinite light, and there was no aspect of beginning or end. Everything was simple and even with complete evenness, and this is called the infinite light. When it arose in His simple Will to create the worlds and to rest his exaltedness to bring to light the completeness of His Actions, and His Names and His Descriptions which was the purpose of creation of the worlds, as we have explained... Then he contracted (*tzimtzum*) His infiniteness into a middle point which was in the absolute middle of His Light. He contracted this light and distanced it from the edges around this middle point. Then a space remained of empty space and void vacuum in the middle point like this:



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Chasidim vs. Mitnagdim

6. Asarah Clalim (Vilna Gaon): Clal 1.

זזה הצמצום הראשון נקרא בשם עתיק. היינו שעתיק יש בו שני פירושים, אחד מלשון זקן שתרגומו עתיק, והב' משלון ויעתק, הוא לשון סילוק, היינו שהזקן הוא מימי קדם והיותר קדום מכל הוא הצמצום הזה ולכן נקרא בשם עתיק, וגם משום שזה הצמצום הוא הסילוק הוא ג"כ סבת קריאת שמו עתיק.

This original contraction (*tzimtzum*) is called *Atik*. This word has two meanings. Firstly it means 'old', and secondly 'removed'. It is called 'old' because it is first of all the contractions, therefore it is called *Atik*. This contraction was also the removal [of G-d from the world], and this is the other meaning of the name *Atik*.

7. Likutei Amarim Tanya Shaar Hayichud ve-Ha-Emunah Chapter 3

והנה אחרי הדברים והאמת האלה כל משכיל על דבר יבין לאשורו איך שכל נברא ויש הוא באמת נחשב לאין ואפס ממש לגבי כח הפועל ורוח פיו שבנפעל המהוה אותו תמיד ומוציאו מאין ממש ליש. ומה שכל נברא ונפעל נראה לנו ליש וממעות זהו מחמת שאין אנו משיגים ורואים בעיני בשר את כח ה' ורוח פיו שבנברא. אבל אילו ניתנה רשות לעין לראות ולהשיג את החיות ורוחניות שבכל נברא השופע בו ממוצא פי ה' ורוח פיו לא היה גשמיות הנברא וחומר וממשו נראה כלל לעינינו כי הוא בטל במציאות ממש לגבי החיות והרוחניות שבו מאחר שמבלעדי הרוחניות היה אין ואפס ממש כמו קודם ששת ימי בראשית ממש. ורוח פיו הוא לבדו המוציאו תמיד מאפס ואין ליש ומהוה אותו א"כ אפס בלעדו באמת.

Now, following these words and the truth [concerning the nature of the Creation], every intelligent person will understand clearly that each creature and being is actually considered naught and absolute nothingness in relation to his Activating Force and the "Breath of His mouth" which is in the created thing, continuously calling it into existence and bringing it from absolute non-being into being. The fact that every creation and act appears to us to exist and have substance is only because we are unable to perceive and to see with our eyes of flesh the power of G-d and the breath of His mouth. But were we able to see and perceive the life force and spirituality that is in each creation which is sustained from the mouth of G-d and breath of His mouth, there would be no physicality to creation or substance or reality apparent to our eyes at all. It is nullified in actuality when compared to the life and spirituality which it contains, since without the spirituality it would literally be nothing and naught like before the six days of creation. The spirituality which flows into it from "That which proceeds out of the mouth of G-d" and "His breath" –that alone continuously brings it forth from naught and nullity into being, and gives it existence. Hence, there is truly nothing besides Him.

"Hashem is here, Hashem is there, Hashem is truly everywhere"

– Uncle Moshe

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8. *Likutei Amarim Tanya Shaar Hayichud ve-Ha-Emunah Chapter 7*

והנה מכאן יש להבין שגגת מקצת חכמים בעיניהם ה' יכפר בעדם ששגו וטעו בעיונם בכתבי האריז"ל והבינו ענין הצמצום המוזכר שם כפשוטו שהקב"ה סילק עצמו ומהותו ח"ו מעוה"ז רק שמשגיח מלמעלה בהשגחה פרטית על כל היצורים כולם אשר בשמים ממעל ועל הארץ מתחת והנה מלבד שא"א כלל לומר ענין הצמצום כפשוטו שהוא ממקרי הגוף על הקב"ה הנבדל מהם ריבוא רבבות הבדלות עד אין קץ אף גם זאת לא בדעת ידברו מאחר שהם מאמינים בני מאמינים שהקב"ה יודע כל היצורים שבעוה"ז השפל ומשגיח עליהם וע"כ אין ידיעתו אותם מוסיפה בו ריבוי וחיידוש מפני שידוע הכל בידיעת עצמו הרי כביכול מהותו ועצמותו ודעתו הכל א'.

In the light of what has been said above it is possible to understand the error of some, scholars in their own eyes, may G-d forgive them, who erred and misinterpreted in their study of the writings of the Ari, of blessed memory, and understood the doctrine of *Tzimtzum*, which is mentioned therein literally – that the Holy One, blessed be He, removed Himself and His Essence, G-d forbid, from this world, and only guides from above with individual Providence all the created beings which are in the heavens above and on the earth below. Now, aside from the fact that it is altogether impossible to interpret the doctrine of *Tzimtzum* literally, [for then it] is a phenomenon of corporeality, concerning the Holy One, blessed be He, who is set apart from them [i.e. the phenomena of corporeality], many myriads of separations *ad infinitum*, they also did not speak wisely, ... [since] the Holy One, blessed be He, knows all the created beings in this lower world and exercises Providence over them, and perforce His knowledge of them does not add plurality and innovation to Him, for He knows all by knowing Himself. Thus, as it were, His Essence and Being and His Knowledge are all one.

9. Letter to Chasidim in Vilna. (R' Schneur Zalman of Liadi)

I would welcome [a discussion] in matters of faith. According to a report from his disciples in our provinces, it is precisely in this area that the Gaon and Hasid found objections to [my] book *Likutei Amarim* and other similar works. The teachings that G-d "fills the world" and that "there is no place void of Him" are interpreted [by us] in a literal sense, whereas in his esteemed opinion it is pure heresy to hold that G-d, blessed be He, is to be found in the mundane matters of our world, and it is for this reason, according to your esteemed letter, that the book [*Toledot Yaakov Yosef* or *zava'at ha-Rivash*] was burned. For they explain the passages "the whole earth is full of His glory" etc. in a figurative manner, as referring to Divine Providence. Would that I might present our case to him, so as to remove from ourselves all his philosophical censures.

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Practical Difference

10. Takanat Hashavin (R' Tzadok HaCohen) 5

דבתחילת כניסת האדם לעבודת ה' יתברך הוא על ידי יראת שמים שהיא ראשית חכמה רצה לומר התחילת הכרת האדם [דכן חכם בארמי רצה לומר הכרה] שיש מציאות ה' יתברך מיד יגיע אליו היראה וההכנעה וכו' כלשון רמ"א (ברייתא שולחן ערוך אורח חיים), ונאמר (דברים י', י"ב) מה ה' וגו' כי אם ליראה דאין המבוקש מהאדם רק מדת היראה, אבל האהבה אי אפשר להגיע בהשתדלות אדם כי אין אהבה אלא בין הדומים ואיך יתפאר הגרזן על החוצב לומר שאהבו רק ה' יתברך ברוב רחמיו וחסדיו קורא לכנסת ישראל אחותי ותמתי תאומתי ואומר אהבתי אתכם וגו' (מלאכי א', ב'), וכשה' יתברך אוהב האדם ממילא האדם אוהבו גם כן והאתערותא דלעילא קודמת בזה לעולם:

The beginning of a person's entry into the service of G-d is through fear of Heaven, which is the beginning of wisdom, meaning the beginning of a person's awareness of the existence of G-d. Immediately the person will be seized with fear and subjugation.... But it is impossible to attain love [of G-d] through a person's endeavours. Love can only exist between similar things (such as two people). How could an axe have the gall to claim to love the woodcutter? Rather G-d, with His great mercy and kindness, calls *Kneset Yisrael* His twin sister and love, and says "I have loved you..." (Malachi 1: 2). When G-d loves a person, automatically the person comes to love G-d, but it must always be preceded by a Heavenly 'awakening'.

11. Asarah Clalim (Vilna Gaon): Clal 2

כן רצונו ית' נתגלה בכתיבה ב' פעמים כלומר ע"י הספר ב' פעמים, אחד בעת הכתיבה שנחקקו ונכתבו כמו כתיבה השגחתו ורצונו בהאור אשר בה נבראו כל הברואים, וכן תמיד שהשגחתו ית' בא ע"י האור והוא הטוב שזהו רצונו כמ"ש וירא אלקים את האור כי טוב, אך עדיין הוא כספר החתום שאין מבינים בהם כבודו ית' ורצונו האמיתי רק חכמים מחוכמים הקוראים בהם ומשימין עיון שכלם היטב בפעל ה' ובמעשה ידיו, כענין שכתוב שאו מרום עיניכם וראו מי ברא אלה.

So too, His Will was revealed twice, meaning in two 'books'. The first is at the time of writing when it was engraved and written, like the writing of Providence and Will with the Light with which all creatures were created. So too, always, His Providence comes to use through the light, which is the Good, and which is His Will, as the verse states "G-d saw the light that it was good". However, it is like a sealed book from which we cannot understand G-d's Glory and true Will. Only the wise people who read it and delve deeply into the works of G-d and his handiwork [can understand]. As the verse states "Raise your eyes to heaven and see Who created these".

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12. Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah chapter 2

א האל הנכבד והנורא הזה--מצוה לאוהבו וליראה ממנו, שנאמר "ואהבת, את ה' אלוהיך" (דברים ו,ה; דברים יא,א) ונאמר "את ה' אלוהיך תירא" (דברים ו,יג; דברים י,כ). והיאך היא הדרך לאהבתו, ויראתו: בשעה שיתבונן האדם במעשיו וברואיו הנפלאים הגדולים, ויראה מהם חכמתו שאין לה ערך ולא קץ--מיד הוא אוהב ומשבח ומפאר ומתאוה תאוה גדולה לידע השם הגדול, כמו שאמר דויד "צמאה נפשי, לאלוהים--לאל חי" (תהילים מב,ג).
ב וכשמחשב בדברים האלו עצמן, מיד הוא נרתע לאחוריו, וירא ויפחד ויידע שהוא בריה קטנה שפלה אפלה, עומד בדעת קלה מעוטה לפני תמים דעות, כמו שאמר דויד "כי אראה שמ"ך . . . מה אנוש, כי תזכרנו" (תהילים ח,ד-ה).
ג ולפי הדברים האלו אני מבאר כללים גדולים ממעשה ריבון העולמים, כדי שיהיו פתח למבין לאהוב את השם, כמו שאמרו חכמים בעניין אהבה, שמתוך כך אתה מכיר את מי שאמר והיה העולם.

1) It is a commandment to love and fear the venerable and feared Almighty, for it is written, "And you shall love the Lord your G-d", and it is also written, "You shall fear the Lord your G-d".

2) What is the way to love and fear G-d? Whenever one contemplates the great wonders of G-d's works and creations, and one sees that they are a product of a wisdom that has no bounds or limits, one will immediately love, laud and glorify [G-d] with an immense passion to know the Great Name, like David has said, "My soul thirsts for G-d, for the living G-d". When one thinks about these matters one will feel a great fear and trepidation, and one will know that one is a low and insignificant creation, with hardly an iota of intelligence compared to that of G-d, like David has said, "When I observe Your heavens, the work of Your fingers...what is man, that You are heedful of him?". Bearing these things in mind, I shall explain important concepts of the Creator's work, as a guide to understanding and loving G-d. Concerning this love the Sages said that from it will come to know G-d.

Please send any questions or feedback to rabbisedley@gmail.com