

Bokker Tov/Good morning everyone. Last night, I mentioned that throughout this coming year I will be sharing with you the top ten lessons I either learned or am learning during my time serving as your rabbi. The first I would like to share with you this morning is the concept of tzimtzum.

Before I arrived at CJC, I had a broad, idealistic understanding of not only what this Jewish concept was, but also how it could possibly apply to my rabbinate. Over the time I have been at CJC I have come to realize how crucial, complicated, confusing and difficult it is to effectively practice tzimtzum, literally contraction or constriction, on a daily basis.

So what exactly is tzimtzum? It is a theological concept used to describe an action Gd took when creating the world. As always, the rabbis were very clear we only know about Gd in order to understand how we are to be. So the real question is how tzimtzum can help us understand who we can become.

Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, a Jewish mystic from the 1800s, explained; "When Gd wanted to create the world, there was no room in which to create it because Gd is infinite and occupies all space. That is why Gd contracted the light to the margins and through this contraction an empty space was created. Inside this available space, all six days of creation and all of the world's attributes were brought into being; in other words, inside this empty space, the world was created." Tzimtzum assumes that before the world existed, Gd filled the whole world. Imagine that you wanted to put together a 1000 piece puzzle. You knew it will take days/weeks before it was finished. It would be easier to have one place to do the puzzle so you do not have to risk breaking it when you move it. But if your house is anything like ours, empty space is never hanging out ready to be filled. So before you can even open up the puzzle you must clear a space, move the Kleenex box, the basket of kippot, books, and trinkets laying on the table you want to use for the puzzle. You must pack everything up and confine them to a smaller square footage in order to make room for your new project. Gd filled the space that became our

world. Before Gd could create the world as we know it, Gd had to contract, clean off the table if you will, so that there would be room for Gd's creations.

Now unlike the puzzle pieces and the objects packed into a box, Gd and Gd's creations must learn to coexist. And, in fact, true inspiration comes from the relationship between Gd the creator and Gd's creations. This relationship when successful is mutually empowering and beneficial.

According to Mordechai Rotenberg, the author of the book *The Psychology of Tzimtzum*, "Kabbala [Jewish mysticism] does not regard this procedure as a one-time instance of Tzimtzum that creates a world where Gd acts kindly toward humans. Kabbala conceives of Creation as an endless process of Tzimtzum ..., through which Gd's abundant light is returned to Gd, from where it emanates and illuminates the world." This process of tzimtzum allows creativity to find room to grow. And it is this creativity that allows the retracting person to be enhanced. When done well, tzimtzum creates a wonderful symbiotic relationship.

In order for tzimtzum to be effective, Gd has to find a way to both contract Gdself while also still being present for Gd's creations. When this process is done well, no one feels silenced or overshadowed. Each has an important role to play in this relationship.

One of the biblical stories that the rabbis used to describe this concept in human terms comes from two of the twelve tribes, Zebulun and Issachar. According to the Midrashim, Zebulun engaged in commerce, while Issachar studied Torah. In other words, Zebulun earned a living through commerce, and offered financial support to allow the tribe of Issachar to dedicate its time to Torah study. According to the rabbis, this relationship was not confined to the tribes during the biblical period but rather accurately reflected the ideal interdependence of the Jewish communities in the Diaspora and in Israel.

Mordechai Rotenberg continued, "In these communities, there were two main groups, each of which represented a different ideal of self-fulfillment: those who studied and those who earned their living through hard work in the material world. Successful people know how to contract themselves in order to make room for others whose lives are guided by different values."

The rabbis took this process and applied it to the biblical system of taxation. They asked why were the Israelites taxed $\frac{1}{2}$ a shekel instead of a whole one. "To teach the Israelites to regard themselves as a single unified nation. No Jew must regard himself as distinct from his fellow; rather, he is to see himself as half a person. Only when he is joined to another Jew is he whole." That is why each Jew must give half a shekel and not a whole shekel

In human terms Mordechai Rotenberg defines tzimtzum as "an entity's willingness to contract itself in order to make room for others... This self-contracting entity does not erase itself but simply makes room for the other in order to reveal itself to them."

At this point many of you are wondering what this has to do with my rabbinate. I have often felt that I have been in an awkward dance with you - sometimes inserting myself and the skills I bring to the table and at other times, retracting, allowing others to stretch their wings to fill the void. When I started my career I thought that inserting myself or watching others take charge would be difficult. How truly green I was. Knowing how to insert or retract my voice was a task to learn-but not difficult. Knowing when to do which, well, that is the skill I have yet to fully master.

To be perfectly honest, I assume, as lay leaders, you, too, have wondered when you needed to assert your true power as my boss and when you should allow me to fumble and, hopefully, learn from my mistakes. There have been difficult years, though thank Gd not too many, when all we did was trip each other up, could not get out of each other's way no matter how hard we tried. More often than not we paid attention to what needed to be done and learned how to balance out each other as best as we

could. I remember conversations, when different congregants thought I should have voiced my opinion louder and others thought I should have retracted to learn from others. Truly my favorite days were when I was told I did not insert myself enough and I inserted myself too much by different people referencing the same meeting.

Those were days that taught me, helped me fine-tune my craft. They illustrated how important it was for me to make transparent what I was doing and why. Your feedback corrected my course and pointed me in the direction that, hopefully, served your needs - which, after all, is why you hired me in the first place.

The times I inserted myself and the message was well received did not surprise me. What surprised me was how effective and gratifying it was to contract myself, allowing others to grow into the lay leaders so many of you have become. Whether it was in the ritual realm as Torah readers, prayer leaders, gabbais or Torah lifters, or in the realm of the Sunday school as teachers, mentors, curriculum writers, or in the synagogue life as committee members, chairs, and officers, you all walk into CJC's door with so many skills, interests and untapped potential.

I never realized how much tzimtzum requires us to see the other as a necessary part of the whole. Each and every one of you must benefit from being members of CJC as individuals. But for CJC to benefit you also must remember that each of us want nothing less than for CJC to thrive. CJC thrives when we all acknowledge each of our part in the dance of tzimtzum.

I am so grateful for this gift for the truth is tzimtzum is not something we must learn how to do only at CJC-but also something we must learn how to do in all of our lives. As students, we are constantly debating when to offer a comment or ask a question in class and when to let others have a turn. As a parent, it is written in our job description that we must insert and contract often doing both in the same day. On a micro level, when we see someone walking into a store without a mask do we say

something or turn our back to them. On a macro level, what is our role in our current discussion of institutionalized racism? How do we both care passionately and listen at the same time? How can listening be redefined as an active role? When are listening and learning not enough but rather we must act instead?

Ultimately, tzimtzum is a Jewish way of asking each and everyone one of us to watch ourselves and everyone around us to learn what comes naturally and when to stretch ourselves. Tzimtzum reminds us that we are part of a larger whole. A whole filled with so many talented and gifted people, including ourselves. Just imagine how beautiful the dance will be when we all learn our steps. You all have taught me so much that I will take with me. The first of which I will share with you today is tzimtzum. Stay tuned there will be 9 more coming throughout the year.