

## *Tsimtsum in Yann Martel's "Life of Pi"*

### **Abstract**

*Tsimtsum* is the name of the ship that went down with Martel's protagonist in his book *The life of Pi*. Apart from mentioning that this is a Hebrew word, the author gives only vague hints about the function of "tsimtsum" in Jewish mysticism and its relationship to the novel's plot.

**Keywords:** *Tsimtsum; HaAri; Kabala; Life of Pi; presence through absence.*

Yann Martel's "Life of Pi" has been an enormous success: The book won the Booker Prize, has sold millions of copies, has been translated into 41 languages. It has been adapted to both the screen (winning four Oscars) and the stage. Its author (Martel, 2002), explained the name he chose to call the Japanese ship whose sinking precedes Pi's 227-day-long adventure in a life boat:

I wanted a representative scoop of religions in the book – Hindu, Christian, Islam. I would have loved to have Pi be a Jew, too, but there are no synagogues in Pondicherry (where the family was from in India). So I chose Tsimtsum as the name of the Japanese cargo boat because, although it sounds Japanese, it is a Hebrew word (Sanders, 2012).

Did Martel know the profound significance of the word he chose? Does he have fit readers (in the Miltonian sense, see Wheelwright, 1962, p. 44, as well as Kramer-Moore & Moore, 2002, p. 25)? Most of the books' reviewers certainly have not even commented on it. The word's literal denotation has to do with contraction, constriction or reduction (including the algebraic reducing of complex fractures). Its Kabbalistic origin, however, has far reaching mystical connotations: It has connections to the concept of exile, to "presence through absence", to the creation of the world. Rob & Kristen Bell (2014) have provided a simple

description for this complicated idea, lodged at the heart of Jewish mysticism:

For something to exist that wasn't God, God had to contract or withdraw from a certain space so that something else, something other than God, could exist and thrive in that space. And the word they used for this divine contraction is zimzum.

The Bells went on to suggest that in a good marriage the partners create space for each other, and that "this zimzuming unleashes energy and creates space that didn't exist before, generating the flow that is the lifeblood of marriage". Freeman (2012) went further by finding a connection between the hero's name and tsimtsum: "Much like the irrational number pi, the primal tsimtsum transforms an infinite circle into a measured line". This notion finds twofold support in Martel's text. Once he acquires his nickname (having been named by his father Piscine, in honor of a French swimming pool), Pi acknowledges that "in that elusive, irrational number with which scientists try to understand the universe, I found refuge" (p. 24). Later on, when holding forth about the merits of Buddhism, Pi describes the relationship between the individual soul and the world soul as "The finite within the infinite, the infinite within the finite" (pp. 48-49).

As explained in the author's above comment, Pi's youthful pan-religious quest did not include Judaism: He quenched his thirst for spiritual experiences by participating in Hindu, Muslim, and Christian ceremonies (pp. 49-50). But he later obliquely corrected this lacuna: On the first page of the book we learn that the adult Pi, who attended the University of Toronto, wrote his fourth year thesis on "the cosmogony theory of Isaac Luria, the great sixteenth century Kabbalist from Safed" (p. 3). Hidden behind this seemingly unimportant bit of information a diligent reader will find that no other than Isaac Luria introduced the concept of tsimtsum into Jewish mysticism (see Scholem, 2000, p. 286). A further important concept in Luria's creation myth concerns exile.

To Luria, *galut* [exile] was a metaphor for the entire world and the Jews, who lived in physical exile, stood as a symbol of the human exile from a righteous world (Bronner, 2011, p. 141).

This notion finds its reflection in the two exiles Pi suffers: His expulsion first from his zoo-paradise, then from his beloved India.

Several additional intrusions of Judaism in the book include.

- Pi's introducing himself to someone in Montreal as "I am who I am", thus appropriating one of the most sacred, as well as mystical utterances of the Hebrew God, given in answer when Moses asked for his name in *Exodus* 3:14 (p. 20);
- A reference to Jesus as "that troublesome rabbi of long ago" (p. 56);
- A teasing remark by his brother Ravi, concerning Pi's attraction to different religions: "Have you found time yet to get the end of your pecker cut off and become a Jew?" (p. 70);

- As well as numerous hints drawn from the Hebrew Bible: the paradisiacal nature of his father's zoo (p. 14);
- The practice of naming the plants (p. 12), reminiscent of Adam's actions in *Genesis* 2:20;
- Mentioning the creation of the world in seven days (p. 57); Pi's lengthy dwelling on animal taming (pp. 43-44, 164-166), in accordance with the commandment to "rule over every living creature" in *Genesis* 1:28;
- Comparing the lifeboat and its inhabitants to Noah's ark (p. 120), and himself (when killing animals for food) to Cain (p. 183). A possible case of Cainian fratricide surfaces in the intentionally confused and confabulated account of the killing of a person whom Pi addresses as "brother".

Martel did not name the cargo ship whimsically, or just to pay lip service to one more religion through the use of a single Hebrew word. He left plenty of breadcrumbs (or perhaps Ariadne's thread would serve here as a better metaphor) for us to follow and thus to give serious thought to the mystical significance of *tsimtsum*. Pi's apparent disregard of Judaism serves as an overarching example of "Presence through Absence".

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