

## Divine Absence and Presence: Dialectical Tensions in Kabbalistic Thought II

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This paper further explores the paradoxical interplay between divine concealment (*hester panim*) and revelation in Kabbalistic mysticism, examining how these opposing yet complementary forces generate meaning within Jewish mystical traditions. Drawing on the seminal works of Gershom Scholem, Moshe Idel, and Elliot Wolfson, I analyze the dialectical tension between presence and absence, particularly through the doctrines of *Tzimtzum* (divine contraction) and *Shevirat HaKelim* (breaking of the vessels).

This exploration reveals how the hermeneutics of mystical experience have evolved through different scholarly interpretations, suggesting potential applications beyond traditional religious contexts. The

paper proposes that these dialectical frameworks offer valuable paradigms for understanding existential questions of meaning, absence, and interpretive possibility in contemporary thought.

My experience with patients suffering from chronic neurological diseases and intractable pain has shown that the mere management of the physical pain is insufficient to address the human experience of the pain and the anguish that follows. By using metaphysical language and expression I invite the patient into a therapeutic space that allows for healing in the presence of the divine.

This presence may be felt by its absence despite the pain and suffering in a paradoxical manner. By inviting my patient into this added dimension allows for healing of more than the physical manifestation of the disease.



## Introduction

The complex relationship between divine concealment and revelation stands as one of the most profound and enduring paradoxes within Jewish mystical tradition. As Gershom Scholem observes in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, "The history of Jewish mysticism is the history of the Absolute as it attempts both to reveal itself and to remain hidden" (Scholem 1946, 12). This dialectical tension—between the impulse toward revelation and the necessity of concealment—generates the dynamic space within which Kabbalistic thought unfolds.

The central question this paper addresses is how absence and presence function not as opposing forces but as complementary aspects of a singular mystical framework. How does divine withdrawal create the very possibility for revelation? In what ways does the articulation of divine absence become a form of presence in itself? By examining these questions through the distinct yet overlapping perspectives of three major scholars—Scholem, Idel, and Wolfson—this paper seeks to illuminate how the dialectic of absence and presence creates a generative hermeneutical framework that extends beyond theological discourse.

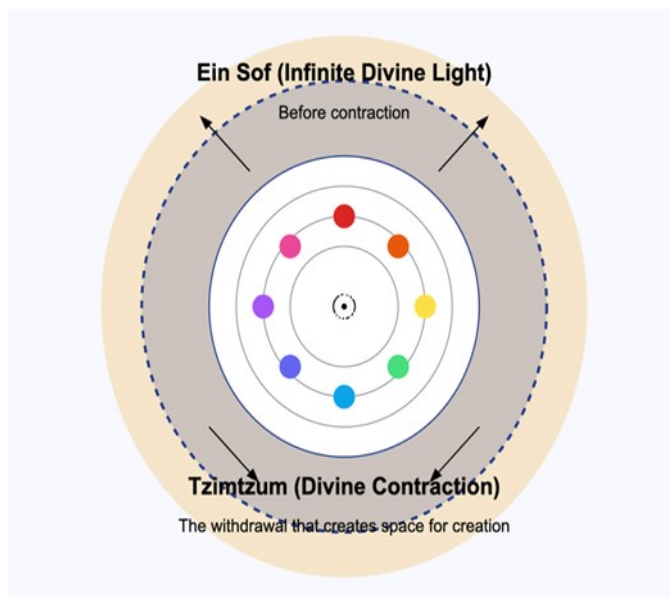
## Scholem's Dialectical Approach to Mystical Symbolism

Gershom Scholem, widely recognized as the founder of modern academic study of Kabbalah, presents a distinctly dialectical approach to understanding Jewish mysticism. His work emphasizes the historical development of mystical symbolism as a response to theological tensions within Judaism itself. In *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, Scholem argues that Kabbalistic symbolism emerged specifically to navigate the seemingly irreconcilable tension between the transcendent, unknowable God of the philosophers and the immanent, personal God of biblical tradition.

For Scholem, the doctrine of *Tzimtzum* (divine contraction) represents perhaps the most profound expression of this dialectic. As articulated in Lurianic Kabbalah, *Tzimtzum* describes how God's first creative act was not expansion but contraction—a withdrawal that created a void within which creation could occur. Scholem writes: "God's retreat into himself is the deepest meaning of an act which, as a work of limitation, and not in Neoplatonic terms, as a work of emanation, must be understood as beginning of creation" (Scholem 1965, 110).

This paradoxical formulation suggests that divine absence is not merely the negation of presence but its very precondition. The act of divine withdrawal becomes, in Scholem's reading, the foundational creative gesture that makes all subsequent revelation possible. In this way, absence and presence exist in a dialectical relationship: divine concealment does not contradict revelation but enables it.

Scholem further develops this theme through his analysis of *Shevirat HaKelim* (the breaking of the vessels). In this myth, the divine light of creation



was too powerful for its containing vessels, causing them to shatter. This cosmic catastrophe scattered divine sparks throughout creation, embedding sacred potential within the material world. As Scholem explains in *Origins of the Kabbalah*, this mythic structure "transformed exile from a punishment into a mission" (Scholem 1987, 423), reframing divine absence as a purposeful dispersion that requires human participation in its resolution.



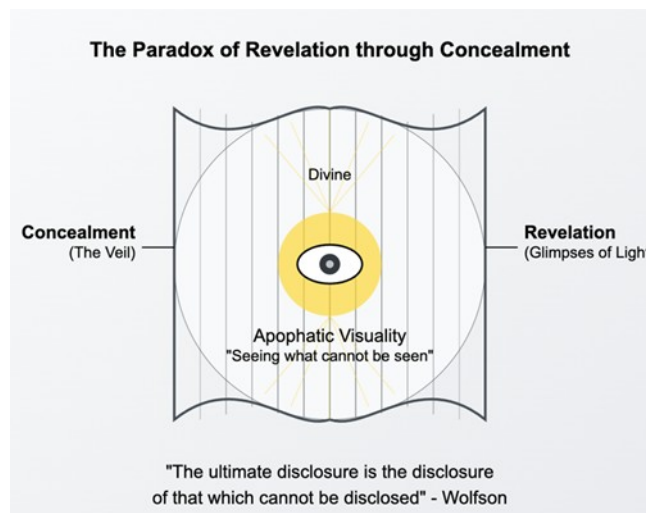
### Idel's Pluralistic Model: Beyond the Dialectic

While acknowledging Scholem's contributions, Moshe Idel offers a significant methodological departure. In *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, Idel challenges what he views as Scholem's overemphasis on the dialectical and historical dimensions of Kabbalah, proposing instead a more pluralistic model that recognizes multiple, concurrent forms of mystical experience and interpretation.

Idel distinguishes between what he terms "theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah" and "ecstatic Kabbalah." The former, which was Scholem's primary focus, centers on symbolic interpretations of divine attributes and their interrelationships. The latter, exemplified by figures like Abraham Abulafia, emphasizes direct mystical experience through contemplative techniques involving language and breath. This distinction allows Idel to move beyond a purely dialectical understanding of

absence and presence. For Idel, particularly in his work *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia*, divine absence is not merely a theological concept but a phenomenological experience that the mystic navigates through specific practices. Abulafia's techniques of letter combination and meditation aim to transcend ordinary consciousness—effectively creating an absence of normal perception—to achieve presence of prophetic consciousness. Idel writes: "The mystic must empty his mind of all images and thoughts in order to receive the divine influx" (Idel 1989, 42).

This model suggests that absence is not simply dialectically related to presence but represents a different modality of experience altogether. The emptying of consciousness becomes not the negation of divine presence but its prerequisite. As Idel elaborates in *Absorbing Perfections*, this creates a hermeneutical approach where "interpretation is not about understanding a fixed meaning but participating in an ongoing creative process" (Idel 2002, 89).



### Wolfson's Apophatic Visuality: The Presence of Absence

Elliot Wolfson's work introduces yet another dimension to this discourse by emphasizing what

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might be termed "apophatic visuality"—the paradoxical seeing of what cannot be seen. In *Through a Speculum That Shines*, Wolfson examines how Kabbalistic texts consistently describe mystical visions of that which is fundamentally invisible, creating a complex interplay between ocular metaphors and the limits of perception.

Wolfson writes: "The highest form of seeing is seeing that which cannot be seen; indeed, the ultimate vision is the vision of the invisible as invisible" (Wolfson 1994, 79). This formulation moves beyond dialectical understanding to suggest that absence itself becomes a form of presence—not as its negation or precondition, but as its most profound manifestation.

In *Language, Eros, Being*, Wolfson further develops this theme through an analysis of the erotic dimension of Kabbalistic hermeneutics. Divine absence is figured as the beloved who is simultaneously revealed and concealed, creating a perpetual hermeneutic desire that drives mystical interpretation. As Wolfson explains: "The concealment of the divine is not the opposite of revelation but its most intimate expression" (Wolfson 2005, 136).

This approach culminates in Wolfson's exploration of mystical temporality in *Alef, Mem, Tau*. Here, the interplay between absence and presence is mapped onto temporal experience, where the divine is understood as simultaneously past, present, and future—both eternally present and perpetually withdrawn. The mystic experiences time itself as the medium through which divine absence manifests as a form of presence. As Wolfson writes: "The truth of time is measured by the timeless moment that is always slipping away" (Wolfson 2006, 92).



### **The Paradox of Revelation Through Concealment**

Central to Wolfson's contribution is his articulation of what might be termed "the paradox of revelation through concealment." For Wolfson, concealment is not merely a stage that precedes revelation or a barrier to be overcome; rather, concealment itself constitutes the most profound form of revelation. As he argues in *Through a Speculum That Shines*: "The ultimate disclosure is the disclosure of that which cannot be disclosed" (Wolfson 1994, 188).

This paradoxical formulation reframes the entire dialectic of absence and presence. The divine is not simply present in some moments and absent in others; rather, divine concealment—the withdrawal that seems to mark absence—itself constitutes a mode of revelation. "What is revealed in revelation," Wolfson writes, "is the concealment that cannot be revealed" (Wolfson 2005, 143). This creates a complex hermeneutical dynamic in which the interpreter must learn to read absence not as the negation of meaning but as its most profound expression.

In *Language, Eros, Being*, Wolfson develops this theme through an analysis of the symbolic significance of the veil in Kabbalistic texts. The veil sim-

ultaneously conceals and reveals; in its very act of hiding, it indicates the presence of that which lies behind. "The veil that hides is precisely what points to that which cannot be shown," Wolfson observes. "In covering, it uncovers; in concealing, it reveals" (Wolfson 2005, 151). This understanding transforms concealment from an obstacle to revelation into its very medium.



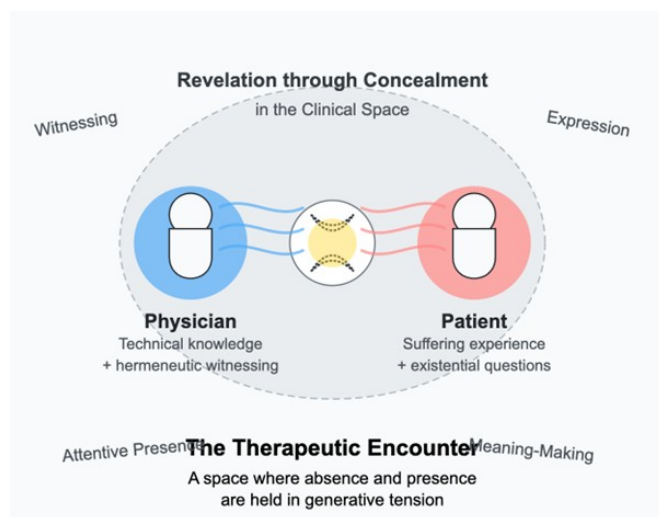
### Synthesis: Toward a Hermeneutics of Absence

When viewed collectively, these three scholarly perspectives reveal a progression in understanding the relationship between divine absence and presence. Scholem's dialectical approach establishes the foundational tension, Idel's pluralistic model expands the phenomenological dimensions, and Wolfson's apophatic visuality transforms absence itself into a mode of presence.

This progression suggests a hermeneutical framework that extends beyond theological discourse. The interplay between absence and presence becomes not merely a theological problem but a model for understanding how meaning itself is generated through interpretive processes. As Arthur Green observes in *Seek My Face*, "The search for God's face is itself the finding" (Green 2003, 23), suggesting that the hermeneutic process—the seeking of meaning within absence—constitutes its own form of presence.

This hermeneutics of absence has potentially broad applications in contemporary thought. In fields ranging from literary theory to psychoanalysis, the generative function of absence—as gap, as lack, as that which drives interpretation—has become increasingly central. The Kabbalistic tradition, with its sophisticated articulation of the relationship between concealment and revelation, offers a particularly rich resource for understanding these dynamics.

As Michael Fishbane argues in *Sacred Attunement*, this approach creates the possibility for "a theology of relation rather than substance" (Fishbane 2008, 47). The divine is encountered not as a fixed presence to be grasped but as an ongoing relationship between revelation and concealment, between presence and absence. This relational understanding transforms theological discourse from the attempt to define divine attributes to the practice of attending to the spaces between revelation and concealment.



### Clinical Applications:

#### The Therapeutic Space and the Suffering Patient

The paradoxical relationship between concealment and revelation articulated in Kabbalistic thought—particularly through Wolfson's formulations—offers profound resources for reimagining the therapeutic

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encounter between physician and patient. The clinical setting, like the mystical experience, often involves confrontation with forms of absence: the absence of certainty, the limitations of medical knowledge, and most poignantly, the experience of suffering that seems to resist meaning-making.

When a physician encounters a patient in profound suffering, traditional medical frameworks often prove insufficient. The biomedical model, with its emphasis on symptom identification and intervention, may fail to address the existential dimensions of illness and pain. The patient's experience frequently exceeds what can be captured in diagnostic categories or treatment protocols, creating a gap between lived suffering and clinical understanding.

Wolfson's paradox of revelation through concealment provides a valuable framework for navigating this gap. The physician who approaches patient suffering through this lens understands that what cannot be expressed—what remains concealed—may constitute the most significant aspect of the patient's experience. Rather than viewing the ineffability of suffering as an obstacle to be overcome through more precise diagnostic categories, the physician can recognize this very ineffability as revelatory in itself.

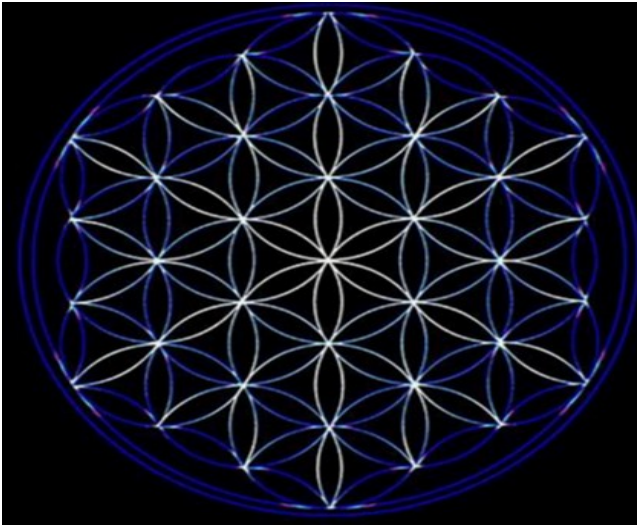
This approach transforms the therapeutic encounter in several ways. First, it validates the limitations of medical knowledge not as failures but as necessary aspects of authentic engagement with suffering. Just as the Kabbalist learns to read divine absence as a form of presence, the physician learns to approach the limits of medical understanding not as deficiencies but as apertures through which deeper forms of healing may emerge.

Second, it reframes the physician's role from one who dispels uncertainty to one who creates a space where uncertainty can be held without premature resolution. Wolfson writes of the mystic's task: "The purpose is not to remove the veil but to see through it, to glimpse what cannot be seen precisely in the act of concealment" (Wolfson 2005, 217).

Similarly, the physician's task becomes not simply to eliminate suffering but to create a therapeutic space where suffering can be witnessed in its full complexity, including those aspects that resist clinical categorization.

Third, it offers a framework for addressing the existential dimensions of illness. The patient confronting serious illness often experiences not only physical symptoms but also a profound disruption of meaning. The question "Why me?" rarely admits of satisfactory answers within conventional medical discourse. Wolfson's understanding of concealment as itself revelatory suggests that the very absence of clear meaning may constitute its own form of significance.

A physician informed by this perspective approaches the suffering patient not simply as a problem to be solved but as a mystery to be engaged. The therapeutic space becomes one in which both physician and patient practice what might be termed "the hermeneutics of suffering"—a collaborative effort to read meaning within experiences that seem to resist interpretation. This is not to suggest that suffering should be valorized or that medical intervention is unnecessary. Rather, it acknowledges that alongside the crucial work of alleviating symptoms, there exists the equally important task of creating meaning within experiences of limitation and loss.



As Fishbane notes in *Sacred Attunement*, this approach fosters "a theology of witness rather than explanation" (Fishbane 2008, 109). The physician bears witness to the patient's suffering without presuming to fully comprehend or resolve it, recognizing that the very act of attentive presence may itself constitute a form of healing. In this way, the therapeutic encounter becomes not merely the application of technical knowledge but the creation of a relational space in which both presence and absence, knowledge and its limitations, can be held in generative tension.

## Conclusion

The dialectical tension between divine absence and presence in Kabbalistic thought offers more than a theological framework; it provides a sophisticated hermeneutical model for understanding how meaning emerges within interpretive spaces. Through the distinct yet complementary perspectives of Scholem, Idel, and Wolfson, we can trace an evolution in scholarly understanding of this dynamic—from dialectical tension to pluralistic experience to apophatic visuality.

What emerges from this analysis is a recognition that absence is not merely the negation of presence but it's necessary complement. Divine withdrawal

creates the very space within which revelation becomes possible; concealment becomes not the opposite of disclosure but its most intimate expression. This paradoxical relationship generates a hermeneutic approach that values the gaps, silences, and spaces between as sites of potential meaning.

In contemporary contexts increasingly characterized by experiences of absence—of certainty, of fixed meaning, of traditional forms of authority—the Kabbalistic tradition offers valuable resources for navigating these challenges. By reframing absence not as empty negation but as pregnant possibility, this tradition suggests that the spaces between presence and absence, between knowing and unknowing, between revelation and concealment, may themselves be the most fertile ground for new forms of meaning to emerge.

As demonstrated in our exploration of the therapeutic encounter, these insights extend beyond theological discourse to inform practical approaches to human suffering. The physician who learns to read absence as a form of presence, who approaches the limitations of medical knowledge as potentially revelatory, creates a healing space that honors both the tangible and intangible dimensions of the patient's experience. In this way, the ancient wisdom of Kabbalistic thought continues to offer valuable resources for addressing contemporary human needs, bridging the gap between mystical theology and practical care.

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